

VI

A SHOCK

It was on a May day, and I saw Mary accompany her husband as far as the first crossing, whence she waved him out of sight as if he had boarded an Atlantic liner. All this time she bore the face of a woman happily married who meant to go straight home, there to await her lord's glorious return; and the military-looking gentleman watching her with a bored smile saw nothing better before him than a chapter on the Domestic Felicities. O Mary, can you not provide me with the tiniest little plot?

Halloa!

No sooner was she hid from him than she changed into another woman; she was now become a calculating, purposeful madam, who looked around her covertly and, having shrunk in size in order to appear less noticeable, set off nervously on some mysterious adventure.

‘The deuce!’ thought I, and followed her.

Like one anxious to keep an appointment she frequently consulted her watch, looking long at it, as if it were one of those watches that do not give up their secret until you have made a mental calculation. Once she kissed it. I had always known that she was fond of her cheap little watch, which he gave her, I think, on the day I dropped the letter, but why kiss it in the street? Ah, and why then replace it so hurriedly in your leather belt, Mary, as if it were guilty to you to kiss to-day, or any day, the watch your husband gave you?

It will be seen that I had made a very rapid journey from light thoughts to uneasiness. I wanted no plot by the time she reached her destination, a street of tawdry shops. She entered none of them, but paced slowly, and shrinking from observation, up and down the street, a very figure of shame; and never had I thought to read shame in the sweet face of Mary A——. Had I crossed to her and pronounced her name I think it would have felled her, and yet she remained there, waiting. I, too, was waiting for him, wondering if this was the man, or this, or this, and I believe I clutched my stick.

Did I suspect Mary? Oh, surely not for a moment of time. But there was some foolishness here; she was come without the knowledge of her husband, as her furtive manner indicated, to a meeting she dreaded and was ashamed to tell him of; she was come into danger; then it must be to save, not herself but him; the folly to be concealed could never have been Mary's. Yet what could have happened in the past of that honest boy from the consequences of which she might shield him by skulking here? Could that laugh of his have survived a dishonour? The open forehead, the curly locks, the pleasant smile, the hundred ingratiating ways which we carry with us out of childhood, they may all remain when the innocence has fled, but surely the laugh of the morning of life must go. I have never known the devil retain his grip on that.

But Mary was still waiting. She was no longer beautiful; shame had possession of her face, she was an ugly woman. Then the entanglement was her husband's, and I cursed him for it. But without conviction, for, after all, what did I know of women? I have some distant memories of them, some vain inventions. But of men—I have known one man indifferent well for over forty years, have

exulted in him (odd to think of it), shuddered at him, wearied of him, been willing (God forgive me!) to jog along with him tolerantly long after I have found him out; I know something of men, and, on my soul, boy, I believe I am wronging you.

Then Mary is here for some innocent purpose, to do a good deed that were better undone, as it so scares her. Turn back, you foolish, soft heart, and I shall say no more about it. Obstinate one, you saw the look on your husband's face as he left you. It is the studio light by which he paints and still sees to hope, despite all the disappointments of his not ignoble ambitions. That light is the dower you brought him, and he is a wealthy man if it does not flicker.

So anxious to be gone, and yet she would not go. Several times she made little darts, as if at last resolved to escape from the detestable street, and faltered and returned like a bird to the weasel. Again she looked at her watch and kissed it.

O Mary, take flight! What madness is this? Woman, be gone!

Suddenly she was gone. With one mighty effort and a last terrified look round, she popped into a pawnshop.

Long before she emerged I understood it all, I think even as the door rang and closed on her ; why the timid soul had sought a street where she was unknown, why she crept so many times past that abhorred shop before desperately venturing in, why she looked so often at the watch she might never see again. So desperately cumbered was Mary to keep her little house over her head, and yet the brave heart was retaining a smiling face for her husband, who must not even know where her little treasures were going.

It must seem monstrously cruel of me, but I was now quite light-hearted again. Even when Mary fled from the shop where she had left her watch, and I had peace of mind to note how thin and worn she had become, as if her baby was grown too big for her slight arms, even then I was light-hearted. Without attempting to follow her, I sauntered homeward humming a snatch of song with a great deal of fal-de-ral-de-riddle-o in it, for I can never remember words. I saw her enter another shop, baby-linen shop or some nonsense of that sort, so it was plain for what she had popped her watch ; but what cared I? I continued to sing most beautifully. I lunged gaily with my stick at a lamp-post,

and missed it, whereat a street-urchin grinned, and I winked at him and slipped twopence down his back.

I presume I would have chosen the easy way had time been given me, but fate willed that I should meet the husband on his homeward journey, and his first remark inspired me to a folly.

‘How is Timothy?’ he asked; and the question opened a way so attractive that I think no one whose dull life craves for colour could have resisted it.

‘He is no more,’ I replied impulsively.

The painter was so startled that he gave utterance to a very oath of pity, and I felt a sinking myself, for in these hasty words my little boy was gone indeed; all my bright dreams of Timothy, all my efforts to shelter him from Mary’s scorn, went whistling down the wind.