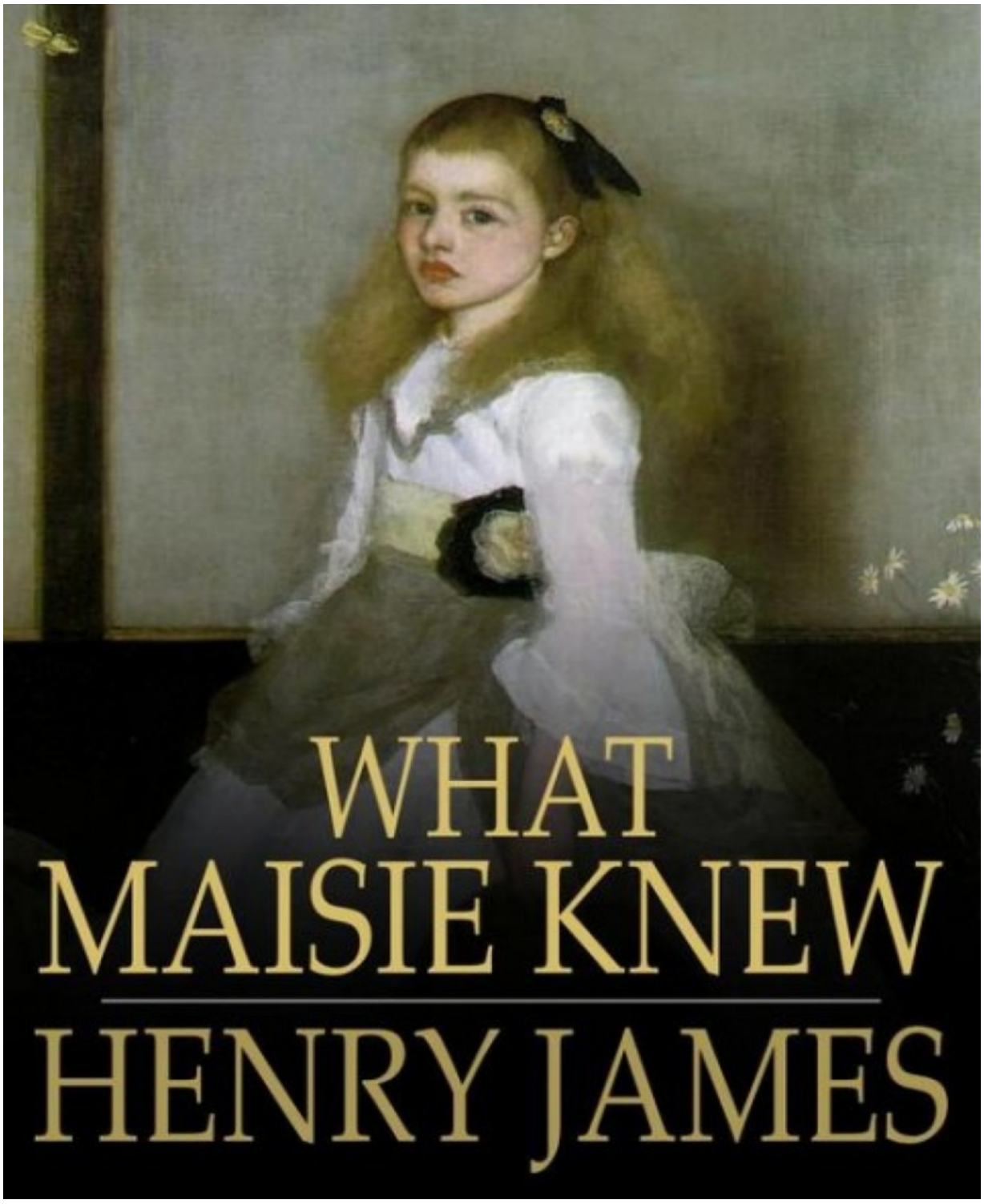
WHAT MAISIE KNEW

HENRY JAMES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81371 Munich

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By Henry James

The litigation seemed interminable and had in fact been complicated; but by the decision on the appeal the judgement of the divorce-court was confirmed as to the assignment of the child. The father, who, though bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance of this triumph, appointed to keep her: it was not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots. Attached, however, to the second pronouncement was a condition that detracted, for Beale Farange, from its sweetness—an order that he should refund to his late wife the twenty-six hundred pounds put down by her, as it was called, some three years before, in the interest of the child's maintenance and precisely on a proved understanding that he would take no proceedings: a sum of which he had had the administration and of which he could render not the least account. The obligation thus attributed to her adversary was no small balm to Ida's resentment; it drew a part of the sting from her defeat and compelled Mr. Farange perceptibly to lower his crest. He was unable to produce the money or to raise it in any way; so that after a squabble scarcely less public and scarcely more decent than the original shock of battle his only issue from his predicament was a compromise proposed by his legal advisers and finally accepted by hers.

His debt was by this arrangement remitted to him and the little girl disposed of in a manner worthy of the judgement-seat of Solomon. She was divided in two and the portions tossed impartially to the disputants. They would take her, in rotation, for six months at a time; she would

spend half the year with each. This was odd justice in the eyes of those who still blinked in the fierce light projected from the tribunal—a light in which neither parent figured in the least as a happy example to youth and innocence. What was to have been expected on the evidence was the nomination, in loco parentis, of some proper third person, some respectable or at least some presentable friend. Apparently, however, the circle of the Faranges had been scanned in vain for any such ornament; so that the only solution finally meeting all the difficulties was, save that of sending Maisie to a Home, the partition of the tutelary office in the manner I have mentioned. There were more reasons for her parents to agree to it than there had ever been for them to agree to anything; and they now prepared with her help to enjoy the distinction that waits upon vulgarity sufficiently attested. Their rupture had resounded, and after being perfectly insignificant together they would be decidedly striking apart. Had they not produced an impression that warranted people in looking for appeals in the newspapers for the rescue of the little one—reverberation, amid a vociferous public, of the idea that some movement should be started or some benevolent person should come forward? A good lady came indeed a step or two: she was distantly related to Mrs. Farange, to whom she proposed that, having children and nurseries wound up and going, she should be allowed to take home the bone of contention and, by working it into her system, relieve at least one of the parents. This would make every time, for Maisie, after her inevitable six months with Beale, much more of a change.

"More of a change?" Ida cried. "Won't it be enough of a change for her to come from that low brute to the person in the world who detests him most?"

"No, because you detest him so much that you'll always talk to her about him. You'll keep him before her by perpetually abusing him."

Mrs. Farange stared. "Pray, then, am I to do nothing to counteract his villainous abuse of me?"

The good lady, for a moment, made no reply: her silence was a grim judgement of the whole point of view. "Poor little monkey!" she at last exclaimed; and the words were an epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's childhood. She was abandoned to her fate. What was clear to any spectator was that the only link binding her to either parent was this lamentable fact of her being a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed. They had wanted her not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other. She should serve their anger and seal their revenge, for husband and wife had been alike crippled by the heavy hand of justice, which in the last resort met on neither side their indignant claim to get, as they called it, everything. If each was only to get half this seemed to concede that neither was so base as the other pretended, or, to put it differently, offered them both as bad indeed, since they were only as good as each other. The mother had wished to prevent the father from, as she said, "so much as looking" at the child; the father's plea was that the mother's lightest touch was "simply contamination." These were the opposed principles in which Maisie was to be educated—she was to fit them together as she might. Nothing could have been more touching at first than her failure to suspect the ordeal that awaited her little unspotted soul. There were persons horrified to think what those in charge of it would combine to try to make of it: no one could conceive in advance that they would be able to make nothing ill.

This was a society in which for the most part people were occupied only with chatter, but the disunited couple had at last grounds for expecting a time of high activity. They girded their loins, they felt as if the quarrel had only begun. They felt indeed more married than ever, inasmuch as what marriage had mainly suggested to them was the unbroken

opportunity to quarrel. There had been "sides" before, and there were sides as much as ever; for the sider too the prospect opened out, taking the pleasant form of a superabundance of matter for desultory conversation. The many friends of the Faranges drew together to differ about them; contradiction grew young again over teacups and cigars. Everybody was always assuring everybody of something very shocking, and nobody would have been jolly if nobody had been outrageous. The pair appeared to have a social attraction which failed merely as regards each other: it was indeed a great deal to be able to say for Ida that no one but Beale desired her blood, and for Beale that if he should ever have his eyes scratched out it would be only by his wife. It was generally felt, to begin with, that they were awfully good-looking—they had really not been analysed to a deeper residuum. They made up together for instance some twelve feet three of stature, and nothing was more discussed than the apportionment of this quantity. The sole flaw in Ida's beauty was a length and reach of arm conducive perhaps to her having so often beaten her ex-husband at billiards, a game in which she showed a superiority largely accountable, as she maintained, for the resentment finding expression in his physical violence. Billiards was her great accomplishment and the distinction her name always first produced the mention of. Notwithstanding some very long lines everything about her that might have been large and that in many women profited by the licence was, with a single exception, admired and cited for its smallness. The exception was her eyes, which might have been of mere regulation size, but which overstepped the modesty of nature; her mouth, on the other hand, was barely perceptible, and odds were freely taken as to the measurement of her waist. She was a person who, when she was out—and she was always out—produced everywhere a sense of having been seen often, the sense indeed of a kind of abuse of visibility, so that it would have

been, in the usual places rather vulgar to wonder at her. Strangers only did that; but they, to the amusement of the familiar, did it very much: it was an inevitable way of betraying an alien habit. Like her husband she carried clothes, carried them as a train carries passengers: people had been known to compare their taste and dispute about the accommodation they gave these articles, though inclining on the whole to the commendation of Ida as less overcrowded, especially with jewellery and flowers. Beale Farange had natural decorations, a kind of costume in his vast fair beard, burnished like a gold breastplate, and in the eternal glitter of the teeth that his long moustache had been trained not to hide and that gave him, in every possible situation, the look of the joy of life. He had been destined in his youth for diplomacy and momentarily attached, without a salary, to a legation which enabled him often to say "In my time in the East": but contemporary history had somehow had no use for him, had hurried past him and left him in perpetual Piccadilly. Every one knew what he had—only twenty-five hundred. Poor Ida, who had run through everything, had now nothing but her carriage and her paralysed uncle. This old brute, as he was called, was supposed to have a lot put away. The child was provided for, thanks to a crafty godmother, a defunct aunt of Beale's, who had left her something in such a manner that the parents could appropriate only the income.

I

The child was provided for, but the new arrangement was inevitably confounding to a young intelligence intensely aware that something had happened which must matter a good deal and looking anxiously out for the effects of so great a cause. It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before. Only a drummer-boy in a ballad or a story could have been so in the thick of the fight. She was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre. She was in short introduced to life with a liberality in which the selfishness of others found its account, and there was nothing to avert the sacrifice but the modesty of her youth.

Her first term was with her father, who spared her only in not letting her have the wild letters addressed to her by her mother: he confined himself to holding them up at her and shaking them, while he showed his teeth, and then amusing her by the way he chucked them, across the room, bang into the fire. Even at that moment, however, she had a scared anticipation of fatigue, a guilty sense of not rising to the occasion, feeling the charm of the violence with which the stiff unopened envelopes, whose big monograms—Ida bristled with monograms—she would have liked to see, were made to whizz, like dangerous missiles, through the air. The greatest effect of the great cause was her own greater importance, chiefly revealed to her in the larger freedom with which she was handled, pulled hither and thither and

kissed, and the proportionately greater niceness she was obliged to show. Her features had somehow become prominent; they were so perpetually nipped by the gentlemen who came to see her father and the smoke of whose cigarettes went into her face. Some of these gentlemen made her strike matches and light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees violently jolted, pinched the calves of her legs till she shrieked—her shriek was much admired—and reproached them with being toothpicks. The word stuck in her mind and contributed to her feeling from this time that she was deficient in something that would meet the general desire. She found out what it was: it was a congenital tendency to the production of a substance to which Moddle, her nurse, gave a short ugly name, a name painfully associated at dinner with the part of the joint that she didn't like. She had left behind her the time when she had no desires to meet, none at least save Moddle's, who, in Kensington Gardens, was always on the bench when she came back to see if she had been playing too far. Moddle's desire was merely that she shouldn't do that, and she met it so easily that the only spots in that long brightness were the moments of her wondering what would become of her if, on her rushing back, there should be no Moddle on the bench. They still went to the Gardens, but there was a difference even there; she was impelled perpetually to look at the legs of other children and ask her nurse if they were toothpicks. Moddle was terribly truthful; she always said: "Oh my dear, you'll not find such another pair as your own." It seemed to have to do with something else that Moddle often said: "You feel the strain—that's where it is; and you'll feel it still worse, you know."

Thus from the first Maisie not only felt it, but knew she felt it. A part of it was the consequence of her father's telling her he felt it too, and telling Moddle, in her presence, that she must make a point of driving that home. She was

familiar, at the age of six, with the fact that everything had been changed on her account, everything ordered to enable him to give himself up to her. She was to remember always the words in which Moddle impressed upon her that he did so give himself: "Your papa wishes you never to forget, you know, that he has been dreadfully put about." If the skin on Moddle's face had to Maisie the air of being unduly, almost painfully, stretched, it never presented that appearance so much as when she uttered, as she often had occasion to utter, such words. The child wondered if they didn't make it hurt more than usual; but it was only after some time that she was able to attach to the picture of her father's sufferings, and more particularly to her nurse's manner about them, the meaning for which these things had waited. By the time she had grown sharper, as the gentlemen who had criticised her calves used to say, she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play. The great strain meanwhile was that of carrying by the right end the things her father said about her mother—things mostly indeed that Moddle, on a glimpse of them, as if they had been complicated toys or difficult books, took out of her hands and put away in the closet. A wonderful assortment of objects of this kind she was to discover there later, all tumbled up too with the things, shuffled into the same receptacle, that her mother had said about her father.

She had the knowledge that on a certain occasion which every day brought nearer her mother would be at the door to take her away, and this would have darkened all the days if the ingenious Moddle hadn't written on a paper in very big easy words ever so many pleasures that she would enjoy at the other house. These promises ranged from "a mother's fond love" to "a nice poached egg to your tea," and took by the way the prospect of sitting up ever so late to see the

lady in question dressed, in silks and velvets and diamonds and pearls, to go out: so that it was a real support to Maisie, at the supreme hour, to feel how, by Moddle's direction, the paper was thrust away in her pocket and there clenched in her fist. The supreme hour was to furnish her with a vivid reminiscence, that of a strange outbreak in the drawing-room on the part of Moddle, who, in reply to something her father had just said, cried aloud: "You ought to be perfectly ashamed of yourself—you ought to blush, sir, for the way you go on!" The carriage, with her mother in it, was at the door; a gentleman who was there, who was always there, laughed out very loud; her father, who had her in his arms, said to Moddle: "My dear woman, I'll settle you presently!"—after which he repeated, showing his teeth more than ever at Maisie while he hugged her, the words for which her nurse had taken him up. Maisie was not at the moment so fully conscious of them as of the wonder of Moddle's sudden disrespect and crimson face; but she was able to produce them in the course of five minutes when, in the carriage, her mother, all kisses, ribbons, eyes, arms, strange sounds and sweet smells, said to her: "And did your beastly papa, my precious angel, send any message to your own loving mamma?" Then it was that she found the words spoken by her beastly papa to be, after all, in her little bewildered ears, from which, at her mother's appeal, they passed, in her clear shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips. "He said I was to tell you, from him," she faithfully reported, "that you're a nasty horrid pig!"

II

In that lively sense of the immediate which is the very air of a child's mind the past, on each occasion, became for her as indistinct as the future: she surrendered herself to the actual with a good faith that might have been touching to either parent. Crudely as they had calculated they were at first justified by the event: she was the little feathered shuttlecock they could fiercely keep flying between them. The evil they had the gift of thinking or pretending to think of each other they poured into her little gravely-gazing soul as into a boundless receptacle, and each of them had doubtless the best conscience in the world as to the duty of teaching her the stern truth that should be her safeguard against the other. She was at the age for which all stories are true and all conceptions are stories. The actual was the absolute, the present alone was vivid. The objurgation for instance launched in the carriage by her mother after she had at her father's bidding punctually performed was a missive that dropped into her memory with the dry rattle of a letter falling into a pillar-box. Like the letter it was, as part of the contents of a well-stuffed post-bag, delivered in due course at the right address. In the presence of these overflowings, after they had continued for a couple of years, the associates of either party sometimes felt that something should be done for what they called "the real good, don't you know?" of the child. The only thing done, however, in general, took place when it was sighingly remarked that she fortunately wasn't all the year round where she happened to be at the awkward moment, and that, furthermore, either from extreme cunning or from extreme stupidity, she appeared not to take things in.

The theory of her stupidity, eventually embraced by her parents, corresponded with a great date in her small still life: the complete vision, private but final, of the strange

office she filled. It was literally a moral revolution and accomplished in the depths of her nature. The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her. She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment. She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so. Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own. She saw more and more; she saw too much. It was Miss Overmore, her first governess, who on a momentous occasion had sown the seeds of secrecy; sown them not by anything she said, but by a mere roll of those fine eyes which Maisie already admired. Moddle had become at this time, after alternations of residence of which the child had no clear record, an image faintly embalmed in the remembrance of hungry disappearances from the nursery and distressful lapses in the alphabet, sad embarrassments, in particular, when invited to recognise something her nurse described as "the important letter haitch." Miss Overmore, however hungry, never disappeared: this marked her somehow as of higher rank, and the character was confirmed by a prettiness that Maisie supposed to be extraordinary. Mrs. Farange had described her as almost too pretty, and some one had asked what that mattered so long as Beale wasn't there. "Beale or no Beale," Maisie had heard

her mother reply, "I take her because she's a lady and yet awfully poor. Rather nice people, but there are seven sisters at home. What do people mean?"

Maisie didn't know what people meant, but she knew very soon all the names of all the sisters; she could say them off better than she could say the multiplication-table. She privately wondered moreover, though she never asked, about the awful poverty, of which her companion also never spoke. Food at any rate came up by mysterious laws; Miss Overmore never, like Moddle, had on an apron, and when she ate she held her fork with her little finger curled out. The child, who watched her at many moments, watched her particularly at that one. "I think you're lovely," she often said to her; even mamma, who was lovely too, had not such a pretty way with the fork. Maisie associated this showier presence with her now being "big," knowing of course that nursery-governesses were only for little girls who were not, as she said, "really" little. She vaguely knew, further, somehow, that the future was still bigger than she, and that a part of what made it so was the number of governesses lurking in it and ready to dart out. Everything that had happened when she was really little was dormant, everything but the positive certitude, bequeathed from afar by Moddle, that the natural way for a child to have her parents was separate and successive, like her mutton and her pudding or her bath and her nap.

"Does he know he lies?"—that was what she had vivaciously asked Miss Overmore on the occasion which was so suddenly to lead to a change in her life.

"Does he know—" Miss Overmore stared; she had a stocking pulled over her hand and was pricking at it with a needle which she poised in the act. Her task was homely, but her movement, like all her movements, graceful.

"Why papa."

"That he 'lies'?"

"That's what mamma says I'm to tell him—'that he lies and he knows he lies.'" Miss Overmore turned very red, though she laughed out till her head fell back; then she pricked again at her muffled hand so hard that Maisie wondered how she could bear it. "Am I to tell him?" the child went on. It was then that her companion addressed her in the unmistakeable language of a pair of eyes of deep dark grey. "I can't say No," they replied as distinctly as possible; "I can't say No, because I'm afraid of your mamma, don't you see? Yet how can I say Yes after your papa has been so kind to me, talking to me so long the other day, smiling and flashing his beautiful teeth at me the time we met him in the Park, the time when, rejoicing at the sight of us, he left the gentlemen he was with and turned and walked with us, stayed with us for half an hour?" Somehow in the light of Miss Overmore's lovely eyes that incident came back to Maisie with a charm it hadn't had at the time, and this in spite of the fact that after it was over her governess had never but once alluded to it. On their way home, when papa had quitted them, she had expressed the hope that the child wouldn't mention it to mamma. Maisie liked her so, and had so the charmed sense of being liked by her, that she accepted this remark as settling the matter and wonderingly conformed to it. The wonder now lived again, lived in the recollection of what papa had said to Miss Overmore: "I've only to look at you to see you're a person I can appeal to for help to save my daughter." Maisie's ignorance of what she was to be saved from didn't diminish the pleasure of the thought that Miss Overmore was saving her. It seemed to make them cling together as in some wild game of "going round."

III

She was therefore all the more startled when her mother said to her in connexion with something to be done before her next migration: "You understand of course that she's not going with you."

Maisie turned quite faint. "Oh I thought she was."

"It doesn't in the least matter, you know, what you think," Mrs. Farange loudly replied; "and you had better indeed for the future, miss, learn to keep your thoughts to yourself." This was exactly what Maisie had already learned, and the accomplishment was just the source of her mother's irritation. It was of a horrid little critical system, a tendency, in her silence, to judge her elders, that this lady suspected her, liking as she did, for her own part, a child to be simple and confiding. She liked also to hear the report of the whacks she administered to Mr. Farange's character, to his pretensions to peace of mind: the satisfaction of dealing them diminished when nothing came back. The day was at hand, and she saw it, when she should feel more delight in hurling Maisie at him than in snatching her away; so much so that her conscience winced under the acuteness of a candid friend who had remarked that the real end of all their tugging would be that each parent would try to make the little girl a burden to the other—a sort of game in which a fond mother clearly wouldn't show to advantage. The prospect of not showing to advantage, a distinction in which she held she had never failed, begot in Ida Farange an ill humour of which several persons felt the effect. She determined that Beale at any rate should feel it; she reflected afresh that in the study of how to be odious to him she must never give way. Nothing could incommode him more than not to get the good, for the child, of a nice female appendage who had clearly taken a fancy to her. One of the things Ida said to the appendage was that

Beale's was a house in which no decent woman could consent to be seen. It was Miss Overmore herself who explained to Maisie that she had had a hope of being allowed to accompany her to her father's, and that this hope had been dashed by the way her mother took it. "She says that if I ever do such a thing as enter his service I must never expect to show my face in this house again. So I've promised not to attempt to go with you. If I wait patiently till you come back here we shall certainly be together once more."

Waiting patiently, and above all waiting till she should come back there, seemed to Maisie a long way round—it reminded her of all the things she had been told, first and last, that she should have if she'd be good and that in spite of her goodness she had never had at all. "Then who'll take care of me at papa's?"

"Heaven only knows, my own precious!" Miss Overmore replied, tenderly embracing her. There was indeed no doubt that she was dear to this beautiful friend. What could have proved it better than the fact that before a week was out, in spite of their distressing separation and her mother's prohibition and Miss Overmore's scruples and Miss Overmore's promise, the beautiful friend had turned up at her father's? The little lady already engaged there to come by the hour, a fat dark little lady with a foreign name and dirty fingers, who wore, throughout, a bonnet that had at first given her a deceptive air, too soon dispelled, of not staying long, besides asking her pupil questions that had nothing to do with lessons, questions that Beale Farange himself, when two or three were repeated to him, admitted to be awfully low—this strange apparition faded before the bright creature who had braved everything for Maisie's sake. The bright creature told her little charge frankly what had happened—that she had really been unable to hold out. She had broken her vow to Mrs. Farange; she had struggled for three days and then had come straight to Maisie's papa and

told him the simple truth. She adored his daughter; she couldn't give her up; she'd make for her any sacrifice. On this basis it had been arranged that she should stay; her courage had been rewarded; she left Maisie in no doubt as to the amount of courage she had required. Some of the things she said made a particular impression on the child—her declaration for instance that when her pupil should get older she'd understand better just how "dreadfully bold" a young lady, to do exactly what she had done, had to be.

"Fortunately your papa appreciates it; he appreciates it immensely"—that was one of the things Miss Overmore also said, with a striking insistence on the adverb. Maisie herself was no less impressed with what this martyr had gone through, especially after hearing of the terrible letter that had come from Mrs. Farange. Mamma had been so angry that, in Miss Overmore's own words, she had loaded her with insult—proof enough indeed that they must never look forward to being together again under mamma's roof. Mamma's roof, however, had its turn, this time, for the child, of appearing but remotely contingent, so that, to reassure her, there was scarce a need of her companion's secret, solemnly confided—the probability there would be no going back to mamma at all. It was Miss Overmore's private conviction, and a part of the same communication, that if Mr. Farange's daughter would only show a really marked preference she would be backed up by "public opinion" in holding on to him. Poor Maisie could scarcely grasp that incentive, but she could surrender herself to the day. She had conceived her first passion, and the object of it was her governess. It hadn't been put to her, and she couldn't, or at any rate she didn't, put it to herself, that she liked Miss Overmore better than she liked papa; but it would have sustained her under such an imputation to feel herself able to reply that papa too liked Miss Overmore exactly as much. He had particularly told her so. Besides she could easily see it.

IV

All this led her on, but it brought on her fate as well, the day when her mother would be at the door in the carriage in which Maisie now rode on no occasions but these. There was no question at present of Miss Overmore's going back with her: it was universally recognised that her quarrel with Mrs. Farange was much too acute. The child felt it from the first; there was no hugging nor exclaiming as that lady drove her away—there was only a frightening silence, unenlivened even by the invidious enquiries of former years, which culminated, according to its stern nature, in a still more frightening old woman, a figure awaiting her on the very doorstep. "You're to be under this lady's care," said her mother. "Take her, Mrs. Wix," she added, addressing the figure impatiently and giving the child a push from which Maisie gathered that she wished to set Mrs. Wix an example of energy. Mrs. Wix took her and, Maisie felt the next day, would never let her go. She had struck her at first, just after Miss Overmore, as terrible; but something in her voice at the end of an hour touched the little girl in a spot that had never even yet been reached. Maisie knew later what it was, though doubtless she couldn't have made a statement of it: these were things that a few days' talk with Mrs. Wix quite lighted up. The principal one was a matter Mrs. Wix herself always immediately mentioned: she had had a little girl quite of her own, and the little girl had been killed on the spot. She had had absolutely nothing else in all the world, and her affliction had broken her heart. It was comfortably established between them that Mrs. Wix's heart was broken. What Maisie felt was that she had been, with passion and anguish, a mother, and that this was something Miss Overmore was not, something (strangely, confusingly) that mamma was even less.

So it was that in the course of an extraordinarily short time she found herself as deeply absorbed in the image of the little dead Clara Matilda, who, on a crossing in the Harrow Road, had been knocked down and crushed by the cruellest of hansoms, as she had ever found herself in the family group made vivid by one of seven. "She's your little dead sister," Mrs. Wix ended by saying, and Maisie, all in a tremor of curiosity and compassion, addressed from that moment a particular piety to the small accepted acquisition. Somehow she wasn't a real sister, but that only made her the more romantic. It contributed to this view of her that she was never to be spoken of in that character to any one else —least of all to Mrs. Farange, who wouldn't care for her nor recognise the relationship: it was to be just an unutterable and inexhaustible little secret with Mrs. Wix. Maisie knew everything about her that could be known, everything she had said or done in her little mutilated life, exactly how lovely she was, exactly how her hair was curled and her frocks were trimmed. Her hair came down far below her waist—it was of the most wonderful golden brightness, just as Mrs. Wix's own had been a long time before. Mrs. Wix's own was indeed very remarkable still, and Maisie had felt at first that she should never get on with it. It played a large part in the sad and strange appearance, the appearance as of a kind of greasy greyness, which Mrs. Wix had presented on the child's arrival. It had originally been yellow, but time had turned that elegance to ashes, to a turbid sallow unvenerable white. Still excessively abundant, it was dressed in a manner of which the poor lady appeared not yet to have recognised the supersession, with a glossy braid, like a large diadem, on the top of the head, and behind, at the nape of the neck, a dingy rosette like a large button. She wore glasses which, in humble reference to a divergent obliquity of vision, she called her straighteners, and a little ugly snuff-coloured dress trimmed with satin bands in the form of scallops and glazed with antiquity. The

straighteners, she explained to Maisie, were put on for the sake of others, whom, as she believed, they helped to recognise the bearing, otherwise doubtful, of her regard; the rest of the melancholy garb could only have been put on for herself. With the added suggestion of her goggles it reminded her pupil of the polished shell or corslet of a horrid beetle. At first she had looked cross and almost cruel; but this impression passed away with the child's increased perception of her being in the eyes of the world a figure mainly to laugh at. She was as droll as a charade or an animal toward the end of the "natural history"—a person whom people, to make talk lively, described to each other and imitated. Every one knew the straighteners; every one knew the diadem and the button, the scallops and satin bands; every one, though Maisie had never betrayed her, knew even Clara Matilda.

It was on account of these things that mamma got her for such low pay, really for nothing: so much, one day when Mrs. Wix had accompanied her into the drawing-room and left her, the child heard one of the ladies she found there—a lady with eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes and thick black stitching, like ruled lines for musical notes on beautiful white gloves—announce to another. She knew governesses were poor; Miss Overmore was unmentionably and Mrs. Wix ever so publicly so. Neither this, however, nor the old brown frock nor the diadem nor the button, made a difference for Maisie in the charm put forth through everything, the charm of Mrs. Wix's conveying that somehow, in her ugliness and her poverty, she was peculiarly and soothingly safe; safer than any one in the world, than papa, than mamma, than the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful, than Miss Overmore, on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one couldn't rest with quite the same tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling. Mrs. Wix was as safe as Clara Matilda, who was in heaven and yet, embarrassingly,

also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave. It was from something in Mrs. Wix's tone, which in spite of caricature remained indescribable and inimitable, that Maisie, before her term with her mother was over, drew this sense of a support, like a breast-high banister in a place of "drops," that would never give way. If she knew her instructress was poor and queer she also knew she was not nearly so "qualified" as Miss Overmore, who could say lots of dates straight off (letting you hold the book yourself), state the position of Malabar, play six pieces without notes and, in a sketch, put in beautifully the trees and houses and difficult parts. Maisie herself could play more pieces than Mrs. Wix, who was moreover visibly ashamed of her houses and trees and could only, with the help of a smutty forefinger, of doubtful legitimacy in the field of art, do the smoke coming out of the chimneys. They dealt, the governess and her pupil, in "subjects," but there were many the governess put off from week to week and that they never got to at all: she only used to say "We'll take that in its proper order." Her order was a circle as vast as the untravelled globe. She had not the spirit of adventure—the child could perfectly see how many subjects she was afraid of. She took refuge on the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth. She knew swarms of stories, mostly those of the novels she had read; relating them with a memory that never faltered and a wealth of detail that was Maisie's delight. They were all about love and beauty and countesses and wickedness. Her conversation was practically an endless narrative, a great garden of romance, with sudden vistas into her own life and gushing fountains of homeliness. These were the parts where they most lingered; she made the child take with her again every step of her long, lame course and think it beyond magic or monsters. Her pupil acquired a vivid vision of every one who had ever, in her phrase, knocked against her—some of them oh so hard!—every one literally

but Mr. Wix, her husband, as to whom nothing was mentioned save that he had been dead for ages. He had been rather remarkably absent from his wife's career, and Maisie was never taken to see his grave.

V

The second parting from Miss Overmore had been bad enough, but this first parting from Mrs. Wix was much worse. The child had lately been to the dentist's and had a term of comparison for the screwed-up intensity of the scene. It was dreadfully silent, as it had been when her tooth was taken out; Mrs. Wix had on that occasion grabbed her hand and they had clung to each other with the frenzy of their determination not to scream. Maisie, at the dentist's, had been heroically still, but just when she felt most anguish had become aware of an audible shriek on the part of her companion, a spasm of stifled sympathy. This was reproduced by the only sound that broke their supreme embrace when, a month later, the "arrangement," as her periodical uprootings were called, played the part of the horrible forceps. Embedded in Mrs. Wix's nature as her tooth had been socketed in her gum, the operation of extracting her would really have been a case for chloroform. It was a hug that fortunately left nothing to say, for the poor woman's want of words at such an hour seemed to fall in with her want of everything. Maisie's alternate parent, in the outermost vestibule—he liked the impertinence of crossing as much as that of his late wife's threshold—stood over them with his open watch and his still more open grin, while from the only corner of an eye on which something of Mrs. Wix's didn't impinge the child saw at the door a brougham in which Miss Overmore also waited. She remembered the difference when, six months before, she had been torn from the breast of that more spirited protectress. Miss Overmore, then also in the vestibule, but of course in the other one, had been thoroughly audible and voluble; her protest had rung out bravely and she had declared that something—her pupil didn't know exactly what—was a regular wicked shame. That had at the time dimly recalled to Maisie the far-

away moment of Moddle's great outbreak: there seemed always to be "shames" connected in one way or another with her migrations. At present, while Mrs. Wix's arms tightened and the smell of her hair was strong, she further remembered how, in pacifying Miss Overmore, papa had made use of the words "you dear old duck!"—an expression which, by its oddity, had stuck fast in her young mind, having moreover a place well prepared for it there by what she knew of the governess whom she now always mentally characterised as the pretty one. She wondered whether this affection would be as great as before: that would at all events be the case with the prettiness Maisie could see in the face which showed brightly at the window of the brougham.

The brougham was a token of harmony, of the fine conditions papa would this time offer: he had usually come for her in a hansom, with a four-wheeler behind for the boxes. The four-wheeler with the boxes on it was actually there, but mamma was the only lady with whom she had ever been in a conveyance of the kind always of old spoken of by Moddle as a private carriage. Papa's carriage was, now that he had one, still more private, somehow, than mamma's; and when at last she found herself quite on top, as she felt, of its inmates and gloriously rolling away, she put to Miss Overmore, after another immense and talkative squeeze, a question of which the motive was a desire for information as to the continuity of a certain sentiment. "Did papa like you just the same while I was gone?" she enquired —full of the sense of how markedly his favour had been established in her presence. She had bethought herself that this favour might, like her presence and as if depending on it, be only intermittent and for the season. Papa, on whose knee she sat, burst into one of those loud laughs of his that, however prepared she was, seemed always, like some trick in a frightening game, to leap forth and make her jump. Before Miss Overmore could speak he replied: "Why, you

little donkey, when you're away what have I left to do but just to love her?" Miss Overmore hereupon immediately took her from him, and they had a merry little scrimmage over her of which Maisie caught the surprised perception in the white stare of an old lady who passed in a victoria. Then her beautiful friend remarked to her very gravely: "I shall make him understand that if he ever again says anything as horrid as that to you I shall carry you straight off and we'll go and live somewhere together and be good quiet little girls." The child couldn't quite make out why her father's speech had been horrid, since it only expressed that appreciation which their companion herself had of old described as "immense." To enter more into the truth of the matter she appealed to him again directly, asked if in all those months Miss Overmore hadn't been with him just as she had been before and just as she would be now. "Of course she has, old girl—where else could the poor dear be?" cried Beale Farange, to the still greater scandal of their companion, who protested that unless he straightway "took back" his nasty wicked fib it would be, this time, not only him she would leave, but his child too and his house and his tiresome trouble—all the impossible things he had succeeded in putting on her. Beale, under this frolic menace, took nothing back at all; he was indeed apparently on the point of repeating his extravagance, but Miss Overmore instructed her little charge that she was not to listen to his bad jokes: she was to understand that a lady couldn't stay with a gentleman that way without some awfully proper reason.

Maisie looked from one of her companions to the other; this was the freshest gayest start she had yet enjoyed, but she had a shy fear of not exactly believing them. "Well, what reason is proper?" she thoughtfully demanded.

"Oh a long-legged stick of a tomboy: there's none so good as that." Her father enjoyed both her drollery and his own and tried again to get possession of her—an effort deprecated by their comrade and leading again to

something of a public scuffle. Miss Overmore declared to the child that she had been all the while with good friends; on which Beale Farange went on: "She means good friends of mine, you know—tremendous friends of mine. There has been no end of them about—that I will say for her!" Maisie felt bewildered and was afterwards for some time conscious of a vagueness, just slightly embarrassing, as to the subject of so much amusement and as to where her governess had really been. She didn't feel at all as if she had been seriously told, and no such feeling was supplied by anything that occurred later. Her embarrassment, of a precocious instinctive order, attached itself to the idea that this was another of the matters it was not for her, as her mother used to say, to go into. Therefore, under her father's roof during the time that followed, she made no attempt to clear up her ambiguity by an ingratiating way with housemaids; and it was an odd truth that the ambiguity itself took nothing from the fresh pleasure promised her by renewed contact with Miss Overmore. The confidence looked for by that young lady was of the fine sort that explanation can't improve, and she herself at any rate was a person superior to any confusion. For Maisie moreover concealment had never necessarily seemed deception; she had grown up among things as to which her foremost knowledge was that she was never to ask about them. It was far from new to her that the questions of the small are the peculiar diversion of the great: except the affairs of her doll Lisette there had scarcely ever been anything at her mother's that was explicable with a grave face. Nothing was so easy to her as to send the ladies who gathered there off into shrieks, and she might have practised upon them largely if she had been of a more calculating turn. Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock—this seemed to produce from within such sounds of derision. Little by little, however, she understood

more, for it befell that she was enlightened by Lisette's questions, which reproduced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in the very darkness of Lisette. Was she not herself convulsed by such innocence? In the presence of it she often imitated the shrieking ladies. There were at any rate things she really couldn't tell even a French doll. She could only pass on her lessons and study to produce on Lisette the impression of having mysteries in her life, wondering the while whether she succeeded in the air of shading off, like her mother, into the unknowable. When the reign of Miss Overmore followed that of Mrs. Wix she took a fresh cue, emulating her governess and bridging over the interval with the simple expectation of trust. Yes, there were matters one couldn't "go into" with a pupil. There were for instance days when, after prolonged absence, Lisette, watching her take off her things, tried hard to discover where she had been. Well, she discovered a little, but never discovered all. There was an occasion when, on her being particularly indiscreet, Maisie replied to her—and precisely about the motive of a disappearance—as she, Maisie, had once been replied to by Mrs. Farange: "Find out for yourself!" She mimicked her mother's sharpness, but she was rather ashamed afterwards, though as to whether of the sharpness or of the mimicry was not quite clear.