The Glimpses of the Moon

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PART I

I.

It rose for them—their honey-moon—over the waters of a lake so famed as the scene of romantic raptures that they were rather proud of not having been afraid to choose it as the setting of their own.

"It required a total lack of humour, or as great a gift for it as ours, to risk the experiment," Susy Lansing opined, as they hung over the inevitable marble balustrade and watched their tutelary orb roll its magic carpet across the waters to their feet.

"Yes—or the loan of Strefford's villa," her husband emended, glancing upward through the branches at a long low patch of paleness to which the moonlight was beginning to give the form of a white house-front.

"Oh, come when we'd five to choose from. At least if you count the Chicago flat."

"So we had—you wonder!" He laid his hand on hers, and his touch renewed the sense of marvelling exultation which the deliberate survey of their adventure always roused in her.... It was characteristic that she merely added, in her steady laughing tone: "Or, not counting the flat—for I hate to brag—just consider the others: Violet Melrose's place at Versailles, your aunt's villa at Monte Carlo—and a moor!"

She was conscious of throwing in the moor tentatively, and yet with a somewhat exaggerated emphasis, as if to make sure that he shouldn't accuse her of slurring it over. But he seemed to have no desire to do so. "Poor old Fred!" he merely remarked; and she breathed out carelessly: "Oh, well—"

His hand still lay on hers, and for a long interval, while they stood silent in the enveloping loveliness of the night, she was aware only of the warm current running from palm to palm, as the moonlight below them drew its line of magic from shore to shore.

Nick Lansing spoke at last. "Versailles in May would have been impossible: all our Paris crowd would have run us down within twenty-four hours. And Monte Carlo is ruled out because it's exactly the kind of place everybody expected us to go. So—with all respect to you—it wasn't much of a mental strain to decide on Como."

His wife instantly challenged this belittling of her capacity. "It took a good deal of argument to convince you that we could face the ridicule of Como!"

"Well, I should have preferred something in a lower key; at least I thought I should till we got here. Now I see that this place is idiotic unless one is perfectly happy; and that then it's—as good as any other."

She sighed out a blissful assent. “And I must say that Streffy has done things to a turn. Even the cigars—who do you suppose gave him those cigars?” She added thoughtfully: “You’ll miss them when we have to go.”

“Oh, I say, don’t let’s talk to-night about going. Aren’t we outside of time and space...? Smell that guinea-a-bottle stuff over there: what is it? Stephanotis?”

“Y—yes.... I suppose so. Or gardenias.... Oh, the fire-flies! Look... there, against that splash of moonlight on the water. Apples of silver in a net-work of gold....” They leaned together, one flesh from shoulder to finger-tips, their eyes held by the snared glitter of the ripples.

“I could bear,” Lansing remarked, “even a nightingale at this moment....”

A faint gurgle shook the magnolias behind them, and a long liquid whisper answered it from the thicket of laurel above their heads.

“It’s a little late in the year for them: they’re ending just as we begin.”

Susy laughed. “I hope when our turn comes we shall say good-bye to each other as sweetly.”

It was in her husband’s mind to answer: “They’re not saying good-bye, but only settling down to family cares.” But as this did not happen to be in his plan, or in Susy’s, he merely echoed her laugh and pressed her closer.

The spring night drew them into its deepening embrace. The ripples of the lake had gradually widened and faded into a silken smoothness, and high above the mountains the moon was turning from gold to white in a sky powdered with vanishing stars. Across the lake the lights of a little town went out, one after another, and the distant shore became a floating blackness. A breeze that rose and sank brushed their faces with the scents of the garden; once it blew out over the water a great white moth like a drifting magnolia petal. The nightingales had paused and the trickle of the fountain behind the house grew suddenly insistent.

When Susy spoke it was in a voice languid with visions. “I have been thinking,” she said, “that we ought to be able to make it last at least a year longer.”

Her husband received the remark without any sign of surprise or disapprobation; his answer showed that he not only understood her, but had been inwardly following the same train of thought.

“You mean,” he enquired after a pause, “without counting your grandmother’s pearls?”

“Yes—without the pearls.”

He pondered a while, and then rejoined in a tender whisper: “Tell me again just how.”

“Let’s sit down, then. No, I like the cushions best.” He stretched himself in a long willow chair, and she curled up on a heap of boat-cushions and leaned her head against his knee. Just above her, when she

lifted her lids, she saw bits of moon-flooded sky incrusted like silver in a sharp black patterning of plane-boughs. All about them breathed of peace and beauty and stability, and her happiness was so acute that it was almost a relief to remember the stormy background of bills and borrowing against which its frail structure had been reared. "People with a balance can't be as happy as all this," Susy mused, letting the moonlight filter through her lazy lashes.

People with a balance had always been Susy Branch's bugbear; they were still, and more dangerously, to be Susy Lansing's. She detested them, detested them doubly, as the natural enemies of mankind and as the people one always had to put one's self out for. The greater part of her life having been passed among them, she knew nearly all that there was to know about them, and judged them with the contemptuous lucidity of nearly twenty years of dependence. But at the present moment her animosity was diminished not only by the softening effect of love but by the fact that she had got out of those very people more—yes, ever so much more—than she and Nick, in their hours of most reckless planning, had ever dared to hope for.

"After all, we owe them this!" she mused.

Her husband, lost in the drowsy beatitude of the hour, had not repeated his question; but she was still on the trail of the thought he had started. A year—yes, she was sure now that with a little management they could have a whole year of it! "It" was their marriage, their being together, and away from bores and bothers, in a comradeship of which both of them had long ago guessed the immediate pleasure, but she at least had never imagined the deeper harmony.

It was at one of their earliest meetings—at one of the heterogeneous dinners that the Fred Gillows tried to think "literary"—that the young man who chanced to sit next to her, and of whom it was vaguely rumoured that he had "written," had presented himself to her imagination as the sort of luxury to which Susy Branch, heiress, might conceivably have treated herself as a crowning folly. Susy Branch, pauper, was fond of picturing how this fancied double would employ her millions: it was one of her chief grievances against her rich friends that they disposed of theirs so unimaginatively.

"I'd rather have a husband like that than a steam-yacht!" she had thought at the end of her talk with the young man who had written, and as to whom it had at once been clear to her that nothing his pen had produced, or might hereafter set down, would put him in a position to offer his wife anything more costly than a row-boat.

"His wife! As if he could ever have one! For he's not the kind to marry for a yacht either." In spite of her past, Susy had preserved enough inner independence to detect the latent signs of it in others, and also to ascribe it impulsively to those of the opposite sex who happened to interest her. She had a natural contempt for people who gloried in what

they need only have endured. She herself meant eventually to marry, because one couldn't forever hang on to rich people; but she was going to wait till she found some one who combined the maximum of wealth with at least a minimum of companionableness.

She had at once perceived young Lansing's case to be exactly the opposite: he was as poor as he could be, and as companionable as it was possible to imagine. She therefore decided to see as much of him as her hurried and entangled life permitted; and this, thanks to a series of adroit adjustments, turned out to be a good deal. They met frequently all the rest of that winter; so frequently that Mrs. Fred Gillow one day abruptly and sharply gave Susy to understand that she was "making herself ridiculous."

"Ah—" said Susy with a long breath, looking her friend and patroness straight in the painted eyes.

"Yes," cried Ursula Gillow in a sob, "before you interfered Nick liked me awfully... and, of course, I don't want to reproach you... but when I think...."

Susy made no answer. How could she, when she thought? The dress she had on had been given her by Ursula; Ursula's motor had carried her to the feast from which they were both returning. She counted on spending the following August with the Gillows at Newport... and the only alternative was to go to California with the Bockheimers, whom she had hitherto refused even to dine with.

"Of course, what you fancy is perfect nonsense, Ursula; and as to my interfering—" Susy hesitated, and then murmured: "But if it will make you any happier I'll arrange to see him less often...." She sounded the lowest depths of subservience in returning Ursula's tearful kiss....

Susy Branch had a masculine respect for her word; and the next day she put on her most becoming hat and sought out young Mr. Lansing in his lodgings. She was determined to keep her promise to Ursula; but she meant to look her best when she did it.

She knew at what time the young man was likely to be found, for he was doing a dreary job on a popular encyclopaedia (V to X), and had told her what hours were dedicated to the hateful task. "Oh, if only it were a novel!" she thought as she mounted his dingy stairs; but immediately reflected that, if it were the kind that she could bear to read, it probably wouldn't bring him in much more than his encyclopaedia. Miss Branch had her standards in literature....

The apartment to which Mr. Lansing admitted her was a good deal cleaner, but hardly less dingy, than his staircase. Susy, knowing him to be addicted to Oriental archaeology, had pictured him in a bare room adorned by a single Chinese bronze of flawless shape, or by some precious fragment of Asiatic pottery. But such redeeming features were conspicuously absent, and no attempt had been made to disguise the decent indigence of the bed-sitting-room.

Lansing welcomed his visitor with every sign of pleasure, and with apparent indifference as to what she thought of his furniture. He seemed to be conscious only of his luck in seeing her on a day when they had not expected to meet. This made Susy all the sorrier to execute her promise, and the gladder that she had put on her prettiest hat; and for a moment or two she looked at him in silence from under its conniving brim.

Warm as their mutual liking was, Lansing had never said a word of love to her; but this was no deterrent to his visitor, whose habit it was to speak her meaning clearly when there were no reasons, worldly or pecuniary, for its concealment. After a moment, therefore, she told him why she had come; it was a nuisance, of course, but he would understand. Ursula Gillow was jealous, and they would have to give up seeing each other.

The young man's burst of laughter was music to her; for, after all, she had been rather afraid that being devoted to Ursula might be as much in his day's work as doing the encyclopaedia.

"But I give you my word it's a raving-mad mistake! And I don't believe she ever meant me, to begin with—" he protested; but Susy, her common-sense returning with her reassurance, promptly cut short his denial.

"You can trust Ursula to make herself clear on such occasions. And it doesn't make any difference what you think. All that matters is what she believes."

"Oh, come! I've got a word to say about that too, haven't I?"

Susy looked slowly and consideringly about the room. There was nothing in it, absolutely nothing, to show that he had ever possessed a spare dollar—or accepted a present.

"Not as far as I'm concerned," she finally pronounced.

"How do you mean? If I'm as free as air—?"

"I'm not."

He grew thoughtful. "Oh, then, of course—. It only seems a little odd," he added drily, "that in that case, the protest should have come from Mrs. Gillow."

"Instead of coming from my millionaire bridegroom, Oh, I haven't any; in that respect I'm as free as you."

"Well, then—? Haven't we only got to stay free?"

Susy drew her brows together anxiously. It was going to be rather more difficult than she had supposed.

"I said I was as free in that respect. I'm not going to marry—and I don't suppose you are?"

"God, no!" he ejaculated fervently.

"But that doesn't always imply complete freedom...."

He stood just above her, leaning his elbow against the hideous black marble arch that framed his fireless grate. As she glanced up she saw his

face harden, and the colour flew to hers.

"Was that what you came to tell me?" he asked.

"Oh, you don't understand—and I don't see why you don't, since we've knocked about so long among exactly the same kind of people." She stood up impulsively and laid her hand on his arm. "I do wish you'd help me—!"

He remained motionless, letting the hand lie untouched.

"Help you to tell me that poor Ursula was a pretext, but that there IS someone who—for one reason or another—really has a right to object to your seeing me too often?"

Susy laughed impatiently. "You talk like the hero of a novel—the kind my governess used to read. In the first place I should never recognize that kind of right, as you call it—never!"

"Then what kind do you?" he asked with a clearing brow.

"Why—the kind I suppose you recognize on the part of your publisher." This evoked a hollow laugh from him. "A business claim, call it," she pursued. "Ursula does a lot for me: I live on her for half the year. This dress I've got on now is one she gave me. Her motor is going to take me to a dinner to-night. I'm going to spend next summer with her at Newport.... If I don't, I've got to go to California with the Bockheimers—so good-bye."

Suddenly in tears, she was out of the door and down his steep three flights before he could stop her—though, in thinking it over, she didn't even remember if he had tried to. She only recalled having stood a long time on the corner of Fifth Avenue, in the harsh winter radiance, waiting till a break in the torrent of motors laden with fashionable women should let her cross, and saying to herself: "After all, I might have promised Ursula... and kept on seeing him...."

Instead of which, when Lansing wrote the next day entreating a word with her, she had sent back a friendly but firm refusal; and had managed soon afterward to get taken to Canada for a fortnight's ski-ing, and then to Florida for six weeks in a house-boat....

As she reached this point in her retrospect the remembrance of Florida called up a vision of moonlit waters, magnolia fragrance and balmy airs; merging with the circumambient sweetness, it laid a drowsy spell upon her lids. Yes, there had been a bad moment: but it was over; and she was here, safe and blissful, and with Nick; and this was his knee her head rested on, and they had a year ahead of them... a whole year.... "Not counting the pearls," she murmured, shutting her eyes....

II.

LANSING threw the end of Strefford's expensive cigar into the lake, and bent over his wife. Poor child! She had fallen asleep.... He leaned back and stared up again at the silver-flooded sky. How queer—how

inexpressibly queer—it was to think that that light was shed by his honey-moon! A year ago, if anyone had predicted his risking such an adventure, he would have replied by asking to be locked up at the first symptoms....

There was still no doubt in his mind that the adventure was a mad one. It was all very well for Susy to remind him twenty times a day that they had pulled it off—and so why should he worry? Even in the light of her far-seeing cleverness, and of his own present bliss, he knew the future would not bear the examination of sober thought. And as he sat there in the summer moonlight, with her head on his knee, he tried to recapitulate the successive steps that had landed them on Streffy's lake-front.

On Lansing's side, no doubt, it dated back to his leaving Harvard with the large resolve not to miss anything. There stood the evergreen Tree of Life, the Four Rivers flowing from its foot; and on every one of the four currents he meant to launch his little skiff. On two of them he had not gone very far, on the third he had nearly stuck in the mud; but the fourth had carried him to the very heart of wonder. It was the stream of his lively imagination, of his inexhaustible interest in every form of beauty and strangeness and folly. On this stream, sitting in the stout little craft of his poverty, his insignificance and his independence, he had made some notable voyages.... And so, when Susy Branch, whom he had sought out through a New York season as the prettiest and most amusing girl in sight, had surprised him with the contradictory revelation of her modern sense of expediency and her old-fashioned standard of good faith, he had felt an irresistible desire to put off on one more cruise into the unknown.

It was of the essence of the adventure that, after her one brief visit to his lodgings, he should have kept his promise and not tried to see her again. Even if her straightforwardness had not roused his emulation, his understanding of her difficulties would have moved his pity. He knew on how frail a thread the popularity of the penniless hangs, and how miserably a girl like Susy was the sport of other people's moods and whims. It was a part of his difficulty and of hers that to get what they liked they so often had to do what they disliked. But the keeping of his promise was a greater bore than he had expected. Susy Branch had become a delightful habit in a life where most of the fixed things were dull, and her disappearance had made it suddenly clear to him that his resources were growing more and more limited. Much that had once amused him hugely now amused him less, or not at all: a good part of his world of wonder had shrunk to a village peep-show. And the things which had kept their stimulating power—distant journeys, the enjoyment of art, the contact with new scenes and strange societies—were becoming less and less attainable. Lansing had never had more than a pittance; he had spent rather too much of it in his first plunge

into life, and the best he could look forward to was a middle-age of poorly-paid hack-work, mitigated by brief and frugal holidays. He knew that he was more intelligent than the average, but he had long since concluded that his talents were not marketable. Of the thin volume of sonnets which a friendly publisher had launched for him, just seventy copies had been sold; and though his essay on "Chinese Influences in Greek Art" had created a passing stir, it had resulted in controversial correspondence and dinner invitations rather than in more substantial benefits. There seemed, in short, no prospect of his ever earning money, and his restricted future made him attach an increasing value to the kind of friendship that Susy Branch had given him. Apart from the pleasure of looking at her and listening to her—of enjoying in her what others less discriminatingly but as liberally appreciated—he had the sense, between himself and her, of a kind of free-masonry of precocious tolerance and irony. They had both, in early youth, taken the measure of the world they happened to live in: they knew just what it was worth to them and for what reasons, and the community of these reasons lent to their intimacy its last exquisite touch. And now, because of some jealous whim of a dissatisfied fool of a woman, as to whom he felt himself no more to blame than any young man who has paid for good dinners by good manners, he was to be deprived of the one complete companionship he had ever known....

His thoughts travelled on. He recalled the long dull spring in New York after his break with Susy, the weary grind on his last articles, his listless speculations as to the cheapest and least boring way of disposing of the summer; and then the amazing luck of going, reluctantly and at the last minute, to spend a Sunday with the poor Nat Fulmers, in the wilds of New Hampshire, and of finding Susy there—Susy, whom he had never even suspected of knowing anybody in the Fulmers' set!

She had behaved perfectly—and so had he—but they were obviously much too glad to see each other. And then it was unsettling to be with her in such a house as the Fulmers', away from the large setting of luxury they were both used to, in the cramped cottage where their host had his studio in the verandah, their hostess practiced her violin in the dining-room, and five ubiquitous children sprawled and shouted and blew trumpets and put tadpoles in the water-jugs, and the mid-day dinner was two hours late—and proportionately bad—because the Italian cook was posing for Fulmer.

Lansing's first thought had been that meeting Susy in such circumstances would be the quickest way to cure them both of their regrets. The case of the Fulmers was an awful object-lesson in what happened to young people who lost their heads; poor Nat, whose pictures nobody bought, had gone to seed so terribly—and Grace, at twenty-nine, would never again be anything but the woman of whom people say, "I can remember her when she was lovely."

But the devil of it was that Nat had never been such good company, or Grace so free from care and so full of music; and that, in spite of their disorder and dishevelment, and the bad food and general crazy discomfort, there was more amusement to be got out of their society than out of the most opulently staged house-party through which Susy and Lansing had ever yawned their way.

It was almost a relief to the young man when, on the second afternoon, Miss Branch drew him into the narrow hall to say: "I really can't stand the combination of Grace's violin and little Nat's motor-horn any longer. Do let us slip out till the duet is over."

"How do they stand it, I wonder?" he basely echoed, as he followed her up the wooded path behind the house.

"It might be worth finding out," she rejoined with a musing smile.

But he remained resolutely skeptical. "Oh, give them a year or two more and they'll collapse—! His pictures will never sell, you know. He'll never even get them into a show."

"I suppose not. And she'll never have time to do anything worth while with her music."

They had reached a piny knoll high above the ledge on which the house was perched. All about them stretched an empty landscape of endless featureless wooded hills. "Think of sticking here all the year round!" Lansing groaned.

"I know. But then think of wandering over the world with some people!"

"Oh, Lord, yes. For instance, my trip to India with the Mortimer Hickses. But it was my only chance and what the deuce is one to do?"

"I wish I knew!" she sighed, thinking of the Bockheimers; and he turned and looked at her.

"Knew what?"

"The answer to your question. What is one to do—when one sees both sides of the problem? Or every possible side of it, indeed?"

They had seated themselves on a commanding rock under the pines, but Lansing could not see the view at their feet for the stir of the brown lashes on her cheek.

"You mean: Nat and Grace may after all be having the best of it?"

"How can I say, when I've told you I see all the sides? Of course," Susy added hastily, "I couldn't live as they do for a week. But it's wonderful how little it's dimmed them."

"Certainly Nat was never more coruscating. And she keeps it up even better." He reflected. "We do them good, I daresay."

"Yes—or they us. I wonder which?"

After that, he seemed to remember that they sat a long time silent, and that his next utterance was a boyish outburst against the tyranny of the existing order of things, abruptly followed by the passionate query why, since he and she couldn't alter it, and since they both had the habit

of looking at facts as they were, they wouldn't be utter fools not to take their chance of being happy in the only way that was open to them, To this challenge he did not recall Susy's making any definite answer; but after another interval, in which all the world seemed framed in a sudden kiss, he heard her murmur to herself in a brooding tone: "I don't suppose it's ever been tried before; but we might—." And then and there she had laid before him the very experiment they had since hazarded.

She would have none of surreptitious bliss, she began by declaring; and she set forth her reasons with her usual lucid impartiality. In the first place, she should have to marry some day, and when she made the bargain she meant it to be an honest one; and secondly, in the matter of love, she would never give herself to anyone she did not really care for, and if such happiness ever came to her she did not want it shorn of half its brightness by the need of fibbing and plotting and dodging.

"I've seen too much of that kind of thing. Half the women I know who've had lovers have had them for the fun of sneaking and lying about it; but the other half have been miserable. And I should be miserable."

It was at this point that she unfolded her plan. Why shouldn't they marry; belong to each other openly and honourably, if for ever so short a time, and with the definite understanding that whenever either of them got the chance to do better he or she should be immediately released? The law of their country facilitated such exchanges, and society was beginning to view them as indulgently as the law. As Susy talked, she warmed to her theme and began to develop its endless possibilities.

"We should really, in a way, help more than we should hamper each other," she ardently explained. "We both know the ropes so well; what one of us didn't see the other might—in the way of opportunities, I mean. And then we should be a novelty as married people. We're both rather unusually popular—why not be frank!—and it's such a blessing for dinner-givers to be able to count on a couple of whom neither one is a blank. Yes, I really believe we should be more than twice the success we are now; at least," she added with a smile, "if there's that amount of room for improvement. I don't know how you feel; a man's popularity is so much less precarious than a girl's—but I know it would furbish me up tremendously to reappear as a married woman." She glanced away from him down the long valley at their feet, and added in a lower tone: "And I should like, just for a little while, to feel I had something in life of my very own—something that nobody had lent me, like a fancy-dress or a motor or an opera cloak."

The suggestion, at first, had seemed to Lansing as mad as it was enchanting: it had thoroughly frightened him. But Susy's arguments were irrefutable, her ingenuities inexhaustible. Had he ever thought it all out? She asked. No. Well, she had; and would he kindly not interrupt?

In the first place, there would be all the wedding-presents. Jewels, and a motor, and a silver dinner service, did she mean? Not a bit of it! She could see he'd never given the question proper thought. Cheques, my dear, nothing but cheques—she undertook to manage that on her side: she really thought she could count on about fifty, and she supposed he could rake up a few more? Well, all that would simply represent pocket-money! For they would have plenty of houses to live in: he'd see. People were always glad to lend their house to a newly-married couple. It was such fun to pop down and see them: it made one feel romantic and jolly. All they need do was to accept the houses in turn: go on honey-mooning for a year! What was he afraid of? Didn't he think they'd be happy enough to want to keep it up? And why not at least try—get engaged, and then see what would happen? Even if she was all wrong, and her plan failed, wouldn't it have been rather nice, just for a month or two, to fancy they were going to be happy? "I've often fancied it all by myself," she concluded; "but fancying it with you would somehow be so awfully different...."

That was how it began: and this lakeside dream was what it had led up to. Fantastically improbable as they had seemed, all her previsions had come true. If there were certain links in the chain that Lansing had never been able to put his hand on, certain arrangements and contrivances that still needed further elucidation, why, he was lazily resolved to clear them up with her some day; and meanwhile it was worth all the past might have cost, and every penalty the future might exact of him, just to be sitting here in the silence and sweetness, her sleeping head on his knee, clasped in his joy as the hushed world was clasped in moonlight.

He stooped down and kissed her. "Wake up," he whispered, "it's bed-time."

III.

THEIR month of Como was within a few hours of ending. Till the last moment they had hoped for a reprieve; but the accommodating Streffy had been unable to put the villa at their disposal for a longer time, since he had had the luck to let it for a thumping price to some beastly bouncers who insisted on taking possession at the date agreed on.

Lansing, leaving Susy's side at dawn, had gone down to the lake for a last plunge; and swimming homeward through the crystal light he looked up at the garden brimming with flowers, the long low house with the cypress wood above it, and the window behind which his wife still slept. The month had been exquisite, and their happiness as rare, as fantastically complete, as the scene before him. He sank his chin into the sunlit ripples and sighed for sheer content....

It was a bore to be leaving the scene of such complete well-being, but the next stage in their progress promised to be hardly less delightful. Susy was a magician: everything she predicted came true. Houses were being showered on them; on all sides he seemed to see beneficent spirits winging toward them, laden with everything from a piano nobile in Venice to a camp in the Adirondacks. For the present, they had decided on the former. Other considerations apart, they dared not risk the expense of a journey across the Atlantic; so they were heading instead for the Nelson Vanderlyns' palace on the Giudecca. They were agreed that, for reasons of expediency, it might be wise to return to New York for the coming winter. It would keep them in view, and probably lead to fresh opportunities; indeed, Susy already had in mind the convenient flat that she was sure a migratory cousin (if tactfully handled, and assured that they would not overwork her cook) could certainly be induced to lend them. Meanwhile the need of making plans was still remote; and if there was one art in which young Lansing's twenty-eight years of existence had perfected him it was that of living completely and unconcernedly in the present....

If of late he had tried to look into the future more insistently than was his habit, it was only because of Susy. He had meant, when they married, to be as philosophic for her as for himself; and he knew she would have resented above everything his regarding their partnership as a reason for anxious thought. But since they had been together she had given him glimpses of her past that made him angrily long to shelter and defend her future. It was intolerable that a spirit as fine as hers should be ever so little dulled or diminished by the kind of compromises out of which their wretched lives were made. For himself, he didn't care a hang: he had composed for his own guidance a rough-and-ready code, a short set of "mays" and "mustn'ts" which immensely simplified his course. There were things a fellow put up with for the sake of certain definite and otherwise unattainable advantages; there were other things he wouldn't traffic with at any price. But for a woman, he began to see, it might be different. The temptations might be greater, the cost considerably higher, the dividing line between the "mays" and "mustn'ts" more fluctuating and less sharply drawn. Susy, thrown on the world at seventeen, with only a weak wastrel of a father to define that treacherous line for her, and with every circumstance soliciting her to overstep it, seemed to have been preserved chiefly by an innate scorn of most of the objects of human folly. "Such trash as he went to pieces for," was her curt comment on her parent's premature demise: as though she accepted in advance the necessity of ruining one's self for something, but was resolved to discriminate firmly between what was worth it and what wasn't.

This philosophy had at first enchanted Lansing; but now it began to rouse vague fears. The fine armour of her fastidiousness had preserved

her from the kind of risks she had hitherto been exposed to; but what if others, more subtle, found a joint in it? Was there, among her delicate discriminations, any equivalent to his own rules? Might not her taste for the best and rarest be the very instrument of her undoing; and if something that wasn't "trash" came her way, would she hesitate a second to go to pieces for it?

He was determined to stick to the compact that they should do nothing to interfere with what each referred to as the other's "chance"; but what if, when hers came, he couldn't agree with her in recognizing it? He wanted for her, oh, so passionately, the best; but his conception of that best had so insensibly, so subtly been transformed in the light of their first month together!

His lazy strokes were carrying him slowly shoreward; but the hour was so exquisite that a few yards from the landing he laid hold of the mooring rope of Streffy's boat and floated there, following his dream.... It was a bore to be leaving; no doubt that was what made him turn things inside-out so uselessly. Venice would be delicious, of course; but nothing would ever again be as sweet as this. And then they had only a year of security before them; and of that year a month was gone.

Reluctantly he swam ashore, walked up to the house, and pushed open a window of the cool painted drawing-room. Signs of departure were already visible. There were trunks in the hall, tennis rackets on the stairs; on the landing, the cook Giulietta had both arms around a slippery hold-all that refused to let itself be strapped. It all gave him a chill sense of unreality, as if the past month had been an act on the stage, and its setting were being folded away and rolled into the wings to make room for another play in which he and Susy had no part.

By the time he came down again, dressed and hungry, to the terrace where coffee awaited him, he had recovered his usual pleasant sense of security. Susy was there, fresh and gay, a rose in her breast and the sun in her hair: her head was bowed over Bradshaw, but she waved a fond hand across the breakfast things, and presently looked up to say: "Yes, I believe we can just manage it."

"Manage what?"

"To catch the train at Milan—if we start in the motor at ten sharp."

He stared. "The motor? What motor?"

"Why, the new people's—Streffy's tenants. He's never told me their name, and the chauffeur says he can't pronounce it. The chauffeur's is Ottaviano, anyhow; I've been making friends with him. He arrived last night, and he says they're not due at Como till this evening. He simply jumped at the idea of running us over to Milan."

"Good Lord—" said Lansing, when she stopped.

She sprang up from the table with a laugh. "It will be a scramble; but I'll manage it, if you'll go up at once and pitch the last things into your trunk."

"Yes; but look here—have you any idea what it's going to cost?"

She raised her eyebrows gaily. "Why, a good deal less than our railway tickets. Ottaviano's got a sweetheart in Milan, and hasn't seen her for six months. When I found that out I knew he'd be going there anyhow."

It was clever of her, and he laughed. But why was it that he had grown to shrink from even such harmless evidence of her always knowing how to "manage"? "Oh, well," he said to himself, "she's right: the fellow would be sure to be going to Milan."

Upstairs, on the way to his dressing room, he found her in a cloud of finery which her skilful hands were forcibly compressing into a last portmanteau. He had never seen anyone pack as cleverly as Susy: the way she coaxed reluctant things into a trunk was a symbol of the way she fitted discordant facts into her life. "When I'm rich," she often said, "the thing I shall hate most will be to see an idiot maid at my trunks."

As he passed, she glanced over her shoulder, her face pink with the struggle, and drew a cigar-box from the depths. "Dearest, do put a couple of cigars into your pocket as a tip for Ottaviano."

Lansing stared. "Why, what on earth are you doing with Streffy's cigars?"

"Packing them, of course.... You don't suppose he meant them for those other people?" She gave him a look of honest wonder.

"I don't know whom he meant them for—but they're not ours...."

She continued to look at him wonderingly. "I don't see what there is to be solemn about. The cigars are not Streffy's either... you may be sure he got them out of some bounder. And there's nothing he'd hate more than to have them passed on to another."

"Nonsense. If they're not Streffy's they're much less mine. Hand them over, please, dear."

"Just as you like. But it does seem a waste; and, of course, the other people will never have one of them.... The gardener and Giulietta's lover will see to that!"

Lansing looked away from her at the waves of lace and muslin from which she emerged like a rosy Nereid. "How many boxes of them are left?"

"Only four."

"Unpack them, please."

Before she moved there was a pause so full of challenge that Lansing had time for an exasperated sense of the disproportion between his anger and its cause. And this made him still angrier.

She held out a box. "The others are in your suitcase downstairs. It's locked and strapped."

"Give me the key, then."

"We might send them back from Venice, mightn't we? That lock is so nasty: it will take you half an hour."

"Give me the key, please." She gave it.