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*The Nature
of a Crime*

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You are, I suppose, by now in Rome. It is very curious how present to me are both Rome and yourself. There is a certain hill—you, and that is the curious part of it, will never go there—yet, yesterday, late in the evening, I stood upon its summit, and you came walking from a place below. It is always midday there: the seven pillars of the Forum stand on high, their capitals linked together, and form one angle of a square. At their bases there lie some detritus, a broken marble lion, and I think but I am not certain, the bronze she-wolf suckling the two bronze children. Your dress brushed the herbs: it was grey and tenuous: I suppose you do not know how you look when you are unconscious of being looked at? But I looked at you for a long time—at my You.

I saw your husband yesterday at the club and he said that you would not be returning till the end of April. When I got back to my chambers I found a certain letter. I will tell you about it afterwards—but I forbid you to look at the end of what I am writing now. There is a piece of news coming: I would break it to you if I could—but there is no way of breaking the utterly unexpected. Only, if you read this through you will gather from the tenor, from the tone of my thoughts, a little inkling, a small preparation for my disclosure. Yes: it is a “disclosure.”

... Briefly, then, it was this letter—a business letter—that set me thinking: that made that hill rise before me. Yes, I stood upon it and there before me lay Rome—beneath a haze, in the immense sea of plains. I have often thought of

going to Rome—of going with you, in a leisurely autumn of your life and mine. Now—since I have received that letter—I know that I shall never see any other Rome than that from an imagined hilltop. And when, in the wonderful light and shadelessness of that noon, last evening, you came from a grove of silver poplars, I looked at you—*my* you—for a very long while. You had, I think, a parasol behind your head, you moved slowly, you looked up at the capitals of those seven pillars ... And I thought that I should never—since you will not return before the end of April—never see you again. I shall never see again the you that every other man sees ...

You understand everything so well that already you must understand the nature of my disclosure. It is, of course, no disclosure to tell you that I love you. A very great reverence is due to youth—and a very great latitude is due to the dead. For I am dead: I have only lived through you for how many years now! And I shall never speak with you again. Some sort of burial will have been given to me before the end of April. I am a spirit. I have ended my relations with the world. I have balanced all my books, my will is made. Only I have nothing to leave—save to you, to whom I leave all that is now mine in the world—my memory.

It is very curious—the world now. I walked slowly down here from Gordon Square. I walked slowly—for all my work is done. On the way I met Graydon Bankes, the K.C. It would have astonished him if he could have known how unreal he looked to me. He is six feet high, and upon his left cheek there is a brown mole. I found it difficult to imagine why he existed. And all sorts of mists hurried past him. It was just outside the Natural History Museum. He said that his

Seaford Railway Bill would come before Committee in June. And I wondered: what is June?... I laughed and thought: why June will never come!

June will never come. Imagine that for a moment. We have discussed the ethics of suicide. You see why June will never come!

You remember that ring I always wear? The one with a bulging, greenish stone. Once or twice you have asked me what stone it was. You thought, I know, that it was in bad taste and I told you I wore it for the sake of associations. I know you thought—but no: there has never been any woman but you.

You must have felt a long time ago that there was not, that there could not have been another woman. The associations of the ring are not with the past of a finished affection, or hate, or passion, to all these forms of unrest that have a term in life: they looked forward to where there is no end—whether there is rest in it God alone knows. If it were not bad taste to use big words in extremities I would say there was Eternity in the ring—Eternity which is the negation of all that life may contain of losses and disappointments. Perhaps you have noticed that there was one note in our confidence that never responded to your touch. It was that note of universal negation contained within the glass film of the ring. It is not you who brought the ring into my life: I had it made years ago. It was in my nature always to anticipate a touch on my shoulder, to which the only answer could be an act of defiance. And the ring is my weapon. I shall raise it to my teeth, bite through the glass: inside there is poison.