

The Beldonald Holbein

Henry James

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THE BELDONALD HOLBEIN
by Henry James

CHAPTER I

Mrs. Munden had not yet been to my studio on so good a pretext as when she first intimated that it would be quite open to me--should I only care, as she called it, to throw the handkerchief--to paint her beautiful sister-in-law. I needn't go here more than is essential into the question of Mrs. Munden, who would really, by the way, be a story in herself. She has a manner of her own of putting things, and some of those she has put to me--! Her implication was that Lady Beldonald

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hadn't only seen and admired certain examples of my work, but had literally been prepossessed in favour of the painter's "personality." Had I been struck with this sketch I might easily have imagined her ladyship was throwing me the handkerchief. "She hasn't done," my visitor said, "what she ought."

"Do you mean she has done what she oughtn't?"

"Nothing horrid--ah dear no." And something in Mrs. Munden's tone, with the way she appeared to muse a moment, even suggested to me that what she "oughtn't" was perhaps what Lady Beldonald had too much neglected. "She hasn't got on."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Well, to begin with, she's American."

"But I thought that was the way of ways to get on."

"It's one of them. But it's one of the ways of being awfully out of it too. There are so many!"

"So many Americans?" I asked.

"Yes, plenty of _them_," Mrs. Munden sighed. "So many ways, I mean, of being one."

"But if your sister-in-law's way is to be beautiful--?"

"Oh there are different ways of that too."

"And she hasn't taken the right way?"

"Well," my friend returned as if it were rather difficult to express, "she hasn't done with it--"

"I see," I laughed; "what she oughtn't!"

Mrs. Munden in a manner corrected me, but it _was_ difficult to express. "My brother at all events was certainly selfish. Till he died she was almost never in London; they wintered, year after year, for what he supposed to be his health--which it didn't help, since he was so much too soon to meet his end--in the south of France and in the dullest holes he could pick out, and when they came back to England he always kept her in the country. I must say for her that she always behaved beautifully. Since his death she has been more in London, but on a stupidly unsuccessful footing. I don't think she quite understands. She hasn't what I should call a life. It may be of course that she doesn't want one. That's just what I can't exactly find out. I can't make out how much she knows."

"I can easily make out," I returned with hilarity, "how much _you_ do!"

"Well, you're very horrid. Perhaps she's too old."

"Too old for what?" I persisted.

"For anything. Of course she's no longer even a little young; only preserved--oh but preserved, like bottled fruit, in syrup! I want to

help her if only because she gets on my nerves, and I really think the way of it would be just the right thing of yours at the Academy and on the line."

"But suppose," I threw out, "she should give on my nerves?"

"Oh she will. But isn't that all in the day's work, and don't great beauties always--?"

"_You_ don't," I interrupted; but I at any rate saw Lady Beldonald later on--the day came when her kinswoman brought her, and then I saw how her life must have its centre in her own idea of her appearance. Nothing else about her mattered--one knew her all when one knew that. She's indeed in one particular, I think, sole of her kind--a person whom vanity has had the odd effect of keeping positively safe and sound. This passion is supposed surely, for the most part, to be a principle of perversion and of injury, leading astray those who listen to it and landing them sooner or later in this or that complication; but it has landed her ladyship nowhere whatever--it has kept her from the first moment of full consciousness, one feels, exactly in the same place. It has protected her from every danger, has made her absolutely proper and prim. If she's "preserved," as Mrs. Munden originally described her to me, it's her vanity that has beautifully done it--putting her years ago in a plate-glass case and closing up the receptacle against every breath of air. How shouldn't she be preserved when you might smash your knuckles on this transparency before you could crack it? And she is--oh amazingly! Preservation is scarce the word for the rare condition of her surface. She looks _naturally_ new, as if she took out every night her large lovely varnished eyes and put them in water. The thing was to paint her, I perceived, in the glass case--a most tempting attaching feat; render to the full the shining interposing plate and the general show-window effect.

It was agreed, though it wasn't quite arranged, that she should sit to me. If it wasn't quite arranged this was because, as I was made to understand from an early stage, the conditions from our start must be such as should exclude all elements of disturbance, such, in a word, as she herself should judge absolutely favourable. And it seemed that these conditions were easily imperilled. Suddenly, for instance, at a moment when I was expecting her to meet an appointment--the first--that I had proposed, I received a hurried visit from Mrs. Munden, who came on her behalf to let me know that the season happened just not to be propitious and that our friend couldn't be quite sure, to the hour, when it would again become so. She felt nothing would make it so but a total absence of worry.

"Oh a 'total absence,'" I said, "is a large order! We live in a worrying world."

"Yes; and she feels exactly that--more than you'd think. It's in fact just why she mustn't have, as she has now, a particular distress on at the very moment. She wants of course to look her best, and such things tell on her appearance."

I shook my head. "Nothing tells on her appearance. Nothing reaches it in any way; nothing gets _at_ it. However, I can understand her anxiety. But what's her particular distress?"

"Why the illness of Miss Dadd."

"And who in the world's Miss Dadd?"

"Her most intimate friend and constant companion--the lady who was with us here that first day."

"Oh the little round black woman who gurgled with admiration?"

"None other. But she was taken ill last week, and it may very well be that she'll gurgle no more. She was very bad yesterday and is no better to-day, and Nina's much upset. If anything happens to Miss Dadd she'll have to get another, and, though she has had two or three before, that won't be so easy."

"Two or three Miss Dadds? is it possible? And still wanting another!" I recalled the poor lady completely now. "No; I shouldn't indeed think it would be easy to get another. But why is a succession of them necessary to Lady Beldonald's existence?"

"Can't you guess?" Mrs. Munden looked deep, yet impatient. "They help."

"Help what? Help whom?"

"Why every one. You and me for instance. To do what? Why to think Nina beautiful. She has them for that purpose; they serve as foils, as accents serve on syllables, as terms of comparison. They make her 'stand out.' It's an effect of contrast that must be familiar to you artists; it's what a woman does when she puts a band of black velvet under a pearl ornament that may, require, as she thinks, a little showing off."

I wondered. "Do you mean she always has them black?"

"Dear no; I've seen them blue, green, yellow. They may be what they like, so long as they're always one other thing."

"Hideous?"

Mrs. Munden made a mouth for it. "Hideous is too much to say; she doesn't really require them as bad as that. But consistently, cheerfully, loyally plain. It's really a most happy relation. She loves them for it."

"And for what do they love _her_?"

"Why just for the amiability that they produce in her. Then also for their 'home.' It's a career for them."

"I see. But if that's the case," I asked, "why are they so difficult to find?"

"Oh they must be safe; it's all in that: her being able to depend on them to keep to the terms of the bargain and never have moments of rising--as even the ugliest woman will now and then (say when she's in love)--superior to themselves."

I turned it over. "Then if they can't inspire passions the poor things mayn't even at least feel them?"

"She distinctly deprecates it. That's why such a man as you may be after

all a complication."

I continued to brood. "You're very sure Miss Dadd's ailment isn't an affection that, being smothered, has struck in?" My joke, however, wasn't well timed, for I afterwards learned that the unfortunate lady's state had been, even while I spoke, such as to forbid all hope. The worst symptoms had appeared; she was destined not to recover; and a week later I heard from Mrs. Munden that she would in fact "gurgle" no more.

CHAPTER II

All this had been for Lady Beldonald an agitation so great that access to her apartment was denied for a time even to her sister-in-law. It was much more out of the question of course that she should unveil her face to a person of my special business with it; so that the question of the portrait was by common consent left to depend on that of the installation of a successor to her late companion. Such a successor, I gathered from Mrs. Munden, widowed childless and lonely, as well as inapt for the minor offices, she had absolutely to have; a more or less humble alter ego to deal with the servants, keep the accounts, make the tea and watch the window-blinds. Nothing seemed more natural than that she should marry again, and obviously that might come; yet the predecessors of Miss Dadd had been contemporaneous with a first husband, so that others formed in her image might be contemporaneous with a second. I was much occupied in those months at any rate, and these questions and their ramifications losing themselves for a while to my view, I was only brought back to them by Mrs. Munden's arrival one day with the news that we were all right again--her sister-in-law was once more "suited." A certain Mrs. Brash, an American relative whom she hadn't seen for years, but with whom she had continued to communicate, was to come out to her immediately; and this person, it appeared, could be quite trusted to meet the conditions. She was ugly--ugly enough, without abuse of it, and was unlimitedly good. The position offered her by Lady Beldonald was moreover exactly what she needed; widowed also, after many troubles and reverses, with her fortune of the smallest, and her various children either buried or placed about, she had never had time or means to visit England, and would really be grateful in her declining years for the new experience and the pleasant light work involved in her cousin's hospitality. They had been much together early in life and Lady Beldonald was immensely fond of her--would in fact have tried to get hold of her before hadn't Mrs. Brash been always in bondage to family duties, to the variety of her tribulations. I daresay I laughed at my friend's use of the term "position"--the position, one might call it, of a candlestick or a sign-post, and I daresay I must have asked if the special service the poor lady was to render had been made clear to her. Mrs. Munden left me in any case with the rather droll image of her faring forth across the sea quite consciously and resignedly to perform it.

The point of the communication had however been that my sitter was again looking up and would doubtless, on the arrival and due initiation of Mrs. Brash, be in form really to wait on me. The situation must further, to my knowledge, have developed happily, for I arranged with Mrs. Munden that our friend, now all ready to begin, but wanting first just to see the things I had most recently done, should come once more, as a final preliminary, to my studio. A good foreign friend of mine, a French

painter, Paul Outreau, was at the moment in London, and I had proposed, as he was much interested in types, to get together for his amusement a small afternoon party. Every one came, my big room was full, there was music and a modest spread; and I've not forgotten the light of admiration in Outreau's expressive face as at the end of half an hour he came up to me in his enthusiasm. "_Bonte divine, mon cher--que cette vieille est donc belle_!"

I had tried to collect all the beauty I could, and also all the youth, so that for a moment I was at a loss. I had talked to many people and provided for the music, and there were figures in the crowd that were still lost to me. "What old woman do you mean?"

"I don't know her name--she was over by the door a moment ago. I asked somebody and was told, I think, that she's American."

I looked about and saw one of my guests attach a pair of fine eyes to Outreau very much as if she knew he must be talking of her. "Oh Lady Beldonald! Yes, she's handsome; but the great point about her is that she has been 'put up' to keep, and that she wouldn't be flattered if she knew you spoke of her as old. A box of sardines is 'old' only after it has been opened, Lady Beldonald never has yet been--but I'm going to do it." I joked, but I was somewhat disappointed. It was a type that, with his unerring sense for the _banal_, I shouldn't have expected Outreau to pick out.

"You're going to paint her? But, my dear man, she is painted--and as neither you nor I can do it. _Ou est-elle donc_? He had lost her, and I saw I had made a mistake. She's the greatest of all the great Holbeins."

I was relieved. "Ah then not Lady Beldonald! But do I possess a Holbein of _any_ price unawares?"

"There she is--there she is! Dear, dear, dear, what a head!" And I saw whom he meant--and what: a small old lady in a black dress and a black bonnet, both relieved with a little white, who had evidently just changed, her place to reach a corner from which more of the room and of the scene was presented to her. She appeared unnoticed and unknown, and I immediately recognised that some other guest must have brought her and, for want of opportunity, had as yet to call my attention to her. But two things, simultaneously with this and with each other, struck me with force; one of them the truth of Outreau's description of her, the other the fact that the person bringing her could only have been Lady Beldonald. She _was_ a Holbein--of the first water; yet she was also Mrs. Brash, the imported "foil," the indispensable "accent," the successor to the dreary Miss Dadd! By the time I had put these things together--Outreau's "American" having helped me--I was in just such full possession of her face as I had found myself, on the other first occasion, of that of her patroness. Only with so different a consequence. I couldn't look at her enough, and I stared and stared till I became aware she might have fancied me challenging her as a person unrepresented. "All the same," Outreau went on, equally held, "_c'est une tete a faire_". If I were only staying long enough for a crack at her! But I tell you what"--and he seized my arm--"bring her over!"

"Over?"

"To Paris. She'd have a _succes fou_."

"Ah thanks, my dear fellow," I was now quite in a position to say; "she's the handsomest thing in London, and"--for what I might do with her was already before me with intensity--"I propose to keep her to myself." It was before me with intensity, in the light of Mrs. Brash's distant perfection of a little white old face, in which every wrinkle was the touch of a master; but something else, I suddenly felt, was not less so, for Lady Beldonald, in the other quarter, and though she couldn't have made out the subject of our notice, continued to fix us, and her eyes had the challenge of those of the woman of consequence who has missed something. A moment later I was close to her, apologising first for not having been more on the spot at her arrival, but saying in the next breath uncontrollably: "Why my dear lady, it's a Holbein!"

"A Holbein? What?"

"Why the wonderful sharp old face so extraordinarily, consummately drawn--in the frame of black velvet. That of Mrs. Brash, I mean--isn't it her name?--your companion."

This was the beginning of a most odd matter--the essence of my anecdote; and I think the very first note of the oddity must have sounded for me in the tone in which her ladyship spoke after giving me a silent look. It seemed to come to me out of a distance immeasurably removed from Holbein. "Mrs. Brash isn't my 'companion' in the sense you appear to mean. She's my rather near relation and a very dear old friend. I love her--and you must know her."

"Know her? Rather! Why to see her is to want on the spot to 'go' for her. She also must sit for me,"

"_She_? Louisa Brash?" If Lady Beldonald had the theory that her beauty directly showed it when things weren't well with her, this impression, which the fixed sweetness of her serenity had hitherto struck me by no means as justifying, gave me now my first glimpse of its grounds. It was as if I had never before seen her face invaded by anything I should have called an expression. This expression moreover was of the faintest--was like the effect produced on a surface by an agitation both deep within and as yet much confused. "Have you told her so?" she then quickly asked, as if to soften the sound of her surprise.

"Dear no, I've but just noticed her--Outreau, a moment ago put me on her. But we're both so taken, and he also wants--"

"To _paint_ her?" Lady Beldonald uncontrollably murmured.

"Don't be afraid we shall fight for her," I returned with a laugh for this tone. Mrs. Brash was still where I could see her without appearing to stare, and she mightn't have seen I was looking at her, though her protectress, I'm afraid, could scarce have failed of that certainty. "We must each take our turn, and at any rate she's a wonderful thing, so that if you'll let her go to Paris Outreau promises her there--"

"_There_?" my companion gasped.

"A career bigger still than among us, as he considers we haven't half their eye. He guarantees her _a succes fou_."

She couldn't get over it. "Louisa Brash? In Paris?"

"They do see," I went on, "more than we and they live extraordinarily, don't you know, in that. But she'll do something here too."

"And what will she do?"

If frankly now I couldn't help giving Mrs. Brash a longer look, so after it I could as little resist sounding my converser. "You'll see. Only give her time."

She said nothing during the moment in which she met my eyes; but then: "Time, it seems to me, is exactly what you and your friend want. If you haven't talked with her--"

"We haven't seen her? Oh we see bang off--with a click like a steel spring. It's our trade, it's our life, and we should be donkeys if we made mistakes. That's the way I saw you yourself, my lady, if I may say so; that's the way, with a long pin straight through your body, I've got you. And just so I've got _her_!"

All this, for reasons, had brought my guest to her feet; but her eyes had while we talked never once followed the direction of mine. "You call her a Holbein?"

"Outreau did, and I of course immediately recognised it. Don't you? She brings the old boy to life! It's just as I should call you a Titian. You bring _him_ to life."

She couldn't be said to relax, because she couldn't be said to have hardened; but something at any rate on this took place in her--something indeed quite disconnected from what I would have called her. "Don't you understand that she has always been supposed--?" It had the ring of impatience; nevertheless it stopped short on a scruple.

I knew what it was, however, well enough to say it for her if she preferred. "To be nothing whatever to look at? To be unfortunately plain--or even if you like repulsively ugly? Oh yes, I understand it perfectly, just as I understand--I have to as a part of my trade--many other forms of stupidity. It's nothing new to one that ninety-nine people out of a hundred have no eyes, no sense, no taste. There are whole communities impenetrably sealed. I don't say your friend's a person to make the men turn round in Regent Street. But it adds to the joy of the few who do see that they have it so much to themselves. Where in the world can she have lived? You must tell me all about that--or rather, if she'll be so good, _she_ must."

"You mean then to speak to her--?"

I wondered as she pulled up again. "Of her beauty?"

"Her beauty!" cried Lady Beldonald so loud that two or three persons looked round.

"Ah with every precaution of respect!" I declared in a much lower tone. But her back was by this time turned to me, and in the movement, as it were, one of the strangest little dramas I've ever known was well launched.

CHAPTER III

It was a drama of small smothered intensely private things, and I knew of but one other person in the secret; yet that person and I found it exquisitely susceptible of notation, followed it with an interest the mutual communication of which did much for our enjoyment, and were present with emotion at its touching catastrophe. The small case--for so small a case--had made a great stride even before my little party separated, and in fact within the next ten minutes.

In that space of time two things had happened one of which was that I made the acquaintance of Mrs. Brash; and the other that Mrs. Munden reached me, cleaving the crowd, with one of her usual pieces of news. What she had to impart was that, on her having just before asked Nina if the conditions of our sitting had been arranged with me, Nina had replied, with something like perversity, that she didn't propose to arrange them, that the whole affair was "off" again and that she preferred not to be further beset for the present. The question for Mrs. Munden was naturally what had happened and whether I understood. Oh I understood perfectly, and what I at first most understood was that even when I had brought in the name of Mrs. Brash intelligence wasn't yet in Mrs. Munden. She was quite as surprised as Lady Beldonald had been on hearing of the esteem in which I held Mrs. Brash's appearance. She was stupefied at learning that I had just in my ardour proposed to its proprietress to sit to me. Only she came round promptly--which Lady Beldonald really never did. Mrs. Munden was in fact wonderful; for when I had given her quickly "Why she's a Holbein, you know, absolutely," she took it up, after a first fine vacancy, with an immediate abysmal "Oh _is_ she?" that, as a piece of social gymnastics, did her the greatest honour; and she was in fact the first in London to spread the tidings. For a face--about it was magnificent. But she was also the first, I must add, to see what would really happen--though this she put before me only a week or two later. "It will kill her, my dear--that's what it will do!"

She meant neither more nor less than that it would kill Lady Beldonald if I were to paint Mrs. Brash; for at this lurid light had we arrived in so short a space of time. It was for me to decide whether my aesthetic need of giving life to my idea was such as to justify me in destroying it in a woman after all in most eyes so beautiful. The situation was indeed sufficiently queer; for it remained to be seen what I should positively gain by giving up Mrs. Brash. I appeared to have in any case lost Lady Beldonald, now too "upset"--it was always Mrs. Munden's word about her and, as I inferred, her own about herself--to meet me again on our previous footing. The only thing, I of course soon saw, was to temporise to drop the whole question for the present and yet so far as possible keep each of the pair in view. I may as well say at once that this plan and this process gave their principal interest to the next several months. Mrs. Brash had turned up, if I remember, early in the new year, and her little wonderful career was in our particular circle one of the features of the following season. It was at all events for myself the most attaching; it's not my fault if I am so put together as often to find more life in situations obscure and subject to interpretation than in the gross rattle of the foreground. And there were all sorts of things, things touching, amusing, mystifying--and above all such an instance as I had never yet met--in this funny little fortune of the useful American cousin. Mrs. Munden was promptly at one with me as to

the rarity and, to a near and human view, the beauty and interest of the position. We had neither of us ever before seen that degree and that special sort of personal success come to a woman for the first time so late in life. I found it an example of poetic, of absolutely retributive justice; so that my desire grew great to work it, as we say, on those lines. I had seen it all from the original moment at my studio; the poor lady had never known an hour's appreciation--which moreover, in perfect good faith, she had never missed. The very first thing I did after inducing so unintentionally the resentful retreat of her protectress had been to go straight over to her and say almost without preliminaries that I should hold myself immeasurably obliged for a few patient sittings. What I thus came face to face with was, on the instant, her whole unenlightened past and the full, if foreshortened, revelation of what among us all was now unfailingly in store for her. To turn the handle and start that tune came to me on the spot as a temptation. Here was a poor lady who had waited for the approach of old age to find out what she was worth. Here was a benighted being to whom it was to be disclosed in her fifty-seventh year--I was to make that out--that she had something that might pass for a face. She looked much more than her age, and was fairly frightened--as if I had been trying on her some possibly heartless London trick--when she had taken in my appeal. That showed me in what an air she had lived and--as I should have been tempted to put it had I spoken out--among what children of darkness. Later on I did them more justice; saw more that her wonderful points must have been points largely the fruit of time, and even that possibly she might never in all her life have looked so well as at this particular moment. It might have been that if her hour had struck I just happened to be present at the striking. What had occurred, all the same, was at the worst a notable comedy.

The famous "irony of fate" takes many forms, but I had never yet seen it take quite this one. She had been "had over" on an understanding, and she wasn't playing fair. She had broken the law of her ugliness and had turned beautiful on the hands of her employer. More interesting even perhaps than a view of the conscious triumph that this might prepare for her, and of which, had I doubted of my own judgement, I could still take Outreau's fine start as the full guarantee--more interesting was the question of the process by which such a history could get itself enacted. The curious thing was that all the while the reasons of her having passed for plain--the reasons for Lady Beldonald's fond calculation, which they quite justified--were written large in her face, so large that it was easy to understand them as the only ones she herself had ever read. What was it then that actually made the old stale sentence mean something so different?--into what new combinations, what extraordinary language, unknown but understood at a glance, had time and life translated it? The only thing to be said was that time and life were artists who beat us all, working with recipes and secrets we could never find out. I really ought to have, like a lecturer or a showman, a chart or a blackboard to present properly the relation, in the wonderful old tender battered blanché face, between the original elements and the exquisite final "style." I could do it with chalks, but I can scarcely do it with words. However, the thing was, for any artist who respected himself, to feel it--which I abundantly did; and then not to conceal from her I felt it--which I neglected as little. But she was really, to do her complete justice, the last to understand; and I'm not sure that, to the end--for there was an end--she quite made it all out or knew where she was. When you've been brought up for fifty years on black it must be hard to adjust your organism at a day's notice to gold-colour. Her whole nature had been pitched in the key of her supposed plainness. She had known how to

be ugly--it was the only thing she had learnt save, if possible, how not to mind it. Being beautiful took in any case a new set of muscles. It was on the prior conviction, literally, that she had developed her admirable dress, instinctively felicitous, always either black or white and a matter of rather severe squareness and studied line. She was magnificently neat; everything she showed had a way of looking both old and fresh; and there was on every occasion the same picture in her draped head--draped in low-falling black--and the fine white plaits (of a painter's white, somehow) disposed on her chest. What had happened was that these arrangements, determined by certain considerations, lent themselves in effect much better to certain others. Adopted in mere shy silence they had really only deepened her accent. It was singular, moreover, that, so constituted, there was nothing in her aspect of the ascetic or the nun. She was a good hard sixteenth-century figure, not withered with innocence, bleached rather by life in the open. She was in short just what we had made of her, a Holbein for a great Museum; and our position, Mrs. Munden's and mine, rapidly became that of persons having such a treasure to dispose of. The world--I speak of course mainly of the art-world--flocked to see it.

CHAPTER IV

"But has she any idea herself, poor thing?" was the way I had put it to Mrs. Munden on our next meeting after the incident at my studio; with the effect, however, only of leaving my friend at first to take me as alluding to Mrs. Brash's possible prevision of the chatter she might create. I had my own sense of that--this provision had been nil; the question was of her consciousness of the office for which Lady Beldonald had counted on her and for which we were so promptly proceeding to spoil her altogether.

"Oh I think she arrived with a goodish notion," Mrs. Munden had replied when I had explained; "for she's clever too, you know, as well as good-looking, and I don't see how, if she ever really knew Nina, she could have supposed for a moment that she wasn't wanted for whatever she might have left to give up. Hasn't she moreover always been made to feel that she's ugly enough for anything?" It was even at this point already wonderful how my friend had mastered the case and what lights, alike for its past and its future, she was prepared to throw on it. "If she has seen herself as ugly enough for anything she has seen herself--and that was the only way--as ugly enough for Nina; and she has had her own manner of showing that she understands without making Nina commit herself to anything vulgar. Women are never without ways for doing such things--both for communicating and receiving knowledge--that I can't explain to you, and that you wouldn't understand if I could, since you must be a woman even to do that. I daresay they've expressed it all to each other simply in the language of kisses. But doesn't it at any rate make something rather beautiful of the relation between them as affected by our discovery--?"

I had a laugh for her plural possessive. "The point is of course that if there was a conscious bargain, and our action on Mrs. Brash is to deprive her of the sense of keeping her side of it, various things may happen that won't be good either for her or for ourselves. She may conscientiously throw up the position."

"Yes," my companion mused--"for she is conscientious. Or Nina, without waiting for that, may cast her forth."

I faced it all. "Then we should have to keep her."

"As a regular model?" Mrs. Munden was ready for anything. "Oh that would be lovely!"

But I further worked it out. "The difficulty is that she's not a model, hang it--that she's too good for one, that she's the very thing herself. When Outreau and I have each had our go, that will be all; there'll be nothing left for any one else. Therefore it behoves us quite to understand that our attitude's a responsibility. If we can't do for her positively more than Nina does--"

"We must let her alone?" My companion continued to muse. "I see!"

"Yet don't," I returned, "see too much. We can do more."

"Than Nina?" She was again on the spot. "It wouldn't after all be difficult. We only want the directly opposite thing--and which is the only one the poor dear can give. Unless indeed," she suggested, "we simply retract--we back out."

I turned it over. "It's too late for that. Whether Mrs. Brash's peace is gone I can't say. But Nina's is."

"Yes, and there's no way to bring it back that won't sacrifice her friend. We can't turn round and say Mrs. Brash is ugly, can we? But fancy Nina's not having seen!" Mrs. Munden exclaimed.

"She doesn't see now," I answered. "She can't, I'm certain, make out what we mean. The woman, for her still, is just what she always was. But she has nevertheless had her stroke, and her blindness, while she wavers and gropes in the dark, only adds to her discomfort. Her blow was to see the attention of the world deviate."

"All the same I don't think, you know," my interlocutress said, "that Nina will have made her a scene or that, whatever we do, she'll ever make her one. That isn't the way it will happen, for she's exactly as conscientious as Mrs. Brash."

"Then what is the way?" I asked.

"It will just happen in silence."

"And what will 'it,' as you call it, be?"

"Isn't that what we want really to see?"

"Well," I replied after a turn or two about, "whether we want it or not it's exactly what we shall see; which is a reason the more for fancying, between the pair there--in the quiet exquisite house, and full of superiorities and suppressions as they both are--the extraordinary situation. If I said just now that it's too late to do anything but assent it's because I've taken the full measure of what happened at my studio. It took but a few moments--but she tasted of the tree."

My companion wondered. "Nina?"

"Mrs. Brash." And to have to put it so ministered, while I took yet another turn, to a sort of agitation. Our attitude was a responsibility.

But I had suggested something else to my friend, who appeared for a moment detached. "Should you say she'll hate her worse if she _doesn't_ see?"

"Lady Beldonald? Doesn't see what we see, you mean, than if she does? Ah I give _that_ up!" I laughed. "But what I can tell you is why I hold that, as I said just now, we can do most. We can do this: we can give to a harmless and sensitive creature hitherto practically disinherited--and give with an unexpectedness that will immensely add to its price--the pure joy of a deep draught of the very pride of life, of an acclaimed personal triumph in our superior sophisticated world."

Mrs. Munden had a glow of response for my sudden eloquence. Oh it will be beautiful!

CHAPTER V

Well, that's what, on the whole and in spite of everything, it really was. It has dropped into my memory a rich little gallery of pictures, a regular panorama of those occasions that were to minister to the view from which I had so for a moment extracted a lyric inspiration. I see Mrs. Brash on each of these occasions practically enthroned and surrounded and more or less mobbed; see the hurrying and the nudging and the pressing and the staring; see the people "making up" and introduced, and catch the word when they have had their turn; hear it above all, the great one--"Ah yes, the famous Holbein!"--passed about with that perfection of promptitude that makes the motions of the London mind so happy a mixture of those of the parrot and the sheep. Nothing would be easier of course than to tell the whole little tale with an eye only for that silly side of it. Great was the silliness, but great also as to this case of poor Mrs. Brash, I will say for it, the good nature. Of course, furthermore, it took in particular "our set," with its positive child-terror of the _banal_, to be either so foolish or so wise; though indeed I've never quite known where our set begins and ends, and have had to content myself on this score with the indication once given me by a lady next whom I was placed at dinner: "Oh it's bounded on the north by Ibsen and on the south by Sargent!" Mrs. Brash never sat to me; she absolutely declined; and when she declared that it was quite enough for her that I had with that fine precipitation invited her, I quite took this as she meant it; before we had gone very far our understanding, hers and mine, was complete. Her attitude was as happy as her success was prodigious. The sacrifice of the portrait was a sacrifice to the true inwardness of Lady Beldonald, and did much, for the time, I divined, toward muffling their domestic tension. All it was thus in her power to say--and I heard of a few cases of her having said it--was that she was sure I would have painted her beautifully if she hadn't prevented me. She couldn't even tell the truth, which was that I certainly would have done so if Lady Beldonald hadn't; and she never could mention the subject at all before that personage. I can only describe the affair, naturally, from the outside, and heaven forbid indeed that I should try too closely to,

reconstruct the possible strange intercourse of these good friends at home.

My anecdote, however, would lose half the point it may have to show were I to omit all mention of the consummate turn her ladyship appeared gradually to have found herself able to give her deportment. She had made it impossible I should myself bring up our old, our original question, but there was real distinction in her manner of now accepting certain other possibilities. Let me do her that justice; her effort at magnanimity must have been immense. There couldn't fail of course to be ways in which poor Mrs. Brash paid for it. How much she had to pay we were in fact soon enough to see; and it's my intimate conviction that, as a climax, her life at last was the price. But while she lived at least--and it was with an intensity, for those wondrous weeks, of which she had never dreamed--Lady Beldonald herself faced the music. This is what I mean by the possibilities, by the sharp actualities indeed, that she accepted. She took our friend out, she showed her at home, never attempted to hide or to betray her, played her no trick whatever so long as the ordeal lasted. She drank deep, on her side too, of the cup--the cup that for her own lips could only be bitterness. There was, I think, scarce a special success of her companion's at which she wasn't personally present. Mrs. Munden's theory of the silence in which all this would be muffled for them was none the less, and in abundance, confirmed by our observations. The whole thing was to be the death of one or the other of them, but they never spoke of it at tea. I remember even that Nina went so far as to say to me once, looking me full in the eyes, quite sublimely, "I've made out what you mean--she is a picture." The beauty of this moreover was that, as I'm persuaded, she hadn't really made it out at all--the words were the mere hypocrisy of her reflective endeavour for virtue. She couldn't possibly have made it out; her friend was as much as ever "dreadfully plain" to her; she must have wondered to the last what on earth possessed us. Wouldn't it in fact have been after all just this failure of vision, this supreme stupidity in short, that kept the catastrophe so long at bay? There was a certain sense of greatness for her in seeing so many of us so absurdly mistaken; and I recall that on various occasions, and in particular when she uttered the words just quoted, this high serenity, as a sign of the relief of her soreness, if not of the effort of her conscience, did something quite visible to my eyes, and also quite unprecedented, for the beauty of her face. She got a real lift from it--such a momentary discernible sublimity that I recollect coming out on the spot with a queer crude amused "Do you know I believe I could paint you now?"

She was a fool not to have closed with me then and there; for what has happened since has altered everything--what was to happen a little later was so much more than I could swallow. This was the disappearance of the famous Holbein from one day to the other--producing a consternation among us all as great as if the Venus of Milo had suddenly vanished from the Louvre. "She has simply shipped her straight back"--the explanation was given in that form by Mrs. Munden, who added that any cord pulled tight enough would end at last by snapping. At the snap, in any case, we mightily jumped, for the masterpiece we had for three or four months been living with had made us feel its presence as a luminous lesson and a daily need. We recognised more than ever that it had been, for high finish, the gem of our collection--we found what a blank it left on the wall. Lady Beldonald might fill up the blank, but we couldn't. That she did soon fill it up--and, heaven help us, how was put before me after an interval of no great length, but during which I hadn't seen her. I dined on the Christmas of last year at Mrs. Munden's, and Nina, with a

"scratch lot," as our hostess said, was there, so that, the preliminary wait being longish, she could approach me very sweetly. "I'll come to you tomorrow if you like," she said; and the effect of it, after a first stare at her, was to make me look all round. I took in, by these two motions, two things; one of which was that, though now again so satisfied herself of her high state, she could give me nothing comparable to what I should have got had she taken me up at the moment of my meeting her on her distinguished concession; the other that she was "suited" afresh and that Mrs. Brash's successor was fully installed. Mrs. Brash's successor, was at the other side of the room, and I became conscious that Mrs. Munden was waiting to see my eyes seek her. I guessed the meaning of the wait; what was one, this time, to say? Oh first and foremost assuredly that it was immensely droll, for this time at least there was no mistake. The lady I looked upon, and as to whom my friend, again quite at sea, appealed to me for a formula, was as little a Holbein, or a specimen of any other school, as she was, like Lady Beldonald herself, a Titian. The formula was easy to give, for the amusement was that her prettiness--yes, literally, prodigiously, her prettiness--was distinct. Lady Beldonald had been magnificent--had been almost intelligent. Miss What's-her-name continues pretty, continues even young, and doesn't matter a straw! She matters so ideally little that Lady Beldonald is practically safer, I judge, than she has ever been. There hasn't been a symptom of chatter about this person, and I believe her protectress is much surprised that we're not more struck.

It was at any rate strictly impossible to me to make an appointment for the day as to which I have just recorded Nina's proposal; and the turn of events since then has not quickened my eagerness. Mrs. Munden remained in correspondence with Mrs. Brash--to the extent, that is, of three letters, each of which she showed me. They so told to our imagination her terrible little story that we were quite prepared--or thought we were--for her going out like a snuffed candle. She resisted, on her return to her original conditions, less than a year; the taste of the tree, as I had called it, had been fatal to her; what she had contentedly enough lived without before for half a century she couldn't now live without for a day. I know nothing of her original conditions--some minor American city--save that for her to have gone back to them was clearly to have stepped out of her frame. We performed, Mrs. Munden and I, a small funeral service for her by talking it all over and making it all out. It wasn't--the minor American city--a market for Holbeins, and what had occurred was that the poor old picture, banished from its museum and refreshed by the rise of no new movement to hang it, was capable of the miracle of a silent revolution; of itself turning, in its dire dishonour, its face to the wall. So it stood, without the intervention of the ghost of a critic, till they happened to pull it round again and find it mere dead paint. Well, it had had, if that's anything, its season of fame, its name on a thousand tongues and printed in capitals in the catalogue. We hadn't been at fault. I haven't, all the same, the least note of her--not a scratch. And I did her so in intention! Mrs. Munden continues to remind me, however, that this is not the sort of rendering with which, on the other side, after all, Lady Beldonald proposes to content herself. She has come back to the question of her own portrait. Let me settle it then at last. Since she will have the real thing--well, hang it, she shall!

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