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T H E            R E G I O N            C L O U D

By Percy Lubbock

THE CRAFT OF FICTION

EARLHAM

ROMAN PICTURES

# THE REGION CLOUD

*by*

PERCY LUBBOCK



'But, oUt, alack! he was but one hour mine,  
The region cloud hath masked him from me now.'

*Shakespeare, Sonnet xxxij*



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## CHAPTER ONE

**A**USTIN NEVER FORGOT, NEVER WILL FORGET, THE look of that long lean head — seen from afar, seen down the length of the big dining-parlour of the old French inn. There were few people in the room, there was none other that enticed the eye; and Austin stared and gazed over his wondrous meal, scarcely regarding the unaccustomed glory of such a meal — stared at the guest of importance, the man of honour who held his state at that little table apart, away at the end of the room. That further end was secluded like an alcove, it projected under a lower ceiling; so that it was marked off from the rest of the room, where the few common folk were sprinkled at their inferior tables; and as for the distinguished recess, it wasn't conceded to the first chance comer, it was guarded by the master-waiter for such as you see occupying it at this moment. Austin from afar had watched the installation of the guest of honour; and his own meal that might have been so exciting was almost forgotten, so needful it seemed to notice every movement of that lean grey head, negligently bent over the dishes and glasses, framed like a spectacle in the alcove.

From his humble station Austin faced the little scene as though it were a lighted stage; for the recess had its own window on one side, to the left, and the silvery spring-light of the morning poured full upon the face of the remarkable stranger. He had now pushed aside the litter of his meal, and he sat with his elbows on the table, his chin on his two clasped hands; he sat motionless, his great bright eye wide open to the morning.

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And Austin watched from his distance, luxuriously attentive, warm in the rosy glow of his strange repletion; it seemed to Austin that for the first time — after how many months, years even? - he had the leisure to brood upon a beautiful satisfying sight. When your mind is chilly and sore it does nothing but race to and fro like a distracted imp; it tires you out and tears you to pieces with its activity. There is nothing like a little hunger, especially towards evening — in the morning it is apt to be only a stupid ache - for driving your fancy into a riot, a perfect carnival of brilliance; but the trouble is that you can't attend to it, can't seize one thing out of the rout and settle down to admire it; and besides, and moreover — but never mind all that for the present, enough for the moment that a lovely meal and a golden-hearted bottle have laid a spell upon the uproar of the carnival and have charmed it into this exquisite repose. Now we can stare in peace. And remark too that a glowing and comfortable mind isn't stupid, it is sharp and sensitive as can be; only it is *content* to look at one thing at a time, to gaze for as long as may be necessary to take serene and secure possession of a most remarkable sight. And there it is, the sight - framed at the other end of the room like a scene in a play.

The man of honour sat perfectly still at his table facing the light of the side-window, Vulturine he almost seemed, with the sweep of thin grey plumage off his forehead and the high-pitched bone of his nose; he watched, he was vigilant in tranquillity, and yet he was absorbed, he was dreamful in alertness, as though he commanded so large and free a prospect that the lightest

movement couldn't escape him anywhere, lost as he was in his "inward visions. He sank his chin upon his hands, and the pressure thrust out his big underlip, and now he looked potent and immemorial like an image, like an idol brooding over long histories that nobody else remembered; but with power in him, too, to frighten an intruder, even a distant worshipper at the other end of the room, if he chose to use it. The ridge of his brow and the hollow of his cheek were acutely modelled in the whiteness of the light; the lines of his face were printed so plainly that you could read—you could have read the unknown histories in them if you had known the language. Everything was written in his face; not bluntly, not coarsely, but with swift and capable strokes - as though the hand of life, tracing his histories, hadn't faltered or fumbled over a syllable; so that the tale ran forward unbroken, from his high forehead to his radiant eye, from the breadth of his cheek-bone to the sudden force of his chin. But the language was the difficulty, though Austin in the luxury of his intelligence might begin to think that *he* could almost understand it. These other folk, casual tourists and bagmen and such, they too looked inquisitively at that brilliant head; but they hadn't the eyes to take it in, not they. It was a sight for Austin, for no one else.

Some one else, however, a most trivial young man, came in and passed up the room and joined the stranger, apparently with a word of inquiry. But the interruption was nothing; the great man barely glanced up at the word, dismissed the matter of his wish or his order with the least tilt of his head; and the youth returned,

shuffling hastily off again on his errand - some kind of colourless attendant on the hero, no doubt. He paused on his way for a hurried admonition to the patroness, **the** black-eyed *cassiere* at her desk by the door, and this lady shot out a sharp word to the waiter, who came scrambling between the tables to overtake the youth at the door. There was a moment of earnest colloquy; but it was all right, the upshot was clear, there was no demand just now from the alcove, and the lank-weeded waiter returned to his bagmen, reassuring the anxious query of the lady as he passed. Ah, these flurried souls were set flying by a nod of the imperial head! Let them fly, let them earnestly consult each other on the meaning of the nod; there was one in the room who could sit quiet enough, glowing with the great peace of food and wine, to understand the look of the master there aloft, and no word said. It is singular to feel so conscious of your intelligence and your power - at the very moment when the object of attention, up there in the light, seems to baffle you with its enigmatic marks of greatness, seems likely to frighten you if it suddenly returned your stare. And this indeed is what had happened the next minute; the strange creature shifted his position and swept a masterly glance over the company before him, a glance that didn't pause anywhere except for a flash, not more, upon Austin himself; then it travelled on. Austin never could forget, never will, that first flash of a glance that he had from this man.

It wasn't frightening, it was illuminating. When a man has become aware of you, has met your eye for the first time, even for only a flash, he is more your

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friend already than he was just now, while he gazed at visions in which you hadn't any part whatever. It is something to proceed upon, the instant that you have shared, and even on this alone the tiny acquaintance will grow surprisingly, if you tend it well. For instance it is already easy to fall in familiarly with the great man's inattention, his bored indifference to the small commotion of service he has nodded away from him; here is something that you can share with him again, it is almost like a secret between you. The great man, how negligently he wore his consequence and distinction, like a loose old coat hanging on him unregarded! — it was a bit of character to be recognized with a smile. Such was the kind of man he was, a very good kind too; one to sit dreaming aloof while his servitors scuffled about his business, leaving them to divine his wishes as best they might - one so well accustomed to their blundering attentions that they didn't for a moment disturb his dream. If you ask for distinction, there it is - distinction and splendour of a sort that appeal to an easy lazy rosy mood. Austin and his new friend might already be exchanging looks of sympathy over the heads of the bagmen - only that his new friend had turned away again, was staring again into the blank light of the window. No matter, Austin was sitting with him now, admiring the high carelessness of his friend's grand style, a thing so unlike the common style of vulgar grandeur. That is the way, the right way to be rich and free and exalted, and you acknowledge it at once, not without emotion, when your mind has so often worn itself almost to death in hating and scorning the wrong way. This new rare friend, he

waved stupidity away from him and lived in freedom.

Austin acknowledged it, certainly not without emotion; but it was a feeling that was rather mixed, even now, even under the influence of the wondrous wine. The familiar grind and grumble hadn't utterly ceased in Austin's mind. He, too, could have been free and splendid in the perfect style; he could have taken his place at the little distinguished table quite as nobly as his friend. He had the instinct, and there was nothing to prevent him from using an exquisite gift, nothing but irrelevant imbecile accidents that prevented him absolutely. But bless the golden wine none the less; for it did appear to keep the dreary old pain in a corner, out of the way, and he could notice it there and leave it and attend to his vision in peace. And bless the vision too, the spectacular hero, who had arrived at exactly the right moment to inspire him, the only right moment there had been for many and many a day. Inspired indeed! —for look, Austin had planted his elbows on the table, had sunk his chin upon his hands, was gazing with wide eyes into his dreams; and as he glanced absently aside at some offer from the shambling waiter, glanced and dismissed it, he wore his disgraceful coat as though it were fame and pride. It is reasonable to yield to an inspiration such as this, once in a way. Sweet, sweet it is to be slightly flown with admirable cheer; one needn't remind oneself to laugh at oneself at all times. For that hour at least he would be solemn and inspired; and the point was this - he was sharing the company of his heroic friend and showing himself to be naturally fit for it.

Austin's heart was melted, he couldn't help it; it *is*

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pleasant to be friendly and noble when you haven't been either for so long. To be hard, to be hostile against people at privileged tables, seen from a distance — one gets horribly tired of being hard and hostile; it is a relief to find that among the hateful people, the rich and free, there is one at least to like, this man of honour upon whom an ambrosial fancy broods so contentedly. How many months, years even, did we say it was since Austin had eaten a lyric meal like this and drained a perfect bottle? Stop — he shuddered back into the presence of those months, and recoiling from them he was faced by the months ahead, lying so soon ahead, after a very few more bountiful hours like this. The chill struck deep for a moment; but it passed, and he was warm and kind again, and his thought sped affably forward again to meet the splendour of his friend. Austin could drop into that kind of company so familiarly that you would never guess what dismal dinginess lay behind him. He had his affinity with a world where people could move freely, talk in pleasant tuneful voices, do their work in comfort with an attentive mind; it was only when his mind was cold that Austin wanted to slay and conquer - he wanted now to slip noiselessly in among the pleasant melodious people and be simply one of them. An idiotic dream; but there was plenty of time in store to be clear-eyed and truculent, and this was an hour *to* melt the heart.

But what about the distinguished stranger after all - who was he, what could he be? It seemed too flatly prosaic, in the middle of these flights of fancy, to make vulgar inquiry of the waiter or the patroness - to ask a question of the groundlings. Austin was so lowly and

disgraceful in his obscurity that nobody took the trouble to tell him the news of the day: news that was manifestly running round the other tables, for the waiter loitered in talk here and there, among glancings and whisperings as the word was passed about. A visitor of importance arrived at the good old inn this morning only: that was all that was known to Austin. Such a visitor makes a flutter at the inn of a little grass-grown provincial city; though such a visitor isn't of course so very rare there either, in a little city where the market-place at midday is darkened by the shadow of three centuries of the Middle Ages. Every one makes his pilgrimage sooner or later to such a shrine as this, and particularly of English pilgrims there is a slender but a steady stream; as indeed there certainly should be, considering how the towers and tombs of the great church in the market-place are really pages, some of the most illustrious, out of English history. Well, and this visitor, towards whom the murmur of homage runs discreetly in the dining-parlour of the inn - he is English, beyond a doubt; but exactly what the kind of his greatness may be, worldly or poetic, of state or of art, it is exceedingly difficult to say. Austin kept his fancy on the wing, but his common curiosity was also stirred. An orator, a prince, a man of letters? - almost any part would fit him, none would account for him. A philosopher, an adventurer, a man with millions of money? Austin's curiosity grew bold as he put the successive questions in vain. And this was the point where the stranger suddenly pushed back his chair, stood up, swept his bright look of exploration again across the company, and strode lightly down the room to Austin.

## CHAPTER TWO

**Y**ES, HE ACTUALLY WALKED STRAIGHT TO AUSTIN, stood before him with a smiling challenging air, and tapped with a friendly hand on the young man's shoulder. 'Well?' he said — 'well? what *were you* thinking of things?' And then, while Austin stupidly stared, the singular man had dropped to a chair, facing him, and there they sat together, 'You must tell me what you were thinking of things, you stray young Englishman. I was alone in the room, and so were you; and indeed I was alone in the world, as I usually am, and so were you. Don't say you weren't; I've a remarkable eye in my head for the lonely look. Wherever I see it I go to meet it; two solitary people — they are the two that have something to exchange. And there are very few of us, mind you, and the world is wide, and it seldom happens that two of us are alone at opposite ends of the same room; so here I come, and we may talk.' He smiled his challenge at Austin and encouraged him with hands upheld — an accolade and a greeting for the stray young Englishman who stared so dumbly. But Austin suddenly found his word, he rushed it out. \*I thought - I was thinking I wasn't alone in the world-just then.'

The strange man quite understood; he was gay and brilliant. 'No, because /was there; it proves my point.' He lounged in his chair, throwing back his head, and as though his thought had veered back to consider his point, he sat in silence, his forehead wrinkled, his eyelids drooping. There was no awkwardness in the pause; he took his time and used his leisure, face to face with a companion in rumination. The personal matter **was**

nothing, it was disposed of already. He and the young man were acquainted - good; enough of that; now they could stretch their arms and think and communicate as they pleased. The rubbish of mere civility was easily dropped; two men of intelligence don't waste a rare opportunity by lingering on the edge of it, exclaiming and explaining; they go forward at once and make the most of it. And so wonderful it is to find yourself making the most of a chance like this that you possibly sit in a simple stupor, dumbly admiring the freedom with which the obvious things, the common conventional things, are brushed aside. The grand way again — there it is! Austin joined the strange man in his lapse into silence; and it was too much to expect that Austin should be able to think, to ruminate companionably, but at least he could hold his breath in fear of disturbing the silence of his friend. The great and only thing for the moment is to meet him aright, not to fall short of what he expects; and so Austin waited, and at any rate he didn't lower the moment with trivial speech.

'Oh yes, I am alone in the world,' said his friend, 'and thankful I am for my loneliness. I live on it; I should have died without it long ago. A lonely man! You mightn't suppose it if you saw my life. But then *my* trade-' He didn't follow his trade, however; he swung round on his chair into a comfortable attitude of legs and elbows, and he began to talk about the old pleasant inn and the old poetic city, to which he was now a pilgrim, it seemed, not for the first time. He talked with rambling and meditative enjoyment of other times, other spring days that had been filled with the enchanted impressions renewed this morning; he

brought out his memories, or rather he let them arise and float before him, and he caught at them here and there with a fanciful word, a lyrical phrase; and his great full eyes wandered after them as they passed, his voice rang high and eager as a new one appeared. He might have forgotten his companion, were it only for his absent look and his reflective tone; but his companion didn't feel forgotten, he rather felt that he was invited to share the ringing thought of his friend as it harked away into the past, into the poetry of other mornings recalled by the two together. 'Don't you think so?' said the strange man; 'don't you know? — don't you remember?' He appealed to Austin as, though they were old experienced pilgrims, they two — the two men who had met by a rare and fortunate chance, and now they could exchange the pleasant memories and emotions that each would understand. Any difference between them he *had* forgotten, it surely seemed — any difference of age, of degree; he talked to the stray young man as it pleased him to talk, assuming and accepting the young man's equal friendship.

Gradually in Austin's mind there was room to think, and he drew a breath that cleared his mind still further, driving out the foolish trifling fear of making a mistake, of disappointing his friend. That wasn't a mood that reached to the height of the occasion, far from it. The great man gave the mood, and it was enough for them both; Austin slipped into the rhythm of it as he began to think. Never, never before had the like been heard of. Austin, passionate enemy of the great safeguarded world, had put off his righteous hostility at the first sign of an advance that the world had made towards

him; he hadn't even waited for a sign. But do you suppose he was ashamed of his weakness? Not at all; for this august ambassador of the world, this prince or courtier or master of millions — he belonged to the world, he dwelt upon the guarded height, but he was lonely there in his difference from all the rest. He needn't have said he was lonely; he might have trusted Austin's intelligence to see it. Don't you perceive that it wasn't the bottle of good wine after all that had changed the heart of Austin? No, no; he had used his intelligence as usual, and it had told him that this man was a man apart, a singular being, Austin's friend; and it was all true, a piece of perfect divination, for here they were. And the great man had picked up their affinity without the loss of a moment; he was carelessly roaming and ranging among his memories, utterly confident of being understood.

But here was that intrusive attendant again, the colourless youth. He came sidling in, hovered diffidently at hand when he saw that the master had found a friend, waited and watched for an opportunity to present himself. The room was almost empty by this time, the small parties of the common folk had melted away; but the master didn't notice the cautious footstep of the youth. He, poor wretch, knew better than to force his way without permission; he came about his service, he only asked to be allowed to serve, but he was quite aware that even on those terms he couldn't presume a welcome. If you humbly attend such a man as this, you have to remember that it is your privilege, it gives you no kind of claim; and as for the wretch, he wasn't likely to forget it. He was a travelling secretary to the

master, that's what he was; for he carried a pencil and a little sheaf of papers, and while he perched at a distance, awaiting his chance, he shuffled the papers and made notes and arranged them for the master's eye. He also looked rather closely at Austin, which wasn't of course surprising; Austin was shabby and disreputable enough, poor lamb, to be a surprise in that company to anyone, let alone the white-collared black-coated secretary of the touring prince. And moreover the great man's attendants, they have always a sharp glance for the strangers and followers whom he attracts by the way; his retinue is naturally jealous of his casual fancies. What the youth doesn't appreciate, however, is that this is no fancy, it is an affinity; and Austin was pleased to parade his bursting shoe and his patched elbow with a movement of defiance. But no, that was just the kind of futility which lowered the greatness of the moment. It was not in the rhythm of the prince's mood to think of the anxious ridiculous youth at all.

There was a pause by and by in the prince's lyrical monologue, and the anxious youth was quick to bundle his papers together and announce himself. 'The two letters you wished to see — I have brought them' — so he said, almost apologizing for the performance of his errand. The master scarcely moved his head; he put up a hand over his shoulder to receive the letters, and with the other hand he retained Austin and held the thread of his talk. 'Lord Richard's letter, and Lady Marion's,' murmured the youth-in-waiting; 'they both beg you - they will come at your time.' Lord Richard and Lady Marion were impatiently twitched by the lean fingers of the master; they were given a cursory

glance and were thrown aside. 'Very well - no, wait/ and he waved the youth to a chair beside him while he leaned again towards Austin with his talk. The youth subsided on his chair, doubtfully reassembling his papers. He sat between Austin and the master, and it wasn't clear whether he was only waiting for a more explicit direction, or whether he had become a companion of the party, taking his place with Austin while their friend discoursed. It didn't seem clear to himself; but on the whole he judged that he could listen, nodding and blinking appreciatively as the speaker developed his tale — and even that he could put in a word of his own at the proper moment, since the odd young man beside him was apparently incapable of speech. At the proper moment accordingly he proffered a word, surely a bright and suitable word of comment. 'Eh?' said the master, turning sharply, and then 'Oh!' - as though the sight of the youth explained a noise that was otherwise unaccountable. This was all the poor wretch got for his word; but it hardly surprised him, he had plainly expected little more.

'I have made a long journey,' said the master, 'since I was last in this place; a journey of many years, many adventures, many people. Years ago I brought a half-empty imagination to it, what I now think half-empty; I bring back to it what I now think a very full one. I shall come again, years hence, and if I find you sitting here then, I shall tell you that on our first meeting you helped to furnish a half-empty imagination. Perhaps I shall tell you how you did it. You will have done it in spite of yourself, by an accident - the accident that you **sat here for this** hour, while there was somebody in

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the room who could use what you had to give. And what was that? You can't know unless I tell you, for it depends on a hundred things that were ready here in my brain, all ready to set to work upon the sight of you. It is what I call an adventure, the kind of adventure with which my long journey has been crowded, the only kind that is needed or desired or valued by a brain like mine. I am alone in the world, and yet, you see, I lead a life of endless adventure at any time, in any place; and it isn't lost, it is saved and perpetuated — some day I will show you what is saved. I make my life in secret, I bring it to light when it is made; you may see it then, you and the world, if you care, for the sight of a life that has been given form and substance. You don't care, you prefer the void; if that is so I have nothing to say to you. But if you *do* care, if you *do* -'

'If I care!' Austin said the words aloud, he didn't only think them, and they came so direct from his thought that their sincerity softened the bright eyes fixed on him. There was no doubt of it, the man was pleased — Austin had pleased him. 'If I care!' Of course it wasn't only the man's actual demand, whatever it may have been, that was answered in such a fervent gasp of sincerity. The words had rushed out to meet the man himself, the man who lounged and leaned across the little table, the man who had stepped down from his own place to come and talk to Austin; and the man himself couldn't possibly mistake the fulness of their meaning. He understood, he accepted the tribute of this shabby and inarticulate admirer. And when one thinks of his solitude, his remoteness, his grand impatience of little things -! The youth-in-waiting with his

tiresome interruptions. Lady Marion, Lord What's-his-name, they were swept aside with the back of one hand; the other was laid upon the shoulder of Austin. And was that the end of it? The strange man would get up directly and go back to Lord Richard, and Austin would then have plenty to say and not another chance in the world to say it. Well, there, it can't be helped; there is nothing to say while a pair of eyes like those are fixed on you with softening searching kindness. 'Thank you,' said Austin, 'for talking to me. What made you do so?'

'You remind me of somebody I knew long ago. When next we meet I will tell you about him.' Here was the end *of this* meeting, then. Yet the man seemed loath to move; he still sat there, radiating all his brilliant experience upon Austin - or not upon Austin, upon that other in the distance, the unknown. It was the secretary who began to stir, and well he might; he must have been amazed at this exhibition of the master's fancy. It was time for him to rescue the master from this odd entanglement; the dear great man was encouraging such a very dilapidated young follower. Was that the notion of the secretary? - it well might be. But this is no moment to think of *him*; there are only a few seconds left, and the flashing smiling mystery of the stranger can't be allowed to vanish without one word more. What is he, who is he? Is it possible to ask him the plain question? No - it would have been too prosaic, a flaw upon the high-shining mystery; he came as he listed, he would vanish without a sign; that was his way. One thing only was best, to let him go as he came; it shan't be said that he flashed upon the intelligence of

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an admirer and was disappointed. His greatness should meet the perception of Austin and be satisfied with what it found; that much at any rate was possible, Austin would manage it. So now the great man suddenly rose, waved a hand and was gone; that was his way, and Austin hadn't spoilt it. But behold, there was more in it after all. The mystery in its flight had left a sign, quite a prosaic token — a visiting-card. Austin picked it *off* the table and read the name of John Channon.

## CHAPTER THREE

**D**IDN'T YOU KNOW IT WAS CHANNON?' THE SECRETARY had remained, and with the disappearance of the master he sat up more assertively, spreading his litter of papers with a bolder air on the table before him. 'Didn't you recognize him? He must have seen that you didn't, and that would have pleased him; so he gave you his card. He hasn't usually to do that. Everybody knows him by sight, it seems to me. It was all over the place that he was here half an hour after we had arrived. Of course you saw how they stared. He doesn't like it; that's why he was so short with us just now while we sat talking. He wouldn't let us say a word! But it can't be helped, he is known everywhere; we have a sort of triumphal progress wherever we go. We do what we can to avoid it; when we run off on a holiday like this we keep away from the big places and the big people; we go about as quietly as possible. He likes to be quite by himself. Of course we couldn't let him travel alone; he's far too unpractical; so I come too, but I make a point of leaving him in peace as much as I can — we don't even eat together. What he enjoys is talking to queer people, the sort he would never come across at home - like a prince in disguise, I tell him. He doesn't mind who they are; he always hopes to find somebody who has never heard of him. But apparently most people *have* heard of him, though of course they don't really understand what he is. Why I often tell him -'

Such was the strain of the secretary, very bird-like as his small cheer mounted. He produced a pen and

busily settled to his duties; he mentioned that he snatched a minute for them whenever he could, here and there. The dear man, one has to look after him well. These letters, for example, the morning's budget — he was pursued by requests like these, and if he were left to himself you can guess what would happen: nothing would happen, he would simply forget them. People like this Lady Marion thought they had only to command him; they soon found out their mistake. It would seem that he had brought her ladyship well to order; see how she now comes crawling to meet his convenience. Channon had an offhand way with these people to which they weren't accustomed, and yet they liked it too - Lady Marion really asked Channon to bully her, and it evidently did her all the good in the world. 'I would come, dear master, *whenever* it suited you' - that's how she wrote to him now. Well, it sometimes struck the secretary that Channon really knew what he was about, and anyhow these big people, they must be shown that a man such as Channon isn't a common tradesman. 'Why, I often tell them-' But still the conclusion is clearly this, that Channon needs some one to look after his interests and to tie him down and to see that all these people (yes, look at the coronets) do finally get what they want. It is the secretary's job, no light one. He will now write to this Lady Marion and tell her she may come on her appointed day.

But hadn't the master appeared to leave Lady Marion just now in rather a doubtful state? He had seemed far from eager to receive her ladyship; one might have thought but poorly of her chance. The competent *charge d'affaires*,-however, knew the master, and better

than the dear man knew himself. He was always so impatient, snapping out a refusal when he was injudiciously pressed; but he didn't always mean it to be taken seriously, and the secretary was the man to interpret his moods. A delicate job; but this time at any rate he was sure of his ground. Moreover, her ladyship was only one of a bunch, and he must fit them all in somehow. The run was tremendous, all the duchesses in full cry, and it really was important that they shouldn't be too far discouraged. He requires them, dear great man, and when his competent young companion puts it to him plainly he is ready to acknowledge it. Naturally it fatigues him to death, this necessity of attending to a troop of women; he would like to devote himself entirely to his big ideas, his real work. But there you have the very reason why the duchesses must be humored for the present; to put it grossly, they paid exceedingly well, and a man mustn't be too proud to reflect upon that side of the question. This was another of the remarks that his young friend often made to the master. 'You must remember they *are* useful to you' - such, only this morning, were his words. And Channon thought so much of his big ideas, and of the fortune it would need to carry them out aright, that he very reasonably didn't wish to forfeit the money of the duchesses.

The secretary twittered very happily. He wasn't at all surprised at the favour Austin had received, and much less jealous of it; he was full of easy and agreeable confidences. To attend a man like Channon is no doubt a privilege; but it does entail a little care between whiles for the restoration of one's damaged little dig-

nity. One knows what Channon is, dear man, and one nourishes no rancour; but between whiles, when he is out of the way, it isn't unwelcome to talk and twitter to a stranger, even to one of Channon's most impossible fancies. This particular impossibility was exceptionally mild and inoffensive. He received the confidences of the sleek-haired youth with so proper an air that the youth was moved to a further advance — he introduced himself. His name was Simpkin, and Austin duly made the return of his own. But never mind these courtesies — Simpkin must be kept to his topic. It was a trivial voice, no doubt, for the utterance of so pregnant a story; but the story once begun, Austin proposed to hear it out. He was safe enough from Simpkin's observation; Simpkin was not of an observing habit, and he was fully occupied with his tale. More and more briskly he recovered his cheer as he revolved the brilliant topic, shaping it to his mind. 'A fine talker, isn't he? At times he is very silent, one has to draw him out; but those of us who see much of him learn the art. A very fine talker, though rather inclined to lay down the law; you may have found that he doesn't care to be contradicted. But he will put up with much from those who understand him. We have great arguments, he and I.'

Austin, listening greedily, was able to push the talk of Simpkin back again to a point on which more was needed. Those big ideas of Channon's, his real work - what about that? He learned that no one could measure the big ideas who hadn't seen 'our place in the country,' the scene of their manifestation, the centre from which they spread. It was already a spot of fame,

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Bintworth; people flocked from far and wide to see it. But Austin had to recognize also that it wasn't enough to see the place, like any casual duchess; anybody might see the place, Channon 'threw it open' to all respectable inquirers. But one couldn't reach the inwards of the meaning of such a scene until one had watched the master himself at work there; it was necessary to take it from Simpkin that this was the fact. It was then, then only, that your eyes were truly opened. And what did you see when you truly saw? Why, as for that, Simpkin has just explained that it is unimaginable to an outsider, to those who haven't the intimacy of the master; but of this much Austin is assured, that Channon is spending money on Bintworth to an extent that turns the eye of Simpkin up to the ceiling in amazement. Bintworth, you see, is to be made a kind of focus of Channon's teaching, a monument of his genius, a thing of national pride—and indeed of national possession, we believe, in years to come. And to make it what he means it to be will undoubtedly need every penny he can raise; which is why it is fortunate that their lordships and ladyships are at last so urgent. This Lady Marion, for example - the tune of the letter that Simpkin is about to write to her will be a thousand pounds.

Shall he still chirrup on, meanwhile? Yes, for the privacy of Austin's dream was quite secure; the communicative youth was thoroughly enjoying himself, and he hadn't the weight to profane a great impression. He could be allowed to pipe his chatter upon the adoration of all these exalted people for the genius they supposed themselves to have discovered. It was their harmless

delusion; they had discovered the sun at midday. They wouldn't hear a word against his genius; they fought his battle tooth and nail. And of course it *is* a battle, as every one knows. There was still the party of opposition, very violent even now; jealousy might account for a good deal of it among the men of his trade. But it was Simpkin's reasoned belief that by this time Channon could afford to disregard them, and if you follow Simpkin's argument closely you will admit that Channon's position is now a very strong one. Simpkin doesn't make the mistake of supposing that Lady Marion and her kind can ensure it; we know what these people are - a man of genius may use them, but he is far beyond their understanding. No, it was the opinion of the men of his trade that Simpkin had in mind; and here we must distinguish, we must analyse the very violent attacks to which the master is still exposed. Don't you observe that none of his colleagues, not even the stalest and driest, will now deny the bigness of his genius? They all agree that he is a mighty fact; they only go on repeating that his ideas are 'radically unsound' - you know the dull old phrase.

A controversy of many years' standing, and still it raged, though chiefly in these days among the ancient and desiccated pedants of the trade. The finer freer younger sort were with him, were applauding him with all their hearts; to them at any rate his ideas were as sound as they were large — large and expansive as the glory of his genius. And these storms and battles and controversies, mark you, do him good; Simpkin was unable to doubt that the master was in all ways the better for them. In the first place - of course it sounds

very vulgar, and it isn't implied that this point of view has ever occurred to Channon — but in the first place it does advertise him, all this hullabaloo about his methods and notions and theories, and to this clear fact a devoted well-wisher of Channon's can hardly be indifferent. And then too, what is more and better, Channon is one who thrives on attack, on storms of dispute and abuse, on calumnies even. Channon was never a weakly soul, one of those who need to be petted and protected. He was 'ever a fighter,' as Shakespeare says; he always worked his best when he was excited by strife, it wrought him up to his grandest pitch. He rose to the challenge, he answered it with work more splendid than ever — vast great things, full of ideas. Unsound they might be; Simpkin for one is not concerned to defend the master's theories, indeed he has always in candour confessed, and has maintained it to Channon's face, that for him they are a trifle too fanciful and far-fetched. You may call it over-critical on Simpkin's part, but that is how he feels, and if Austin had only been a little more attentive at this point he might have been the first to admit the justice of Simpkin's view. But it is impossible to miss the force of his conclusion, which is that Channon's work, compare it with the work of whom you please, is overwhelming for its strength, its wealth, its size, its - its *vurve*, for that is the only word that finally satisfies Simpkin, and it may well impress us with the penetration of his insight.

'Bless me, how I do run on! - but I could see you were struck by the way he talked. Yes, I consider it a lucky chance, seeing as much as I do of such a man. It makes one think. No, I haven't been with him long; but we

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hit it off remarkably well from the first; we understand each other, he and I. Some find him difficult to get on with; he certainly has a temper, but I like a man to have a temper — I'm no angel myself either. He's inclined to bully people, especially if they give way to him. One needs to stand up to him; it struck me, if you don't mind my saying it, that you didn't stand up to him enough. If one's afraid of him -' The good Simpkin, he was well in possession of his theme, moulding it with a practised hand, and it was scarcely fair to regard him so steadily, with such deep contemplation, while he added the more decorative touches. Why disturb him with a doubt, a little dim suspicion that the seedy-looking stranger had thoughts of his own behind his odd ugly face? Simpkin had a perfectly neat and shapely face, but it was the kind of face that shows very clearly what is happening when, as people say, it falls. For a passing moment it perceptibly tottered; but Simpkin is not the man to forget what is due to himself from an ugly scrubby stranger, and a stroke to the hair and a pat to the neat black tie is enough to remind the stranger of it also. That's all right then; Austin was immensely interested by Simpkin's story and openly gratified by Simpkin's affability. Shall he proceed? Well, really Simpkin appeared to have contributed all that Austin required for the time being, and two high windows of the dining-parlour stood open to the courtyard, and the afternoon was sweet and kind outside. It seemed to be the moment for carrying a strange and wondrous accumulation of thought into the open air, into silence and seclusion.

'If you'll excuse me now,' said Simpkin, 'I must get

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on with my work. We're stopping here only till to-morrow, and I must see to these letters while I can. There's not much time to myself when I'm travelling with Channon; he's always wanting this or that, and changing his mind and unsettling his plans. He needs as much looking after as a child, I often tell him. We're off to Italy to-morrow, Sicily, North Africa, Lord knows where; I make the plans and he unsettles them. But I shall hold him to Italy - I've always wanted to see Italy, and I shan't let *him* look at pictures. It's to be a real holiday for him; I promised his wife. He's to moon and idle, and I'm not to say a word to remind him of his work. I tell him that in Italy I shall only talk about hotels and time-tables; I shan't let him mention the state of his soul. I want a holiday too, if it comes to that; we've had some very heavy weather lately at Birtworth. All these duchesses are alike, each of them expects me to arrange that she shall have our first free day. It's no use their appealing to Channon, he turns them all over to me; I sort them out and do the best I can for them, and then I'm blamed because I can't make a dozen free days in a week. Well, I shall tell Lady Marion she can come as soon as we get home again. She's a good-looking woman; he won't object to painting *her'*

## CHAPTER FOUR

CHANNON! NOT THE LEAST IDEA THAT IT WAS CHANNON had entered Austin's mind until he read the name on the little card; and he had to carry the little card away with him, away from Simpkin, away from the houses of the town, before he could rightly read what it had to say. All his burden of thought about Channon must now be distributed over the impression of the singular stranger, the man who had descended to talk with Austin, the man who had made himself Austin's friend; slowly and deliberately the friend was to be made one with Channon. Time\*was needed, long hours of a pale and windless afternoon in the great bare country-side — over the grave sweep of the land, endlessly rolling: where you can walk and walk for hours, ruminating without distraction, till the houses of the town have sunk from sight and the vast old church in their midst is nothing but the dark sail of a ship emerging upon the skyline. A long afternoon was scarcely long enough; for even when the twilight of April was already falling it was still possible, so it seemed, for the unknown friend to hold Austin with his broad bright eyes without consenting to become-to become what the little card had made him. He had been Channon all the time, Channon when he sat aloof, Channon when he stepped from his height and entered the world of Austin. But it is useless to repeat the words; there remains a gulf between the two ideas, they can't unite.

The gulf was Simpkin, to put it plainly, and Simpkin's tale; the two ends of Austin's meditation would

have joined, but for Simpkin, by the time of nightfall upon the empty roads. It is absurd to make so much of a trifling chattering youth, who really after all had nothing to say that Austin couldn't have imagined for himself with the help of the card in his hand; the name of Channon would perfectly have told its story. But when Simpkin chatters and plumes himself over his narration it becomes forbidding and estranging; things that in Austin's imagination would have been great and splendid, looming in the distance, jump up with a vulgar pertness and shrillness and discordancy when Simpkin tells the tale. He cheapens and smartens it; and this didn't affect the image of Channon himself, but it seemed to ring Channon round with the grossness of the world, cutting him off from Austin and from Austin's friend. Channon up there at Bintworth in his glory, wrapt in his genius, commanding the storm — that was noble, that would have been the image of Austin's fancy. But Channon encircled by the rubbish of Simpkin's chatter, with Simpkin marshalling their ladyships to wait upon his attention, was sundered from Austin in a very troublesome manner; and the fall of the dark, the chill of the April night, the silence of the rolling road, the beat of Austin's solitary tramp - hours of all these were hardly enough to undo the blundering of Simpkin. And to be thoroughly honest, there is more in it than this. Austin may try to think it was only the vulgarity of Simpkin that made Bintworth look so inaccessible, so repelling; but it was more than Simpkin really, it was the undeniable presence of a throng of people, earnest inquirers, beautiful adorers, circling and closing around Channon in the

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distance, drawing him away from the jealous eyes of his one intelligent friend. The throng was real, not one of Simpkin's twittering fictions, and it had no place for Austin, no knowledge of him, no perception of him. It is well seen that Austin's rosy mood had vanished; indeed by nightfall he was cold and tired and hungry, he hated the world that cut him *off* from Channon.

But then we get back to the bewildering fact that Channon and the nameless stranger were one and the same; and it can't be forgotten how the stranger had seemed to approach Austin with a kind of appeal — an appeal to Austin over the heads of the thronging world. Channon, since it *was* Channon, had glanced over their heads, had met the eyes of the one who understood — and had come to him with a request, no less, a touching and charming invitation. Austin had reminded him of some one he had known long ago. Very well then, Austin took up the part of that long-lost friend and devoted himself to filling the gap, making up to Channon for the loss; and now he tramped by the side of Channon, his mind eagerly spinning and discoursing for Channon's benefit, and together they scorned the world that had failed to keep them apart. Oh if that were true! It was very late and they were far from home, but with a fancy rattling and rioting in the well-known way it was easy to forget the miles; and a long and exquisite discourse, Channon on one side, Austin on the other, carried them tramping forward at an amazing rate. A belated yellow moon had risen, too, before they reached the first of the lighted houses of the town, and Austin saluted the moonrise for an acceptable omen. But there, the little cramped streets of

the town put an end to fancy; Austin was alone, was hungry, was hostile - had no good friend at his side with whom to hate the world. He found himself standing in the square before the huge black cavernous church-front; and the moon, now white and meagre, looked round the corner of the church at him with a sneer.

And yet it *was* true! — or rather it became true as Austin stood there in the moon-struck market-place; for the man who came forward out of the deep of the shadow, out of the blackness of the sculptured porch, was only for a moment a passing stranger, and then it was Channon. Bare-headed, slowly pacing, Channon came near and nearer, and his look was fixed and grave upon Austin — grave, but with a flash of excitement in it as he stood still, a few yards off, on the edge of the shaft of moonlight that slanted across the square. The moon was on Austin's face, and Channon stopped dead in the silence, regarding him. '*It's you*, said Channon; his voice was queer and serious. '*It's you - du Doppelganger!*' Intently he regarded Austin, and then he came further forward and paused again, still with wonder in his look. '*The moon shows me —*' in the same low voice he spoke - '*the moon might show me to-night what I little thought to see again - you ghost!*' He laughed gently and oddly, and he took Austin's arm and they walked in silence; but at the end of the square, when they turned, their talk began. It was talk which banished all memory of Austin's discourse on the open road; for that was shallow and hard, and this is novel and rich and urgent, voluminously filling the mind. When things come true they obliterate the hard stiff

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lines of the impression they made before they were true; a free-handed fancy produces such crude and tangible images, and when truth steps in and remoulds them the difference is wonderful - they soften, they grow shadowy and mysterious, they absorb the mind with their ambiguous hints and lights. Austin forgot that he had talked to Channon in fancy; he started anew from the beginning, and the newness had the alluring vagueness of life and truth.

He had to answer a string of definite questions, none the less. Channon swung upon him with inquiries, and they brought out answers that he questioned again - till Austin had told him things that appeared to have reached the open never before. They were things that were highly active in meditation, but they moved stiffly and painfully at first, dragged into spoken words; only Channon's questioning was swift and businesslike, he knew better than Austin how to manage their awkwardness. There was no fumbling in Channon's method; he struck out from point to point, sure of his intention and wasting none of it. He very well knew how it seemed to find oneself wandering and wondering for the first time in a little foreign town, by moonlight too — so very unlike the pavement of Gray's Inn Road the day before yesterday. For the very first time! — it is amazing how in the neighbourhood of the Euston Road a mind is prepared for this cataract of wonder and beauty, prepared for it by being crammed through several years with the trash and lumber of the pavement: which of course a man will use for the stuff of imagination, since he gets no other, but which terrifies a man of judgment as the years go

by, lest he should cnce for a single hour forget that to-day and to-morrow and for evermore it is futility and trash. That's it, that's it—the horror of being cheated or tired or starved into mistaking futility for anything more than it is or ever will be, Austin had nursed the fear, resolute to keep it alive; but it had been a nursling of his in privacy till this very moment, when Channon took it from him, quite expecting it, approving it with his recognition. That was very good. And meanwhile Channon had no desire for the delicious story of this reaction from the Euston Road since the day before yesterday; he could take it well for granted; but he did need a good many bits of bare information about Austin, all of which he could instantly clothe with his brilliant understanding.

He plainly asked how it was that Austin had brought off this adventure in historic places. If it was so great and sweet an event, the very first of its kind, it showed that something sweet and great must have happened to make it possible. Didn't it? — but Channon broke off with a laugh, almost a howl of wry amusement, recalling and reviving the thing that had happened to *him*, many and many years ago, to give him his very first chance of just such a plunge into the beauty of the world. 'What do you think it was? Tell no one — not a soul! I was a hungry lonely youth like — like another; and by accident I climbed one day into the lap of a prince of the Philistines, and he was so surprised that he fed me and lodged me for a month in his varnished gilded brass-bound court; and in return I was to paint him a colossal painting, a mile high, for the stucco of his billiard-room; and I did paint it, I painted till he

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found it perfectly suitable to his taste and fortune, God forgive me; and there it is to this day, firm in the plaster of the vile man's gilt-edged mansion - which nobody has burnt to the ground for my deliverance. But I don't tell you where it is - never have I told a soul; and myself I shall burn the house to the ground, please God, before you discover it. Twenty pounds he gave me, and the next morning I was in the Louvre and the Elysian Fields. And so you see it wasn't either great or sweet, the thing that had happened to make it possible. What happened to *you*?<sup>9</sup> But he didn't linger over the vulgar origin of Austin's twenty pounds; he seized upon the dead uncle and the oil-and-colour shop at Romford, and the uncle's embarrassed affairs and the slender margin of Austin's profit when all was settled; he swiftly seized and thrust them aside and reached out to another point, a more essential.

'Twenty clear clean pounds - to spend as you pleased - with no other claim on them?' Oh Channon knew too much; he hit upon that which gave Austin a very familiar twinge and chill. No other claim, did he ask? There crawled up Austin's back, quick on the words, a writhing coiling snake; it meandered up the hollow of his spine with caressing intimacy. The tale of the claims upon those twenty pounds was the only matter in life which he didn't exactly and closely and coolly look at; if Channon had asked what the length of the tale precisely was he couldn't have told him — and wouldn't have told him even as much of it as he admitted to himself. Yes, it was the point where Austin's bitter coolness and sharpness quavered, though surely the only point; it had come to this, that he veiled the

money he hadn't got with as many illusions as he could muster, veiled it from himself like any common and cowardly trifler. But Channon knew all about it, Channon as usual understood. The Philistine's twenty pounds, they would have done so little to satisfy the dreary claims upon them that - that Channon had found himself next morning in the Louvre; and a good thing too, for that morning in the Louvre was a possession that he still retained after thirty or forty years, and few good things can be said to last so long. Thirty or forty years hence will Austin say the same of this hour in the moon-struck square? Ah, will he *not*? — it is better than the Elysian Fields. The margin of oil-and-colour that had been left to Austin was at least enough to divide him for a while from his hobgoblins in Gray's Inn Road, almost enough to carry him beyond earshot of their chatter; and behold it has given him more, this hour that will easily last him for forty years. He was very nearly able to say so; but again, again, Channon knew all about hobgoblins, the sort that infest a blank little lodging in the neighbourhood of King's Cross station; and he caught up the word and proceeded once more.

'You're alone against them, quite alone?' Oh Lord, yes — thank goodness at any rate alone; fear would be added to fear if one weren't alone in the world. It is bad enough to be for ever fighting and scuffling with the evil beast of poverty, but at least one may be thankful that nobody looks on, nobody sees one in the act, nobody notices when one is inclined to faint. That really would be too bad. Austin was clear upon this matter, he thoroughly knew his way in it. Help from

another, fighting by one's side, an ally? As for that, Austin had seen plenty of people who fought with help from another, plenty who helped another in the fight; he envied none of them. Let us rejoice if we can say that all our strength and weakness, all our satisfaction and care, lies within the hollow of our own foolish skull; there at least is a simplification, bless it for that, in a tangled world. Austin is his own; and he isn't such a precious gift that he could wish to share it; but again he *is* his own, poor thing, and he has no desire to expose the battered prize to another. Channon was very attentive here. \*I remember that you are right.' he said. One doesn't wish for help, because help, what is called so, is a hindrance. But still, mightn't there be something in the thought of attentive eyes, clear and critical eyes, following one's accomplishment in the world? — not, you see, with any notion of helping or of being helped, but in mere calm appraisal of the thing one does, the sort one is. Austin was very well able to say that never, never in his life — neither in his blank and orphaned childhood nor in the later agitations of his age — had he known what it is to be watched in *that* fashion; and it is probably a fine and animating experience, but how can he tell? Channon was very attentive.

'So, then, you are alone, you are hungry, you are insecure; and what about your ambition — is it still fairly hard and bright? — or do you find that squalor has bitten into it, dinginess invaded it, so that it isn't the lovely weapon it was when you took it in hand at first? But of course - you have answered that question already; so long as a man is certain in his mind that

trash is trash his ambition has kept its shine. And some day accordingly the world will acknowledge that your ideas, your style, your newspaper-stuff, your books when they are written, have brought a new and real and indestructible fact into being - is that it? And then you will use your power and bully the world that slighted you - is that so? Go on, go on.' And Austin perhaps may have blushed a little to hear some of the more vulgar riots of his fancy spoken aloud by Channon in the silence of the moonlight; but he could truthfully say that his fancy wasn't vulgar at its best, and that his idea of the right sort of triumph in the world was a better idea than Channon had implied, better and more satisfying and far more dignified. Bully the world? That would indeed be a cheap revenge. Austin at his best had a grander scheme than that, locked in his breast till this most singular hour of bewitchment. All his best and only his best should be given to Channon; and out it comes accordingly, Austin's hoarded and treasured opinion of the world. Suppose the world ready and willing to place its neck beneath your feet: could the dignity of a man endure to touch it? The insolent world that does all it can to destroy you, and then comes fawning, flattering, slobbering — is a man of pride to notice the creature even so far as to stamp in its face? Austin may have done so a hundred times, he can't deny it; but that wasn't Austin as he really is, true to himself, pacing by the side of Channon through an hour that grows more lofty, more legendary with every minute. Here and now, at any rate, Austin might declare what he really is.

'Aha - we meet on it!' — Channon's cry rang out in

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jubilation. 'The world and what it is, you and I and what we really are: we meet on the discovery. I told you we were both of us lonely souls, and here we see it. You with your books, I with my paints, both of us with the lovely eternal images in our brains — we meet here; and the world is dead asleep all round us - look, not a light now in any window - and you and I walk up and down as conspirators, hatching our plot against the world. I have looked for you often; to-night I could believe that I have found you - and I never have yet, at all events. Do you remember Zoroaster, what he says of the footsteps of the lonely man, heard by night in the empty streets and the market-place? — and how the world in bed, hearing his footstep, only wonders what that thief, that thief is up to now — "wohin will der Dieb?" That's how we seem to the world. It's asleep just now, and it only turns over and mutters and snores again; in the morning it is active, it chases the thief, beats and ducks and starves him; or if the thief is a little too big and strong, it tries to flatter and please him and buy him *off*. Me it has treated in both ways; you haven't given it so much trouble as yet; but we're both of us thieves, to be starved if possible, to be bribed if necessary - anyhow to be made and kept as harmless as may be. The world and what it is! And here are two men, alone in the moonlight, who know it.' Channon turned suddenly, faced upon Austin with his odd wild gleam of a smile, and his voice dropped. 'Two men? No, there are three - you and I and that other of whom you reminded me. I said I should tell you about that other. Would you like to hear?'

## CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN QUIETLY IN CHANNON'S big low voice; and he walked with a hand upon Austin's shoulder, intently telling him the story, offering it very specially to Austin as a matter of concern between them. He talked of a man who had battled his way through a good many years, who had desired much and attained much; and this was a man who now, looking back, held that the earliest of all his achievements had been the best, the most needful and fruitful. He had achieved the solitude of which to-day he enjoys the power. This man, he hadn't been born to that great gift; he wasn't like Austin, heir from the beginning to the sole possession of himself. He had been tangled from birth in a network of ties and legends and presumptions, a heritage of character not his own, thoughts and words and deeds not his own; and it doesn't matter what they were, what their nature may have been, whether meaner or grander — the point is that a creature so caught and bound can never know what, who or what, he is; for he can't discover in the tangle where *he* begins or ends. How in that welter can you tell which is you, which is the stuff that holds and smothers you? It isn't possible, you can't; and the great achievement of this man had been to see from the first that he couldn't, and once for all to wrench himself clear and free from the stuff that enveloped him. It is the kind of deed that isn't to be deferred; the chance to accomplish it comes soon, and never comes again, and this man had known it in time and had seized the chance as it passed. There came a day when he could be certain

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at last that he was clear of all that suffocation; for he was starving alone, and nobody knew or noticed. Oh he could see very well what he was, who and what, from that day forward.

And how did it profit him? Channon, still clutching Austin's shoulder, had now forgotten him; and the big voice rose again, searching the memory of the story in a growing excitement. What did it profit this man to see himself isolated? It might have been small gain for another, but this one had a peculiar need. He was bound to know himself; for it was required of him, throwing aside everything that he wasn't, to dedicate everything that he was, the last scrap of it, to a singular service. It is a rare case; but there is no counting the cost of the sacrifice where the case is seen. And look, consider, think what it meant to him! - for this man, hardly yet a man, starving, shaking with cold, toiling, toiling in a wretched little room under a leaking roof in a dingy street, had with him all the time — had with him what Channon, stopping short with uplifted hand, breathed the word for with reverence, with awe. He had his genius, nothing else. And that was why he was bound to be sure of himself, what he was; for genius, if it is yours, can't be offered anything but yourself — you can't mix in with your offering stuff that isn't you. Ah, make no mistake: it is a jealous god, and a man mayn't stand before his genius bargaining, chaffering; there is no room for uncertainty, for double thoughts, for a little less or a little more. Here, here is the real and true and last and best in life, what finally simplifies it for ever and to the uttermost: to look up from your paints, your books, in your empty room and to see - it,

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before you there, ruling all you do and all you think, always there, always in command.

Yes, you fight for it day and night; you scheme and plot and contrive for it. Channon stood there without moving, clasped his hands behind his head and stood in darkness, for now they were in the moonless quarter of the square. You fight for it; and yesterday you thought you could do no more, you prayed that it might be enough; but to-day there is more to do, and you *can* do it and you must; and to-morrow you will hardly dare to wake, knowing you will have to do more again, and there *is* no more to be done, it is the end of you. You daren't wake, but you do wake, early in the dark; and you start your planning and plotting — asking how in the world you are to accomplish what It commands, when you can barely live, barely so much as keep alive yourself. Yet you can and you must, for It depends on you; and other gods may accept the sacrifice of your death, but this one won't, it must have your life; and you must go on living, it doesn't matter how, so as to give what it daily needs. And it does matter too, how you live, and that's the worst of it; you mustn't live battered and bruised and damaged; it won't have that, it demands a better life - not for *your* sake, merely for its own. 'Ce n'est pas toi, imbecile!' -that's what Napoleon said to the village-priest whose hand he kissed; and many's the time that this man, Channon's far-away friend, has heard the same from It. *You* aren't anything; but It lives in you and on you, and somehow or other you must make the life in which, on which, It will enjoy its greatness and its fulness. 'And you *will* make it, you *will*-! The

words leapt from Channon like despair, like triumph, from the depth of the memory in which he was lost, 'You will! - it is the test of your belief in the Thing beside you, your treasure, your divinity, your genius; it is the test and the proof.' He flung out his arms, and now he turned upon Austin again, striking him lightly and swiftly upon the shoulder. 'And I *have* made it — made for my genius the life that it commanded. I have made it and given it all; the Thing has had its will.'

This, then — this is strength; and Austin, poor soul, had sometimes thought that *he* was resolute and strong. Ah, poor soul, if now he looked for a moment at the aspect of *his* small treasure of bitterness and rebellion, all that had once seemed strong and hard and great to *him* - how he found it changed, fallen, gone to rubbish! Nothing it was, nothing after all, nothing but the spite and fret of small resentment; and this, close here at hand in the darkness, smiting him like an inspiration, was strength. One does know it, thank God, when at last one sees it; and perhaps one knows it all the better, it may be so, for having esteemed as strength one's futility. It drives the contrast home when the contrast appears, when Channon flings open the chamber of one's private puny miseries and stands there in the triumph of his genius. And again he seemed to appeal to Austin, to summon him; and Austin could see that spacious life of Channon's all there behind him - a life full of battle and tempest, full of crueller proofs and tests than those of his own that Austin had shivered under, and a life that was shining and victorious in its plenitude of to-day. A life achieved; and not,

mark you well, a life that rests at ease upon victory, contented with achievement; for a man like Channon there is no such thing as a triumph fulfilled, genius satisfied and placated. It goes on, goes on; it won't let him rest, it devours him daily; and he has made his life, as he says, only to make more of it, always more and more, for his offering to the genius that rules him. And with all this he opens the door of Austin's dingy grimy lodging, lets in a great billow of air and light and summons him forth. There is no mistaking it now; Channon has called to Austin, he has need of him.

And why, great heaven? But it wasn't possible to begin upon that; the question waited and must wait — plenty of time to deal with it to-morrow, the day after. This alone was enough for to-night, that Channon was — was *simple*: it was the word that came up for Austin, though it sounded weak. But what word are you to use of the man who faces his genius, watches it, serves it — knows that it is his and knows that it yet isn't *he*? — so that it claims him wholly and yet gives *him* no claim, do you see? Channon had been long ago the man who could starve and fight for his divinity, with no demand for himself that wasn't for *its* great sake; and for *its* sake his demand was prodigious, and he had insisted. And we know that now he is the man of honour, the prince, and still it isn't for himself that he goes on and on insisting, it isn't he who requires the honour and courtship of the world. Oh yes, indeed; that, if we never saw it before, is simplicity; and Channon adds to everything else that he possesses the gift of making all others, even Austin in his abject raiment, appear to be fussing and fretting over their own neglected merit,

their own forgotten or disregarded value. Channon, here in the middle of the market-place, his lean head rimmed with the silver of the moonlight behind him, was by the look of him a figure of genius incarnate: such an one as we might celebrate for the very person and type of the spirit itself. But that wasn't his own way of thinking. 'Ce n'est pas toi, imbecile.' he said to himself; and his genius that had sat with him in his leaking garret, years and years ago, was now throned and exalted in the high place he had won for it; and still it wasn't he, wasn't Channon himself.

'My friend, ghost that you seem to me, I - I think I've found you; I never found you before.' They stood squarely and looked at each other; but Channon had his back to the mounting moon, and it might have been only the quake in his voice that made Austin aware of the charged intensity of his face. An appeal, yes: not a command, not a permission, neither imperial nor condescending, but a call from a friend to a friend, an equal to an equal: this was the gesture of Channon's hand, once more, as he stretched it out to Austin. If that doesn't give the measure of his large simplicity, no word or gesture has ever had a meaning. Channon, himself to himself, had no grandeur, no pride, nothing that raised him towering above the obscurity of Austin; Channon greeted the man whom he had found, his friend, his familiar ghost. And was it only this morning, a few hours ago, that Austin had seen this man in the distance, wondered at him, spun his fancies about him?-and now those fancies had come alive, they vaguely stirred in the night with the breathing and flushing of things that are really true. Mystery and

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marvel — as inscrutable, as velvet-soft in the night as the caverns of blackness in the great church-front that was piled above them; and also as imminent, as fixed and certain as the stone of its soaring towers. Little we reckon of the reason of the towers and porches, why they are there, why they are so; we see them, we don't doubt the sure fact of their splendid presence. In the light of morning we shall discover what is now soft-hidden in the blackness; but it won't be more real, it can't be, than it now is at midnight; and as for the reason of it, why it was made as it is - who cares, who cares? If not to-morrow, another day and another may have light for our waiting questions; time enough there will be for them all in plenty. We wait in peace, we know what we know; we shall discover a great deal more, no doubt, in the clarity of the waking world.

The world!-the very word is like a knell. Where was Austin when the world should awake? He knows what he knows indeed; and this much is easy knowledge, that the world between him and Channon is as solid and sure as any mountain of buttressed stone. It wasn't poor Simpkin's pertness that Austin now needed to recall; Simpkin was out of the story, banished and abolished for good. But the throng remained; and true it may be that Austin and Channon had joined hands in the darkness above it - yet the gross people would be there between them in the light, and what's the good of denying it? Even supposing - well, even supposing that Austin were as comely and seemly as he isn't, still he would shrink from joining hands with Channon in the light, in the crowd. Wouldn't he? - for say what you will, the crowd and the light are no setting for a

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compact between a man and a man, two men of pride, two men who actually know that trash is trash. The staring stupid world is too manifestly wrong in such a scene; it spoils everything, that's all. And Channon, only look at him - he is formed and prepared and armed for the world; he chases it *off* with a bare shake of his head, but it returns, and it *has* to return; for the fulness of his life has need of it, and his genius has need of his life. There seemed to be one place only where Austin and Channon could rightly meet, the historic square at midnight, ringed round by a world that merely muttered in its sleep, hearing their footsteps. Are they never to meet again then, till the day that Channon had spoken of long ago, this morning — the day when again they may happen to meet as pilgrims in the square? A very little more, and the coiling snakes would be at work upon Austin's back, nimbly reminding him of things forgotten for an hour.

And didn't he yet know Channon better than that? Channon was supreme - admit it and have done with it once for all. Channon put the world in its place as fitly and flatly as he had put little Simpkin; let Austin remember and have faith. With a great sweep of the hand Channon rent the entanglement. 'Like *that!*' he cried, flinging his long arm behind him, shoulder-high. The gross creatures, could *they* get between him and his will? 'Come and see - see me at my work; and tell me then that the world is too much with me!' Can't Austin understand that if a man works, what the right man means by working, he works - with forty people at his right hand - in a desert, in a solitary place, in the empty circle of an unbroken horizon? No living soul

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has ever stood within Channon's ken while he was at work, and he has been always at work, always is and always will be. To such a man it is one and the same, a crowd or a solitude; and the friend of such a man will find him utterly alone, at all times, everywhere. 'Come and see — you will soon be convinced, my friend.' And there was something else that Channon had to say, gravely and finely — something that was concerned with a pair of intelligent eyes, following a man's achievement, watching and appraising him. Austin had never had that experience — and no, perhaps not Channon either. Intelligence is rare, what the right man calls intelligence; faithful and clear-eyed estimation is rare indeed. 'You shall see what you think of it at last,' said Channon seriously; 'perhaps we shall both of us see. It may be interesting. Come.' And this was their parting that night; Austin, treading upon clouds and dreams, left him still standing in the deserted square.

## CHAPTER SIX

**I**T WAS AT THE HEIGHT OF THE DAY AND OF THE SUMMER that Austin first saw Bintworth. It was so in fact; Bintworth on its hill-top was stirring and shining in breezy leafy June; but surely it couldn't have been otherwise, for who can imagine a first sight of Bintworth in any light or air but of June at its height? Bintworth is its own summer, surely, and it shines with its own noon-day for all who come there new to it; and to Austin, when he emerged from the bowery lane that climbed the hill, when he stood before the sudden sight of the house itself - to him the white clouds in the sky and the great breeze in the beeches and the grey gables of the house were one, were all the bountiful and lovely soul, the spirit of the place. He looked down the short straight path of approach to the house - short and wide and grass-bordered it was, opening suddenly from the secluded lane, without a fence or a gate; and to right and left the great beeches stirred and sighed like a wash of waters, and between them was the sight of the house, five grey pointed gables in a row, stately and kindly and venerable. That was the first appearance of Bintworth, and Austin stood long at the sight, listening to the murmur of the tide of summer, accepting the bounty that came rolling in on the breeze of the great blue spaces and the dancing shadows. Then he set forth along the pathway to the porch under the midmost of the gables. There was another building that he saw as he approached, screened away to the right of the house among the beechen green. It was close to the house, linked indeed with the house, and it showed a clear-cut trim-

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ness of new finish, a range of high windows, the cornice of a roof or a balustrade that caught the sun; but this was momentary, a sidelong impression as Austin reached the open door in the porch. And then there was the dim depth and coolness of the house within, a shining wooden floor, a green dark hanging of figures and trees on the wall that faced him; and there was more, but at this point things happened quickly, he had to deal with a courteous old man who appeared in the doorway - he had to explain himself, to be admitted and directed, and things quieted down again only when the old man had departed and Austin was left upon the threshold of another room, a room that opened from the dim green hall - left to himself with a direction to go forward in that quarter 'to the gallery.' Ah, the gallery! But it was needful to pause before going forward; for these impressions mustn't be shaken or flurried, they must be absorbed in prudence, and here was a room to be crossed, a solemn kind of parlour, with the gallery to be reached by another door in front. What of the parlour? There were more green hangings, there was a very soft old fragrance in the air, there were great jars and bowls of flowery china; and there was a gleam of metal — silver, steel? — only Austin had already crossed the room and reached the further door; and this he pushed open to be met with the surprise, not of the gallery, but of a wide passage, a little length of sunny pillared corridor; and it wasn't possible to keep things in order at all, he was at the end of the corridor in a moment, standing before a high and curtained arch. And so he lifted the curtain and went on.

Great silence, great size - light that seemed grey after

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the sunshine, a full diffusion of pallor - but chiefly silence and height, and again a floor that ran shining and shining ahead, clear and free - and another fragrance, a slight light tang in the air as soon as he lifted the curtain; well, it was indeed the gallery. It stretched ahead a long way to the warmer light of windows at the far end, and the broad span of the ceiling above was a rich intricacy of gold and blue, washed over at intervals by the pallor of windows high on the right; and the walls, they perhaps were darkly panelled—but don't look at the walls just yet, not while a sort of tremor and suffocation clutch at the mind and the throat of the little thing, the little thing one is in this immensity. Let it be said - at any rate there was none to see; let it be said that in Austin's brain there was a swim and surge that reached his eyes, and reached them as tears. He was all alone in the middle of the shining floor, the hushed splendour of the place was around him, and that which flooded his brain was as sweet and as painful as love itself. 'I am here—it is this!' Love isn't eloquent in words, it may be; but the lover knows the queer ache of desperation that is behind the poor plain words. Austin had nothing to say but that here he was, seeing at last what he actually saw; yet his eyes brimmed over, they were warm with tears, and it wasn't surprising. Desperate - he felt that, all so little as he had to say. But he might have more to say presently, before long, if he were left alone in the shining gallery. He walked very slowly to the end of it, to the big bay of warm-lighted windows at the further end, and still he was alone, there wasn't a sound but his own slow tread on the polished boards.

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The walls of the gallery then, darkly panelled, were hung with many pictures. Austin, here and now, was in the company of Channon's achievement, in the temple he had raised to his genius, and Austin had to discover that until this moment he knew nothing of Channon. For all these weeks since that midnight talk he had known his friend; he had held Channon firmly by the hand, he had shared his life - though they hadn't met and not a word had passed between them. And all the time, all the time there had been *this* - and here and now it suddenly opened out and rose and towered above a daunted intruder, almost a stranger, anyhow a friend with a sinking heart. The life that Channon had made for It — Channon had spoken of that, Austin had seen the vision plainly, a vision of glorious storm and flashing victory and adventure that never ceased; and Austin had lived with that vision, he had lived into it for weeks. But *this!* — this silence and cool light and inviolate bigness that arched like a dome over nothing in the world, nothing whatever, save the lonely wordless patient work of a man. Has Channon fought and conquered? No doubt he has, from end to end of the ringing plains; but what is that, what is tempest and strife? - he has worked. And he said so, he said that he had worked in a desert; but Austin's silly head was so full of his own ridiculous fears and fancies that he hadn't understood the name of work when he heard it. The lovely eternal images under the roof of silence - these were the life of Channon, they *have* been all the time. Austin gazed upon the long labour of Channon's hand, and his heart sank to think of himself as an intruder, a stranger to all that was really Channon.

It was out of his reach. Oh of course he could gaze at the pictures, and he did gaze for a time; up and down the long gallery he wandered, staring his full. He saw the images, he could even have used his intelligence to speak of them. But is it intelligence that will help him here? You know it isn't; his cleverness only tells him he is a fool. It is sad to be so very acute that on a first visit to Bintworth, after a faltering ramble up and down the length of the gallery, you stray away to the open windows at the end and feel inclined to make this only promise to yourself—to look at Channon's pictures never again. It isn't folly, it is the best of Austin's acuteness. What should he want of the eternal images but that which they will never give him? To look at them with Austin's eyes, to speak of them with Austin's own understanding of truth and beauty - don't you see what flat-footed nonsense that would be? He turned away from the sight of them and tried to look at the view from the windows, the fair blue summer-land which they commanded. He didn't wish for Channon's pictures if they would only show him what *he* could see. To Channon they were his life, and Channon could see in them his life, and Austin might see in them wonder and beauty and glory, but not what Channon saw. It is enough to make a man impatient with his clever perceptions; Austin had plenty of these, he pushed them away from him with a gush of weariness. Imagine that Austin should be content with his own old insight and understanding, face to face for the first time with all that was really Channon 1 — it is plainly nonsense.

He tried again however - one mustn't be defeated by a fantasy, what might be such. He turned back again

into the company of the pictures, he lingered and loitered before this one and that, and he did very likely surrender himself to the glory that he saw. He may even have done so for a good long while; nobody yet came to interrupt him. But the point is that of all he saw, of all his enthusiasm, of all the just and fine and penetrating things he might say, there was nothing he could take seriously for a moment as soon as he thought of Channon. In that great lucid unresting mind of Channon these images had shaped their beauty; and Austin with *his* admiration, he couldn't touch the hem of the garment of the beauty they had worn for Channon. Call it a fantasy, it is still enough to make Austin feel that Channon escapes him here, and this time for good and ever. It isn't and it can't be a pleasant thought - so far from it that Austin was twinged with furious jealousy, and knew it. He wanted to hold Channon fast and keep him; it was the spirit of their midnight compact. But if Channon had lived *thus*<sup>^</sup> in remote communion with loveliness that was beyond the reach of Austin, Channon would never in truth be caught and held, and he must be aware of it himself. It is only his generosity and his simplicity that could put it into his head to be kind to an adorer, and the adorer isn't man enough, it would seem, to accept a beautiful offer with simplicity and generosity of Channon's kind. It is small, it is petty to be thinking of your own emptiness when Channon forgets it - to be wondering how you shall bind Channon down when he has sought you unasked. Austin surely was a more magnanimous lover - wasn't he? But the sight of the pictures didn't help him to find out.

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The windows at the end of the gallery were open to a green terrace, a dipping slope, a waving rustle of tree-tops, and beyond these lay the blue heart of the country, wide to the summer, rippling and rolling away toward hills that were themselves no more than a broken ripple along the sky-line. Austin passed out upon the terrace - or rather he paused, before reaching the shaven turf, upon a flagged space beneath the windows, a space very nobly arrayed and adorned with carving of stone, clipping of greenery; a kind of unroofed pavillion, you might call it, where he stood and vainly tried to assemble the sights and admonitions of the hour. 'Here I am - this is it I' - he really couldn't get much further than the same poor words. Here he was, and he was missing the whole of it, his mind wouldn't act; he could only waste the minutes on the foolish turmoil of himself. One seeks to batter the mind into sensitive play; but that's no good, it is far too busy with its private pains; it continues to repeat that it desires and desires and can't be satisfied. It is jealous, jealous of the great wondrous images in the gallery there; and the phrase may sound absurd when you say it, but it isn't absurd to feel that in the immensity and secrecy of his lovely labour, past and present and to come, Channon is lost to you. There's what accounts for the ache of desperation. It has never been a happy moment, that in which a man desires to give and give, and still to give more again, while he sees that nothing he has to give is needed - or if anything, then only the bleak confession of his uselessness. Well then, consider this, let this be remembered for support when all is said - that Austin isn't such a fool as to think he can accompany Channon

where he can't, where nobody can. This perception is one that he can offer Channon honourably, and it may be a rarer and a more unusual than you suppose. Simpkin - the name of Simpkin turned up with a sudden consoling smile; Simpkin, you see, had proposed to understand and accompany Channon everywhere.

And anyhow the ache of desperation — to a magnanimous lover it is sweet too, sweet after all. Austin stood on the terrace, in the sun and the breeze, and the oath that he swore there was large enough and generous enough to content him. Is it rightly to be called an oath? It wasn't exactly an oath, it was more like a masterful cry of insistence, almost a menace; but there are threats that spring from resolutions not unbeautiful, and this was one of them. 'I *will* be used!' — that was how it began. It is all very well for those silent pictures to declare that they dwell with Channon apart, that they and Channon are one, that he and they are entire and all-sufficient; but they can't forbid that Austin should deliver his threat, and it remains with Austin, not with them, to see to its fulfilment. If Austin determined that he *would* be used, needed or no — and if he meant it enough, what he said — why something will come of it, Austin will have his way in the end. And there was a good reason why Austin could be certain of this. He vowed that he intended to be used, but in truth he meant more; and even if Channon's life, his real life, had no use for him whatever, it might always destroy him, and that would satisfy Austin. He wished to give; and there is one gift, two gifts indeed there are, which no one can throw back on you if you choose to give them - your prayers, your life. 'I *will* be destroyed,'

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said Austin, and if Austin really meant it there could be none, not Channon himself, to say him nay. The desperation of a great-hearted lover - it is undoubtedly sweet to him at times.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

AND HE TURNED ACCORDINGLY, MUCH ENCOURAGED, to meet the tall and gracious lady who emerged from the window of the gallery. She moved serenely, she spoke tunefully, she was sorry to have been detained and delayed; she was Mrs Channon. She walked along the terrace at Austin's side, spreading her sunshade over her golden head, and her golden head she carried with care, like a fragile and costly vessel. She was more of a picture than anything Channon had ever painted. She tilted her roseate sunshade on her shoulder, and the warm glow of its shadow fell on her neck and part of her dress, and she even trailed her white skirt on the daisied grass; nothing of Channon's had ever looked so like a picture. Surely there must be a peacock on the terrace—a stone seat—at least a sundial? 'My husband will be free before long. You've seen the gallery?' At any rate here was a fantastic tuffet of yew, and at the end of the terrace there was the angle of a clipped and castellated hedge. 'My husband has some visitors. He will be showing them round the whole place presently, and you must join them.' But no, perhaps she was right; she didn't pause by the pyramid of yew, or by the hedge either. She descended the steps to the lower lawn, and see how naturally, negligently, her free hand catches at her skirt as she makes the descent. It was easy to watch Mrs Channon, but not so easy to attend to her words. Their tune, however, was delicious. 'Oh yes, no doubt my husband expects you; he expects every one, all his friends.' It was a pleasing air, if the words were hackneyed; Mrs Channon seemed to know them well.

She possibly wasn't very young, but she was fair and slender. It appeared difficult to make an impression on her by means of talk. Austin's remarks were proffered rather jerkily, more so than beseemed the tranquil poise of her head; but however you may blurt your remarks at her, you will note them spent and exhausted before they reach her delicate surface. She bears a charm; the pellet that is jerked at her becomes a flake of down, flutters in mid-air and floats to her feet. Had Austin an uncomfortable sense that he needed explaining and accounting for, he in his old disgracefulness upon the daisied turf, at a picture's side? His explanation, if he attempted one, drifted as lightly round his companion as the gauze of the scarf that fell from her shoulder; she charmed its weight into nothingness, it was gone. Her husband was always glad to see his friends, to show them his gallery. Yes, his friends - but the case of Austin was peculiar; Mrs Channon had only to look at him to see that he wasn't of the sort you expect at Bintworth. How comes it that Channon has extended his friendship to this poor waif? Can't the lady of the picture perceive that a singular thing must have happened? - hasn't she heard of a midnight talk, a moonlit square, a ghost? It might seem that she simply hasn't - only that with an intangible rose-tinted creature of this sort you can't be sure, she appears to have heard of everything and of nothing. Mrs Channon undulated sweetly across the lawn, with no more evident responsibility on her than one of the white lilies by the castelated hedge. She was quite as decorative as they; she might have been designed for the very purpose of looking frail and gracious in the shadow of the cedar.

She maintained her melody as they strolled. Ah, her husband and Austin had met out there, in that beautiful place? - what a place to meet in! Her husband had returned from abroad with treasures, with studies, a harvest of work - how he had worked in Italy! - as he always did work, to be sure, for he couldn't be idle, you couldn't wish him to be idle; he pined if he hadn't the enjoyment of his work. 'And he met you by chance, in that interesting place?' Indeed he found so many friends, wherever he went. Nothing delights him more than to pick up a friend, a new friend - and especially a young new friend, and if the new young friend is clever and talented as well, then he is pleased indeed. And the reason is that he feels — but Mrs Channon bubbled into musical laughter as she caught back the word: not that he feels, that he *is* so young himself. He needs the company of his age; he loves to be understood, to be encouraged by generous sympathy. And Mrs Channon very prettily and flowingly explained that her husband - only first let her call the attention of Austin to this quaint recess of the garden, a little Italian theatre of greenery, stage and scene complete, that he had designed himself after a famous model; she explained then that her husband, artist as he was, had another side to him, a boyish human sociable side. Absorbed as he was in his work, he yet loved gaiety, loved humanity, and one mustn't think of him only — but even Mrs Channon was brought to a pause, as it seemed to Austin, when at a turn in their course she happened to notice the companion of her stroll. It might almost appear that the words of her tune were a little too well known to Mrs Channon;

sometimes she might forget she was repeating them.

No, Austin's hat and coat-collar weren't entirely of the sort you expect to see at Bintworth. They may have taken Mrs Channon by surprise for half a minute; but then they settled into their right category, and the stroll continued. The new young friend must be exceptionally clever, that was all; Mrs Channon's interest in Austin's conspicuous talent was marked in the chimes of her voice. She even went so far as to ask him about his talent. 'You are an artist, you paint?' Austin could speak up confidently to this question at least - oh no, no, he didn't paint. But it puzzled him to proceed further, and Mrs Channon didn't intend to abandon her line, having found it. What then, what did he do? Austin thought of what he did, he saw it very clearly in his mind; and he also saw the enchanted garden of Bintworth, the lordly cedar, the woman like a tall flower of June in her sheltered corner; and it was amusing to put the two clear visions side by side, and not very easy to explain to Mrs Channon why he smiled. What sort of a talent are you to bring from a lodging-house off Gray's Inn Road and lay before the feet of Mrs Channon, with her peacock and her sundial and her Italian theatre? Or would it be simpler to take Mrs Channon and set her down in a blighted blistered little room under a sloping roof - where in summer the wafted presence of a mean street seems to soak into the very paper of the wall and the very blanket of the bed, oozing out again in winter to make the stuffiness that is at the bottom of the draughtiness; to place Mrs Channon at the writing-table that is also the washing-table, and there invite her to gaze upon the talent of Austin -

wouldn't that be simpler? And isn't this a pretty vision to go veering off into at such a moment, upon the lawn at Bintworth? But it shows at a glance that Mrs Channon is not a person to whom it is easy to describe one's talent.

She had to be satisfied, however; she had hit upon her line and she persisted. Well, you see — Austin's talent was one that would enchant the world, no doubt, if the world allowed itself the chance of beholding it. But the world, it so contrives that every minute of Austin's life shall be spent, not in exhibiting his talent, but in doing the few odd jobs that are needful before the exhibition can begin. A coat to put on and a fire to light and a meal to eat — only a few odd jobs, nothing to speak of. And yet, you see, each of them takes a day, a week; and indeed you may drive your pen for more than a week, and even then perhaps it hasn't lit your fire for a day, or produced a dinner for two or three evenings. Austin's talent is enchanting, but it doesn't help him over the odd jobs, and his hand for these is a very poor one indeed; he bungles them ever more awkwardly, it would seem. For the last few weeks, since his meeting with Channon, he has chiefly subsisted upon clouds and dreams, and really they have supported him better than he has often supported himself; for it is all but meat and drink to know that Channon knows, that Channon looks back and remembers - and if Channon, by the way, why not the gracious lady herself, come to think of it? Hasn't her place been at Channon's side, doesn't she too remember? Well, look at her! - you won't find the stain and the scar of battle upon *her* fair freshness, look as you may. *She* knows

only Bintworth, the green terrace and the blue summer-country are the bounds of *her* remembrance. She must have the account of Austin's talent that will suit her, and in this account there is one advantage, for it can be given in two words. 'Ah, you write - you are a writer? And what do you write?' Yes, that *is* the inconvenience of the account, that it moves the next question so promptly. But it was lucky that Mrs Channon brought it out as they reached an opening in some screen of bosage — they seemed to have left the lawn, they had wandered on among mazy shadowy ways; anyhow, they reached this opening at the moment, and a sight was before them which put the punctual question aside.

It was the sight of Bintworth itself, a full and perfect display of Bintworth. Roofs and gables and chimneys of the grey old house, they were gathered together in a mass like a little township, like a little ancient well-knit city-state, at home with itself. Such a comfortable sense of completeness and compactness and honest providence there was about the old mass of the building, a place well-stored against the winter, sure of its power to live and prosper on its own good stuff; such was the old house with its appurtenances of Bintworth. And then beside it, behind it, around it, showing and shining among the trees, daring and calm and dominant, was the work of the new life that had descended upon Bintworth—the work of the bold outrageous hand of genius, fully as sure of itself as the ancient homeliness of the township. There was much of the new life, more than one expected, and it was scattered around, it disappeared and appeared among the trees; it looked out here and there, the columns of a cloister, spacious steps,

a garlanded cornice - who knows what? Genius that knows no fear! - you can only say that before it the rest of us fail and flag a trifle, we can't tell what to think of it, we pause and gape. What *is* it all, what is it about? It is useless to turn to Mrs Channon; too well she knows what it is and what about. Her mellifluous phrasing is of no help to a man at a loss. Austin, to be sure, will be interested to hear that her husband hoped to make something quite unique of Bintworth, something that finally would express him, a complete memorial of himself. The gallery of pictures — that was only a part of it; there was much more already, one day there would be more still. A temple of beauty, a college of artistry, a light shining for ever on the hill-top — it will have to be all this before Channon is satisfied, if satisfied he ever will be. His ideas are so great, and they are always growing. Mrs Channon, waving her hand, gracefully sketched the extent to which they daily grew.

Simpkin indeed had himself been struck by their abounding growth. 'The money that Channon is spending at Bintworth-!' The gracious lady expressed it with more refinement; but the phrase, the phrase of Simpkin, was louder in Austin's head. And the tune of the letter to Lady Marion - do you remember that? At one point in the prospect, somewhere among the trees, there appeared visible signs of the growth of Channon's ideas, they were caught in the act of growing; for there was building in progress, wasn't there? — scaffolding-poles, glimpses of a litter of rubbish where work was on hand? Work unfinished, yes, but for the moment at a standstill; Mrs. Channon men-

tioned that it had been arrested of late, while her husband reconsidered his idea of the court, the cloister, the belfry; of this idea in particular the growth had been amazing. 'The belfry, you see, *must* be right.' And what might the belfry be about, or the cloister? But these questions of Austin's were breathed in the silence of his brain, if anywhere; and they were foolish questions, he was ready enough to believe in the meaning of the belfry. It was only a little unnerving to see with his own eyes that which had impressed, be it not forgotten, Simpkin himself. Genius that isn't afraid, not even of its own ideas, not even of their — well, of their expense! There is something in this that strikes on the ear very loudly, after all that silence of the picture-gallery. But good heavens, for that matter what is Austin's knowledge of expense? He only knows that it is rash to spend tenpence rather than sixpence on a Saturday night. Channon is grandly expressing himself in Bintworth, and the old house sits there in the midst, looks on, lends itself to the daring hand of genius. You might expect it to look a little startled and unnerved; but the old house would appear to take it quietly.

'I see,' said Mrs Channon, 'my husband's secretary on the terrace; he may bring a message.' So they returned to the lawn by a broad green alley, and Austin saw a black-coated figure on the terrace which proved to be not at all Simpkin as he approached, but a much thicker and burlier young man. 'It's Mr Blake,' said Mrs Channon. Mr Blake was charged with a message for the lady, and he delivered it with circumspection. He didn't join the stroll, he stopped it; he planted himself

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squarely in front of Mrs Channon and surprised her attention. This, as we know, is not a feat as simple as it might be; it demands a knack to hit the surface of her sweetness with the proper force. Mr Blake was clear and firm. He gave Mrs Channon a very explicit direction to the effect that Mr Bumpus had arrived - that same Mr Bumpus who had been, as she was aware, expected. 'Certainly, I know Mr Bumpus,' cried Mrs Channon. No - this was not that other Mr Bumpus whom Mrs Channon knew; this was the gentleman expected to-day, he who had so particularly desired to see the new constructions. 'Certainly, I remember his letter.' Mr Blake had a pair of quick eyes in his round red face; they twisted upon Austin for a moment over the letter that Mrs Channon remembered. 'This Mr Bumpus didn't write *that* letter,' said the secretary; 'he wrote the letter of which Mr Channon spoke to you this morning.' The young man still blocked the way; he watched the lady with care until his message had reached its destination. 'Oh,' said Mrs Channon - she looked doubtful. And when Mrs Channon, ceasing to know and to remember, looks doubtful, it is apparently the sign that you have hit your mark; for the secretary now released her, and they proceeded towards the house, the three of them.

They reached the fine flagged space in front of the windows of the gallery at the moment when Channon issued from the gallery with two companions, a man and a woman. 'Ah, my good young friend of the market-place!' - Channon's welcome pealed out before them all, a genial delightful cry. They met again in public and in daylight, and it made no difference, Chan-

non and Austin were trusting and trusted friends. Channon immediately dropped the man and the woman, seized Austin by the arm and joyfully proclaimed their meeting. 'This is my friend who really understands me — we tell each other all our secrets!' He presented his friend to the world assembled; he drew Austin to his side and together they faced - whatever there was to face, Mrs Channon and the burly young man, Mr Bumpus and a small creature who glittered and shimmered at a distance. They were enough of a company to make Austin feel very publicly presented; but Channon had a way with him to nerve the friend of his choice. How easily things happen after all! You vex yourself into such turmoils while they aren't happening, earth and heaven are shaken with your lonely thoughts. And here is Austin now, cool in the head, pleased and contented in public, with a slight sense of having shown himself rather ridiculous over his turmoils. But nobody knew of them, and Channon made all things easy, and Austin was a sensible simple cool-headed man. A pleasant and interesting little party was assembled in front of the gallery-windows of Bintworth, and Channon proposed to lead the party on a tour of inspection there and then.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**S**O THEY SET FORTH ALONG THE TERRACE, CHANNON firmly retaining Austin at his side. 'Now I shall tell you.' he said to Austin, 'or rather you shall see for yourself, the secret of my life at Bintworth. I told you all my other secrets when we last met; this one is new to you.' He led the way with Austin, the others followed. The terrace ran along the front of the house, and at the end it was masked by streamers of greenery, by rose-hung traceries, by the sprawling and ramping of many flowers and leaves — enough, by vagueness and sweetness. Channon glanced behind him, found Mr Bumpus detached at his heels and beckoned him forward. 'My dear Bumpus, we're leaving you out-come!' The shimmering creature was engaged with Mrs Channon, the secretary seemed to have slipped away. They proceeded to thread the fragrant maze, from which they issued upon a green secluded court or close, and there was more fragrance everywhere, and the tinkle of splashing water; and there was the new smooth wall of a building, a flight of steps, an echoing dark entry — what was there, what wasn't there? Everything was around them all at once, while Channon was throwing a word of encouragement to Bumpus - while Channon was pressing Austin's arm and directing his eye - while Bumpus was dropping behind again unnoticed on the steps, in the vaulted entry. Where were they? 'Now.' exclaimed Channon excitedly, 'now you shall see where I am. I only told you where I have been.' He clutched Austin and thrust him forward through an open doorway. 'Now,' cried Channon, 'here it begins.'

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There it began. It began with a hall, high-roofed, galleried, like the hall of a college. The building was complete, but it was still in a confusion of unfinished planking, ladders, pails, swathed woodwork; it was all unfinished within, and operations of some sort were proceeding, though no one was at work. Ah yes, at the end, on the end wall! — but Channon was already striding ahead, towards the dais at the end, beckoning, summoning the rest; and half-way up he stopped, turned, waved aside Bumpus, caught Austin again by the shoulder and bade him look, look! - pointing to the roof, to the bay of a window, and to the wall, the wall at the end. 'You see, you see! Here it begins. That's where I'm working now, on that wall. That's the size I am, the size of that wall — it's what you must understand. And when that's done, here are the others waiting—and when they're done, others again. Here's space at last, room enough to move in, room for *me!*' He broke away again, left them in the middle of the floor and moved to and fro with restless strides; with head tilted he searched the walls, the height and breadth of the great painted vision that faced him, that faced them all — and then the blank spaces to right and left, where he gazed with sweeping eyes, avid and silent and absorbed. He paced to and fro with an action of vigilance and excitement and stealth — almost stealthily, yes, as though he had surprised the sight of a portent. He looked like a great watchful untamable cat. He hadn't the faintest attention for Austin now, or for anyone. The little group of his visitors were dropped out of hand; there was no distinction between one and another, they were a small grey mass in the

middle of the floor, they were nowhere. So it began.

The other visitors, however, didn't perhaps feel as grey and indistinguishable as Austin felt. The little woman who glittered - she, for example, soon darted forth into Channon's solitude, she hurled herself against the pacing monster. He jerked a shoulder as though to shake off a buzzing insect, and she swooped in a bright circle and returned again — there she was again in his ear; and Mr Bumpus, he too lurched suddenly forward with a word and a demand. 'Is it your idea, Mr Channon -?' Bumpus was a short man, very sturdy, with a flopping steel-dark moustache; his voice was harsh. 'Then would you propose, Mr Channon -?' But Bumpus had no good chance against the brilliant insect. She had possession of Channon's ear, and when he fairly noticed her he relaxed, he bent to her, he seemed to be pleased with her quick sharp point of colour. Bumpus didn't give way without a struggle; his blunt-headed demand was in the air, and he stood firm for a reply. Channon, without turning, spoke clearly. 'Yes, my dear Bumpus, it is distinctly my idea that these walls should be painted by me.' 'And it's my idea too, Mr Bumpus — remember that!' sang out the little sharp woman; and Channon's large hand seemed to descend upon her and to miss her as he carelessly laughed at her remark. 'Your idea, you little absurdity!' he said; 'why you've only one idea in your head — that I should paint you; and I'm not going to paint you, as you very well know.' She slipped round him with a little fizzing effervescence of mirth. 'Oh yes, beloved master, you are!' — and she involved him, he allowed himself to be drawn off to the end of the

hall by her diminutive flings and flourishes. Bumpus was left detached.

His glare upon Austin was stony; but Mrs Channon was at hand. 'Her ladyship knows how to manage your good gentleman, I should say,' he remarked with playfulness to Mrs. Channon; 'she'll get her portrait, I should say.' The playfulness of Mr Bumpus had considerable force of blow. 'Dear Lady Cordelia.' said Mrs Channon serenely, 'she knows how to manage you all, I'm sure.' Would she get her portrait? - as to that Mrs Channon had no opinion, she didn't know whether her husband had decided to paint her or not. 'It won't be for him to decide, I'm thinking,' said Bumpus. But he wanted to hear from Mrs Channon — he wanted her to be kind enough to answer a question that he could put, you might say, in a nutshell. 'My husband's idea -' began Mrs Channon with readiness. But no, she must first be so kind as to allow Mr Bumpus, while he swung a very massive gold-rimmed eyeglass upon a stout red finger, to formulate a doubt, by no means more than a doubt, that disturbed his mind with regard to the practicability of the very fine, very great, very high-minded and public-spirited idea of Mr Channon's - the idea, in short, that didn't fit into the nutshell as easily as Mr Bumpus had expected. But this didn't trouble Mrs Channon; she declared that her husband had thought of that very point when his idea had first occurred to him. 'Is it practical?' he had said to himself, and Mrs Channon couldn't say *what* pains he had taken to make sure that it was. And seeing that he knew he could look to those who understood him for support — why then he *was* sure, you see, and Mrs

Channon could placidly wait for the next doubt in the mind of Mr Bumpus that needed to be resolved. 'Now all this,' he pursued, waving the eye-glass at the walls of the hall - Very beautiful of course, full of taste, I can see that; but what I ask myself is —' Why again, another of the very questions that her husband had asked himself, as Mrs Channon particularly remembered; she could see how well Mr Bumpus had grasped her husband's idea.

They had all moved on by this time; they were in the open air, they were among columns and arcades. They were scrambling through unfinished windows, they were walking up planks — or again they were pausing in a paved cloister-walk, or something of the sort, and Channon was always striding ahead, and Lady Cordelia was always at his elbow, and Bumpus was still asking himself judicious questions that Mrs Channon could answer, could answer before they were asked. But in the cloister-walk, if such it was, Channon wheeled around and made once more for Austin. 'I want you,' he said, 'to take this in; you and I can understand it. (Oh, my dear Bumpus, forgive me, forgive me!) Don't listen to that nonsensical little woman; she hasn't a rational thought. You and I are the only two people here who know what work is, and thought, and here is the place for us both. You shall work here, and think too; or if not you, others like you, in time to be. All work and all thought shall flourish here when I am gone.' Combing his fingers through the thinness of his grey hair, Channon flashed and rang out and was exalted in talk. He spoke of the glory and the beauty that was to be, the citadel of art that he was creating,

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the beacon that he would leave behind him on the hill-top - and how it would stand there and shine and inspire the young Channons, the gallant young Austins, all the appealing striving young ghosts of the future — and how it would tower above the vile and vulgar world, high over the heads of those who couldn't understand. 'This is the size of me — you begin to see it; you can't till you see me here. I'm like the man in the poem, the other painter; I need four walls of the new Jerusalem to paint, to show what I am, and here I have them, not four but fifty - room for *me!*' He backed again abruptly into Bumpus, who was listening with all his stare. 'My dear Bumpus, forgive me! This bores you, I fear. But it will soon be time for luncheon.'

On the contrary, Bumpus was interested, distinctly interested. 'But touching what you said, Mr Channon, of your work, and of the work, as I understood you, of this gentleman here, it strikes me that you overlook — and overlook, if I may say so, in common with most of the artistic profession -' 'Eh?' said Channon; 'ah, my dear Bumpus, we all know your work; don't imagine that we forget it for an instant. I'm told that the smoke of your chimneys at Wolverhampton (not Wolverhampton? Pandemonium, to be sure) is in all probability visible from the moon. We're not likely to overlook it at Bintworth; we do you the fullest justice, never doubt it. But come, let's finish our round. Lady Cordelia thinks that if she pretends to understand my schemes and my plans I shall consent to paint her portrait; but I have told her a thousand times that I paint flesh and blood — I can't paint the

portrait of a shriek and a flutter in a pearl necklace. Lay hold of her if you can, my good Bumpus, and control her; she needs a strong silent man like you, a real man. Oh, you must be firmer than that; you must use your weight. And now let us go forward.' The weight of his playfulness at any rate Mr Bumpus was ready to use with the little lady; but by the time he had set it in motion she wasn't there. So he addressed himself again to Channon, holding him back and tapping him on the breast with the eye-glass; and Channon from his height looked down with indulgent attention, encouraged him with light consoling cries, while Bumpus put before him, as a reasonable man, certain doubts, by no means certainties, that had occurred to him in the course of his most interesting visit. 'Exceedingly well put, my dear Bumpus.' said Channon at length; 'Wolverhampton is a great place; what Wolverhampton thinks to-day the world will think - not only to-morrow, but for ever. Be sure that Bintworth won't forget it.' He led Mr Bumpus forward with a kindly gesture.

Lady Cordelia and Mrs Channon followed behind, and Austin was with them; but Lady Cordelia is one who makes her own privacy when she needs it - she made herself quite alone with Mrs Channon. She had much to say to that lady, and it seemed to matter little in what order she said it. Her talk was no dull stream; it was the blown spray of talk, it hung about her with a shifting sparkle as she moved. But as the rainbow in the flying cataract, the subject of her talk shone steady in the midst of it, and it was the master, the beloved master, the dear disdainful bullying jeering master,

who despises us all so profoundly and is such a love and only lives for his darling glorious work. Won't it be grand if that unspeakable Bumpus can be brought to do something handsome? Bumpus has all the money that nobody else can get, and Lady Cordelia knows too well of her own experience how much that is - the money that she can't get, she alone, is literally millions. But how does one deal with a thing like Bumpus? — there ought to be some safe way of drugging and robbing a man with a moustache like that. 'The dear master,' cried Lady Cordelia, 'he knows how to manage *me* — he can twist me round his finger!' But that splendid scornful way of his, so effective with Lady Cordelia, may be above the head of the impossible Bumpus — who seems to think he may be taken seriously. As if the master could argue and explain things to Bumpuses! 'Mrs Channon, *you* must take the creature in hand, you really must. We can't waste him. Tell him it is the moustache of your maiden dreams. I'll fetch him and give you an opportunity; and I shall listen to be certain that you make use of it.'

She fluttered ahead, she plucked Mr Bumpus from Channon and thrust him behind her; to one who looked on, comparing the breadth of their two backs, it was a striking performance. But the gadfly has her advantage over the ox, and she knows it; the lumbering beast is left *to* stare massively after her flight. Mrs Channon, overtaking him, could observe how thoroughly he appreciated her husband's difficulty in solving the problem that at this point presented itself, the rather baffling problem of the belfry. Lady Cordelia, though

much occupied in being managed by Channon, found time to fling a glance over her shoulder as Mrs Channon made her declaration — 'The belfry, you see, *must* be right.' There was no need for Lady Cordelia's very lively grimace at the words; Mrs Channon, to judge by her look and her tone, might well have been confessing her maiden dreams. But Bumpus seemed insensible; he stared after the little gadfly with a bulky gravity that turned, turned very slowly, to a broad and satisfied smile; he contemplated her nimble back with pleasure. 'That's a remarkable little lady,' he said. And he said no more till the party were again united over the troublesome problem — it brought them to a standstill among a confusion of foundations and excavations and piles of stone; and he then was less inclined to grasp the difficulty, or Mrs Channon's exposition of it, than to intercept Lady Cordelia as she frothed in talk with Channon. The tour of inspection languished, and it was really the fault of Lady Cordelia, for she could now talk of nothing but the great event of to-morrow night — there was to be a great event at Bintworth, it appeared. A feast, a festival, a scene of splendour - the little lady knew all about it, she knew how the world would be flocking to Bintworth to-morrow night, and she should be there herself if she could manage to get her pearls out of pawn for the occasion — 'and also if *you* will promise to be there, Mr Bumpus,' said she, shooting a ray upon Bumpus in passing, for which he wasn't prepared after all. The tour had fallen to pieces; Mrs Channon didn't finally know *what* to think about the belfry. Channon, shouldering away from the company, signalled imperiously to Austin. Tor God's sake come

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away, come out of this.' he cried aloud in his impatience. 'These people murder me!' He marched off with Austin; Lady Cordelia's merriment flew up and was scattered in their wake.

## CHAPTER NINE

**A**T ANY RATE THE TWO MURDERERS DEPARTED EARLY in the afternoon; and Channon could stretch his arms and gasp his relief when he had pulled Austin into a quiet room and shut the door. It was his own room, his big, genial library. Blake's round head was bent over his writing at the further end, in one of the three tall windows of the room; he didn't move, he wrote busily. Channon flung himself into a chair and groaned and leaped from it again; he fumed to and fro, mighty in his irritation. 'Well, they're gone, the precious pair! The flat-iron king has carried off the powder-puff princess - or was it the other way round? Anyhow I bless their union; they're made for each other. Let them go Y And he wailed his cry that he was destroyed, he was poisoned - he was degraded by the attention of the monstrous pair. He stormed about the room, he glared moodily into the green garden. A glance from the round blue eye of the secretary flitted across to Austin, to Channon at the open window, and returned to his table. Channon slewed round again to Austin, shaking his fingers in despair to heaven, and his exasperation gushed forth. What had he done, what in the name of a thousand devils had he done to incur these visitations? Blake the secretary kept steadily at his work while Channon raged.

He raged against the world that comes and pushes its great stupid head into the life of an artist. Not into his real life - heaven forbid! - it can't get at that; his real life is safe enough. But it comes and flattens its impertinent nose, its horrible snout against the windows of

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his life; it impudently darkens his light, if only for the space of a maddened imprecation. It can't touch him, there's no fear of that; but if he looks up from his work for an instant he sees the brute — there it is at the window, day after day, year in year out. An instant only; but enough to remind the man at his work that around him, watching him, peering and leering at his secret - is Bumpus, God help us all! - Bumpus with his collar in the fat of his neck and his watch-chain on the bulge of his belly. And for three minutes, maybe, the man at his work remembers and thinks of Bumpus, he is sickened by Bumpus for perhaps a quarter of an hour. And Bumpus, mark you, believes that a man might *talk* to him! The woman, to do her justice, she's more intelligent than that; she knows you can have nothing to *say* to a scrap of rubbish like her. But her impudence is even greater, for she thinks she can see what you're doing-she thinks she can admire it! honestly, I tell you the truth,' cried Channon - 'that woman believes herself capable of admiration for my work — that little shrieking bouncing scrap of imbecility!' And this is the race that swarms and teems upon the doorstep of an artist; he tumbles over them if he dares to set foot outside. Well, thank the eternal powers that he is free to stop within, to stay at home and keep superior company. 'And now let us enjoy it,' said Channon, casting forth his anguish in a great sighing gasp and dropping into the large arm-chair that was opposite Austin's.

Blake, the secretary, looked up from his work and spoke across the room. 'You'll find, I think, Mr. Channon, that the arrangements for to-morrow night are now

satisfactory. There's a full note of them here; you'll perhaps let me know before this evening if there's anything to add.' He got up; he crossed the room with a paper in his hand. 'But before I go now I had better show you' - better show what Channon took from him with the impatient snatch over his shoulder that we well remember. Simpkin or Blake, it is all one; these servants of our convenience, they plague us with their good intentions. But it isn't quite one, after all; for Blake was less aware of intrusion than the hovering hesitating Simpkin. Channon snatched, but Blake didn't hover; he stood there and clearly maintained that the best date for Lord Richard's appointment was the fourteenth. Channon snapped and threw aside the paper — 'I shan't do it, I've said so.' For Lord Richard's provisional appointment, in that case, the best date was undoubtedly the fourteenth. And with regard to Mr. Bumpus - the snap was a bark at the hearing of the name: with regard to Mr. Bumpus, if he is really interested in the progress of the building, it might be possible to fix a further date, the date of the resumption of the work. Blake would be glad to settle this matter before he left; but in his opinion, which the level precision of his tone made very clear, there was doubt whether the interest of Mr. Bumpus was — in short, was really substantial. And if Channon's vacant stare meant that he had no further wishes for the moment, Blake would now go. No cause appearing to detain him, Blake therefore went.

That was rather an annoying incident. Channon fretted a little over the thought of Blake, a perfect secretary, an inhuman young man. He forgets nothing;

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every wretched fact and date is written in his book, and all the facts are correct and all the dates come true. Blake always knows that the fourteenth will be the right day, Blake was an absolutely trustworthy machine, and doubtless we ought to be grateful to a convenient machine that is never out of order; but Channon was fidgeted, he frowned and shifted in his chair, to think that a young man should screen himself with that sort of mechanical reserve. 'I can't breathe.' said Channon, 'where prudence is in the air. That young man is the pattern of prudence. We can't live together, he must go; indeed he *is* going. He's better than the fat men, for he doesn't expect me to talk to him; and he's better than the bouncing little women, for he doesn't admire my work. He's no fool. But with a man who doesn't give himself away I can't live, I can't breathe.' Yet it was difficult to forget him. The young man was certainly no fool; he could even at times see an inch or two into a picture. Channon brooded, still frowning, over the passing trifle: a grain of grit in the mind, so he said, which vexed it more than you would think. Blake was nothing, but that was the effect he had. One can't see into a cautious man, not so much as an inch or two; and that no doubt is how most people appear to most people — wooden images, dummies. But for an artist to find that he can't get inside some object about him, for a painter to find that he can't see the movement of its life — oh well, it fidgets him, it frets him a little, that's all there is to say. And more than enough, in all conscience; banish the thought of it. 'Weren't we about to enjoy superior company?' said Channon, now smiling upon Austin with the confi-

dence, the searching radiance that we remember so well.

'So now - what do you think of me?' It was a question, straight in the face, which it is very certain that Austin answered to the full. He answered it with a strong unhesitating flight of eloquence which perhaps he could see reflected in the eyes of Channon, reflected and understood. As for words, there was naturally no need for them, with that other more convincing eloquence that Austin had at his command; but words couldn't quite fail either, and he possibly said more, even in words, than he ever supposed he could have said. Anyhow Channon was very fully answered, and receiving his answer he was quickened, he was alert with understanding and he laughed aloud. 'You and I, we're not wooden images, I think!' - he enjoyed the words as he said them. 'Supposing I were to draw you as I see you there, would you know yourself, I wonder? Have you ever looked like that before? You began to look like that, it was the first time, not very many weeks ago. I saw you—but you had already seen me; you began it. And now I see you, don't deny it, as nobody else has seen you ever. I've got you here,' said Channon, striking his palm upon his forehead. The lean clear lines of his face were alive with mobility, with humour and content. And now that Channon had Austin so clearly in his head that he was contented and at ease, an artist again, as he put it - what about Austin himself? Austin has seen Channon at Birtworth; he hasn't peered and leered, but it may be that he has divined the secret as only the right man may divine it, with the true workman's lucidity of head and heart;

and now what does he mean to do? Alas, there isn't the same eloquence at command for such a question as this. It is very difficult to say what Austin *is* to do, after admitting into his head and heart this sight of Channon at Bintworth. Presumably he will go back to Gray's Inn Road and live on a dream; it isn't impossible, we know, to live on a dream for certain weeks or months. And then? And then - perhaps we had better not think too closely of what follows then.

Channon got up from his chair and began to move about the room with that curious stealthy footfall of his, the movement in which he seems so full of purpose, mastering an ardent thought. He brushed against the deep-grey curtain of the tall window near him, he trod the faded old roses and garlands of the carpet, he stood before the gilded lattice-door of a great cupboard of books; and he was still standing there, at a distance from Austin, with his back turned, when he spoke again. He spoke quietly, he spoke perhaps to himself; but there wasn't a word that Austin missed. He spoke of a fine-minded perceptive young human being, one who stands on his own feet and looks at things with his own eyes and lives actively in his own thought - and isn't that the kind of human being that any of us would wish to be? There aren't many like this, there are all too few. What a wonder it would be for a man to find himself in a world that should be filled with sensitive and straight-seeing people! That's only a wild idea; but even in a world of folly the right man is to be seen now and then. How does one know him at sight? Channon started once more on his soft-footed ramble about the room, repeating the question to himself,

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How does one know him quickly, at once? Perhaps one doesn't, perhaps one often makes a mistake - one misses him; and that's worse than the other mistake of finding him, and of finding that he's the wrong man after all. There are certain signs; but they aren't always the same signs, they may mislead. Channon was now in front of Austin again, he stood and looked down at him. 'How *does* one know him?' asked Channon gravely. But he wasn't waiting for an answer; his eyes, though they were puzzled, were fastened upon his own thought; he seemed to watch it with curiosity and doubt. It is strange to see Channon in doubt; his face, that is graven so brilliantly by the purpose and the achievement of his life, is not the face for hesitation. But if he doubts it is only for one long moment; and then — Channon flung up his head and threw back his hair and burst out into that same full laugh of happy contentment that was heard just now.

'Ah, don't you yet understand?' he cried - and it was as though Austin had demurred and objected and must be made to see. 'This isn't a stranger that comes to me from I don't know where. This isn't a mere young man whom I watch and wait for and who won't give himself away. It's my old familiar ghost whom I know by heart; and my dear good ghost, now that he's returned to me from that dismal dreary haunt of his that I remember - oh don't I remember the look and the taste of it! — he won't leave me again just yet, he surely won't. Stay awhile and see a little more of me after our long separation. Come and sit you down - yes!' — and Channon was as pleased as a boy with the engaging amusing idea of dragging Austin in a trice across the

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room and depositing him in the chair at the writing-table of Blake the secretary. It was done, Austin sat at the table with the neat little note-books and papers of Blake before him. 'There!' cried Channon, delighted with himself. 'That's your place - stay there. Our valued Blake, I think he leaves me on the fourteenth; it's no doubt the date he provisionally fixed for his departure, so it's sure to be the right one. I dare say he also provisionally fixed his successor, but in that case he was wrong for once - the one mistake he has made! You, nobody else, shall take charge of his facts and dates, and I shan't be afraid any longer of their always coming true. Best of all, we'll burn the facts and dates - on the fourteenth; and then we can set to work. What times we shall have, what times! Never mind that rubbish on the table; we'll do away with all that. But there you shall sit, with your thought and your work; and I shall be just round the corner in my studio with mine; and I shall say to myself, "He's there — der Doppelgänger - the old young far-away thing that the moon so very extraordinarily showed me." That's what I want; and it isn't at this end of time that I shall begin to be denied it. Come then and sit you there and try me!'

He seemed to be himself as young as the ghost; he was enchanted with his play. He defied Austin to refuse him what he wanted, what he intended to have. And as for Austin, he said what there was in him to say, poor lamb, the whole of it; and what there may be in you to say, whether much or little, when you say it all — it skills not to inquire. The point is that you discharge yourself of all your intelligible words, and per-

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haps of a good many that only Channon would understand. Very well then - done! But Channon, with his hand upon Austin's hand, was already grave again. Here's one thing that Austin must bear in mind; he mustn't fear it, but now in good time he must look at it well and truly. It was this - that Channon didn't promise him a light or a trifling task. 'And I'm not,' said Channon, still holding Austin and still with a serious eye, 'I'm not referring to the little note-books and things on the table before you. They, I've no doubt, are weighty enough, and there do seem to be too many of them for us to burn them all. But I'm referring to another matter, and you must look at it now. Look well—it's this!' With his other hand Channon waved a circle in the air, a round frame about himself, his head and shoulders—which he ringed like a portrait in a frame for Austin to examine. That's the weight of the task, Channon himself. Does Austin face it truly and without fear? Channon can't promise him that Channon is an easy undertaking; let it never be supposed that the genius of Channon can be played with like a child in a vacant hour. To one who will take Channon's hand and give him what he wants there is that much to be said with all due gravity. Said then it is, and impressively said, and left at that. The hand remains within the hand on the words - no more are needed.

## CHAPTER TEN

ON THE TREACHEROUS FLOOR OF A GREAT BEECH-wood, late in the darkness of a thick and moonless midsummer night, it may be difficult for any man to order his steps and his thoughts. Austin stumbled and sank in the deep-drifted leaves, and the heat of the heavy night came closing rather horribly about his ears, and the blackness of the spaces overhead seemed too silent and solid for a roof of trees. He didn't like to stop, for the hiss of the dry leaves under his feet prevented the silence from spreading *off* around him to unnerving distances; the stir and rummage of his movement kept it within bounds. He stumbled and scrambled up the slope of the floor, which was presently steeper — and so far encouraging, for it gave the direction he wanted; but the trees were no longer tree-trunks, full and firm to the hand — they writhed into the strangest coils and fissures as they clung to the rising hill-side. And the heat! - who would believe that midnight could be as heavy and smothering as this in a beechwood on a hill, a place of such wide-washing breezes in the noonday. He had to stop for a moment; he hung upon the crooked arm of a branch or a root out-thrust from the precipitous bank; and at this level the silence was not so void, it appeared, nor the vaulting of the darkness so black and great. There was no stirring of the air, however, not by a breath; and he might have been far from the end of his climb, he thought he must be - only then, swelling out suddenly, came a queer little whining gust of music, and sank again.

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He climbed on cautiously; and yes, to be sure, he was near the edge of the wood. He now knew exactly where he was, and he stopped again as the shine of lights began to twinkle ahead of him; but he was safe enough, nobody could see him if he moved on still further, almost into the open. He did so, he reached the limit of the trees; and this was the place where he could safely stand, just as he had expected, and look on at the mysterious pretty sight that he desired. The open ground still swept upward ahead of him, but not far; he was little below the level of the big lighted windows of the bay at the end of the gallery. The music, floating out now more poetically, seemed to come from the garden, from the lawn, where there was a cluster of light that glared up palely into the breathless air, a tangle of lamps that were obscured and revealed by many moving figures. And indeed there were people everywhere, shifting and passing in the soft gloom, with a chatter and bicker of voices that rose against the music. But this was all in the background. The scene, the glowing centre of sight, was that which Austin, below in his safe concealment, directly faced - the gleam of the lighted gallery, the big open windows, the broad platform in front of them with its decorate screening, arcading, whatever it was. That was the scene; and there the passing and gathering of the revellers, if that is the word for them, was distinct and bright to a hidden onlooker - who could soon and easily lose himself in following the voices and gestures and attitudes of the curious exquisite crowd. All the men and women, they appeared upon the scene like creatures very finely wrought, delicately finished, gracefully ordered; and

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they played their parts so trippingly that it was a delight to watch them.

But the music, the music in the background began again after a silence; and it can't have been really what it seemed, it was probably nothing at all so wonderful; but it had some power of changing or colouring or disturbing the pretty play. Austin before long was afraid of that music. There was some kind of sweeping or thrumming of strings in it, doubtless nothing very strange - only it set up an answering quiver and murmur in the fibres of a man, and he felt weak, and he wished for more than he could have. Can't one look at a charming picture, knowing it to be only a picture made for the eye to rest on? It is merely that, a beautiful scene displayed. But it changes, it turns to something more sensitive and desirable when the mind begins to quiver in the music. And look, there's Channon! Channon appeared at one of the open windows and came forward among the men and women, laughing and talking, gracious and brilliant, with that masterly fling of his head which means that all is right and well with him. He wouldn't know it, he simply wouldn't know it if all at this moment were wrong with Austin. Channon had everything in the world, had even the gift and grace of smiling and talking happily with the men and women inside the picture — which comes alive and pulls rather painfully at the mind of another man, lurking nameless in the night outside. Can one admit that a man like Channon has any business to seem so well and happy and charming in there, moving so lightly among that fair-mannered crowd? It isn't the place for him. Desirable it is, oh certainly;

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flushing with buxom life, flowing with nimble talk, it is a place that plucks at a man's vibrating inclinations. But to see Channon, bright and gay, all unaware of Austin in his lurking-place - it makes one wish to drag him out and carry him off into the silence of the night. And why? Because the place is too seductive, because Channon is too good for the place - which?

Ridiculous fancies and questions of a man who has scrambled up a hill on a midsummer night to look on at a festival unseen! The man was a little upset, that was all; a little disarrayed by his stifling scramble in the wood, a little overcharged by the poetry of some music of which he really understood no syllable. Let him remember the small amusement that was the object of his humble adventure. Wouldn't it be fun to attend the festival, see the people, see Channon lordly in the midst of them - and to say to himself that the miracle had happened and the heavens had opened, and all to make room at Bintworth for the nameless onlooker? It was a good idea; in this way the miracle might be got home into a mind that still refused it. If Austin could put himself, dishevelled and unseemly and unknown, face to face with Bintworth at the top of its pride, and there tell himself that he was about to enter in and assume his station at Channon's side — possibly Austin might in that case be convinced. It was worth a trial. So here he was; and there were better things to think of than the heavy heat of the clouded night and his wish to drag Channon down into his own obscurity. Channon, on the contrary, was awaiting him in the light. And then they would soon be at

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work together, Channon and he; and Austin would listen again to the scorn of genius when it shoots out its lips against the world. Genius has all the graces by natural right; it uses them lightly and duly, guarding its mind for Austin. When these pretty people have departed and it is time for work, then it is Austin's turn. One flash of Channon's disdain, and the playthings are forgotten and the eternal images appear in their stead. It would be strange to remember then that the playthings had come alive for a moment.

But, oh mercy! there was that Bumpus again — no mistaking the tight white waistcoat that now bulged forth from the gallery! Channon, you may be sure, was out of the way when Bumpus appeared; but the waistcoat was attended by a very lovely vision indeed, Mrs Channon herself, robed in glory. Fair in silver and gold, the gold of her head and the silver of her shining raiment, Mrs. Channon flowered upon the night, upon the assembly of her guests, upon Bumpus; the lily by the cedar is not more impartial in its sweetness than the smile of Mrs Channon. She is like the lily, too, you may remark, in her unconsciousness. She sends forth her fragrance and forgets it, so to speak; it reaches you at a distance, and by the time it has reached you there is more on the way; but Mrs Channon herself hasn't noted its effect, she is only continuing to diffuse it upon Bumpus, upon the garden, upon the least and obscurest of her guests. It was the creature most favourably placed for its enjoyment who seemed just now to be the most unaware of it, strange to say. It didn't affect the lily, but the truth is that Bumpus was paying her no

attention. Rather pale in the face but very rosy in the neck, Bumpus was feeling the heat; and the heat occupied him in a manner that *he* needn't really have been at so great pains to disguise. His fair cool hostess was the last person to intrude upon the more intimate passages in his play with his handkerchief, but he did his best to render them discreetly. He couldn't however attend to Mrs Channon's bashful avowals at the same time — avowals they must be at last, with those lovely glances under her eyelashes. He looked uneasily to right and left among the assembly. He wasn't quite ready as yet to face a pair of eyes more intrusive than Mrs Channon's, but with a little more dabbing and mopping he made the best of an awkward job. He began to edge away from Mrs Channon among the encircling group.

He might have drifted perhaps without being missed, but it happened in fact that he fell into the arms of Channon - who returned incautiously to the circle round the gallery-windows exactly in time to collide with the unspeakable waistcoat. It wasn't possible for Austin to hear what Channon said, but he could see it. 'Ah, my good Bumpus, forgive me!' And to atone for his inadvertency, Channon took the arm of Bumpus very cordially, gave Bumpus his countenance and treated him as a friend. The taut watch-chain didn't sag beneath the blandness of that ironic regard, but fortunately there were eyes unseen to observe and cherish it. There was some one to laugh at the sight of Bumpus indulgently petted and patted by the hand of Channon; Austin laughed low and prudently, but from

the heart. Bumpus was very clearly inclined to look further for consolation; the tail of his eye was twitched by a small and restless object of brilliant colour, flitting in his neighbourhood, which is easily divined to be Lady Cordelia in vivid green. And it is delightful, Channon seems to be capable of a spurt of mischief; there was a gleam in his smile that couldn't be anything else, as he stooped benevolently over Bumpus and fastened him in talk. Poor old Bumpus, he doesn't command the arts for dealing with this predicament; he only gapes and stares and begins to mop again. You may laugh indeed, with due precaution. But isn't it also exasperating, the thought of the power behind that monstrous lump, the power and the ugliness of the belching chimneys of Pandemonium? It's an old story, to be sure, old and dreary; but even now it may sometimes madden a man to think of the millions in the hand of a lump which uses them — good Lord, we know how that kind uses them! And even as you say the words a sudden little jolt of thought reminds a man of the opportunity that has fallen in the way of Bumpus — to use them for a great and honourable purpose. Will he take the chance? And do we, facing Bumpus now as he furtively plies the handkerchief in the creases of his neck — do we really and truly desire him to take it? One might almost wish him to clear out and be gone from Bintworth, moustache and millions and all; it isn't the place for *him*.

Austin on this gave a jump and almost cried out — but it had nothing to do with Bumpus. Close behind him there was a movement in the darkness; somebody else was among the trees below, somebody climbed the

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slope and stood beside him. 'Ah, that's you.' said a voice; 'and this is me.' It was Blake, so it was — dimly descried, but unmistakable in his burly compactness. He spoke softly, quite softly enough to be unnoticed by the revellers, but with his own distinctness. 'Why aren't you up there with the great?' he asked; and then perhaps he remembered, though he couldn't well see, the dismal details of a good reason why Austin wasn't with the shining great; and he went on quickly, 'I also thought I would come and peep, like you - it's a pretty show.' But for what reason, seen or remembered, should Blake be reduced to peeping? — why wasn't *he* up there? 'Oh, I'm not on duty,' said Blake, 'for this occasion, and my pleasure I take in this way — to-night at any rate. But you, didn't you leave us yesterday? — till the fourteenth, as I learn.' It might be an awkward interview, this of the discarded and the adopted, Blake and Austin; but Blake fully understood why Austin had liked to linger for a day in the offing, for the small amusement of a sight of the show. Yes, it was quite worth while; and Blake indeed had a paternal interest in the performance, for some of it he had invented himself—for example the device by which it would be hidden from the conductor of the band, a nobleman of Wallachia, that he was supping in the servants' hall. Blake was a sort of scene-shifter, with no call to appear on the stage; and the nobleman's supper was to be trusted, and Blake could loiter awhile and peer from the wings. 'And so you're coming to take my place.' said Blake; 'I was glad to hear it.'

It might well be uncomfortable; but Blake took it

easily and talked on. It isn't the thing perhaps for the outgoing functionary to waylay the incoming and give him hints and tips about the situation; and besides Blake had held it for a very short time, only a month or two; and now a chance had appeared that seemed to be more in his line, and Channon had agreed that he mustn't reject it. That settled the question of Blake's departure; but what about his experience of the month or two? It wasn't the thing for Austin to ask for hints, it wasn't in his mind to do so; only Blake's view of any situation was likely to be precise, and he talked amiably; and in short Austin did rather wish to hear him talk of Bintworth. Blake, however, preferred to speak of *his* predecessor in the situation; for the last man who held it, he had been perfectly free on his departure with advice for the guidance of Blake. His tenure, too, had been short; but whatever there was to know about Channon and Bintworth he knew it, and he hadn't at all desired to keep his knowledge to himself. There was a small cluck of laughter in Blake for the thought of his predecessor's knowledge. 'But I can't say I found it useful,' he said. 'There is, I think, a very great deal to know about Channon and Bintworth, and all of it interesting; but you don't get to the end of it in a month or two. I shan't offer guidance to my successor. I had to manage without any myself, in spite of Simpkin, and you probably need it less than I did. I haven't the - the nerve for dealing with genius; nerve, I think, is what it requires. Yet Simpkin had that, to be sure,' said Blake, clucking again.

**Channon had now disappeared with Bumpus, Lady**

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Cordelia had flashed after them, Mrs Channon had floated away elsewhere with her smile. Blake and Austin turned back into the darkness of the wood, descended a few yards of the hill, and came to a pause on some ledge or shelf, strewn with dry leaves - where' they paused, both together, for it was certain that there was more to say. But for which of the two? Not for Austin, surely; he waited in silence, and the silence was broken soon. 'Channon,' said Blake, 'is a man of genius — we all know that. I don't speak of the things he paints. For several weeks I've seen fifteen people a day who can speak of his pictures, and who do speak; if you wish to know the last word that there is to say of them — not only the last word either, the last hoot or yelp or gasp — you'll learn it very soon. But one needn't have gasped at his painting to discover that Channon has genius. A far better way of discovering that, to my thinking, is to spend a month or two, a day or two, under his roof. I had never myself come within range of genius before; so for me it has been a highly remarkable experience. But you, I judge, are better equipped by nature to handle an experience of that sort; I know at least that Channon thinks so, and Channon is always right. You'll have a wonderful time, no doubt - I congratulate you.' The voice of Blake was very clear and distinct in the darkness. But he didn't after all — he didn't *say* much, did he? The prudence of Blake encircles him even in the stillness of the midnight, when it ought to be possible for him to speak more freely. The discretion of the out-going servitor needn't constrain a man so obviously as all that. Here were two of them who knew the genius of Chan-

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non; mightn't they talk of him, really talk? But Blake is one who won't give himself away to anyone, anywhere.

It was hotter than ever under the trees; the heat clung to your face like a mask. Austin gathered himself for his scramble down the hill again, and he put out his hand to say good-bye. There came at that moment, falling among the trees, a kind of aimless lurch of wind — a dull breeze that set up a brief melancholy commotion and dropped. 'Rain!' said Blake; 'it's coming; you'd better get back.' Yes, if Blake doesn't mean to talk, really talk, Austin may as well get back; a dreary tramp lies before him in the rain. Good-bye, then! 'I shall be gone.' said Blake, 'when you return, but it's likely we shall meet again in time. There will be plenty to talk of then. Meanwhile I don't know that we really *can* talk — for we haven't the common ground, which is a month or two at Bintworth. Channon apart from Bintworth isn't ground in common — I don't know why, but so it strikes me. Here's the rain.' It began indeed - a patter on the leaves, very quickly and urgently increasing. There was a sigh through the wood, and then no sound but the thick rustle of the raindrops; the warm dampness of the earth was immediately in the air. 'I must fly at once,' exclaimed Blake; '*my* nobleman must be protected from the weather. But look, here's one thing - perhaps for your guidance after all. It's about Channon. There's always even more in Channon than at any moment one's inclined to think. I assure you that's true. I believe it'll be true for most of us to the end. Good-bye — some day we shall meet again.' Blake was gone, clambering up the

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hill. Austin knew very little of the rain or the dark wood or the long tramp back to his village ale-house, with a head so full of what he thought there was in Channon.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**E**VEN AFTER MORE THAN A FEW DAYS OR A FEW WEEKS at Bintworth you might marvel afresh every morning to see Channon at work. He worked like a famished beast tearing a carcass to ribbons. He worked like a man who races against a spreading fire to save his dearest possessions. He worked like the sun that strides across the sky of a tropical day. Austin watched him and wondered, trying to satisfy himself, trying to make out what Channon was like when he worked. There, for instance, is Channon — on a cool clear morning of the later summer - mightily dominating the great pictured wall of his new Jerusalem, the wall that he seems to think is by this time all but finished. If Austin peered in at the doorway for the fiftieth time he didn't look at the pictured wall; he looked at Channon - at Channon lost in his work, alone with his genius, surrounded by the leagues of solitude that divide him from the world. Channon wouldn't be conscious of an onlooker at such a distance; turning away from his work he might face you with unseeing eyes — eyes that smote you with the sense of all that they saw beyond you. And then perhaps suddenly his gaze would shorten, his eyes would close upon you, and he would wave you a bright vague greeting as he fell upon his work once more. He never came nearer than this to an onlooker in his hours of labour.

The fiftieth time of seeing him at work was the same as the first. Was the great wall indeed now all but finished? That made no difference for Austin - who hardly looked at the wall, looked almost only at Chan-

non. It isn't possible for an intelligent man to attend to Channon's pictures in the wake of the people who daily admire them — that is the fact. Blake was very right about the gasping and the yelping; it makes a reasonable man, Austin for example, simply turn his back on the pictures, lest by chance he should think he is able to admire them. Do you know how Lady Cordelia admires them? She is far more intelligent than some, and you can see that she has her wits about her even when she is dumbstruck, awed, overwhelmed by the genius of the beloved master. When he says to her one afternoon, 'Now, you imp of absurdity, you may come and shriek at what I have done' — when he lazily catches her with his great hand and bears her off to the painted hall, she slips out of his grasp and goes half-dancing at his side, she heedlessly chatters and twitters according to her wont. But mark her well as they enter the hall, side by side. On the threshold, where the great painting is suddenly all displayed before you — on the very threshold her chatter dies off in a little sigh, a little moan under her breath; she falters for a moment, she is grave, speechless; and the contrast of this with her ordinary style is curiously touching and pretty. Her hand flutters up to her eyes; she plucks it away, she looks bravely and simply at the painting, still in silence, her lips parted. And then at length she turns, she lifts her face to the master; and she looks at him with beautiful eyes that shine like a child's, shy and admiring — till with a tremulous change, a flicker that doesn't escape you, they become the eyes of a woman nobly and seriously raised to the genius of a man. That is Lady Cordelia's way, and she doesn't debase it with

many words. She probably says nothing but 'Master, master!' - not to him, you perceive, but to herself, almost unconsciously; and a depth that you mightn't suspect is revealed in her mind, for all its apparent flightiness. Ah, there are some of us, you see, who put on a flighty demeanour for concealment, for an armature; and if we are misunderstood, no matter; and if we betray ourselves in an unguarded moment, no matter again — indeed all the better, for the master will notice and perhaps understand. This is Lady Cordelia's way; she is far more intelligent than most.

Does the master notice? Why to be sure he does! - for with his hand on her shoulder he gives her a little humorous hug, accepting her tribute like a big man to whom a child has offered its new bright threepenny-piece. It is a pretty sight; he enters into the spirit of the game, and yet he reserves his bigness and kindness and wisdom — his great qualities that overshadow her protectingly, with amusement, with pleasure and pride in the small shy tribute. Afterwards he may pretend to be angry with the little lady's impudence; but of course a big man is touched by the homage of a child - isn't it natural and right? But what does he think of her when she changes and trembles into the woman who is able to look genius in the face, gravely comprehending it? There she goes too far; and you may note how he thrusts her petulantly aside as soon as she ventures to be grave and noble. She intrudes upon ground where nobody perhaps can meet him - certainly none of the gasping crowd who come surging into Bintworth week by week, to gape at all the wonders of the place, the master included. Austin had learnt to know them

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pretty thoroughly by the later days of the summer; he knew all their tones and manners, just as Blake had predicted; he knew them by heart, though as a matter of fact it was always Channon whom he watched, not they, on the occasion of their visits. Channon suffered them with marvellous good-humour. His rage exploded when they were out of his way; but his rage didn't exhaust him, it only seemed to renew the brilliance of his amenity next day. He dazzled the intruders with his mirth, or he flattered them with his grandeur, or he caressed them with his irony — always according to his mood, giving them what he was pleased to give; for they mightn't choose, they had to take what he offered them, the greatest with the least. Sometimes he bullied and trounced them without mercy, and on this mood, too, they thrived as well as ever. For anyhow Channon was always Channon, and that was the greatness of it. He commanded the world that was perpetually surging over his hilltop; and he overruled the intruders, one and all, with that lordly possession of himself against which even Lady Cordelia beat in vain. Not one of them could touch him without his will.

They tried to touch him in many artless ways. But their ways were so much alike, nearly all such poor imitations of Lady Cordelia's, that one needn't dwell on most of them; they may be seen through and dismissed after a very short time at Bintworth. Only here and there a few of them stand out more clearly - this young man, for instance, Streeten is his name, who strolls in on a cool September morning, very cool himself, to see how Channon the great is getting on with his mighty undertaking. Streeten - a new figure to

Austin, but apparently by no means new to Channon or to Bintworth. It was really for Austin to receive him and to guide him; and Streeten didn't mean to be received or guided, least of all by the odd-faced stranger in his way; he meant to stroll in, nod good-humouredly to the old servant at the door, exchange a familiar word with Mrs Channon and pass straight on to the master at his work. The old servant may give no trouble, and Mrs Channon is always a pleasant sight; but what about this new queer creature in the way, who comes forward as though to offer guidance to Streeten? Oh, the secretary of course. 'Thanks, it isn't necessary. Mr Channon is expecting me, and I know where to find him.' Streeten spoke with languid civility and passed on — a hollow-cheeked young man, with a loop of black hair dipping over a large dead eye. But the people who know where to find Channon are apt to go astray, and his manner of expecting them is all his own; and Austin had plenty of time to stand in the doorway of the great hall, watching the master at his work, while Streeten was roaming in search of him. Who *is* Streeten? Will Channon remember that he is expecting him? Channon was far away in his work at the moment, and Austin could wait and watch him, marvelling afresh for the fiftieth time.

Streeten did find his way at last. He turned up at Austin's side, glanced at him with surprise and waved a kindly dismissal. 'Thanks, I needn't trouble you,' said Streeten; 'Mr Channon is well used to me.' Yes indeed - Channon is well used to every variety of Streeten; we know that. But it doesn't follow that this particular variety will attract his attention at this par-

ticular moment; and when the Streeten of the moment, waving Austin aside, advanced up the great hall, paused, shuffled, began to make vague noises of understanding and interest before the painted wall - why then it appeared that Channon was looking for Austin, for Austin only, and hadn't time in his hurry to notice the intruder beside him. Channon stared over the intruder's head and called to Austin to come and help him. 'I need you badly this morning,' cried Channon, 'I need your support. There's somebody I'm supposed to be expecting. He's probably here already, but he'll know where to find me.' Well, here he is, here's Streeten — who extends a damp-looking hand and who has the right word of intelligence ready upon his lips. 'Yes, Channon, he knows where to find you by this time — on the crest of your work as usual!' - and Streeten is prepared to join him there and to consider the great work with care and penetration. Streeten isn't rawly enthusiastic, you see; he discriminates, he pierces beneath the surface of what is obviously greatness and glory, and he finds — what does he find? — an illuminating detail, overlooked by the rest of us, which gives you exactly the measure of Channon's art and craft. He finds it here, and again there and there, for it is in several places; and he flourishes his hand (damp, it does look damp) with a kind of challenge, defying the master to maintain that Streeten hasn't penetrated to his secret. Streeten is the admirer who *knows*, not the blind disciple; so that his homage - but wait, wait! - Streeten really must be stopped. For Channon wasn't paying him the slightest attention, had disregarded the extended hand, had drawn Austin to the doorway

to meet the visitor he was supposed to be expecting.

Sir James Clitherow — here he was then at last. Sir James was trim and small and grey-bearded, and his beautiful manners were never more finished than they were while he described to Channon the peculiar interest that he promised himself from this little visit. Sir James extremely regretted that it hadn't been possible sooner; his own work had held him, held him - Channon would well understand the difficulty of breaking away from an idea, a conception, a vision, till one had finally mastered and expressed it. A vision of what? Oh, a little smear of paint that had occupied Sir James for a matter of months, keeping him a prisoner in St. John's Wood - where Channon, it was to be hoped, would soon return the visit. Not that St. John's Wood had anything to show - anything to show like *this*. Sir James concluded rather weakly, fixing a pair of glasses upon his nose and throwing back his head. 'No - no - nothing at all like *this*.' he murmured; and he looked around him blandly, cautiously, without more words for the moment. Streeten lounged apart, Sir James peered in silence; and Channon in the background turned upon Austin with a grimace and a gesture and a whispered word. 'Leave 'em alone,' said Channon; 'they'll do!' — whatever he might mean by that; and at any rate he left them alone himself, he shouldered *off* and busied himself with the litter of his materials and appliances, brushes and pots and so forth, in a corner of the hall. Streeten and Sir James would 'do'? - very well, let's see how they will do. At present they were ignoring each other completely, as indeed one might expect; for it wasn't likely that Streeten's loop of lank

hair could have much in common with the neatly-pointed beard of Sir James Clitherow — surely not.

Sir James, for all he had come straight from his own smear of paint in St. John's Wood, had much more the air of having come from a desk of an office in Whitehall. He was very official in his civility. He advanced benignly to meet the remark that was offered him — advanced to it, regarded it, and then drew back with it for consideration while he matured and protected and qualified his reply. The remark in question was finally offered by Streeten, and of course it referred in that young man's rather defiant manner to the art and craft of Channon the great; and if Sir James took his time to answer it we must remember that he speaks upon such matters as one who represents a severe and gentlemanly institution. Sir James can't and mustn't talk at random, for responsibility weighs upon him, and this manifestation of Channon's art and craft is very large, very large and striking and powerful, no doubt - full of effect, full of effect; and in short Sir James, fixing and refixing his glasses, may find it difficult to say much more than this, with all the weight of the authority of the institution upon every word he says. Sir James, be it not forgotten, was something of an institution in himself; it was he who maintained, in so many a well-turned speech at so many a glittering banquet, that great art doesn't shrink from the world, isn't afraid of life - and that the great artist is known for his habit of mixing with men, himself a man. And as for these conditions, they were certainly fulfilled by Channon; no one could say that he shrank or was afraid - far from it, and only too far! See how he strides and storms his

way through his work, devouring these huge wall-spaces, flinging out his galleries, hurling up his bell-fries, spouting his perpetual eruption of ideas and schemes and theories — while Sir James, a man among men, is spreading the patience of months and months over three feet of canvas in St. John's Wood. No, Channon isn't afraid, either of his work or of the world; and perhaps his gentlemanly visitor, himself a man, is more than a little shy of Channon. And why so? If you put the question it isn't doubtful what the answer must be in the mind of Sir James. Channon is a barbarian — that's why.

It only meant that at the next banquet the phrase would have to be turned rather differently. The artist isn't afraid of the world, but he doesn't storm and trample and devour; he isn't ashamed to be a civilized being, finished and complete, upholding the best tradition of the finest style in life — in life as in art. And Channon was really after all impossible — lurching off to a distant corner, making confidential faces at his secretary, leaving Sir James to the cocksure impudence of this young Streeten, whoever he might be. At any rate Streeten could be snubbed — not barbarously of course, but with a little of that icy irony which is the weapon of civilized art. Streeten was again informing Sir James that the secret of Channon's power lay in this and in that, where apparently no one but Streeten would think of looking for it; the young man talked and drawled as though it were hardly worth his while to enlighten Sir James, that trim and prim old academic — but still, Sir James might as well try to understand, since here was his chance of understanding. Is that a way to address an elderly

gentleman, grown grey in the long service of style, in art as in life? "I congratulate you, Mr Streeten, on your singular acumen," said Sir James—just that and no more; and he continued his survey of the painted wall, icily silent, turning his back on Streeten's unruffled composure. That was how they 'did,' as Channon had put it - rather an awkward kind of doing, one might think. However Channon is always right, and it was plain that these two, Streeten and Sir James, were fully occupied with their own antagonism; they were entertaining each other in their fashion, they could be left to themselves.

These two, they certainly stood out more clearly than many or most of the visitors at Bintworth. Sir James in particular was unforgettable, though he said so little and soon departed so politely. Few people came to Bintworth who were as guarded, civilized, responsible as Sir James; his note was unfamiliar in the place. Any one could see that he didn't want to commit himself in the presence of Channon; he trod carefully, he spoke warily, he departed with relief. A well-buttoned trim-bearded old official of the arts — Streeten of course disdained him; and it was annoying to Sir James that Streeten should be at hand, proffering unasked his clever appreciation of Channon's greatness. And between the two, between the impudence of Streeten and the severity of Sir James, something small, small and amusing, was declared to an onlooker. Which do you think is the smaller—the young man's cool understanding of Channon, the old man's suspicion and dread of Channon? Look up above them both, look at the work of Channon's hand, where it sings and soars

and exults in the breadth and height of the wall, in the space where there is room for him. That's the size of Channon, again and again, and that's where he towers aloft — which of these two should reach him there? It isn't only the gaspers and the gapers whom he eludes, it is also the suspicious and the knowing; and it is the pride of the onlooker in the corner to see how he does it. Very easily he does it, as you behold; he simply leaves them together, neat beard and lank hair, secure in the knowledge that their smallness will occupy their smallness and won't trouble *him*. A charming entertainment for a quiet morning! — no wonder it is marked for remembrance in the future. Sir James and Streeten continued their little play, acid on one side, contemptuous on the other, till they departed — separately of course.

Such are the diversions of a watchful spectator at Bintworth; they are trivial, and it is just their triviality that fixes them in the memory. For when they pass and cease, and when Channon is alone with his work again, the tiny echo they leave on the spacious air is absurd, it nearly makes one laugh aloud. Now's the time to hang about the open doorway and to notice how quickly Channon has soared away from the interruption of those two. He had brushed it aside, as it might have been a fretting midge, and was off to his work, to his glory, to himself. Austin could linger as he liked, Channon wasn't aware of him now; Austin could linger to hear that tiny echo, faint, fainter, silent at last—just for the fun of reflecting that it was the echo of the intelligent world. That's all that comes of it ten minutes after its departure. And presently - to-

T H E            R E G I O N            C L O U D

day perhaps, or to-morrow or next week — Channon will be standing here in the middle of the floor, ample and easy and untidy in his big old working-gown, his hands clasped behind his head, very quiet and still; and it seems unnatural that Channon should be still and dreamful and tranced in the presence of his work, instead of devouring like fire, striding like the sun — but that's how he appears; and altogether it's so unnatural that Austin is arrested, almost with anxiety, wondering what's the matter with Channon that he stops and rests and dreams. To-morrow, perhaps, or next week — anyhow, the moment arrives, and just for the moment Channon is at rest. What does it mean? Well, you aren't in doubt for long. Channon swings slowly round, and there in his eyes is the light that no one sees in them for long, the quiet light of achieved satisfaction. 'It's done,' he says, 'it's done. There it is. So much for that.' Even Channon may rest for a moment when he has finally freed himself from some great fragment of his genius, such as this which spreads from end to end of the wall behind him. So much for that. Now what comes next?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**W**HATEVER CAME NEXT CAME SOON, IT IS VERY CERTAIN; the great images in the brain of Channon, they would see that he wasn't quiet and satisfied for long. But a brief pause there might be, while the summer hung upon the edge of autumn - a little interval, a few days or hours, in which there was time to take one's eyes off Channon and to look elsewhere. And really it was a strange experience, so new that it made Austin feel unsettled and aimless; for there wasn't much else that seemed worthy of a look, after all these months of Channon. Yet it was a chance too, and a chance that oughtn't to be missed, and if only Austin could bring himself to face it there *was* something - indeed there was something important, waiting round a corner of his mind to be looked at presently. He told himself that he meant to face it. Let it wait, however, a little longer, for it isn't likely to be as pleasing to the eye as the sight of Mrs Channon in her drawing-room, where she happened to be sitting in the dusk, with her slim hands held out to the crackle and blaze of the evening fire. An enchanting vision, to be sure, and a picture that rewards a look at any time; sunlight or starlight or firelight, all were equally becoming to Mrs Channon. Austin drifted into the large dusky room where she sat unoccupied, and he wondered what she thought of when she was alone.

You could never surprise her in a moment when she wasn't delicious and amiable and serene. She smiled up at Austin with a gracious word — or not at Austin, to be exact, but at the world in general, anybody in the

world, whoever it was that had entered the room just then. It was Austin, was it? - very well, Mrs Channon had already smiled and welcomed him. 'Come and enjoy the blaze.' she said to him, if he it was. But it would have spoilt the picture to go and sit by her in the chair to which she pointed; for she and the blazing fire were the picture, her golden tranquillity beside the dance and chatter of the flames ; and Austin held off at the proper point of view, naturally enough, and enjoyed the sight from there. It was all the same to Mrs Channon ; she must have been well used to seeing the people round her stand back a little, edging this way or that to get the right angle for the full effect of her; she must have been aware of it, of course she must. But the queer thing was that she never seemed to get any fun out of it for herself. What would it be to most of us, what wouldn't it, to be conscious of always looking as Mrs Channon always looked? — year in, year out, the wilderness would blossom like the rose. To Mrs Channon, on the other hand, her own perfection was apparently a matter of routine, and she didn't practise it for enjoyment or for triumph or for interest or for any evident reason at all. It is easy to call her stupid, but true stupidity doesn't hit by accident all the time upon flawless art. It simply can't be doubted that Mrs Channon knew what she was about. But did she know why she was about it? - that's the question.

'My husband -' began Mrs Channon, as indeed she generally did begin. But it was merely the force of habit, for she found she had nothing to say of him, and she left the words to hang in the air while she went on being lovely. However they were made appropriate

by Channon himself. He too came drifting into the twilight of the room, he too was held for a minute by the picture that Austin was admiring; but only for a minute — then he crossed over and entered the picture and threw himself into the big chair beside his wife. Ah, that's better still, the pair of them together in the firelight, her roseate delicacy beside the time-worn grandeur of himself; there's something to be carried away and considered and treasured in the days to come. Not a touch of that picture could be forgotten, it was safe enough, and Austin was already turning to leave the quiet room, and then he was stopped absurdly by another of his unanswerable questions. What would they talk about when they were alone? Mrs Channon can't begin with her usual lead when she is alone with her husband, and as for him, long ago he must have given up trying to make her understand anything whatever. But how absurd - why should they talk at all? Channon was tired and satisfied for the moment; he wanted nothing but to rest in a silence that made no claim on him, in an hour when his work and his world had released him, in a beautiful picture that nobody else would see. His wife was lovely, she was silent, she didn't understand; it was all he needed. There he could rest for his little hour, he and his brain, wanting nothing and nobody else. Austin turned away again and was going.

'Don't go,' said Channon, without moving. 'Come here -I want you.' And then with his hand he beckoned Austin to go and stand in front of him, at the corner of the big broad hearth. 'That's right. I've got time to look at you this evening. Let me use the

chance.' The chance to look at Austin! - here it is, by all means. Austin stood where he was told to stand, his shoulder against the pale marble shaft of the mantel-piece, and there they all three were now in the picture, glowing in the flare of the logs, shut in together by the deepening dusk without. It was a long while, so it was, since Austin had seen those luminous eyes fixed on himself—with that gravity, with that stillness, and they bore him back in memory, back to the old bad days, the old black days that were almost forgotten the days that had been ended for Austin by the sudden flash of a look from those searching eyes. The past was very far away, with all that had happened before those eyes had sought him out; there was nothing in that old past to retain, it had all been pitched out of sight together. 'Do you remember,' Channon said presently, 'when I saw you first? It comes back to me to-night. It wasn't very long ago, I suppose. I had great hopes of you - do you remember why?' He still didn't move; he lay back in his chair, thinking and gazing and remembering. 'I thought you would bring me something that I needed. You understood what it was. Do you think you brought it after all?' He spoke the question in a warm and meditative tone; he didn't exactly ask it, he seemed to brood upon things that it suggested. And Austin, who had told himself that he meant to face that question, held his breath while Channon faced it instead.

But he didn't betray what he thought of it. 'Well?' he said at last, as though he expected Austin to find the word. To find the word for all that Austin had brought him? - all that Austin had done to fulfil the great hopes

of Channon? - all that Channon had gained by flashing upon Austin in the strange old days? The word is easily found, if Channon insists on it. In the glow of the firelight, with Channon there before you, it doesn't cost as much to say the word as it might at another time — in the grey of a lonely morning, for example, when you talk to yourself. There is nothing beautiful about the pain that wakes you in the dawn, when the wound is cold. But it isn't the same in the ruddy firelight, while Channon watches you with that shining penetrating attention. Then, then you can willingly utter the word that hurts you, and you can bring it out with a twinge that is pain, of course it is — but pain that glows and throbs, pain that is on fire with pride. To wound yourself in the presence of Channon — that isn't all unpleasant; for his eyes are upon you, he sees, he feels, and it is you who are making him feel — you, the poor empty-handed fool who has brought him nothing. There it is! - nothing in return for his hopes, nothing that he needs, nothing at all; that's the answer to the question that Austin had meant to face. He has disappointed the man who came down from the unknown to speak to him, the man who called Austin his friend; and that's indeed a pleasant reflection, after the weeks and months of glory that he owes to Channon. But enough, the question is answered, and Austin brought out the bare word with a sort of angry pride in the pain it cost him. Let Channon mark that he wasn't afraid **of it.**

Channon saw this, no doubt, but he still mused on in silence. And his wife, what did *she* think? Mrs Channon appeared to be easy in her mind, and she didn't

hesitate to smile encouragingly. 'But you're so clever, she said; 'I wish I were as clever as you.' She spoke as though this settled the matter very pleasantly and she liked to see Austin reassured. But is there anything more exasperating than just that — to be reassured by Mrs Channon? When she, poor lovely creature, thinks a man clever it is enough to make him very impolite. A man feels inclined to answer her back - 'Indeed I wish you were!' - for really now, it isn't for her to measure the cleverness of Austin. And meanwhile Channon was still silent, still resting in his unwonted hour of calm, and from him there came no word of reassurance, not one. Things, it would seem, had been accumulating round the corners of Austin's mind at a greater rate than he had supposed; for they began jumping out profusely while Channon didn't speak. Look, for instance: this is one which points out to him that in all these weeks and months he can never have interested Channon for a single moment — isn't that so? Austin, with all his cleverness, has never been able to show a spark of it to Channon; it seems to have been smothered in his presence — not by Channon himself, but by Austin's craving staring boring attention to Channon and all his ways. A sore thought - and it has jumped out at Austin on the first opportunity, the first hour in which he has felt able to take his eyes off Channon; Austin has failed the only man he has ever wished to please. And Mrs Channon, smiling and cooing, thinks him clever.

Channon spoke again, slowly and gravely still. 'Nothing? You think you have brought me nothing? No, that isn't what you really think. Try again.' But what's

the good? Isn't it obvious that nobody, neither Austin nor another, can bring Channon anything that he truly needs? You have only to see him at work to be sure of that. He has got all he needs in himself. And that is the hopelessness of the difficulty; for Channon's independence of us all is just what we admire, and our admiration makes us long to help him, and nobody can, and that's why we long to do so - and so on, and so on. Round and round it goes, and we can only rage to think that we give him nothing in return for all that we have taken. And how did Channon get that strange idea that Austin had something to offer him? Oh, that's easily explained. Channon had a sudden generous impulsive fancy, stirred by a far-away memory out of the past; and in his large and eager simplicity he indulged it, he lifted Austin to his side, and this is the result. At any rate Austin had once been clever enough to foresee what would happen — which is more than you could say of most of the people who throng round Channon with their homage. Simpkin had vanished, but there was still that Streeten, for example - *he* had no misgiving either, nor ever would have any; to the end of time he will believe that Channon was struck with his singular acumen. Yes, it may be that Channon, who sees everything, has seen that Austin's acumen goes a little deeper than that - at least he knows that he's a failure. But still, still - it would have been good to feel that he had made himself needful and notable in Channon's life.

'Think.' said Channon, 'of the people you have seen round me here. Think of the women, think of the distinguished men, think of our penetrating Streeten. Haven't you been struck by their acuteness in under-

standing me? Haven't you noticed the intelligence of their delight in me? Haven't you admired the stimulating boldness of their criticism of me? Think of them all. And then think of me - me. Put yourself inside me and look through my eyes and see what I see. Now then — you're there?' Channon sat suddenly upright, clutching the arms of his chair; his *eyes* were like lamps, full upon Austin. 'Now you know. You know how it feels to be looked at with *your* attention - yours that is on me, on me through all their cackle. Now you perceive what it means to have a brain beside one, a brain - ticking away there in silence, thinking its own thoughts, holding its own counsel. Do you imagine that I haven't been aware of it? There hasn't been a day when I haven't heard it ticking. What kind of a new experience is that, do you suppose, for me? I'll tell you. I never before had anyone beside me who kept me in my place — there's something in the tick of your brain that does it. You're very ignorant, you can't talk, you don't look at *my* work, and you wouldn't see it if you did. That's nothing. You live your own life in your brain, and it's a real life, and since you've been here I've had reality beside me — I never had it before. Do you think it gives me nothing? It gives me the measure of myself; I match myself against it, I've had everything else in the world that I've wanted, and never this. You've got eyes in your head that really see what they really see, and a mind in your brain that really thinks what it really thinks. How strange and how new! - and there it is, and only you have brought it. I give you my thanks.'

These, if it is believable, were his words. Austin leaned against the shaft of the mantelpiece, facing him,

and the flame of the wood fire danced and died down and flared up again, and the warm light changed upon the looseness of Channon's hair and the leanness of his jaw - changed and flickered while he spoke ; and beside him was his wife, slender and erect in her big chair, her fair head shining against the gloom beyond, her hands open upon her lap; and the light of the flame as it leaped was caught by the edge of a high screen, by the corner of a dark picture-frame, by a bowl of leaves and flowers on a table - caught and lost and caught again while Channon spoke. It seemed easier to see than to listen; or else seeing and listening ran together somehow, and were one. And when Channon had ceased to speak — then the sight of him and of her and of the dim room had to drop forgotten, while the words that Channon had spoken were heard again, heard exactly in the rise and fall of his warm great voice. Easier then to listen than to see! — but anyhow anything is easy when your powers and faculties are sharpened to a completely sensitive edge. It is thrilling. The room was full of a glowing silence in which thought was free and lucid, swinging across the mind and back again, active in delight. At length, needless to say, it was Mrs Channon who spoke, and with a sudden little topple of laughter Austin heard what she said. 'Didn't I tell you so?' cried Mrs Channon. 'You're clever — I always said so!' And she pointed a finger at him in triumph, very prettily.

She was right after all, bless her, and she was pleased to think that Channon had convinced him. Now they were all satisfied! - Channon had found what he wanted, Austin was reassured, she herself knew what

she was about; could anything be pleasanter? But why had Austin felt misgivings that had never troubled Mrs Channon? *She* didn't worry herself to ask whether Channon was disappointed - in her own loveliness, in Austin's cleverness, in whatever it might be. No, she simply existed and bloomed where Channon had placed her; it was enough that he had placed her there, she needn't think or worry any more. Leave it all to Channon — that's her rule, and a good enough rule for any odd-faced young man, clever as he may be, whom Channon instals at his side. His wife had neither will nor thought nor ambition nor any life at all of her own, kept to herself; they were in better hands than hers. Isn't it really rather grand of her? She knows that if Channon places you beside him he must have his own good reason for doing so. Why bother your head about your value or remarkability in his life? That's vanity, merely - nothing but your vanity asking to be flattered, desiring a visible token of success. How much finer to be content with the simple certainty that Channon is somehow fitting you to his purpose and using what you have to bring him — such is the lesson that anyone of us may learn from his wife. Long ago, weeks ago, Austin had prayed that Channon would use him, contrive to use him somehow, or destroy him if he couldn't. That was wild talking, and Austin may smile at himself by this time, and at his vanity that talked so loud. He needn't have been afraid; Channon has been using him right enough, and Austin is properly taught once more to have faith and patience. And if Channon presently finds that he can use him no longer - why then Channon will destroy him on the spot: trust him for that as well.

One doesn't disappoint such a man as this, for he takes care that he isn't disappointed. Let that be enough for Austin, whatever happens.

Channon was on his feet in a moment; he rested his hands on the broad marble shelf of the mantelpiece and sank his head between his arms. 'And what have I,' he said, '*brought you?* It's time you began to tell me.' He didn't look up, his face was hidden; but of course without looking he knew very well what Austin had to say. 'Oh, I know all that — you've often told me that,' said Channon quickly. 'But wasn't I going to bring you a great deal more when I started off into space to find you? Didn't I mean to give you — to give you yourself?' But no, he broke off, shaking his head impatiently. 'That isn't it, that isn't rightly said. The queer ghost in the moonshine — he always owned himself at any rate, if that was all he owned. I don't remember the day when he ever needed to be given what he never lost, what no one could ever take from him. Then what can it have been that I meant to bring you? Ambition, hope, endurance? — pride or faith? No, the ghost had always plenty of all those. I might have taught him what to think of the world, but he knew that as well as I did — do you remember? So after all there was nothing I could give him, for there was nothing that he lacked — to speak of. And indeed, come to think of it -' Channon meditated, dropping his voice - 'come to think of it, I should never have recognized him in the moonshine if he had been one to whom things are *given*, given by another. No, he could only be one who has all that he needs - to speak of; otherwise he wouldn't have been my dear good ghost at all. But he

was, I knew it, and he'll prove that I was right. Here he'll stay, close beside me, and here he'll serve—' Sharply Channon raised his head and looked to Austin— 'What will he serve? You remember well. He'll live and plot and toil in the service of—.'!" The word sprang out as Channon threw up his hands; he was alert again, alive in his rested vigour. 'He'll follow his genius, his own - as I mine, and here's my own good brain beside him — listen! — to keep him in his place. Will you match yourself against the measure that I give you?' cried Channon. 'Yes, you will, and I do for you what you have done for me - I help you in the service of It. That's understood. Now what comes next for both of us?'

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**I**T WAS APPARENTLY THAT IRREPRESSIBLE LITTLE LADY Cordelia who came next, for both of them. She was never very far from Bintworth at any time, and she fluttered back in all haste and alighted with decision when she was shown her chance. And such a chance! — for Channon had suddenly ordered her to come and be painted on the spot, there and then, and for ever after hold her peace. Wasn't it like him? He couldn't paint the portrait of a shriek and a pearl necklace, he couldn't, he wouldn't—for long months he wouldn't and he couldn't; and then, without a word of warning, suddenly he could and he must. So here she was again, in triumph and excitement, and if Channon didn't happen to be at hand for the moment, on a golden windless morning, the first of the autumn, she was willing to seize upon anyone else, even upon Austin, to share the effervescence of her news. She was staying at Bintworth; it was the morning after her arrival, and she passed like a breeze along the flowery terrace, discovered Austin at the end of it, and was already scattering the light bubbles of her talk before she reached him. 'He says I have a face after all - really a face!' She laughed and prattled and drew Austin along with her. 'He says it's easily overlooked, and it's not surprising that he never noticed it before; but he sees it now, and he wishes to paint it before he forgets it again. Now let's go and look for him - where is he?'

He was nowhere in sight. They went forward together through the tangle of the rose-trellises, past the tinkling waters, between the green hedges - by the

familiar paths that were already untidy and abraded in the change of the year. Where could he be? He might be farther on, surveying his hopes and dreams in the yet unfinished cloister, or beneath the belfry which even now wasn't right — which indeed was still what it had been, months ago, when the moustache of Bumpus had first drooped in its shadow, at Mrs Channon's account of her husband's ideas. Do you remember that day? Lady Cordelia remembered it well, especially the moustache. Bumpus had appeared again since then — twice, three times; but he hadn't inquired about the belfry, he couldn't fix his mind on it at all. 'He doesn't understand,' said Lady Cordelia — 'how should he, with that waistcoat? It can't be helped, the belfry is beyond him.' There it was then, still unfinished, and Austin and Lady Cordelia proceeded as before, over piles of rubbish and across planks and through gaping windows, among the silent and deserted beginnings of Channon's great ideas. It is sad to see them left so silent, even now. And when one thinks of that horrible old Bumpus, buttoning his waistcoat over millions, literally millions - it's too bad! However, perhaps a day will come; he'll have to unbutton it in time, we shall see! Lady Cordelia snapped her defiance at Bumpus as she spoke of him. Never mind, he would have to reckon with Channon presently; let him look to it.

But where was Channon meanwhile? He wasn't in the cloister, wasn't anywhere in sight, and indeed Austin could have told Lady Cordelia that he wouldn't be found among his interrupted hopes, desolate as they appear on an autumn morning. Channon didn't care to linger over his palace of art, so long as it stood for-

lorn and fragmentary; he was too mightily impatient for the day when his ideas could leap forward again, ringing and resounding with energy let loose, soaring to completion, 'It's misery.' said Lady Cordelia, 'to see it all at a standstill. No wonder he hates the sight of it.' She looked petulantly at the sight of it herself as she fluttered on. Channon might be strolling in the further reaches of the garden, so on they went. Lady Cordelia had plenty to say, with that engaging candour of hers which is always a relief after Mrs Channon's inscrutable sweetness. This little lady, she puts it all into the frankest words, and she makes no account of her listener, she will bubble away as indiscreetly to Austin, whose very name she doesn't know, as she might to Channon himself. Hark at her! She too was another of those who couldn't escape from Channon, couldn't take their eyes off him; he might be as brutal as he chose, he would never discourage her. 'I've no illusions,' cried Lady Cordelia, 'I know he doesn't truly love me. But at least he loves no one any better, not a soul in the world. He hasn't the vestige of a heart — that's why I love him!' Her laughter was as light as her step as she sped along a grassy path, scattering her talk in all directions, for Austin to catch what he might.

'No heart! — he's a monster. But he's going to begin my portrait this very day, for fear my face should disappear again if he puts it *off*. And he knows I can't pay for it, except with pawn-tickets; but he doesn't care, it amuses him to do it, because he thinks I had given up hoping. He little suspects how artful I am. Of course I left off hoping exactly at the right moment - when I knew he'd paint me if I did, just for the sell of it. He's

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a child! But he mustn't be told how I managed it; he must think it was all his own perversity — that's what pleases him. So now I'm going to get my portrait, and I must say I've worked for it. And he must love me a little after all, because he likes to be paid, we know, and he makes them pay, the rest of them - we know that too. Thousands and thousands! - where does it all go to? But I suppose it's millions that he needs; thousands aren't enough for a monster, they only pay for the men and women he kills and eats; they're only enough to support bare life. Yet you'd think living would be cheap, without a heart. I'm only poor because I'm so susceptible; I should be rolling in money if I wasn't always in love. It's unbelievable how expensive it is to be so loving, and I've spent my last penny this time, pursuing that stony-hearted monster. And even now he only says I have a face. Where are we now — what's this? Oh, the green theatre — of course, I remember. I must go and get on the stage over there; I ought to be always on a stage, an empty stage like that. Nobody notices me except in the glare of the footlights. Now watch!

The green theatre, away in the recesses of the garden, was full of the freshness of the morning. The floor was of grass, the walls were high hedges; and Austin stood in the doorway, at the end of the enclosure, while Lady Cordelia flitted down the length of it towards the stage that faced them. The small stage, lifted above the grassy floor on three curving steps of stone, was backed and was flanked by smooth-cut screens of yew, and the little creature sprang up the steps, glanced about her, dashed from side to side and vanished behind the

screens. Austin moved forward and stood still and waited. Presently she appeared again, slowly emerging from the opposite wing; she entered, she advanced to the front of the stage with an air and a gesture, she paused in an attitude. And singular she was to see, and very unlike the creature of three minutes ago; for she stood there with her arms upraised, quiet and slender and tall, a figure of pale brown and pale gold against the darkness of the yew — detached, enhanced, ennobled even, by her gesture and her setting. She was right, she needed an empty stage, and she knew how to use it. She was grave, she raised her eyes serenely; and then as her arms fell her eyes fell with them; and suddenly, when she seemed to be looking just over Austin's head, a light shot into her eyes, her hands were arrested; and there she stood, motionless again, in a poise that was half appealing, half commanding — (no, that's too fanciful) — in a poise, say rather, which revealed her as a woman with a speaking glowing sparkling face, a face at last! A strange small perfect performance: who would have supposed her capable of it? And she didn't break away from it yet; she remained where she was, holding the stage.

Channon too remained where he was. He stood behind Austin, regarding the spectacle on the stage. Austin moved aside and effaced himself in a corner; the spectacle wasn't for him. And so there were the other two, Channon and the woman, facing each other with the length of the grassy enclosure between them; and it hardly needed the robin that sang in a tree, close at hand, to mark the silence. The robin piped out his **shrill and** desultory phrases, fragments of a song that

he couldn't get by heart; he sang so much as he could remember, a few bits here and there, with no thought of an audience for such a broken tune. A robin doesn't sing for a listener, doesn't expect any; he merely happens to be piping away to himself, when the rest is silence, and the hush of an autumn morning is the deeper for his voice. Channon didn't move; and as for the woman, glowing and smiling at her distance, she held her poise and her gesture for a long half-minute, so it seemed, and even then she still kept them as she stepped down from the stage and came slowly forward across the grass. On she came, pacing deliberately — and who ever saw Lady Cordelia deliberately pace? But she did; and finally she stood before Channon, close to him, and held her face up to him, more like herself, with the sparkle of a question in her look. 'Well?' she said. 'Well? Do you see it?' More like herself, but still quiet and grave, she awaited his answer; and Channon didn't move an inch or put out a hand till she spoke again. 'You'll paint it before you forget it — will you?' she said. And then suddenly she flung it all away, her gravity and her serenity, and she flitted around him like the imp of absurdity we have known.

Channon's head turned as she flitted, following her movement. He watched her, but not as he has been seen to watch her before. He has often been amused by her, and engaged and exasperated; he has stooped indulgently to the funny shy child with the threepenny-bit, he has brushed her *off* when she tried to pretend she understood him. The ridiculous little creature has pleased him before now, so long as she didn't take herself too seriously. But this was different, and it was

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fortunate to be at hand, to notice the difference and to see what it meant. What was happening in Channon's brain, just at this moment? Ah, if one could see that, just for a moment, it would be a thrill for somebody who doesn't pretend to understand him. Of course it isn't an affair of vast importance, as the affairs of Channon go: nothing but a portrait of Lady Cordelia, a trifle, a diversion in the middle of huger things. But even on a trifle, when it chances to please him, his genius works; and here and now it was working on the pretty little scrap that had caught the attention of It. Channon was watching her at last with the intent to paint her; and to one who has longed to reach him, to attain to him, to share the life that he leads in the company of his genius — and to one who is everlastingly baffled, who can only look on from a distance, seeing him disappear with his genius and shut the door behind him - to that one it is tantalizing to behold him here and now, while he absorbs this fluttering featherweight into the service of the mighty thing. Well, she hasn't lived in vain; and Austin could easily find it in his heart to be jealous of her. But that is really absurd beyond anything — is *she* admitted where Austin is shut out? It won't be Lady Cordelia who will ever know what happens in the solitude of Channon's brain.

'Yes,' said Channon, low-voiced, thoughtfully, 'I'll paint it before I forget it.' She clapped her hands and shrieked. 'Come along then, come and begin at once! You see I'm dressed for the part.' And she displayed herself in her colours, duskily soft, delicately clear, and demanded his approval. 'You wish me to look noble, don't you? - noble and gracious, my true nature soaring

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above my pearls! You're not going to paint me shrieking and chattering, you're going to paint what other people never see in me - how should they? It takes a master.' She was entirely herself again; she couldn't keep still for an instant, or silent either. 'It'll be the only picture in the world, the one and only! All the other pearls you've ever painted will go green in the night. Your fame, beloved master, will rest upon me entirely; you'll be sorry to think how you've scorned me hitherto, when you find what you owe me. But I've no illusions — I'm aware you're only painting me because you know what it'll do for you. No matter, I only wish you -' It is hard to keep pace with Lady Cordelia when she is aware of what she wants; but the upshot was that she only wished him to make use of her, as much as he needed, and then to chuck her on the rubbish-heap with the mangled remains of all the others, his victims. Enough for her that she would share the renown of the master of the only picture in the world - so says Lady Cordelia in a breathless phrase. But then she struck off and fell back, faltering slightly. She glanced curiously at Channon, as though she noticed for the first time that he was watching her with a difference. And certainly it might disconcert even her, so new and strange it was for Channon to regard her as a woman with a face. But it isn't to be imagined that she objected.

Far from it - she glowed with satisfaction, and it became her well. Here was Channon for the first time neither amused nor annoyed by her, and she blossomed in the importance of the hour. Not quite disconcerted, no - she couldn't be that; yet she laughed with a sort

of aimless titter that sounded nervous, 'Well.' said Channon at length, 'I shan't forget it; nevertheless we'll go and begin.' He didn't move at once, however, and her titter died out as he faced her with his brilliant smile. That was all right then; he had absorbed what he needed, he could use what he had absorbed; and he smiled upon her in the pleasure of his power. A trifle it was, no doubt; but his power was active over a pleasing trifle, not less than over the greatest of his huge ideas. And now mark him as he sets the seal on the pretty affair, small as it is. For Channon, with his arm about her shoulders, drew her to him and kissed her on the mouth — and then held her away, still with his arm about her shoulders, and regarded her again. It was like an acknowledgment, charmingly made. The little woman hadn't lived in vain; Channon had happened to look her in the face and to find in it something that he needed — and he kissed her to acknowledge it. Then he turned, imperiously signing to her to follow; and in turning he discovered the forgotten presence of Austin, near at hand all the time. What did it matter? It mattered nothing in the least, only Channon had quite forgotten him, and showed it. There was something eternally boyish about Channon; just for a second, catching sight of Austin, he looked very young indeed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**A**ND SO CHANNON WAS AT WORK AGAIN, AND THE whole place was conscious of it: how should it not be, when Lady Cordelia was so conscious of it herself? She filled the house with her care and her protection and her tact; these were her great days. It all rested upon her, for she was supporting the genius of Channon, and for the time she was the only woman in the world. When the door of Channon's work-room closed upon her the world stood still; and nothing more could happen till the door opened again, and she reappeared with her importance and her joy. Wait, only wait! It couldn't be for long, but while the time lasted it should be great indeed for the one and only woman. In the intervals of work she was still tactful and mysterious; not a word must be said about the hours that passed behind the guarded door. It is a critical business for anybody, thus to hold the genius of Channon in suspense; you must hardly so much as speak to her while the weight of it is on her hands. You only know that the work goes forward, and that's enough; Lady Cordelia vanishes, finger on lip, and if you chance to hear voices now and then behind the door you mustn't stay to listen. Only a short time more, and her day will have been fulfilled; meanwhile the world must be good and patient as it may, knowing that all is for the best. Even to Mrs Channon herself it is made plain that she must wait; but Mrs Channon's is not an impatient nature, she can always sit and smile. And so the time runs on; and indeed it is very soon over, and Lady Cordelia can't be grudged her day if that is all there is of it.

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She seemed to be still at the top of her importance, however, when the door was flung open at length to the acclamation of the world.

Austin didn't miss the moment, but there was so much brilliance and circumstance in it that he couldn't see things very clearly. The only picture was exhibited for the occasion in the gallery, and a flock of people closed around it and raised their familiar cry. There was more to be heard in the gallery than to be seen, and Lord, how well we know that cry, all its tones and modulations! These people came tumbling over each other to Bintworth again, at Lady Cordelia's call - to glorious noble lonely Bintworth, proud upon its hill, which can't be protected, it seems, from the punctual surge of futility at all the changes of the moon. These people closed around Channon as though he were meant for them; they took it as their right, they swept and surged between Channon and the one who really needed and who really knew him. Think, only think how Austin had once been frightened by his vision of the world from afar, the world in which Channon held his state, the world in which Channon was rightly and magnificently at home. Austin was wiser now; he had heard the thin shriek of the world at closer range, and he had seen for himself that it wasn't good enough for Channon. Lady Cordelia pervaded it, and her high notes rang out above the rest; but for her at least it could be said that Channon had noticed her, singling her out for an hour because she chanced to have a face. And which of the others had even that? Oh, why not send them all tumbling back again to the place where they belonged? - Austin would take his scourge and lay about him at the

smallest sign from Channon that it was time to do so. But Channon didn't make that particular sign as yet; he suffered the crowd a little longer. He was talking, not indeed to a face, but to something which after its manner was also conspicuous in the crowd - to a moustache.

Bumpus — *he* wouldn't miss the fulfilment of Lady Cordelia's day, naturally he wouldn't. He was a little bewildered by the glitter and the chatter, and he glared cautiously, he seemed to have nothing to say, when Channon tapped the waistcoat with casual pleasantry. Bumpus in the crowd was very much weightier than the world in general; he was a thing by himself, massive and opaque in the midst of flimsiness. They all talked too fast for Bumpus, their notes were too high, and he breathed laboriously as he tried to attend to Channon. But Channon passed on, and Bumpus found himself attending to somebody quite different, a dusky and serpentine young woman at whom he blinked and gaped — till she too passed; and immediately another pair of eyes and set of teeth were thrust upon him, claiming attention, and then another again; and all these people were so ready and so mobile, flashing their teeth so easily at Bumpus in passing, that he grew heavier and more palpable with every minute. He was cruelly dazed, and Lady Cordelia kept him waiting unconscionably. But there, for an observant eye the tiny game was plain enough, so plain that it wasn't even amusing to watch the detail of it. The methods of Lady Cordelia were no more subtle than they needed to be. She had cleared the field and brought Bumpus into play before he had begun to collect himself for movement, and the

great silly smile on his face was a thing to turn one's back on. Surely it must be time to seize that scourge and have done with it - if only Channon would give the word. And indeed Channon looked as though he were ready to give it. He had fidgeted away from the company, and he held aloof, almost openly twitching with the outburst which these invasions were likely to provoke. He might have startled the company if he had chanced to meet Austin's eye at the moment — so it seemed to Austin, But he suffered these people for the present, moodily glooming till they had wreaked their will.

And after all, Lady Cordelia mustn't be grudged her hour of triumph; she had worked for it, as she said, and she was enjoying every thrill of it. And moreover she was doing her little best for the master, it can't be denied, according to her lights. She was wheedling the millions out of poor old Bumpus as well as she might, and she couldn't be expected to know that her game was too small, too puny for the glory of Bintworth. She couldn't see herself as Austin saw her, trivial as he saw her beside the negligent impatient bigness of Channon himself. *His* way with Bumpus, how different it was! — bland and casual, with irony enough to make even old palpable Bumpus feel disturbed. Channon would be glad to handle the millions - why be shy of admitting it? But not for the millions ten times over could he have tapped old Bumpus on the waistcoat in a style less loftily pleasant. Take him or leave him, that was Channon; and Bumpus hadn't the stature to reach his level. Bumpus was checked and scared and would certainly leave him. And desirable as it is that Channon

should have everything in the world that he wants, Lady Cordelia had better have perceived that her arts are out of place at Bintworth. They aren't big enough for Channon, and he may laugh at them with his lofty negligence, but things would be finer and truer and more like Bintworth if she and her arts and the waistcoat itself were bundled away together, once for all. And so it has come to this, you observe — that Austin is disposing of millions, is deciding to reject them on Channon's behalf for a scruple of his own, for a matter of fanciful taste that Channon would brush aside with a shout of laughter. But then Austin, though he could smile at himself, had never pretended to the vision of a man like that, a man who could laugh at the smallness of the world, possessing another of his own.

Channon, however, appeared just now to be taking smallness more hardly, and at length he did indeed beckon to Austin and give the word. 'Bundle them off as fast as you can,' he said sharply — as though Austin had only to lay about him and see them fly. If they didn't fly the storm would break, so Channon seemed to say with his curtness. And Austin of course was helpless, but luckily the devoted company didn't linger to be blasted. They began to fly — perhaps it was Lady Cordelia who chiefly dispatched and routed them. With one hand she easily held Bumpus in play, with the other she scattered the mob; the hour and the occasion were after all her own, she dealt with them as it pleased her. She was in high excitement, and it was a marvel how she managed to flit down the gallery, blessing and dismissing the company, without leaving hold

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of Bumpus, She was able to keep him flitting in her wake, and remarkable it might have been to see how she did it, save that Bumpus, with his moustache hanging limp over his grin and a yellow gleam in his leer, was no honest sight for an observant eye. It was more comfortable to notice how Channon, as the gallery cleared, drew off to the windows at the end and nursed his impatience, disdaining all show of responsibility for Lady Cordelia's occasion. Austin promised himself to be there for the breaking of the storm, as soon as ever the last intruder had been put to flight; and meanwhile he couldn't help it, no eye could refuse to be drawn by the disgracefulness of Bumpus. He was not only flitting, he was hovering — if you can imagine how Bumpus hovers! He had evidently lost his head, he was ducking and parading unnoticed behind Lady Cordelia's back while she discharged the others; but he wasn't forgotten, she was saving him up for the last, and his turn came duly. She swept round on him, caught up his two hands and held them high. 'There, Mr Bumpus, now you know what he thinks of me. One man, you see, has done me justice!' She dragged him back again to the only picture and planted him before it. '*One* man, my lady?' said Bumpus-if you can imagine how he warbles! But there are limits to the attraction of disgracefulness, and when Bumpus insinuatingly croons and warbles he has touched them. Austin sought his duty outside, among the departing guests.

When he returned to the gallery it was empty but for Channon at the far end. Channon faced the window and the autumn afternoon, and Austin hesitated on the

threshold, in the curtained archway. Did Channon want him? — he paused for the question, and as he did so Lady Cordelia slipped past him, dancing with her lightest step over the shining floor. She had got rid of Bumpus, she was free, and she sighed out her relief as she ran. Well, let her shake off' the memory and fling herself into the master's arms. It is rather a low game that she plays with Bumpus, certainly, but that's because *he* is low; and she plays it so gaily and irresponsibly, she drops it with such alacrity, that you can't be solemn about it; and now she may run back to the master, who abolishes Bumpus and his kind with a burst of exasperation, clearing the air. No he doesn't, however - as at this time it chances. For Channon, turning to meet her, didn't storm, nor did she fall into his arms. She was stopped by a little impatient shake of his head, by a word that checked her outcry; and they stood together in the window and talked — talked too quietly for Austin to overhear them, at the other end of the gallery, but talked too earnestly to be interrupted, it was clear. So he retreated again, not without some curiosity unsatisfied. Is Channon really going to begin to take that woman seriously? It does seem over-scrupulous, but one wouldn't wish him to change his familiar ways with her, that are so much better suited to her tricks and her manners than serious talk. Pretty she is, and amusing and adoring - let her go at that; she isn't of a size to be considered in earnest. And now, you see, here is Austin dictating to Channon on the manner of his treatment of a woman; and he carried this thought into the corridor, not without a smile.

In the corridor, as he retreated, he was met by a sur-

prise. He met Blake. Nobody seemed to have thought of Blake for a long time past. With his discretion and his punctuality he had vanished from Bintworth, silence had closed above his head; Channon was no longer suffocated by the company of prudence. But here was Blake, all unexpected of Austin, summoned perhaps to assist at the triumph of Lady Cordelia and not as punctual as he used to be. No, however, he hadn't even heard of the triumph an hour ago; he had come on a different errand, and having found that a celebration of some kind was on hand he had waited, he had kept off till the coast was clear; and now he asked for the opportunity of a rather urgent word with Channon. Nothing easier, of course; though just at the moment — Austin only doubted whether Channon was ready for it just at the moment. 'He's engaged in there with Lady Cordelia,' said Austin, nodding towards the gallery. Blake glanced up and nodded too. 'Ah, with Lady Cordelia,' he remarked. 'She's feeling important, no doubt, by what I've just heard. And so she gets her portrait at last, and it isn't the moment to interrupt her, I dare say. I can imagine -' There was comicality in the look of Blake over the image in his mind; he knew the ways of Bintworth. But Lady Cordelia, he implied, could hardly be considered a serious engagement, except by herself, and his word for Channon was rather pressing. Mightn't she be checked, couldn't she be made to postpone the rest of her rapture for half an hour, not more? Blake, who knew everything, knew that Channon could always shake her off for half an hour. And yet, if Austin still looked doubtful, perhaps there was a better way too; Blake hesitated, but apparently it seemed to

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him better. 'After all,' he said, 'I would rather give *you* my message - why not? And you'll pass it on presently to Channon, without me. Do you agree?' Austin readily agreed.

They needn't, therefore, intrude upon the gallery — where no doubt, Blake suggested, Lady Cordelia was enjoying herself. 'It has taken her longer than I expected,' he said. 'She can't have worked for it as intelligently as I thought she was working. All the more joy for her now! - I wonder we don't hear it.' He pointed back at the great blue curtain of the gallery-door, as they turned in the opposite edirection. 'Channon never knew whether he liked bullying her or liked being bullied; she managed to keep him in doubt — does still, I suppose. I can well imagine —' And Blake was amused again, picturing the scene behind the curtain — not quite accurately, as we know, but Austin didn't feel inclined to correct him. Blake knew enough and to spare about Channon, that's the fact, and rather too much for the taste of Austin. Things have happened since Blake's departure; and these things, they belong to Austin, and he may feel that Blake's understanding of Channon is quite sufficient as it is, without these things. Channon with the guarded young man was one, Channon with Austin is another; and that is a good reason why Austin should lead the guarded young man in the opposite direction, away from the gallery, away from Channon's low-voiced interesting talk with the woman. And what was the urgent message? 'I'll tell you directly,' said Blake - 'and a good idea to tell it to you, not to Channon. I'm out of his affairs, you're in them, and he'd prefer that we should keep our places.'

Very well - they would find a place of privacy, Blake should deliver his message and depart. And meanwhile Austin wondered what Channon was saying to the woman. Blake would have known, you may be sure; why didn't Austin know? Of course it is vulgar to be inquisitive, but not so very vulgar if you keep it to yourself. Anyhow Austin held back, allowing Blake to proceed for a minute alone.

It could only be right to let Channon hear that Blake had presented himself, had arrived unexpected; Channon might wish to see him before he left. Austin lifted the blue curtain and entered the gallery accordingly. Channon and the woman were still at the far end in the afternoon sunlight, and their talk was apparently finished. No more seriousness! - they were face to face, the hands of each were in the hands of each, and they looked at one another with radiant smiles, at arm's length. That is the kind of thing one likes to see. Channon was touched by the woman's delight in her triumph, and perhaps a little more than touched; he was moved, he was stirred by the pretty thing that had played about him for so long, adoring and undiscouraged. Who supposes that a lofty genius isn't warm and alive to a beguiling world? Better than another he knows its value; and that is how he smiles, happy and brilliant, upon the woman whom he has chanced to notice and to need. It isn't she, of course — ('ce n'est pas toi, imbecile'; do you remember?) — it's what he finds in her, gives to her, makes of her; he can make something of her in life as well as in paint. And it's better to look at her like that than to talk to her - much **more** suitable to the size of Channon; **for** he could **only**

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talk to her if it *were* she, and we know the woman and her smallness. But there it is, she hasn't lived in vain, and that much at any rate she is big enough to understand. Austin lifted the curtain again and went out.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**N**OW WHAT HAD BLAKE TO SAY? AUSTIN OVERTOOK him and led him to his own chamber, where they could talk; and it might have been uncomfortable again, for it seemed that Austin's position with Blake must again be rather false. Austin, the supplanter, received him upon the very ground that had been Blake's; and Blake had been forgotten so flatly at Bintworth that his good friendly ease was a reproach to them all, or it might have been. But he obviously didn't think of that himself; he even wanted to hear what Austin had to tell him. 'First tell me,' said Blake, 'how things are. Can we talk of Channon now, do you think?' He seemed to hesitate a little with his message, he preferred to talk of Channon - or rather to make Austin talk of him, since that was now Austin's affair, not his. Generous of Blake, to be sure it was, and stingy of Austin to feel so unable to respond. But the more you know of Channon the harder it is to put it into words, especially to Blake; for so friendly as he was, Blake had a manner of giving an edge and a limit to the spoken word - so that you saw its meaning clipped, curtailed, impoverished somehow as it reached him. And Austin meant so much, whenever he spoke of Channon; he naturally wouldn't enjoy that blunt prosaic handling of his intention. And so he put Blake off, not very candidly. They both knew, he reminded him, that there was always more than they knew in Channon; and mustn't they wait till they had discovered what it was?

'We shall wait till the end, in that case,' said Blake.

'But you may be right, and anyhow it isn't for me to be inquisitive. I didn't succeed with Channon, I didn't get far; I don't need to be told that he talks more freely with you. And I'm out of it now — out of whatever I had, which of course wasn't much. Yet I still can't keep out of it entirely, so it appears; for here I am. You'll see that I could hardly help it. Two days ago I happened to meet Mrs Bewlay.' He wasn't looking at Austin as he spoke; he was looking out of window, and he paused on the name. Austin waited inquiringly; Blake seemed still to hesitate upon the subject of his errand. 'I met Mrs Bewlay,' he repeated. 'It was a chance. We found ourselves upon the roof of the same omnibus. You may suppose that I shouldn't have gone to meet her; she's no affair of mine — now. But she saw me and she remembered me and she asked me to pay her a visit. I did so yesterday, and I was sorry I had. It's no conceivable business of mine; I told her so, and I made her understand. She isn't clever, but she has had a kind of sense ground into her, and to do her justice she's never more troublesome than she need be. Her excuse appeared to me a good one, I'm bound to say — so good that I agreed to do what I'm doing, very much against my will. She's having an exceedingly bad time.' He paused again; and then abruptly he looked round, expectant and surprised. He met the blank inquiry that was on Austin's face and hung for a moment in consternation, completely taken aback. 'Do you mean you don't know what I'm talking of?' he asked.

How should Austin know? Blake seemed to begin in the middle of his story. 'But who *is* Mrs Bewlay?' said

Austin; and as he put the question, and as he saw how Blake was staring at him, blankly arrested, and as he noted how to Blake the name of Mrs Bewlay appeared to explain the reason of his errand — in fact as several things rapidly tumbled together in Austin's mind he felt empty, cold of a sudden and empty. But why? Blake was at a loss, uncertain how to proceed, and there was a kind of flurry between them, a gap of misunderstanding that divided them. Then Blake spoke up. 'Of course I was assuming,' he said, 'that you knew the name of Mrs Bewlay. If you don't know it I oughtn't to have come to you with what I have to say of her. I ought to have gone to Channon, as I meant to go. It's not for me to tell you about Mrs Bewlay, poor woman. But judging from my own experience, when I was with Channon, I didn't suppose that her trouble would be news to you. Now I don't know what to do.' And he stopped, he pondered with doubtful eyes. 'Channon, you see,' he continued, 'has always been a puzzle to me, and I oughtn't to take anything for granted where he's concerned. In this case I've made the mistake of doing so. Can you help me out?' Yes then — the name of this woman *was* important; Blake evidently so regarded it. And to Austin it was like a pebble thrown out into the darkness, revealing spaces where he hadn't been aware of them; and yet it was only a name that would explain, when you knew it, this errand of Blake's to-day. What's the matter with Blake? — who *is* the woman, after all? But the light fingers of that chill, they were unmistakably upon Austin as Blake proceeded.

'Well, the mischief is done, if it is mischief; anyhow

I'll go on. The woman is a very old friend of Channon's, a friend of his youth — I believe of many years of his youth. She was beside him all through the difficult times, long ago; she shared the battle with him — by her account it must have been worth sharing. They parted before the days of his greatness, and she talks as though nothing else had ever happened to her since then. One can't help liking her. As a matter of fact a great deal has happened to her since they parted, and nothing very fortunate. She isn't a woman who can fight by herself; she's kind and stupid and helpless, left to herself. And now she's getting old, though she isn't in years any older than Channon, I suppose; and she has had more disasters of late, dreary dull disasters, that have brought her to the point of making up her mind — always her chief difficulty, I judge. She had decided to write to Channon when she saw me; and she's one who likes talking better than writing, so she hailed me instead. She doesn't write to Channon if she can avoid it: not that he doesn't answer, don't think that — he answers liberally. But she's a sentimental sort of woman, and Channon isn't at all a sentimental man. Perhaps that isn't the right word; in a way I think it is she who has the hard flat sense, now at any rate, and he who doesn't care for facts. It has struck me that he likes to think of her as a dream, far away and long ago; whereas to her it's plain that she's an elderly woman living in West Kensington. But I imagine that she remembers the time when she *was* & dream, so to speak - when she was something bright and clear and interesting in Channon's life; and Channon, he doesn't remember that so well perhaps - he's got the gift of forgetting. Anyhow

she doesn't remind him that she still exists unless she's considerably put to it. And at present she is. That's Mrs Bewlay.'

Now it's necessary, when you feel suddenly chilled and Blake is looking at you, to keep your head. It's necessary to bridge the misunderstanding so quickly that it needn't be noticed in words. The first thing is to receive Blake's explanation of the name quite easily and lightly, not to make a fuss, not to leave a silence. 'Ah — a curious story: I'm glad you've told me.' That will do to begin with. Then something about Channon — something to call him back from the unknown spaces into which he seemed to have drifted. That was more difficult, but surely not impossible. 'You're right — Channon talks to me very freely. This matter hasn't chanced to turn up. I'll let him know what you say.' But there was Blake, regarding Austin with his competence and his kindness, telling him about Channon; and he still had the word, his story wasn't finished. It was mortifying; Channon oughtn't to have exposed Austin to a discomfiture in the sight of Blake. However — let him get on with his story and his interpretation of Channon's ways; Austin had only to listen and nod his understanding and be quiet. So Blake continued; he related the dreary tale of Mrs Bewlay's latest disaster, and he was perfectly clear and precise, and he didn't take long. Austin was at last in possession of the facts; Blake had discharged his errand and could depart, glad to have been able to get the matter finally off his hands. 'It's yours now,' he said, 'and far more properly yours than it ever was mine. You are of Channon's intimacy; with me he had nothing but strict

business, and as little as possible even of that. And this matter of Mrs Bewlay, you see, turned up in the way of business while I was here; otherwise I should never have heard of it.' And so Blake disposed of the misunderstanding, very considerately, and now he was ready to say good-bye. Was there anything more to detain him? Only this, that Austin didn't wish to be left alone just yet with his thoughts.

For it is vain to pretend that he didn't feel hurt. It wasn't agreeable to discover these spaces, all in a minute, to which he hadn't been admitted. Blake put it kindly, but one can't refuse to see that Austin hasn't had quite so much of Channon's intimacy as he might have supposed. And that is a grievance; and the only doubtful question was why he shouldn't wish to be left alone with a grievance, a thing that in general one likes to coax and worry in solitude. Wait however: he was sure that he didn't want Blake to go. And couldn't they now say more perhaps, so much having been said? Blake seemed to be pleased by the question. 'Why surely,' he replied, 'so far as I'm concerned. I'm deeply interested in Channon, and I like to talk of him with someone who really knows. Mrs Bewlay was very communicative yesterday. She still lives entirely on her admiration of him; nothing else interests her, not even her troubles. She's a faithful soul; she hasn't set eyes on Channon, so she told me, for twenty years, but she watches him from West Kensington. And she doesn't wish to see him now — or she doesn't wish to be seen by him, perhaps, after twenty years. She never speaks of him, I fully believe, except with those who really know, and it's very seldom that she sees anyone who knows,

Then she makes the most of it. A curious story it is, when she tells it, and you sit and listen and think of Channon up here on his height. She's well aware that she couldn't have followed him to the top; she has no gift whatever for success. But it does her good to remember that she was with him lower down; she had her chance, and she didn't miss it. There's no rancour in her at all. She's altogether easy-going and good-tempered and unsuccessful.' Thus it was that Blake proceeded, thoughtfully working over his impression of Mrs Bewlay. Austin felt surer than ever that Blake mustn't go just yet.

But it wasn't the woman of whom he wished to hear; she was unreal and out of sight. Wouldn't Blake go back to the matter of Channon? — for that of course was the interest, and Blake could say so much if he only would. Yet it was disagreeable to ask him, not unnaturally; Austin oughtn't to have to ask about Channon. And by this time it may as well be said outright, in Austin's mind, that he was afraid to ask. He pressed toward the question and shied away from it; he wanted to hear, he wanted to put off hearing. What did Blake think of Channon in the light of the matter of Mrs Bewlay? Austin hung upon Blake's opinion, but he didn't ask it; he said nothing at all, leaving it to Blake. And presently Blake began again. 'I asked her what Channon was like,' he said, 'in the old days; but she doesn't know how to describe him. She could only say that he "flamed" - that was her word, and it is a description too; you can tell that she sees him, as she sits and thinks. I also asked her what *she* was like, and she showed me a little head that he had painted of her long

ago; only that wasn't quite what I meant — I was wondering what she did for him, all those years. She was pretty and soft, I dare say she was livelier then; she was a pleasant thing to find at home, at the end of the day. It can't have been more than that. And Channon finally needed more; it's only remarkable that he didn't need it sooner. And then I asked her how they parted; it seemed easy to ask, for she was enjoying her chance to talk. She said they parted ' Very quickly'; I suppose she meant that Channon was quick, when it came to the point, and he can be, as we know. Well, on the whole she had more than might have been expected; she's not to be pitied. And she had the nerve for it — for Channon, I mean; I remember saying to you that nerve was required for facing the question of Channon. Mrs Bewlay must have had it. She certainly has it now, helpless as she is; she doesn't lose her head when she looks at Channon. But then it helps, no doubt, to be rather stupid.'

And still Blake hadn't come to the point. Not what the woman had told him about Channon of old, but how Channon here, Channon as we know him, was affected by the story — that's what Austin wished to hear, and didn't wish. To him the story was unreal, away in the past; it didn't get into his imagination. But it has to be joined up in some way with Channon as we know him, and here is where Blake could help — if only it weren't for his manner of making a thing so blunt and round when he touches it. Austin felt that chill again as Blake proceeded, still following his thought, 'I've no doubt that Channon was quick. He never wastes time over the dead. The moment his past has

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ceased to breathe he buries it and goes on. Of course he couldn't otherwise have done what he has done; he wouldn't have had the time. He's forced to sweep away everything he has no use for, simply in order to clear the time and the room that he needs. It's a magnificent sight, if you can stand it. And so that poor good woman had to be buried, when her time came; and I really don't pity her — far better for her to be buried and done with, once for all, than to be dragged after Channon when she was dead. She thinks so herself. It may happen at times that his dead don't die so easily; and yet I don't know, I believe they expire pretty punctually, most of them, when their hour is up. His own conviction is too strong to resist; if he decides you're a corpse you simply can't contradict him - the facts are against you. And you die, mind you, having had your day, and you feel as Mrs Bewlay feels, that you can't complain. And even if you could, who's to be blamed? Channon isn't Channon alone; he's himself and another, and the other is — you know what it is, you've seen it. His genius uses him, as he the rest of us; it's just as irresistible as he is. And it's the kind of tale one is ready enough to admire from a distance, and it's a poor spirit that is scared by it at closer quarters. I envy anyone who isn't scared by it, I assure you.'

Why yes, after all - how well Blake understood. There's nothing to be afraid of, given the power to face what already we know, the might of Channon. Blake's prosaic touch was exactly the right one, and it seems to be not he, but Austin, who is inclined to shiver away from Channon's might. This woman, Mrs Bewlay-

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there was nothing in her story to make one feel neglected and lonely: as though Channon forbade one to go straying and blundering into spaces of his life that he kept to himself. It wasn't in the least like that, don't you see? To Channon the past was past and the dead were dead; Blake knew all about it, and one needn't be ashamed to learn from Blake. And if Austin at this time of day is to begin to shudder at ruthless heartless genius, at genius that scorns the world and tramples on its neck — then Austin may as well vanish at once, fold his hands and be buried in West Kensington. Look well, look at this story of Mrs Bewlay: an excellent test for Austin's famous nerve, and the first, actually the first that he had had to meet. There you see a woman whom Channon had need of once, and who hasn't set eyes on him once, she says, since his need of her was at an end — a woman whom he took when she was alive for him, dropped and left and forgot when she was dead for him; that's the flat truth of it, and, Austin for one will force it into the plainest words, plainer and blunter if need be than even Blake's. Austin did so, and having done so he is surely safe, his feet upon the ground. Didn't he stand on the floor of fact, and oughtn't he to thank good Blake for guiding and placing him there? And so it appears that Channon is, really and truly and actually is, the man we have held him to be, admired him for being. Was Austin unprepared for the discovery? Well, the shift from belief to knowledge, from the belief that you choose for yourself to the knowledge that is forced on you - it is always a jolt and a jerk, no doubt, where all that you care for, all that you think and dream of is concerned. But it's

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a poor spirit that looks back and regrets, and Blake may be thanked with the best of Austin's gratitude' Thanked he was when he said good-bye and departed, glad to leave his mission in Austin's charge.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AND THE STRANGE THING IS THAT A WEEK LATER — and more, perhaps a month later — it was still in Austin's charge, unfulfilled. Not a word had he said to Channon of Mrs Bewlay and her bad time. It was very hard of course on the poor woman to keep her waiting: Austin often remembered to remember that. But she made no sign, and Blake had gone off to his own affairs, and Channon never spoke of her; and altogether Austin, if he looked around him, saw a world that contained no hint of Mrs Bewlay, no trace of her existence, no expectation of the sound of her name. She was nowhere that he could see, she was only in his mind; and she settled down in his mind, she stayed there, till after certain days it was hardly possible to think that she might break out. She sat silent so easily - every day it appeared more natural that she should. Nobody noticed her in Austin's mind, she troubled nobody; and strange it would seem, after more days and more, if she began to make herself heard. Mrs Bewlay, in fact, had missed her opportunity. There was a time, following on Blake's good-bye, when it was obvious that Austin was on his way to Channon, bearing her name, ready with her story. But that time, as it proved, was short, and it was succeeded at once by another and a longer time in which Austin was waiting, reflecting, preparing to go to Channon with his news; and presently that time too was past, and Mrs Bewlay was quiet and at home in Austin's mind, and the days ran on as usual - for a month, perhaps.

And then one evening - late, towards midnight

almost — she suddenly rose and got up from his mind, so it really seemed, and stood in front of him and faced him. It was in Channon's room, his library, that large and genial room where Blake in his day used to sit over his notes and books at the table in the corner. Austin had sat there too, often enough; and he had never acquired Blake's competent hand with the facts and the dates, but they weren't missed, Channon rejoiced to be rid of them. And the table in the corner didn't call him now; he paced about the yellow-lit room, where Channon would presently join him — Channon who never was tired, never was dimmed or dulled, at the end of his insatiable day. Channon would come in soon, full of his life and talk, spoiling already for to-morrow; this was an hour when he loved to ramble among his ideas, glancing gaily off into his hopes and dreams, thinking aloud. The face with which he would enter, how well Austin knew it — and the sound of his voice, which would have a ring in it as though he had just triumphed, topped his ambition, brought off his adventure at last! 'Listen! — what do you think of this?' And Austin would listen, alert for the newest adventure of Channon's tireless thought; and Channon would talk, would talk, thinking aloud, eager and young - flaming! Yes, it is the word. And as the word shot up for the image in Austin's mind, the woman slipped out, the woman whose name he hadn't mentioned, and he thought of her as though for the first time.

Why had the days run on so quickly while he didn't speak of her? She was alive, she was waiting for him to say the word to Channon, and he had failed her. Some-

thing ought to have happened to break the charm, something outside; it would have been so easy to speak of her if anyone else, anything else, had appeared to raise the question. But who or what should allude to her at Bintworth? See this room, for example, Channon's room that was so full of his life and talk — full of the maturity and season of his experience. Deep in beauty, ample in comfort, high in time-softened dignity - doesn't the room tell a tale of his achievement, how he has used his strength and mastered his choice, his purpose? He couldn't afford to fail, possessing as he did the thing that was in him. For only imagine if he had failed, if he had dropped on the way! — he couldn't have survived at all, the thing would have rent him in pieces. There are plenty of us who have the freedom to be unsuccessful; we can fall out and subside, and it doesn't kill us, life goes on. But with Channon it isn't so — for him there is nothing but to attain and to achieve; for if he doesn't the thing will round on him like an avenging beast, and he perishes on the spot. Think, then, of what he has escaped — of the dreadful alternative to all this fullness of loveliness here around you. Channon must often have thought of it himself, here in this very room; little as he seemed to look back, there must have been times when he remembered, when he was struck by what might have been. Austin at least was struck; and with the woman of whom the room had so little to say, with the unknown woman at last in the room before him, he wondered how it would all strike *her* if she saw it.

He hadn't really thought of her till now; he had only thought of Channon, intent to see Channon as he

actually was. In that matter she had helped him; for Blake's report of her had added its weight to the reality of Channon. But she in herself, Mrs Bewlay, a woman at this very moment alive under the sky — she was a new idea. She wasn't dead to herself, she was waiting in West Kensington with her memory of Channon in his youth; and it wouldn't be a miracle if she came to Bintworth, came this very night even, and saw the place where he was living in his plenitude, with nothing in all of it to show that she still existed. And if she were here, how strange to think that *she* would find something of herself in the place - and the best of herself, what is more, and all that interests her; for she would find Channon, and in him she would see those old years of her own that nobody else can see. And the rest of the place would seem of small account to her, no doubt, compared with those old years; for it was on them, so to speak, that the place was built, and she was needed for its building. What else would matter to her? She wouldn't care for anything that Austin sees; she would go straight to Channon and join her memory with his, and that unseen possession of those two would be all the meaning of the pride of Bintworth — to her. She would have the right to be proud, and she could easily ignore the rest, Austin and the others, who only knew what they could see. Yes, Mrs Bewlay was a new idea, and she became important very rapidly. Of course she wouldn't really come to Bintworth; she would stay apart, alone with the possession that she treasured. But there she was, a living woman all this time, and Austin at last perceived her.

And Channon — did *he* ever think of her? Only as a

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dream, said Blake, something dead and gone, poetic in the distance; and that was a hard saying of Blake's, but it is certainly true. He doesn't think of her in her elderly troubles; they aren't any part of what he is, what he does and what he means to do - they don't concern him. If she appeals to him she doesn't appeal in vain; but he won't admit that she is alive when she is only irrelevantly, accidentally alive, surviving her day by a chance that is her own affair, none of his. This is understood and accepted by anyone who pretends to faith in Channon; and if you don't accept it easily you must recall his warning, solemnly given, that he isn't a light undertaking. That's clear enough. But suppose the woman did appear, suppose she came up over the edge of the horizon and drew near and spoke to him: what would he think, what would he say? Can Blake suggest that Channon wouldn't meet her greatly, facing her straight in the eyes with the recognition she deserves? He 'doesn't care for facts,' said Blake; but what he meant was that Channon hasn't a mind for the facts that are no longer there, serving his life; he can't think that Channon refuses anything which *is* there, lovely or dreadful, old or new. Oh no, no — no indeed; Channon forgets, and he is very quick at forgetting, but he doesn't blink; and he wouldn't dislike to be reminded of her existence if she returned to his world and offered him her memories, placing them together again with his, twenty years after. It would be beautiful to see. Channon would make greatness of it somehow, and it would serve him; and as for the woman, she would bless the chance that had kept her alive for so long, apparently to no purpose.

But it was beside the mark, all this - let it not be forgotten. There was no question of their meeting again; the poor woman, she wouldn't wish him to see her as she is. Not how he would speak to her, look at her, if she came back, but how he will look at Austin presently when her name is named — that is the point. It was fixed and resolved that as soon as Channon should enter the room, gay and triumphant as usual, Austin would name the name of Mrs Bewlay; nothing was to prevent him. And what would Channon make of it? Austin had to break into the silence that had hidden her, and now with his hand raised to do so he asked what the silence meant. Perhaps nothing at all, nothing to matter; yet it seemed like a violation to break into it, and possibly Channon would look surprised, annoyed — as though he hadn't conceded a liberty of that sort to Austin. Had Channon invited Austin to intrude into a private affair? No, he hadn't, and Austin had been inclined to make a grievance of it, feeling that he might have been trusted, might have been admitted - we know that argument of injury, how readily it flows. Yes, and we know too that a grievance is a manner of consolation, and wherever you see a grievance you put the question at once: what is it designed to soothe? — what is beneath it? And Austin by this time was well aware that he preferred to feel injured, excluded from the intimacy of Channon, rather than to break in at a moment when Channon mightn't be — mightn't appear - at his best. There, it is out. If Channon doesn't look his best when Austin speaks of Mrs Bewlay, it will be hateful. In the silence that hung about her there was enough ambiguity for just that

uncomfortable thought; and Austin would be much relieved if Mrs Bewlay would leave him alone - instead of confronting him to-night so insistently, demanding that he shouldn't force her to wait for another day.

For you see what it is that she does to make him uneasy, disarrayed in his mind. She puts him into a kind of superior position with regard to Channon. For the first time Austin had it in his hand to surprise Channon, showing himself in possession of a thing that somebody else, not Channon, had given him. A most unaccustomed sense of power! - it was likely that he would be vexed by a doubt, shaken by a qualm, on the verge of using it. If Blake is right, and Channon is unassailable in his ruthlessness, then all will be well; Austin only wanted to see him for ever brilliant and imperial, lord of himself. But here was a doubt that ran in under everything else, it was hard to say why. Channon might not be quite so ready to meet Austin grandly and firmly over the name of Mrs Bewlay as you would expect him to be: that is the doubt, and whence it comes, or how or why, Austin may surely be at a loss to explain. Has Channon ever to his sight been anything but grand? Not really, no — with one ridiculous small exception in which there was probably nothing but Austin's fancy. There had been a moment in the green theatre, that morning a few weeks ago, when Channon had forgotten the presence of Austin, and had looked rather young - don't stick at the word, a little foolish-as he perceived it. That was only amusing and boyish of Channon, no doubt — if he could be taken aback on being surprised in a tiny tender passage with

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the imp of absurdity. But it shows that he wouldn't always and necessarily appear as the mighty master, lord of himself, to one in a superior position; and this time Austin may see him at a real disadvantage - who knows? Austin had no better reason to give for his qualm, but he discovered that he could very plainly imagine a scene, over the name of Mrs Bewlay, in which Channon would drop below himself, caught out in uncertainty, in discomposure, and trying to conceal it. Horrible it was how plainly he could see it; and it is a long step for Austin to have taken, a long distance for him to have covered, if he has arrived at imagining that Channon won't face him straight in the eyes over anything whatever.

These are thoughts that race out of a man's control. They won't stay and argue, they rush him off and pitch him down before a vision that can't be reasonable, can't be credible — and yet the man sees it plainly. What is he to do? Is he to call his thoughts back and insist on an argument? - proving how baseless the vision is, pointing out that Channon, with all his faults that are so splendid, never lies to himself, never stoops. Austin might also suggest that Channon isn't likely to be shy *of him* at least; he doesn't flatter Austin to the point of desiring to be never seen by him at a disadvantage. But it isn't worth while to disentangle these notions, these scruples; speak up decidedly, rather, and ask what conceivable reason is there, here and now, why Channon should be disconcerted when Austin dispels this particular cloud of silence between them. None, obviously none - and that should be enough for runaway fancies. Isn't it final? Do you imply that Chan-

non is ashamed of the existence of the poor good woman and disposed to keep it dark? Baldly stated, the thing appears as the nonsense that it is. And don't begin to answer back that Channon hasn't shown himself perfectly candid in another matter, perfectly clear and hard in the matter of the little imp and her labours on his behalf. He doesn't encourage her in her rather low little games, indeed he doesn't; he scoffs at her, he derides her tenderly, he impatiently bullies her world. And as for the troubles of Mrs Bewlay, he will deal with them in his high-handed manner, not without a beautiful quiet backward glance at the dream of old. What further reassurance, then, should Austin be still demanding? Does he ask for the decisive proof that Channon is above the opinion of any man — that he handles the world as he chooses - that he shuns and blinks no corner of his mind or his memory? It has been proved a hundred times, all this. And yet — well, Austin might continue to worry himself deeper and deeper into uncertainties and mistrustful doubts, but Channon appeared at last, eager and masterly as usual, and cut him short.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**L**ISTEN! - WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS?' CHANNON flung the door shut behind him and strode across the room, talking in excitement. Here was the real right news at last, and the ringing triumph, the latest and the best! Listen now to a tale worth hearing; it can be told to-night, for this day has brought the successful end of it, and to-morrow shall see the beginning of its great result. Every word of the story is satisfaction and relief, now that it's possible to look back from the fortunate end of it; for indeed it has been troublous while it lasted, vexing with its delays and its doubts; but to-night they're finished, we've seen the last of them, and to-morrow — it's hard to wait for to-morrow, on the climax of a tale that has dragged and dragged for so long. 'Don't you know what I'm talking about?' Channon called out suddenly, pulled up in his stride. But what matter if Austin knew or didn't know? — Channon was off again, tearing his story to pieces for his own delight. He picked it up here and there and anywhere, questioning it, arguing with it, intently debating it - as though at last every word of it should yield its satisfaction, and no shred of it escape him. He exulted in it, worrying at his argument while he roamed about the room; and in his triumph there was more than excitement, there was greed-and greed that wasn't merely imperious and impetuous either, but hard and strained in its concentration.

He scarcely regarded Austin; his eyes were *set* upon his thought, and he dashed off in eager talk without losing a moment. Everything was all right, he said -

at last, at last! Now he was liberated and he could breathe, he could march ahead. And wasn't it enough to make one howl or laugh or cry to see how great things are brought about in the world — how they are set moving by absurdities and monstrous lumps who don't know what they are doing, while those who know are compelled to wait upon their whims. To wait? No, we don't wait, we who know; we lay hold of them and they can't escape and they have to do their best for us, little understanding what it means. Look at that woman, imp that she is! — and at that lump of a man, with the power in his hands which he thinks is his own! Bless them both for a pair of the queerest implements that ever fell to the right man's use. Bumpus - he's a simple affair, if you can bear to set eyes on him; there's no interest in Bumpus. But the woman, she's a prettier sight and a more complicated handful, and about her there's a good deal more to be said. And Channon, ranging round the room, said it all out — to Austin at times, when he stopped before him to beat upon a phrase; but chiefly to himself in a torrent of words, in a rage of greed.

She had absolutely reduced the egregious Bumpus - that was the first plain fact. Never mind what it means exactly; the upshot is clear — she had dictated her terms to Bumpus, and he hadn't had a word to say at last, he had simply signed them. But it was a tougher job from beginning to end than she had expected, Bumpus knew the value of his millions, when it came to the point — their value to him. There isn't any poetry in Bumpus, there isn't anything at all pretty in the whole of him. He's obstinate and ugly and predatory,

There's only one way of dealing with Bumpus—to hand him over to the woman who in the end is his match. 'The only way!' cried Channon, with a hard rap on the words. And so the woman had dealt with him, and Bumpus had paid and would pay; and great things would come of it, things far greater than a man or a woman, this one or that one, and Channon could go storming forward on the road to the greatest. As for Bumpus, if you choose to think of him, what does he get for his millions - what do you say that he gets? Channon paused to drive the question at Austin defiantly. Does he get what he wants? Indeed then, he gets considerably more; he gets his share of the glory of the greatest things, and that isn't bad for Bumpus, little as he is able to measure their meaning. Let's forget about him, however; or let us only remember, laughing aloud, that among those who are needed in the world is Bumpus with his waistcoat! And so he plays his part and he disappears. Channon dismissed the thought of him abruptly, flinging him aside with a sudden rasp of harshness. Lady Cordelia, she's decidedly more interesting.

Constantly in movement, Channon talked and talked about her in a strange mixture of tones. He couldn't leave her alone; he was aggrieved and he was pleased; he was proud of her, scornful of her, fond of her - wasn't it all in the changing colour of his voice? The queer small creature - she could do so much, she could do so little. She was a jumping flame of enthusiasm, burning with an idea; and she never flagged, she was never discouraged, she was always on fire with her idea; it possessed her completely. And what did she

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think it was? Perhaps she really believed that she cared for greatness and glory, for the things that Channon saw ahead of him in the distance - for the eternal images that Channon served. Perhaps she thought so. And do you suppose that she would lift a finger in that service for the sake of that service, for nothing else? — or that she has the beginning of an inkling of anything that it means to the genius of a man? Not she indeed! She wants to please Channon - is that all? She wants to be notable to Channon. She wants to be a part of the high adventure of his genius, for in that way only, as she well understands, can she reach him, hold him, make him look at her. What are you to call a craze and a fire of that sort, what name are you to give it? Channon bent over the question coolly and curiously, turning it from side to side as he talked: a queer conundrum, ever more complicated as you look more closely. For if you say that all her adoration is Channon, you see at once that it is herself that she adores, her power and her notability in Channon's life; and then again it isn't that, it's rather her own triviality and futility that she seems to adore, the insignificance of her part in the adventure that proceeds without her. She likes to be everything, she loves to be nothing; she hopes that Channon will think and think of her, talking out a mind that is full of her - only the point of it all is somehow to be that he never thinks of her in the least, thinks only of the greatness where she can't follow him, neither she nor any other. And that isn't right either, by itself; for she is also convinced that she follows him to the heart of his genius, she alone.

And obstinate she is, as obstinate in her fashion as

Bumpus himself; she very well knows her value when it comes to the point. She isn't to be put off with child's play, and if anyone thinks that Channon has found her easily manageable, someone makes a mistake. She's as hard as nails. She has no scruples and no principles and no feelings; she'll do anything in the world that is asked of her — at her price. She appears to hurl herself into the cause, the cause of Channon, without thought or calculation; you might think that she hadn't a head in which two and two were ever put together. Try her and see! She exacts the value of her value to a farthing, and there's nothing to be done with her till she's got it. And once she's got it — then, to be sure, she isn't half-hearted or nice or grudging in the playing of her part. For consider: she demands of Channon his best, the real thing, a bit of his life; she knows the difference between Channon when he's amused by her and Channon when he looks at her, takes her seriously, loves her. Less than the real thing won't satisfy her; but when she has it at last, then it's amazing indeed to see what she's capable of facing and tackling and flooring; she isn't troubled by a taste that is too fastidious for an uncouth piece of work. Strange, strange, ten times strange it is, the sensibility of a woman such as that — so quick and so light, and then so tough. Wouldn't you say she had delicate fingers for the handling of lumps and monsters? Not at all - she doesn't care, she doesn't feel, there isn't a nerve in the whole of her that feels or shrinks; and that's a woman who is all aflame and aquiver with a great idea, or so she supposes. And there is more and more to say of her - angrily, scornfully, fondly, one hardly knows which; and after all

what is she, what is she but a scrap and a trifle that chance has thrown where there chanced to be need of it? Isn't that the whole account of her part in the story?

But Channon roamed on, withdrawn into his thought; and his mood rose, and he began to speak more deeply, more richly, of things that were rarer and lovelier than these poor schemings and wheedlings of an imp. The woman's part in the story, it was more than this; and the sense of what it was, what it had been, could move Channon to wonder and gravity - as though in the restless exploring of his thought he had reached a height and a vision of beauty that opened suddenly, striking him afresh. He gazed at it and he exclaimed aloud. There's always something new in a life that is really a life — like Channon's; nothing is repeated, there are no blank spaces unfilled. Here was a woman who asked to be looked at, and Channon turned to look at her, and he found a new vision, unexpected, unawaited, all unlike any other that ever was seen before. Do you know why that is, and how? It's because Channon makes his own life, every hour of it — he is the author of it all; and when he has made an hour of it his life is not what it was before, it is changed by the value of that hour; and so it's a new man, a new author, who passes on to the next hour and the next, and each of his days is a creation as fresh as the first. That isn't how most people hold their being, far from it. The genius of most men is exhausted in a very few deeds of authorship, and thereafter they sit powerless, seeing the same day succeed to the same day, incapable of seizing and renewing it. But Channon, he's different; he never ceases to create. And of this woman he has made a great and

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beautiful day for himself, while it lasts; and he goes forward to the morrow with an enrichment, with a treasure in his mind that yesterday wasn't there. It means that you must always be learning Channon, discovering him over and over again, if you wish to know him. It taxes your wits to keep pace with him; but it's an effort very well worth making, for it brings you at last to a sight of the supreme thing - a passion, what a man such as Channon calls a passion. Watch it, watch it closely, you who can and may; and don't imagine that it is given to many - the sight, and an understanding of the sight.

'Listen!' cried Channon; and he thrust himself at Austin almost roughly. 'Listen! — it will do you good. I'll show you what it means, a passion. It isn't a name for those tangles and jumbles of greed and of vanity that are good enough for the world. What is the object of the desire of a human being - in the world? All those people out there, they can't look their loves and crazes fairly in the face, for they love nothing singly or simply; there's nothing which pulls and tugs and strains at the whole of them, in one direction, always. And that's what there is for me. I look straight into the face of my desire, and I have never created a day of my life that hasn't been given to it. And now see what I am able to give it to-night. Look squarely, don't be afraid! — it will do you much good.' Channon held up his two palms, as though he balanced a weight in each of them. 'Here,' he said, 'in this hand I hold the money of a fool and a brute - you understand; and here in the other I hold the beauty I have found in a woman - found in her, made in **her**. And both, both equally, the whole of both, I throw

into my passion — like that! I needn't think or hesitate, I *know* what to do with them; for my passion is always there, unsatisfied, asking for more and for more. The money of the brute - that was something, much indeed; but don't you see how strange and perfect it is that I'm able to give it, not the money only, but this much more, this beautiful day that I have created? And nothing of it is wasted; my passion accepts it all and makes good use of it. And not only that, but here I am, myself the better for my lovely day; so that to-morrow I shall be more capable, more powerful to make new life and new beauty for my passion. All this at a stroke! It hasn't been easy, and I'm not patient of tangles and complications; but I've done it, and to-night I'm satisfied.'

So he flung himself at last into a chair, loosely and happily, and surveyed his achievement. The mellow harmony of the room encompassed him; he sank back in it and enjoyed it and sighed out his pleasure. 'Ah, if you knew,' he said, 'all that has gone to the making of all this! It's a long history, and the beginning of it is so far away that I wonder at myself, casting back to it. How is it possible to leave the past of one's life so far behind, and yet to see it so clearly in this present that has grown from it? I see it all, sitting here; I could tell you the whole of it from the beginning. Everything about us in this place is compact of my life; nothing is accidental, insignificant; it's all what it had to be, growing out of *me*. It's strange to think that you, sitting there, can see so little — only the pretty surface of the place, the last few days or months that have been added to it. There's so much beneath that you can't perceive or divine. And queer stuff it is, some of it - unpromis-

ing stuff, you would say, for the use I have made of it. I had to use whatever I could lay hands on, in the old days; I couldn't afford to pick and choose, I can assure you. I rejected nothing, I took what I could *get*; and I learned, as I had to learn, that the right man isn't to be baffled by the stuff that he gets, whatever it may be. That which is under his hand must serve his hand - must and will serve it, till he is able to choose where he pleases. And so I lost no time, not even in the old days; and everything I got is here, in this house, in this room, if you could see it. That's what I mean by a passion. Are you afraid of it? Most people are mortally afraid of it - but you're not. You follow me through to the end; and remember, I count on it. Watch me, see me choose where I will, as I can in these days; and mark what I shall do with the stuff that I hold in my hands - to-night at last!' Channon flamed with his hands uplifted again; and Austin thought of Mrs Bewlay and didn't speak of her.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**W**ATCH CHANNON, SEE WHAT HE WOULD DO WITH the stuff in his hands? - it became difficult to watch him, for he was always so far ahead and so busy and so full of his affair, and Austin dropped further and further behind as the weeks went on. He saw Channon disappearing into the thick of his schemes and plans, and his own life grew solitary as he followed at a distance, thinking painfully and perhaps more clearly, while the days of the winter turned the corner and began to lengthen towards an early spring. Channon didn't notice that he had left him behind; he seemed to assume that Austin was as closely beside him as ever, not perceiving that his talk reached Austin across widening spaces in which more and more of it was lost. Lost? No, that wasn't how the change affected Austin. He missed no word of Channon's really, but his talk came to him with a difference — thinned somehow by the dividing spaces, without the old echoes and reverberations that had once enriched it. Austin watched him rejoicing in the fever of activity that soon raged about the cloister and the belfry and the rest of the soaring schemes; and the voice of Channon was strained and hardened in the clatter, in the babble of discussion, in the making and remaking of a hundred lordly plans — in the public day that was so very unlike the distant secret moonlight, where only the steps of two solitary men had broken the silence of a dull world asleep.

'The money that he's spending at Bintworth —!' The words came out of the past to Austin very often as the months ran on. They were loud in his ears as he strayed

in the wake of Channon, picking his way through the noise and the stir of the grand work resumed - which was now Channon's triumph by day and by night, the burden of his perpetual exultation. There was no trouble about the belfry now; anybody could see that it was right at last. Mrs Channon said so herself; she pointed out to Austin that the belfry was an inspiration indeed. She liked to make the tour of the great work with Austin, so understanding he was, so deeply in sympathy with her husband's ideas; they often wandered together among the rising walls and advancing corridors and striding arcades, while Channon marched ahead, while he talked and directed and commanded to his heart's content. This was the future, it opened before him in the growing palace of his dreams, and he sprang forward into the future, where alone there was room for him - where cloisters could be big enough, corridors grand enough, belfries inspired enough even for him. Mrs Channon was sweetly pleased by the sight of him; she often remarked to Austin that her husband's opportunity had come to him at last, she had known that it must and would come. See how he enjoys it! Think of the day, months and months ago, when he led Mr Bumpus around and explained his ideas to him —and how well Mr Bumpus had understood them after all! And dear Lady Cordelia too! - it was pleasant to watch them once again, all three of them, absorbed in their admiration of the future. Mrs Channon followed at a distance, with Austin.

'The money that he's spending!' Was it very vulgar and mean to be so much engaged by the expensiveness of Channon's future, the load of money that was needed

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to build it? How in the world should Austin know about such things, be able to measure and to judge them? Channon spent his load like a prince, he changed it into splendour and brilliance for the enlightenment of the world; and who shall say that it isn't a worthy work for genius to set up such a monument of its daring on the bowery height of Bintworth? It costs a fortune; but what's the good of a fortune if not for the liberation of the power of genius? These are the questions with which you pose yourself, day after day, while Mrs Channon takes it all so very happily for granted. 'Isn't it glorious!' cries Mrs Channon, 'isn't it wonderful!' And Austin, when she ingeminated her musical cry, felt that wonder and glory were cheap indeed at Bintworth; the place was drowned in them, anybody could have them for the asking, and they were cheap — why were they cheap? — because they cost so much. If two *men* talk together in the moonlight, unsuspected of the world, the glory of the genius that is between them and upon them is precious beyond any cost or price; and it isn't to be bought, and the perfection of it is that the world, disturbed for a moment in its sleep by the footsteps of the men, doesn't want it, doesn't wish for it at any price — is only annoyed and a trifle uneasy at the slight disturbance; and very quickly the world forgets it and goes to sleep again. That's glory indeed; and this other sort, poured out at Bintworth for Bumpus to stare at with his solemn and complacent and bilious eye, is cheap. So says Austin at last, in answer to his questions, though it isn't what he says in answer to Mrs Channon's cry.

Nor is it what he says to Channon; but then Channon

wasn't attending to him, Channon was conducting Bumpus round the growing palace of the future, and a remarkable sight it was to see from a distance. Bumpus rolled his eye from point to point as he was directed, and Channon towered above him and looked down on him, patted him on the back with condescension, humoured him very pleasantly where his slow-witted understanding failed. Bumpus couldn't be expected to grasp the lovely designs that were unfolding at Bintworth, but Channon didn't mind giving him a glimpse of them here and there, far over his head as they might be; this was still the tone of Channon's grandeur, and Bumpus had to accept what he was given. The prince was inclined to be indulgent; he was in a mood to be amused by the goggling wonder of a heavy old vulgarian, whom it tickled him to dazzle and puzzle and subjugate in an idle hour. But don't let the old ass imagine that he has any hold upon the prince; the entertainment won't proceed for a moment longer than it chances to tickle Channon, and Bumpus hasn't the least excuse for supposing that it will. 'You, my dear Bumpus, understand me so well that it is a pleasure to explain to you what I'm planning and dreaming up here; it's not for all the world to stare at, but to you, my dear Bumpus, I can safely open my mind-'the power of your apprehension is plain in your eye.' When Channon uses such language as this his companion visibly quails; Bumpus is never sure of himself at Bintworth, he is cowed by a princely manner. And Channon, leading him on with a protective arm, pursued his advantage with a will and enjoyed himself. He expounded his designs in their loftiest costliest flight,

and Bumpus no longer dared to suggest that they weren't thoroughly practical. He was mastered and floored, and Channon, opulently parading, his magnificence and his ease, didn't spare him.

'How splendid it is,' cried Mrs Channon, 'how fortunate, how right!' And indeed Channon too seemed to think it very right, and Lady Cordelia was shrill in her ecstasy, and so the glory mounted, the triumph swept forward, and Austin was left further and further behind. Nobody but Austin, apparently, was so base and gross as to consider the cost; to him alone it occurred to reckon up the value of Bumpus. And it is this that is remarkable about the value of Bumpus — that if it weren't for his millions he wouldn't be so nakedly and crudely cheap. Strip him of his millions, and you might find a use for his lumpish stuff; he really wouldn't look so badly without his load of gold. But his cheapness, as things are, is dreadful; and thus one gets round to the fact, once more, that with his value, with his cheapness, the glory of Bintworth is being purchased at this moment. It isn't a pretty thought. Channon's great ideas seem to be worth as much as Bumpus is worth, no less and no more. They rise up in their impressive flight, and the world marvels at them, and Austin alone chances to turn his head and look round — and there is Bumpus, ugly and solemn and uneasy, who has put a price on them and paid it. And it is useless to say that it is fine and large of him to do so — that at least in this matter he has shown himself capable of an inspiration nobler than his waistcoat and his leer. Austin had thought of all that, and there was nothing in it. Give Bumpus all the credit that you can,

and there still remains the discomfort of the notion that he has bought his way hither with his load of gold, and that Channoji has permitted it. Noble indeed! - does Bumpus regard the cloister and the belfry as his money's-worth, is it for them that he has disorged? We well know that it isn't; Channon knows, we all know. There can't be much doubt on the question if you turn and look at Bumpus, marking the greedy yellow gaze with which he follows an ecstatic little woman.

As for her — well, it is easy at last, and only too easy, to think clearly when you see her at her tricks. She doesn't detain you for long, the little absurdity. In her way she's the best of them all, she's even rather touching in her honesty and her transparency and her glow of prettiness. You can't say that she cheapens what she seizes; no, she somehow brings a breeze and a whisk of poetry with her — not very deep or rare, to be sure, but freshening, sweetening in a manner. Lady Cordelia had fluttered through a tale that had grown by this time difficult to bear, and she was the only thing in it that could still seem light and bright. It was still impossible, thank goodness, to take her seriously — so Austin felt at any rate, not ungratefully. She'slipped out of the coil and she was as merry as ever; they do a good work in the world, these shining indestructible atoms, who flit in the air while the rest of us are caught and dragged in the coil. At Lady Cordelia you can only smile, whatever happens, and there are moments when you may well be grateful to the thing that irresistibly makes you smile. That's what she is and all she is, whatever happens - the same at the end as at the

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beginning. See how she skirmishes round Bumpus, gay as a lark. You wouldn't suppose from the look of her that she has tackled and accomplished a horrible job - no, nor yet that Channon has made of her a wondrous and memorable day. She appears after all to evade them both, and it is refreshing to watch her; she might almost make you believe that there are no difficulties anywhere - only that is so palpably untrue, just at present, that you can't stay to contemplate her for long. Let her dart off on her airy way, therefore — wave her a smiling farewell, not untenderly. Lady Cordelia is an occasion for trouble, where she alights, but you can't say that she devises or invents it; and off she goes, glittering in the wintry sunshine, and the rest of us may attend to the trouble she leaves behind her.

Now for it, once more, Austin, with his eyes fastened upon Channon, noting every gesture of his ironic blandness - how loftily he was kind to Bumpus, how graciously he was rude - told himself the moral of the story of that trouble. He wasn't upset by it; Mrs Channon's harmonious descant, pleasant in his ear, was enough to keep any man's temper and mood upon an even level. Austin strayed by her side in coolness and clarity, repeating to himself the moral that he had got by heart. How does it begin? It begins with a sham and a make-believe and a staring imitation, and words are piled upon words to express the glaring and daring of the sham. You see it from here, you see it with your eyes upon the brilliance of Channon's irony. Ah, how Bumpus falters beneath it! Bumpus knows no better; in spite of himself he is impressed by the fact that with all his millions he can't buy a place of equality beside

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the prince. He is overwhelmed, and he fears, but also he dimly admires, the aloofness and independence of genius, eternally beyond him. That's what he thinks, and he will never understand, bless him, the moral of Austin's tale. Independent, aloof? Genius has clutched at poor old Bumpus - not clutched, no, for he presented a surface too broad, curves too solid for an easy snatch. Genius has lain in wait for him, stealthily watching, artfully pouncing when he slobbered and leered in his greed - or no again, not pouncing, for it isn't the habit of genius to waste its energy, risk its dignity, in an open resolute jump. No, no, there's a better and simpler way. Get someone else to do the waiting and the jumping; best of all, get the creature for whom the mouth of Bumpus hungrily waters, who inflames his stupid voracious eye. She, she will manage it, and she may demand some petting and flattering first, but what of that? - she's undeniably attractive. So there you see, with your clear eyes fixed upon Channon, the true loveliness and the real loneliness of the soaring pride of genius. Words can hardly be piled up high enough to do it justice; but Austin was cool-headed, he talked to himself with remarkable effect.

That's how it begins. But it proceeds a good deal further than this on a wintry morning, when the air is thin and active and the sunlight pale. It is no time for luxurious wrath and agitation. It is a time for sober argument — thought may be very nimble and precise on such a morning. Very well then, don't be satisfied with trouncing and denouncing, for which there is many a long and more suitable day in store. Accept the shams and the imitations, accept the coil of vulgarity in which

**poor** marvellous Bintworth has been caught; and now, still firmly holding Channon in view, consider a contrast which it may do you good to measure.. Austin has a wonderful brain, that's agreed; it ticks away incessantly, discriminating and analysing most daintily, and it is so fine, so sharp, that nothing can finally baffle the insight of Austin, everything is riddled by it in time. And so there comes a day when there is no substance left in anything at all, for it has all been cut to shreds by the acuteness of Austin, and on some clear wintry morning he may look round and discover nothing in the world that is good enough for him, nothing having proved a match for his exquisite intelligence. That's a promising state of affairs! What then shall Austin do but fold his hands and wish for a world more worthy of his brain? For it is his cleverness that makes him so fastidious, and it is the dainty distinctions he is always drawing that make the world so vulgar to his eye, and it is that dismal vulgarity in the 'look of things, at length and at last, which makes him shrink from touching them with his exquisite fingers. And what then of his genius? It stays with him in solitude for ever — a precious companionship, but perhaps rather monotonous at length, perhaps at last rather dreary. For nothing comes of it, nothing at all.

That's one side of the contrast. Now consider the other — and you know where to look for it. Ah, there's little need to describe the other side in words, after thinking of nothing else for all these months. Genius lives richly and happily with the man who knows how the world is worthless and who yet doesn't care, doesn't mind - who plunges both hands into the squalid stuff,

since there is none more fit for him, and shapes it to the convenience of his companion. If he could fly to the stars, where the commonest stuff is perhaps the dust of sapphire, be sure that he would willingly do so, glad to fill his hands with sapphire instead of this poor" dirt. He didn't elect to be tied to a tenth-rate planet, but here he is, and the point to be remembered is that he must get his work achieved, must and must, or else he dies of the power that he doesn't use. That's his dilemma; his power is divine, and every least manifestation of his power is bound to be mixed with earth; for it can't work in the void, and there's nothing but earth for it to work in. A thing done is a thing tainted; you can't escape the dilemma upon a planet where the rarest stuff is cheap plain vulgar dust. Lord, how quickly the argument rattles along in a discriminating brain! The man who works and achieves, *he* could discriminate if he chose, moaning and lamenting over his labour. But what's the good? — he won't waste the time, and a pinch of dirt is after all no cleaner than a load — so if dirt it must be there's no great virtue in refusing a load, making shift with a pinch. Channon isn't the man to pretend that you are spotless if only the tips of your fingers are soiled. He's too proud for such pretences<sup>^</sup> too proud even to explain and defend himself when he rejects them. He bemires himself from head to foot, he leaves you to make what you can of it. Yes, he trusts the intelligence of Austin.

And does he trust in vain? Austin followed him far off; and though the winter weather, eager and tremulous on the verge of an early spring, gave speed and nerve to his thought, *yet* he was tired very soon, and

he stretched his arms in exasperation, for there seemed no end to the scurry of his restless mind. Driven from corner to corner, he was moved to cry out to Channon for the mercy of a pause. Wasn't he nearly at the end of his argument, poor Austin? - it had lasted for months. And still the sound of Channon's voice, hard in the distance, drove him forward, and he had to think on and on - through a new turn of the argument, and probably not even now the last. Does Channon trust in vain to the understanding that Austin brings him? Well, here's the answer, blurted out in a weary mind. It depends upon Channon, it depends no longer upon Austin. The brain of Austin, tired as it is, will hold out to the end if Channon knows what he is doing, knows that the world isn't fit for him, knows that trash is trash. It isn't a question now of good clean slashing ruthlessness, in dealing with the vulgar stuff; Channon was clearly Channon, you remember, while he hacked and trampled in his might. But is he still Channon when he drops to a crawling plot - call it that, by all means — in his use of the only planet that is under his hand? He may be, he may, but on this condition alone — that the pride of his own taste in his own mind is inviolate, as cold and silent and solitary as a moonlit square when the dull world lies sleeping. Channon wasn't afraid of being ruthless, and he isn't afraid of being base and artful: this we plainly see. And it may be all right, and Austin may still be worrying himself thick-wittedly; but it's necessary to be certain that above these plots and tricks, looking down on them and knowing them for what they are, Austin and Channon stand side by side, they two alone, now and then just

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exchanging that straight glance which nobody else will get from either. 'Is that you? - And is that you? - We understand, we know that trash is trash.' That's all, it would be enough. But at present Channon wasn't attending to Austin, he was benignly congratulating Bumpus on his singular acumen.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**B**UT CHANNON ATTENDED TO AUSTIN AGAIN AT LAST. They were together in the picture-gallery, and a fine morning of March was shining and roaring outside; they stood together in the middle of the floor, under the ceiling of blue and gold, while a great carnival of weather went shouting and bouncing among the trees, on the dip of the hill below the windows. The world outside was full of the enormous youthful un-gainliness of the fine March morning, with all its untried energy let loose for a riot; and the clouds toppled and raced, the trees rocked, the sun flamed out and was quenched and flamed again; and Channon's talk, which began rather quietly, seemed small and anxious against that exuberant backing of light and noise. He wasn't in the mood of the day, as he stood or strolled about the gallery; he was listless, he lounged with his hands in his pockets - lean and worn, with something lost of his resilience. Perhaps these towering energies of the youthful year, so exactly the same as in all the other years, all the string of the elder years that a man remembers — perhaps they make him feel that his own spring never returns to him, say what you will, with entirely, precisely the identical flush of the spring that came and went last year. Is that true even for Channon - does he feel it? He seemed to feel it as he moved off to the windows at the end of the gallery and watched the jubilation of the day outside. It wasn't for him, he couldn't always hope to have his part in it.

He turned his back upon the gallery and stared into the day, the day that left him out of its tumult. And

meanwhile, behind him - think for a moment of the dark floor and the lustrous ceiling and the walls, the long walls of the gallery on which his back was turned. Austin never spoke a word of the pictures that hung along the walls - not a word to Channon, much less to anyone else; and perhaps he didn't even look at them if he could help it, the long line of Channon's pictures that were always beyond his reach; but at any hour he remembered their large cool presence — at any time, and especially now in these days, when there seemed to be too much glory all ove' the place, in stacks and loads, marked with its gigantic price. These pictures in the gallery, the lonely work of a man, they still held aloof; their home was in Channon's past, cool and secure, and even in these days their glory couldn't be cheapened. Yes, that is so; for Channon has left them far behind him, shed them, detached them from himself, and now they are safe from anybody's touch, even Channon's. Do you see?-when Channon's work has completely dropped away from himself it is serene and lovely; and now, you see, Austin with his dainty pride may at last approach it and admire it. Channon's back was turned upon the labour of his past, and Austin was left alone with it. Mightn't there at last be a kind of understanding between Austin and the company of these secluded pictures? The morning rioted and roared without, Channon brooded upon the sight of it; but Austin could almost forget Channon, forget the day, in the thought that he might come nearer to the eternal images now than ever he had before.

'They look vulgar, don't they?' said Channon - who was at Austin's side again, his eyes travelling along the

stately rank of the pictures. 'Here beside you I think them vulgar.' He swung round moodily and he swept a hand at the great array of his labour, dismissing it all. 'What can you expect of a man.' he cried, 'who must always be doing things, making things — or else he will die? It's not possible for such a man as I am to be silent; that's the trouble. Look at all that stuff, up and down these walls - all of it only a fraction of the amount that I have shouted and bawled since the beginning. I make such a noise because I can't contain myself; doesn't it seem to you odd? I was packed too full, I had to yell it all out of me somehow, and if one bears a brain it's a disgust to one's brain at times to listen to such an uproar. The whole of my work is a witness to the fact that I'm vulgar-look at it! It's good, much better than you know; but look at the size, hark at the noise! No man creates such a commotion as I have made, day after day from the beginning, who hasn't a poor cheap fibre in him somewhere. A brain, what you and I call a brain, can't ever look happily upon abundance; it isn't in nature for abundance to delight a brain, for nothing is the best but the last and utmost rarity. I know it well - sometimes. If I had been honestly difficult to please I shouldn't be here. What difference does it make if all that stuff is very good? - there's too much of it. Merely by its noise and size it's given away. It makes me feel so small and so poor, as I stand here and look at it with you. I should like to be myself and you too, both together. I should like to make masses and masses of beautiful things, and also I should like to destroy them all, or never to have made them - and so to please my brain. I want both, and I can't have

both; and it's the best of the two, you know it is, that I miss.'

So said Channon, if really it was he. Austin found that Channon was looking up at him with an appeal, it might have been an appeal for comfort and protection. Channon had everything that he needed, excepting only this, and it seemed too cruel that he should be forced to go without it, especially since it was a thing that Austin in his indigence possessed. It was his pride, and if he could have plucked it out and given it to Channon on the spot he would have done so. It was his pride — which hasn't always been a great consolation to Austin himself, with its thin voice perpetually insinuating that nothing is good enough for Austin; but if Channon felt the lack of it, with all his opulence outspread before him, it was hard and horrible to leave him uncomforted, unencouraged. Austin has so little that he could easily manage without anything at all; he is well used to living narrowly and scrubbily, it's no great hardship to such as Austin. But that Channon should be troubled for want of the scrap that Austin has contrived to save — it seems an outrage. Channon desired the exquisite pleasure of disdainfully refraining from the world, from bigness and from loudness, from glory in stacks and loads, and he desired it for ever in vain, his genius refusing him only this with all that it gave him. And thus at last it is made clear to Austin, after months of doubt, that he does possess a single little precious talent, his very own; and he sees what it is, and he knows that he can't impart it to another, not even to this other whom he so woefully craves to serve. And never indeed had he craved more painfully to serve him than just

now—just now, when Channon seemed anxious and sad, believing after all that he missed the one thing needful. Austin would have surrendered his scrap with both hands, there and then, if he might - poor Austin!

It was hard on him if he couldn't. Think how splendid it would be for him to feel that he and Channon, Channon and he, were united for ever in their partnership, not by reason of a thousand gifts from the rich man to the poor, but by reason of one, one only, from the poor man to the rich. All that Channon had given to Austin had turned out in the end to be less than enough; less, you see, by so very little, and yet the want of it has spoilt their partnership, and Austin can't supply it. He can't? No, but he will! For isn't Channon appealing to him in a dispirited mood, and isn't Austin close beside him to catch his glance, and isn't this perhaps the very moment we have imagined and hoped for, when two men exchange that look of understanding which puts the world in its place? It is far from being all that we have pictured it; for Channon didn't lift his head and didn't flash his eye to do honour to the moment, he drooped with irresolute uneasiness. The two men weren't companions in an equal understanding, side by side in their loneliness; one of them, and he the rich man, clung to the other and asked him for his help. So much the more then it was for Austin to be proud, and here was Austin's usefulness made manifest, and this is how his poor proud genius may support the mighty man who is doomed for most of the time to a debasing traffic in the world. Austin is one who will never do anything, make anything, on his own account, and his proper business is to hang about in the

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background, communing as he may with the noble work that Channon has left behind him in the past, and then to be ready and alert when Channon is suddenly tired, disgusted by the traffic of the present, and finds nobody but Austin who can understand. Is this really the final twist of the argument that has kept Austin occupied for so long? Let him hope so, by all means; for he hasn't much energy in reserve for more.

'Well,' said Channon, 'I am vulgar, and you know it.' He still held Austin's arm, and they drifted together down the length of the gallery, stopping now and then before the array of the serene great images. They didn't appear vulgar to Austin, but as usual he didn't speak of them, and Channon also was silent for a while. They drifted, paused, returned, and Austin tried to remember that this was the moment of his usefulness, when with no word said between them he could lend Channon the support that for once he needed. And to be sure he had the air of needing it. He weighed heavily upon Austin's arm, he was wan and uneasy, and as for the great pictures on the walls, they seemed too many and too big for him, they couldn't be the work of the hand of a man so irresolute. How many times, hanging upon Channon with his gaze, Austin has tried to catch the movement of the imagination within that head, and how he has thought and wondered to think of the power at work there, always making and making; and now Channon stared at his pictures with an empty eye, coveting for himself the one little talent that he didn't possess, the talent of obscure and sterile pride. He had to forgo it, he envied Austin his secure possession of it, and a touching sight it was to see him,

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forlorn, bewildered almost like a child, because he perceived that just here Austin held him at a disadvantage. And was Austin the man to use his chance ungenerously? Not so, he would simply hold himself in readiness by Channon's side, showing him without a word that his intelligence could be trusted. It hadn't happened till now, perhaps it would be long before it happened again; but on this boisterous morning of March it was seen that Channon could feel poor and vulgar, and Austin rose to understand him, support him, enrich him out of the plenty of his indigence. It was the moment.

'Well,' said Channon, Vulgar as I am and as you know me to be, I admire a fibre that is rarer and finer than my own. I think it a very pretty thing to possess. If you have it you can live upon air - high up, where the air is thin. That's a great opportunity in its way. Up there a man sees very clearly; he sees exactly what everything is worth lower down, and from that height one thing seems worth little more than another. The power to live there is certainly its own reward — for at last the brain is satisfied, the brain that won't accept anything baser and grosser and stuffier than the thinnest air. Down below the unhappy brain has perpetually to put up with stuffiness; it laments and bewails, but that is its portion. And perhaps you think that it doesn't find its portion so very unpleasant after all; it seems to you to adapt itself pretty comfortably on the whole. I don't say you are wrong. And yet it rebels now and then — rather painfully, I assure you. It must be charming to live upon air. You, I suppose, look down on me and wonder why I don't join you up there,

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if I wish to do so. Why don't I jump out of all this and go aloft with you? Yes, you'd respect me if I did that. You can't understand how a great man like me, knowing the world and what it is, can consent to remain on the ground. You think it horrible. You can't believe, whatever I say, that a man can keep himself lonely and clear-headed in the crowd on the ground. Oh yes, my friend, I've watched you - I've seen. You arraign me, and this is my last chance.' And Channon was now very serious. He didn't ask for Austin's generosity, it seemed; he was prepared to defend himself. And was it necessary for Channon to defend himself? — couldn't he see how nothing was needed but that they two, Channon and Austin, should once in a while confront each other in such sincerity as this? Why add a word more to the words that are enough?

'My last chance,' said Channon. 'Well, then, I'll take it.' They continued their slow march, and Channon, dropping the arm he had clutched, looked straight in front of him as he spoke. And why should he harden his face, his voice, while he made his defence to Austin? Ah, what strange times, what remarkable changes! — that Austin should be trying to be considerate and kind to Channon, showing how intelligently he could rise to his support. Only let Channon take his disadvantage more easily—let him see how vain and small is an explanation, a clarification, at the height of understanding where these two may now stand side by side. Channon won't be Channon if he can't perceive that Austin is ready for him here. And now Channon was talking on, lifting his head, gathering the strength that he seemed to have lost; but his face was hard, and his

tone as he talked was new and difficult in Austin's ear - the tone of a man determined to speak and have done. Stop him, prevent him by any means! — it's too much for Austin, it's more than he can bear to see. Channon needn't stare grimly ahead of him, avoiding the long deep faithful looks of his poor companion. Here at last poor Austin knows what Channon has desired and required of him — nothing more nor less than a partnership, an alliance to which Austin's poverty should bring the one thing needful. Let Channon turn then and face him and discover how swiftly, suddenly, utterly the cheap silly world would drop beneath them - for a moment, a mere moment if it couldn't be more; a moment of reality, once in a thousand days, is enough to revive the heart and to satisfy the brain that is sick with trash. 'Don't I know at last,' cries Austin, 'that I have something to bring you? What becomes of all that rubbish, if across it and over it I can catch your eye?' And he seized Channon by both hands, on fire to convince him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

CHANNON, AT HIS FULL HEIGHT ONCE MORE, IN POSSESSION of his strength, with his great head thrown back in power and confidence - Channon didn't answer immediately; he stood away and he contemplated Austin very coolly. His eyelids drooped, his mouth twisted into a smile that certainly wasn't a smile of welcome to an intelligent companion. Not at all — it warded off his companion, it dismissed him to a convenient distance, and there it held him, just at the right distance for quiet and biting speech. Do you think perhaps that Channon is a man to be treated kindly? Fool and fool and three times a fool, see how easily Channon plucks your kindness out of your hand, glances at it with an amused grimace and jerks it over his shoulder! Channon is Channon, sure enough. If he is anxious and discouraged for five minutes in the young tumult of the spring, you had better not imagine that he asks for consolation; he rounds on you in a trice with that thin smile of irony before which you drop - drop dead almost, the last of your energy oozing away and leaving you flat, cold, tired out. What does it mean? Austin's wonderful moment was his own no longer; "Channon had taken it, and he would make what he chose of it - something very unlike poor Austin's expectation, yet again. It happened as quick as thought, and Channon's smile had a very sharp edge as he spoke. 'You're not as clever as I've supposed you,' he said. 'You don't seem able to understand me after all.'

It was impossible to approach him; Austin could only

wait for the words that bit the air so cleanly. 'It's evident,' said Channon, 'that I must protect myself; I can't afford to be misunderstood - in your way. Those charming fancies of yours don't help me. I like the look of them, I should be delighted to share them - if I were you. But I chance to be myself— not a man who can live upon nothingness, and you're of the superior kind, we agree on that, but still there's a point where your understanding fails, and we seem to have reached it. You aren't large enough to accept me, that's the fact. Oh, I know how greatly you can forget and forgive; you can be entirely divine in your indulgence; you're ready to wash out my offence at the slightest sign that I am penitent. But that, you see, is of no use to me whatever; I don't want absolution. I'm too old and too big and too sinful to be forgiven—in the midst of all this, with my vast vulgarity upon my head. Take it or leave it, I say; but if you take it, understand that you must take it all - and I admit that it's an armful. There's no other way. And remember, I never deceived you; I warned you long ago that I wasn't a modest undertaking. Well, you misjudged your capacity, and so did I; no doubt it's disappointing to both of us. But you at least have the consolation of your virtue.' And so Channon spoke on, standing in the middle of the shining gallery, isolated in sharpness and coldness by his tone, by his smile.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's disappointing. You seemed to watch me as I had never been watched before. I felt safe with you to the end - and you've failed me already. Don't you see that I've neither time nor room for any-

thing that hinders me? I can't stop to answer questions and doubts, refined as they may be, and yours, I know, are highly refined. It's most unfortunate — for if you can't help me what else are you to do? There are few chances for people of your sort; there is none, perhaps, except the chance to be useful to a man like me. In that way you might have done something that would live and last, a piece of work of your own; the difference that your clever brain might have made to me would have been your very own. As it is, since you aren't capable of belief in me, I don't see what you are to hope for. You'll do nothing. You would never have come here at all, you would never have given your mind away to me as you did in the beginning, if you had needed yourself for any purpose of your own. I always saw that. I, when I was young, was of another fashion. I could no more have offered up my genius to another man than I could have worn another man's head. But you were different, and I did you no wrong.' And Channon insisted eagerly and severely that he was not to be blamed; this much Austin must admit, that it was his own generosity which had proved too small and too timid for its chance.

Here, then, here is the limit of Channon's comprehension' he guards himself against reproach from Austin. He thinks that Austin might cherish a private wrong of his own, an ill turn done to him, poor and harmless and obscure, by a great rich man like Channon. He thinks it worth while to point out that he isn't to be blamed. There's a flat conclusion to Austin's long laborious argument! It is reduced from its height and its pain, it is brought down to this - and by Chan-

non, who supposes that Austin may have a thought for himself. And so at last there was nothing any longer mysterious about Channon; he was edged all round by a plain line, the whole of it had finally come into sight. Without effort, without distress, Austin could see that Channon was intelligible; and one ought perhaps to be more upset by these discoveries, but the self-worrying mind is so glad to find anything resolved and defined and simplified that it can't be in a hurry to count the cost. The splendour and the mystery that have been so big, so much bigger than the size of a man - and that have been so bright, dazzling the eye that has tried in vain to measure them — harden to a glitter which dazzles nobody, shrink to the size of a man no bigger than another; and sad as it is to have lost the company of mystery and splendour, yet in a way it's a relief, one can't deny it, to a toiling flagging mind. Austin needn't charge himself any longer with the burden of wondering at Channon; his mind is free again, none too soon. He felt the relief of it as he looked at Channon now - at Channon by himself, cut off from the marvel of his genius, a man quite easy to be understood.

He didn't want Austin's little hoarded gift at all. It was a mistake; he had no wish to meet the eye that sees him in his weakness. Channon is very seldom discouraged, unsure of himself; but when he is he won't have the company of one who perceives too much. It scares him to be understood. He won't have it known that he lacks the one thing needful, and if Austin has made the discovery he must go. Will Austin protest and complain and pretend that he has been treated

badly? Channon seemed to expect it, really even to hope for it; he would like the chance of repelling an undeserved reproach. It would help him out of his uneasiness if he might be a little indignant with Austin, raiding him on a ground where they could wrangle over trivial rights and wrongs. There could be no doubt of it; Channon recovered himself when he felt that nobody could blame him. And it was this, it was a squabble over pretended injuries, that was to break the noble silence of Channon's genius - cut off from himself, silent upon the walls around them. Was this what Channon asked of his companion? Well, there's a point where Austin fails him, and it is reached indeed. He can't consent to be injured, aggrieved, for the reassurance of Channon. Austin, who has touched the height of pain, can't descend to recrimination - not even though Channon would be glad of it, though he awaits it with open eagerness. It is too much to ask. Austin turned away from him, from the man at whom he had ceased to wonder, and it was to the pictures on the walls that he offered his rejected gift. Is it absurd to feel that they and Austin could now exchange that look, that look of pride, which Channon fears and has refused? Absurd as it might be, Austin seemed to be welcomed as a friend by Channon's genius, when he broke away and turned to it, neglecting Channon.

'Ah, you're very virtuous - you're not to be pitied.' said Channon sharply. He stood behind Austin now, calling after him - trying to provoke him, you might say, with exasperation in his voice. When he lost his greatness he lost it very quickly; the last trace of it was

gone as he snapped out his annoyance, perceiving that Austin wouldn't help him with a quarrel. 'I don't pity you,' Channon called out. He could be hard, he could be cruel — everybody knows it. But who could have believed that he would try to hurt a man for the sake of the satisfaction of hurting? He needed somehow to wound his virtuous friend, his friend of the superior sort, the man of pride. And he really thought he could wound his friend in that way - with a taunt thrown at his back across the chasm of silence that now divided them. Austin, moving away, was at the end of the gallery by this time. Channon didn't follow him; he flung his taunt, and perhaps he saw how harmlessly it dropped into the silence; perhaps he was irritated afresh to discover that he couldn't hurt his friend — in that way. It was humiliating, and not a grand humiliation either; and Channon, who has been admired so often in splendid rage, in ruthless might, shan't be seen by Austin at such a moment. And yet it's vain for Austin to turn his back; he knows too well, strangely enough, how Channon looks at such a moment. How should he know? — for this is a new thing, it's only just now that Channon has been shorn of the last of his greatness. But Austin is able at once to see, to see without looking round, the cold and ugly *fish* of the spite of jealousy with which Channon tries to wound him.

It was hard on Channon that he couldn't succeed. To feel and to wince was more than Austin could do for him just now, and it was better for them to separate, widening the chasm between them. Austin at his end of the gallery was alone with the images of Channon's great-

ness, and they were friendly, they were kindly and familiar now that Channon was left behind. They seemed more genial, more liberal than ever; Channon had nothing to do with them. Think of the man who was jealous of Austin's independence, who couldn't bear to be understood, who couldn't endure the level eyes of a clever friend; think of Channon — and see whether you can trace the hand of that man in this profusion of generous strength. It can't be done, it can't at least by Austin - who is content to feel that his gift isn't altogether wasted, since Channon's genius is bigger and prouder than himself. Are his pictures vulgar? Perhaps Sir James, artist and gentleman, found them vulgar, and Channon may be right, and there can't in all the world be so much of the best as there is of his genius, his alone. That isn't the point. The point is that his genius was big and easy and unafraid, abounding as it chose, without a thought or a care for the opinion of any of us; and Channon himself, behind Austin's back, was exasperated to think that his humble clever friend should judge him in silence. He would welcome a fight, he likes to be attacked; a scuffle in dust and noise encourages him, for he always wins. But if he sees that you see what he lacks, and if you don't say a word, and if he can't sting you to reproach him, then his accustomed support has failed and he's a disappointed man and he seeks for consolation elsewhere, dropping you, forgetting you on the spot. That is Channon. And if he hasn't any longer the power to hurt you, why hesitate to face him and have done? Channon certainly won't delay you.

And so Austin turned to face him, not knowing what

to say, but determined to have done, for it was obviously the end. Channon looked at him coolly as he approached, and it was Channon who spoke. 'Well,' he said, 'have you made up your mind? Am I to be forgiven? Let's have it plainly out. You think me bad and base because I take hold of the world and do what I choose with it — and because I don't sit aloft, enjoying my own nobility and doing nothing. But perhaps after all you see that I'm incurable; I am as I was made, it's too late to change me. There's the chance for your rare comprehension — won't you take it? Say to yourself that my great *gifts* are my excuse. They were piled upon my back without my asking, and I had to accept the consequence. Why not be sorry for me when you learn what they entail? Where's your intelligence if you can't perceive that I'm a victim, helpless and irresponsible? Show your magnanimity, therefore, and forgive me in your best manner. It'll do you good.' And Channon was now so happy in his command of the scene that he played with his conclusion, he held it back and made much of it; and he stood there, planted in his confidence, ready to deliver his stroke at the vital point. 'Come, forgive me,' said Channon, smiling lightly. And at last, with a jerk of his chin, he threw out his final word. 'If you do, it'll be the end of you. For when you've forgiven me you'll have to

There's a stroke to bring Austin to the ground! Channon delivered it and watched for its effect. And Austin again couldn't satisfy him, couldn't please him with the sight of a friend brought down by a word. Channon waited for the evidence of his power, and

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nothing happened. He only saw the steadily open eyes of his friend, and the tired gesture with which the blow was put aside. Austin couldn't do more. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'I forgive you.' That was all, that was the end — the end to which they had been moving all the time. Austin must have foreseen it almost from the beginning, for it didn't now surprise him. How easy to say that he forgave Channon, how easy to leave him! - of all that had passed between them since the beginning there had been nothing easier than this, nothing that cost so little. Why should Channon wish to strike an attitude and make a speech about it? That's natural; he enjoys his attitudes, he lives in them; Channon is always so public, he likes the full light and the big stage where there is room for him. But he doesn't like it when his audience won't be roused - to admiration, to execration, it's all the same; and for once he found an audience inert, patient, only waiting till he had finished his speech and dropped his attitude. And it's very difficult for Channon to descend from his climax without the hand that he counts on. Austin failing him, he looked round for other help; he expected it as of right, and it was there. Nothing of the play was lost upon the patient onlooker: the awkward hitch - Channon clinging to his climax, not knowing how to leave it — and then his relief, his comfortable subsidence, when his wife entered the gallery and gracefully trailed across the floor to his side. Austin, too, was relieved; Mrs Channon as usual was beautifully timed.

Channon seized her hand and gaily recovered himself in a trice. 'Mourn with me,' he exclaimed; 'our good young friend is determined on deserting us. We

oppress him with our worldliness. He's just been telling me his true opinion of us all, and I'm quite shocked to learn how vulgar we really are. He mustn't be exposed to contamination a moment longer. Don't try to delay him, don't tempt him! - his whole moral nature is in the greatest danger. How thankful we ought to be that he has discovered it in time!' Ah, Channon had found his footing. Austin could now slip away unremarked - it was all he asked. Channon, with one hand on his wife's shoulder, raised the other to his forehead, covered his face, bowed his head; it was a posture of humbled resignation, and a good one. Anybody could see that the great man took his disappointment finely: with true feeling, for the stoop of his grey head was pathetic, but also without extravagance, for with a mocking humour he refused to make a tragic scene over his wound. Anybody could see it, that is to say, except his wife - whose business it isn't to see, who is only charged to be seen; and we know how faithfully she minds her business, never encroaching beyond it. And so she now resumed her place in the picture and smiled enchantingly and didn't understand. But Austin understood, and he turned as he slipped away — he turned in order that Channon shouldn't again be disappointed. Isn't it strange? - one must give Channon what he wants if one possibly can; the demanding insisting force in him isn't to be ignored. Austin looked round and did his part. The young man whom Channon had discovered and befriended, the young man who had wounded his kindness, beheld the picture of his benefactor's dignity beneath a blow. It would have been a shame to withhold that last small service. Channon's face was hidden,

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but what of that? He knows what you are about, he never forgets you till the last service you can do for him is done.. 'And there it is.' said Austin to himself, as he slipped away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

**A**DULL STREET IT WAS, NO DOUBT, MOST DULL AND depressed, but respectable enough if it hadn't been cast off like old clothing by those for whom it was made. Or no, not cast off - for in that case it would have had its memories, and there is pride in any past; and these dreary houses, they hadn't been used and thrown away, they had been rejected from the first; they were failures, they were mere mistakes, with no dignity even to remember. And so they had fallen to a population who forced them on and wore them, somehow, anyhow - misfitting garments that were too good to destroy, though they suited nobody. The blistered front-door, designed to keep out the weather and the stranger, gaped open and admitted both - let in the March wind that scattered the litter of the street in the narrow passage, and the stranger, Austin, who climbed the dishonoured staircase to the first floor, to the second, looking in vain for guidance. The house had been split up and parcelled out, and the staircase apparently was nobody's concern, or everybody's, and a broken perambulator on this landing, a heap of empty bottles or a tousled child on that, were everybody's too, or nobody's, in the communal dinginess that was free to all. At the top of the house Austin was faced by a door that hung ajar, and as he stood before it doubtfully a woman's voice called to him from within. 'Come in - no, wait!' cried the voice, rather sweet and full in its tone. And presently she pulled open the door and looked out, half concealing herself. 'What is it?' she said.

What was it indeed? Austin didn't know where to begin, so much it was and all of it so queer, there's a great deal - if you'll let me tell you — if you're Mrs Bewlay.' Not that he doubted it was Mrs Bewlay; her voice was enough to assure him in that place. And there was more than her voice, as she peered at him round the door with bright soft eyes; and there was the loose tangle of her hair, there was the clutch of her hand on her untidy raiment - of course she was Mrs Bewlay. She possibly thought she remembered Austin and began to greet him; and then she hesitated, she didn't know what she thought; but she wasn't embarrassed, she held out her hand — or would have done so, only her disarray couldn't safely be released; and so she retreated, crying to him again to wait, wait while she righted herself—just a minute! She left the door still ajar, and it seemed there was more than herself to be righted; drawers had to be shut, crockery rattled, a curtain pulled;- and when she returned, after more than a minute, she appeared to have forgotten the dishevelment of the odd garment upon her bosom. No matter, she invited him in, vaguely, freely, and they passed together into a small room that was raked uncomfortably by the cold light of the window, at that height above the street. 'Sit down,' she said — 'but there's nowhere to sit!' And indeed there wasn't anywhere, though the room was very full of furniture too big for it; but a japanned tea-tray and a pink flannel dressing-gown were prominent, and there was a chair under both; and soon they were sitting opposite each other, Austin and Mrs Bewlay, in the hard spring-light, by a fire that was chiefly smoke and a smell of coal-dust.

'Well, what is it that you have to tell me?' she asked without much attention. 'And who are you?'

But she was quick, she understood as soon as she had put her question. 'You come from Bintworth.' she said. And how strange it was to see the manner in which she was affected, uttering the name; it changed her, it brought her suddenly together, it drew her wandering glances to a point. 'So that's who you are.' she went on after a pause; 'I might have expected you - I did expect you.' She was lost in the thought before her eyes. A gust in the chimney caught the chilly smoke of the fire and puffed it out into the room, again and again; but she didn't notice it, she sat with the light on her face and satisfied herself with her thought. For a time she was alone with it. Then she remembered Austin with a visible jerk and came back to him. 'Yes, I heard about you some while ago,' she said. 'I thought I should see you sooner. You've had a good many months with him, haven't you? Blake had a very short time, but that didn't surprise me when I saw him.' Did it surprise her that Austin had had so long? Her shining eyes dwelt on him as she pondered. She sat in an easy casual heap, her hands holding her elbows, her plentiful grey hair loose and wild against the worn softness of her cheek. She wasn't prettily dressed - if you could call it a dress; she seemed to be clad in crumples of rusty finery with nothing to fill the chinks, and the chinks were many. But she was entirely at home with her disorder, and with her visitor too. 'Yes.' she said, 'I was surprised that you didn't come to me before. Blake told me about you. I didn't think I should have to wait so long.'

Im so very sorry - I really don't know how - of course I ought -' Austin began to stammer. And well he might, for of course he ought, and yet he really didn't know, and with the woman before him, gleaming at him in contemplation and curiosity, he was very sorry indeed, and no wonder; there was a twinge for him in her unresentful tone. He had failed her disgracefully, but she didn't reproach him; perhaps she had been failed very often. She was beaten by life and she was used to it, and without blaming Austin she observed the fact that he was like the rest, he found her easy to forget. But there she was wrong — couldn't she understand how wrong she was? It's hard to explain and it looks bad and it's exceedingly awkward; for this poor patient soul, don't you see that even now she can't know the worst? - she must be supposing that Austin is here on Channon's errand and that between them they've remembered her at last. And now Austin has to declare, not only that Blake had trusted him in vain, not only that Channon hasn't been told of her last disasters - but also that her visitor is as poor, patient, defeated as she is herself. He hasn't come to her rescue, he has come—well, why has he come? It seemed natural, that's all he can say, and when he says it this unhappy woman's expectation will crash, and she'll see the rescue that she counts on, that she has waited for till perhaps there isn't another minute to lose, snatched from her by the word that Austin has to say. It's horrible. How much better to have kept away after all, leaving the poor woman alone with her defeat. She was at home with it, left to herself; and now Austin had appeared, stirring her memory, sharpening her vision, with noth-

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ing to give her but a new stroke of disappointment. 'You don't understand,' he said; 'I didn't forget, but I've failed you. I never said a word to Channon. I haven't a word from him to bring you.'

<sup>4</sup>'Why no,' she cried, 'of course not! You've left him - I understand that. People don't come to see me till they've left him, but they do come then. It seems natural to them then to wish to see me. It *is* natural. Blake often comes now — we're quite a party. We talk - we talk —' And she was lost again, roving away over Austin's head; and you couldn't think her pathetic in her untidy discomfort, poverty-stricken as it appeared; for it didn't hold her, it didn't detain her for an instant when she followed what she saw beyond it. She was free, and a tired defeated man who watched her might well be smitten with *envy*<sup>^</sup> so free she was, so careless. Austin really felt as though he clung to her, as she spoke on, wandering further. 'Why, sometimes I think,' she said, 'that if other — if other things failed he'd come to see me himself. Wouldn't it be strange? - and it would be natural too. But other things won't fail, of course not; there'll always be other things. He's got the world to choose from, he can help himself where he pleases. Isn't it odd that I can remember a time when it was all so different? Yet even then - he could always get what he wanted. Yes, I remember -' And indeed she did; there was plainly nothing in her that wasn't memory. She was a fortunate woman, she was deeply to be envied. The trouble with most people is that they call in memory to hurt them here and now; and this woman couldn't be hurt, for she wasn't here or now; she was given up to the past, all there and all then. If

one doesn't exist in the present one is evidently safe. The dream of the old time is sweet; it is only bitter when you wake — if you wake. 'Yes.' said Mrs Bewlay, secure in her dream, 'he could always get what he wanted. Once he wanted *me!*'

But Austin was awake and alive, and his memory made the most of its opportunity as she talked on. She didn't wish to hear very much; she couldn't return to the present. She talked of the old time, when he wanted her; and you could see that she saw him, as Blake said, for she spoke as though she searched for words to match things that were before her eyes — rejecting a word now and then, questioning her vision till she found a better word, the one that hit it off exactly. She wasn't a good story-teller, but thing after little thing caught the light through her talk, and gradually the scene cleared, and 'at length Austin was gazing at it, he too, as intently as as she herself. 'Look at it!' she seemed to point and say. 'There we are, he and I, as we both were once. Isn't it pretty?' Yes, it's very pretty, so much so that a barren life and an empty heart may ache to behold it. Channon could always get what he wanted and always afford to throw it away. See him throw it away in the scene before us—very quickly indeed! Ah, but the woman, she always knew that it couldn't last; or at any rate - that's to say - perhaps she didn't know it at the time, but afterwards she *had* known it always, from the first. Is that clear? - anyhow it seems quite intelligible to the woman. For he was one (ah, you know, you know!) - he was one to be for ever climbing, ranging, conquering, and the woman couldn't follow him, not for long. *She* couldn't climb; why, she was frightened to

death by the very servant-girl when first he insisted on hiring one to help her. And she laughed, she laughed charmingly; it's easy to laugh when you're so serenely safe in the past—have been for so many years. It's amusing to look at that dreadful girl with the fringe and the sham pearls, 'Kittay' she called herself; it was Channon who hired her, Channon who blew up one day and fired her—look at that! Isn't it pretty and funny, the whole of it together? Careless love and nameless youth and penniless laughter, it's well to have known them once. Then you can sit and look at them for evermore.

'And was it really so pretty at the time, the whole of it, and so funny?' Austin began to ask the question, but he smothered it. That's an imbecile question. Who knows what love and youth were really like when they were new and alive, who knows and who cares? They *were*; and now they are lodged in the woman's dream, and Austin the hungry-hearted may have his glimpse of them, and it's only because he's so wretchedly alive and awake that their prettiness hurts him. Yes, they hurt him to such a degree that he could strike out at them, smash them, insist that they weren't what they seem. Perhaps they weren't—and what then? Mrs Bewlay was radiant and tender over the sight of them, and well she might be. Her life had been fed, once for all, and she didn't sit hungry in her destitution, she didn't ache with resentment - with the dry hard anger that ravages an empty heart. But Austin did, and the only cure for him was to fold his hands and die if he could—or rather to go sound asleep, like this **poor** woman, and live upon a dream. For he too possessed the stuff of dreams, after all, if he could **but** drop *off*

like her; he had had his day—not a long day, but enough to fill the visions of a very long night. Couldn't she tell him what to do, how to get away from himself and change his aching into dreaming? She too, perhaps, hadn't managed it easily in the beginning; she ought to be able to instruct him. 'How does one get to sleep? - or, better still, how does one die? For surely you of all women can tell me.' But that of course is as vain a question as the other. One has to learn these things for oneself, and meanwhile Austin was very wide awake with his pain.

'Now *you* talk of him,' said Mrs Bewlay presently. She didn't ask for information, she simply wished him to join her in contemplation of the old bright picture. But her word brought Austin to his feet; he moved, he went and stood by the chilly smoulder of the hearth, facing the woman and the staring light and the poor frowziness of the room. Truly they were on the rubbish-heap, he and Mrs Bewlay together, chucked there by Channon; they fell where they happened to fall, out of his sight, out of his mind; and Channon was high on his hill-top, in the sun and the wind, exalting the power of his life and his genius. How could Austin talk of him? Channon was aloft in the shining world, whence long ago he had stretched out a hand to Austin, so suddenly, so strangely; and it was all over, silence had returned upon the miracle accomplished, and now Austin was every morning a little more broadly awake to the sight of Channon out of reach once more. How could he talk about it? If he talked he would strike out and smash it, for he could reach the vision to destroy it. What is it, after all? It's cheapness, we know it is -

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the kind of cheapness that can be bought for money, for stacks and loads of money; and Channon has bought and paid for it, and he sits there with his genius, proud and happy, while these two whom he has chucked behind him fall to the ground and are forgotten. But *they* don't forget; they rouse themselves in the cold light, they huddle together and contemplate their memories. The woman doesn't fully understand, but she can be made to do so. She *shall* see how easily he can smash the glory, up there on the hill-top, which seems so far beyond the reach of either of them. A word dashes it to pieces. It's cheapness! - can't she see the fragments fly?

But Mrs Bewlay was looking at Austin now, not at Channon, and if she asks you to talk it doesn't follow that she listens. She rested her chin upon her clasped hands, her odd gown was askew upon her shoulders, and she searched the face of her visitor with gleaming interest, but she clearly didn't attend to what he said. No matter, if he began to speak he must go on, and he did go on. He couldn't stop, it was too deep a relief to be smiting and smashing at last. Down with it, down with beauty and glory that have been bought and paid for - you see what they are made of when you see how they are shivered by a word. They're all vulgarity within, and if one's eyes weren't dazzled, if one's poor heart wasn't fooled, the shining surface must have betrayed long ago what it hardly barely covered. Even Channon himself, shaken, dismayed for a moment in the riot of the young year, had known the word that would send his life and his genius flying into bits. He had known, but he had been afraid; he had kept it up

too grandly, too successfully, too long. And so he had protected himself, had bethought himself to kill the poor heart which had inconveniently discovered him; he ha<sup>d</sup> tried to kill it - only hearts are so tough, even when they are stricken they must painfully teach themselves to die. Austin can't die, it appears, and if he lives he must take the relief that is open to him; he must shout the word that destroys. Channon won't hear it, nobody will hear it - least of all this woman with her untroubled eyes. It's safe here, Austin may say what he pleases; it's so safe that he may indeed be grateful to Mrs Bewlay. 'I shall often come and see you,' he declared - 'quite a party, as you say.'

But still her gaze passed over his words, seeking his face. 'You remind me of him,' she said, 'somehow. He never could take things easily. He was always storming. Times were bad in those days, and he fought - he seemed to be always fighting. I don't know that it's good for people to fight so much when they're young. He wouldn't be beaten, and at last he got everything he fought for. But perhaps -' Well, perhaps it's better to give in and to be beaten - sometimes. Here for example is Mrs Bewlay, careless and kindly in her failure; one's heart goes out to her, not in pity but in warmth. She's a good soul, she's incorruptible; her failure hasn't made her peevish. Her great possessions are all in the past — and so great, so lovely, that nothing counts beside them. What could you give her now that would be worth her taking? You can offer her no better than the best; and she has had the best, she has it. If she had been a fighter, if she had tried for more and won her way and climbed to the top with Channon,

what could she think of the glory she would now be sharing? Would she take it as serenely as his wife takes it? — his wife, whom the least fleck of the dust of the struggle has never touched. No, it isn't always good to fight—and why not? 'Perhaps,' said Mrs Bewlay, 'all that fighting and struggling is bad for a man. It makes him cruel - it may make him seem cruel to some. One has to understand. I can understand, because I know what it was. You can't know. It was very hard. If you blame him remember that it was a long time — the hard time. Those who don't know are unjust to him; Blake's unjust to him.' And she sat up, urgently explaining why Channon might seem cruel - to some.

'What do I care about his cruelty?' Austin flung away; he pushed across to the window, he pressed his head against the cold glass. 'He has only been cruel to you, to me, to all the others. That's nothing. If his fighting was bad for him it was worse for him than that.' Cruel? — why we have gloried and rejoiced in his ruthlessness, and Austin, for one, has asked and prayed to be destroyed by Channon when the right hour struck. As for that his only complaint is that he hasn't been enough destroyed; he's left with too many sharp and lively thoughts. But that's nothing. This is what matters — not cruelty, but cheapness. Channon's afraid, ashamed to be seen; he shields himself - not from the world, oh no, which pays a pound a minute for the privilege of his scorn, but from Austin, from this woman of his youth, from anyone who brings him the understanding that he doesn't want. That's why they're here now on the rubbish-heap — because they know too much. They know exactly what his scorn is worth—a pound a

minute, not more. Was it always so, in the old days? Of course it was, it must have been, if this woman had only known.' Or perhaps she did know and she didn't care — that's more likely. Anyhow Channon is the man who has cheapened his scorn, his splendour, his loneliness; and these two, first and last of the things that he has feared and chucked behind him, they may sit here and reckon the precise value of Channon's life. Won't it be fun? — especially for Mrs Bewlay, who will learn so plainly, if indeed she has to learn, how the hardness and the brightness of the old days have been fulfilled. Here's enough to occupy them for many a happy hour, between the black grate and the staring window. It'll be meat and drink to them, they'll be filled and warmed. And there'll be one spot at any rate upon the globe jwhere the price of a cheap thing will be known and named.

'You-do remind me of him,' said Mrs Bewlay. She was still gazing at Austin meditatively when he turned; her eyes followed him as he moved and stood before her. What had he been talking about? She only knew that she was watching a young man who talked, who railed, who hit out against the thoughts of his mind and couldn't, leave them alone. He was disappointed, he was savage and unjust; it was very natural. 'He used to talk like that; I've heard him so often. You're very different from Blake. He's unjust too, but he isn't savage; he accepts a thing and leaves it alone. You can't do that, you worry, like - like *him*? And she now stretched out her hand to Austin with a pretty tender consoling smile. 'You're not like me.' she said, 'you don't give in. It makes you cruel, and it'll keep you

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moving. I suppose I shan't see you again, but I shall remember this.' And she seemed to say good-bye to him, but he held her hand, held it fast while she still looked up at him with the dreamful humour of her smile. She was a strange woman, so quick and so slow; she had no need to worry her mind, she knew all about everything. But apparently she didn't know this, that Austin meant to cling to her in the days to come. 'Of course you'll often see me again,' he cried, half exasperated by her patience, her understanding. Once more a puff of smoke, lurching viciously out of the chimney, spread over the confusion of the room to the dingy ceiling; but nothing disturbed her, nothing could rouse her from the placid untidiness in which she sat and dreamed. He could almost have struck her. 'Of course I shall see you again,' cried Austin, 'many times. I can't afford to lose you. I shall come again very soon.'<sup>y</sup> But with her hand still in his she smiled at him more doubtfully, more mistily. 'I wonder,' she said. 'You do remind me of him.'









