

# THE SACRED FOUNT

## I

IT was an occasion, I felt—the prospect of a large party—to look out at the station for others, possible friends and even possible enemies, who might be going. Such premonitions, it was true, bred fears when they failed to breed hopes, though it was to be added that there were sometimes, in the case, rather happy ambiguities. One was glowered at, in the compartment, by people who on the morrow, after breakfast, were to prove charming; one was spoken to first by people whose sociability was subsequently to show as bleak; and one built with confidence on others who were never to reappear at all—who were only going to Birmingham. As soon as I saw Gilbert Long,<sup>1</sup> some way up the platform, however, I knew him as an element. It was not so much that the wish was father to the thought<sup>2</sup> as that I remembered having already more than once met him at Newmarch.<sup>3</sup> He was a friend of the house—he wouldn't be going to Birmingham. I so little expected him, at the same time, to recognise me that I stopped short of the carriage near which he stood—I looked for a seat that wouldn't make us neighbours.

I had met him at Newmarch only—a place of a charm so special as to create rather a bond among its guests; but he had always, in the interval, so failed to know me that I could only hold him as stupid unless I held him as impertinent. He was stupid in fact, and in that character had no business at Newmarch; but he had also, no doubt, his system, which he applied without discernment. I wondered, while I saw my things put into my corner, what Newmarch could see in him—for it always had to see something before it made a sign. His good looks, which were striking, perhaps paid his way—his six feet and more of stature, his low-growing, tight-curling hair, his big, bare, blooming face. He was a fine piece of human furniture—he made a small party seem more numerous. This, at least, was the impression of him that had revived before I stepped out again to the platform, and it armed me only at first with surprise when I saw him come down to me as if for a

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greeting. If he had decided at last to treat me as an acquaintance made, it was none the less a case for letting him come all the way. That, accordingly, was what he did, and with so clear a conscience, I hasten to add, that at the end of a minute we were talking together quite as with the tradition of prompt intimacy. He was good-looking enough, I now again saw, but not such a model of it as I had seemed to remember; on the other hand his manners had distinctly gained in ease. He referred to our previous encounters and common contacts—he was glad I was going; he peeped into my compartment and thought it better than his own. He called a porter, the next minute, to shift his things, and while his attention was so taken I made out some of the rest of the contingent, who were finding or had already found places.

This lasted till Long came back with his porter, as well as with a lady unknown to me and to whom he had apparently mentioned that our carriage would pleasantly accommodate her. The porter carried in fact her dressing-bag, which he put upon a seat and the bestowal of which left the lady presently free to turn to me with a reproach: “I don’t think it very nice of you not to speak to me.” I stared, then caught at her identity through her voice; after which I reflected that she might easily have thought me the same sort of ass as I had thought Long. For she was simply, it appeared, Grace Brissenden.<sup>4</sup> We had, the three of us, the carriage to ourselves, and we journeyed together for more than an hour, during which, in my corner, I had my companions opposite. We began at first by talking a little, and then as the train—a fast one—ran straight and proportionately bellowed, we gave up the effort to compete with its music. Meantime, however, we had exchanged with each other a fact or two to turn over in silence. Brissenden was coming later—not, indeed, that that was such a fact. But his wife was informed—she knew about the numerous others; she had mentioned, while we waited, people and things: that Obert, R.A.,<sup>5</sup> was somewhere in the train, that her husband was to bring on Lady John, and that Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley were in the wondrous new fashion—and their servants too, like a single household—starting, travelling, arriving together. It came back to me as I sat there that when she mentioned Lady John as in charge of Brissenden the other member of our trio had expressed interest and surprise—expressed it so as to have made her reply with a smile: “Didn’t you really know?” This passage had taken place on the platform while, availing ourselves of our last minute, we hung about our door.

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“Why in the world *should* I know?”

To which, with good nature, she had simply returned: “Oh, it’s only that I thought you always did!” And they both had looked at me a little oddly, as if appealing from each other. “What in the world does she mean?” Long might have seemed to ask; while Mrs. Brissenden conveyed with light profundity: “*You* know why he should as well as I, don’t you?” In point of fact I didn’t in the least; and what afterwards struck me much more as the beginning of my anecdote<sup>6</sup> was a word dropped by Long after someone had come up to speak to her. I had then given him his cue by alluding to my original failure to place her. What in the world, in the year or two, had happened to her? She had changed so extraordinarily for the better. How could a woman who had been plain so long become pretty so late?

It was just what he had been wondering. “I didn’t place her at first myself. She had to speak to me. But I hadn’t seen her since her marriage, which was—wasn’t it?—four or five years ago. She’s amazing for her age.”

“What then *is* her age?”

“Oh—two or three-and-forty.”

“She’s prodigious for that. But can it be so great?”

“Isn’t it easy to count?” he asked. “Don’t you remember, when poor Briss married her, how immensely she was older? What was it they called it?—a case of child-stealing. Everyone made jokes. Briss isn’t yet thirty.” No, I bethought myself, he wouldn’t be; but I hadn’t remembered the difference as so great. What I had mainly remembered was that she had been rather ugly. At present she was rather handsome. Long, however, as to this, didn’t agree. “I’m bound to say I don’t quite call it beauty.”

“Oh, I only speak of it as relative. She looks so well—and somehow so ‘fine.’ Why else shouldn’t we have recognised her?”

“Why indeed? But it isn’t a thing with which beauty has to do.” He had made the matter out with an acuteness for which I shouldn’t have given him credit. “What has happened to her is simply that—well, that nothing has.”

“Nothing has happened? But, my dear man, she has been married. That’s supposed to be something.”

“Yes, but she has been married so little and so stupidly. It must be desperately dull to be married to poor Briss. His comparative youth doesn’t, after all, make more of him. He’s nothing but what he is. Her clock has simply stopped. She looks no older—that’s all.”

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“Ah, and a jolly good thing too, when you start where she did. But I take your discrimination,” I added, “as just. The only thing is that if a woman doesn’t grow older she may be said to grow younger; and if she grows younger she may be supposed to grow prettier. That’s all—except, of course, that it strikes me as charming also for Brissenden himself. *He* had the face, I seem to recall, of a baby; so that if his wife did flaunt her fifty years——!”

“Oh,” Long broke in, “it wouldn’t have mattered to him if she had. That’s the awfulness, don’t you see? of the married state. People have to get used to each other’s charms as well as to their faults. He wouldn’t have noticed. It’s only you and I who do, and the charm of it is for *us*.”

“What a lucky thing then,” I laughed, “that, with Brissenden so out of it and relegated to the timetable’s obscure hereafter,<sup>7</sup> it should be you and I who enjoy her!” I had been struck in what he said with more things than I could take up, and I think I must have looked at him, while he talked, with a slight return of my first mystification. He talked as I had never heard him—less and less like the heavy Adonis<sup>8</sup> who had so often “cut” me; and while he did so I was proportionately more conscious of the change in him. He noticed in fact after a little the vague confusion of my gaze and asked me—with complete good nature—why I stared at him so hard. I sufficiently disembroiled myself to reply that I could only be fascinated by the way he made his points; to which he—with the same sociability—made answer that he, on the contrary, more than suspected me, clever and critical as I was, of amusement at his artless prattle. He stuck none the less to his idea that what we had been discussing was lost on Brissenden. “Ah, then I hope,” I said, “that at least Lady John isn’t!”

“Oh, Lady John——!” And he turned away as if there were either too much or too little to say about her.

I found myself engaged again with Mrs. Briss while he was occupied with a newspaper-boy—and engaged, oddly, in very much the free view of him that he and I had just taken of herself. She put it to me frankly that she had never seen a man so improved: a confidence that I met with alacrity, as it showed me that, under the same impression, I had not been astray. She had only, it seemed, on seeing him, made him out with a great effort. I took in this confession, but I repaid it. “He hinted to me that he had not known you more easily.”

“More easily than you did? Oh, nobody does that; and, to be quite honest, I’ve got used to it and don’t mind. People talk of our changing every seven

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years,<sup>9</sup> but they make me feel as if I changed every seven minutes. What will you have, at any rate, and how can I help it? It's the grind of life, the wear and tear of time and misfortune. And, you know, I'm ninety-three."

"How young you must feel," I answered, "to care to talk of your age! I envy you, for nothing would induce me to let you know mine. You look, you see, just twenty-five."<sup>10</sup>

It evidently too, what I said, gave her pleasure—a pleasure that she caught and held. "Well, you can't say I dress it."

"No, you dress, I make out, ninety-three. If you *would* only dress twenty-five you'd look fifteen."

"Fifteen in a schoolroom charade!"<sup>11</sup> She laughed at this happily enough. "Your compliment to my taste is odd. I know, at all events," she went on, "what's the difference in Mr. Long."

"Be so good then, for my relief, as to name it."

"Well, a very clever woman has for some time past——"

"Taken"—this beginning was of course enough—"a particular interest in him? Do you mean Lady John?" I inquired; and, as she evidently did, I rather demurred. "Do you call Lady John a very clever woman?"

"Surely. That's why I kindly arranged that, as she was to take, I happened to learn, the next train, Guy<sup>12</sup> should come with her."

"You arranged it?" I wondered. "She's not so clever as you then."

"Because you feel that *she* wouldn't, or couldn't? No doubt she wouldn't have made the same point of it—for more than one reason. Poor Guy hasn't pretensions—has nothing but his youth and his beauty.<sup>13</sup> But that's precisely why I'm sorry for him and try whenever I can to give him a lift. Lady John's company *is*, you see, a lift."

"You mean it has so unmistakably been one to Long?"

"Yes—it has positively given him a mind and a tongue. *That's* what has come over him."

"Then," I said, "it's a most extraordinary case<sup>14</sup>— such as one really has never met."

"Oh, but," she objected, "it happens."

"Ah, so very seldom! Yes—I've positively never met it. Are you very sure," I insisted, "that Lady John *is* the influence?"

"I don't mean to say, of course," she replied, "that he looks fluttered if you mention her, that he doesn't in fact look as blank as a pickpocket. But that

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proves nothing—or rather, as they’re known to be always together, and she from morning till night as pointed as a hat-pin, it proves just what one sees. One simply takes it in.”

I turned the picture round. “They’re scarcely together when she’s together with Brissenden.”

“Ah, that’s only once in a way. It’s a thing that from time to time such people—don’t you know?—make a particular point of: they cultivate, to cover their game,<sup>15</sup> the appearance of other little friendships. It puts outsiders off the scent, and the real thing<sup>16</sup> meanwhile goes on. Besides, you yourself acknowledge the effect. If she hasn’t made him clever, what has she made him? She has given him, steadily, more and more intellect.”

“Well, you may be right,” I laughed, “though you speak as if it were cod-liver oil. Does she administer it, as a daily dose, by the spoonful? or only as a drop at a time? Does he take it in his food? Is he supposed to know? The difficulty for me is simply that if I’ve seen the handsome grow ugly and the ugly handsome, the fat grow thin and the thin fat, the short grow long and the long short; if I’ve even, likewise, seen the clever, as I’ve too fondly, at least, supposed them, grow stupid: so have I *not* seen—no, not once in all my days—the stupid grow clever.”

It was a question, none the less, on which she could perfectly stand up. “All I can say is then that you’ll have, the next day or two, an interesting new experience.”

“It *will* be interesting,” I declared while I thought—“and all the more if I make out for myself that Lady John *is* the agent.”

“You’ll make it out if you talk to her—that is, I mean, if you make *her* talk. You’ll see how she *can*.”

“She keeps her wit then,” I asked, “in spite of all she pumps into others?”

“Oh, she has enough for two!”

“I’m immensely struck with yours,” I replied, “as well as with your generosity. I’ve seldom seen a woman take so handsome a view of another.”

“It’s because I like to be kind!” she said with the best faith in the world; to which I could only return, as we entered the train, that it was a kindness Lady John would doubtless appreciate. Long rejoined us, and we ran, as I have said, our course; which, as I have also noted, seemed short to me in the light of such a blaze of suggestion. To each of my companions—and the fact stuck out of them—something unprecedented had happened.

## II

THE day was as fine and the scene as fair at Newmarch as the party was numerous and various; and my memory associates with the rest of the long afternoon many renewals of acquaintance and much sitting and strolling, for snatches of talk, in the long shade of great trees and through the straight walks of old gardens. A couple of hours thus passed, and fresh accessions enriched the picture. There were persons I was curious of—of Lady John, for instance, of whom I promised myself an early view; but we were apt to be carried away in currents that reflected new images and sufficiently beguiled impatience. I recover, all the same, a full sequence of impressions, each of which, I afterwards saw, had been appointed to help all the others. If my anecdote, as I have mentioned, had begun, at Paddington,<sup>17</sup> at a particular moment, it gathered substance step by step and without missing a link. The links, in fact, should I count them all, would make too long a chain. They formed, nevertheless, the happiest little chapter of accidents, though a series of which I can scarce give more than the general effect.

One of the first accidents was that, before dinner, I met Ford Obert wandering a little apart with Mrs. Server,<sup>18</sup> and that, as they were known to me as agreeable acquaintances, I should have faced them with confidence had I not immediately drawn from their sequestered air the fear of interrupting them. Mrs. Server was always lovely and Obert always expert; the latter straightway pulled up, however, making me as welcome as if their converse had dropped. She was extraordinarily pretty, markedly responsive, conspicuously charming, but he gave me a look that really seemed to say: “Don’t—there’s a good fellow—leave me any longer alone with her!” I had met her at Newmarch before—it was indeed only so that I had met her—and I knew how she was valued there. I also knew that an aversion to pretty women—numbers of whom he had preserved for a grateful posterity—was his sign neither as man nor as artist; the effect of all of which was to



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make me ask myself what she could have been doing to him. Making love, possibly—yet from that he would scarce have appealed. She wouldn't, on the other hand, have given him her company only to be inhuman. I joined them, at all events, learning from Mrs. Server that she had come by a train previous to my own; and we made a slow trio till, at a turn of the prospect, we came upon another group. It consisted of Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley and of Gilbert Long and Lady John—mingled and confounded, as might be said, not assorted according to tradition. Long and Mrs. Froome came first, I recollect, together, and his lordship turned away from Lady John on seeing me rather directly approach her. She had become for me, on the spot, as interesting as, while we travelled, I had found my two friends in the train. As the source of the flow of “intellect” that had transmuted our young man, she had every claim to an earnest attention; and I should soon have been ready to pronounce that she rewarded it as richly as usual. She was indeed, as Mrs. Briss had said, as pointed as a hat-pin, and I bore in mind that lady's injunction to look in her for the answer to our riddle.

The riddle, I may mention, sounded afresh to my ear in Gilbert Long's gay voice; it hovered there—before me, beside, behind me, as we all paused—in his light, restless step, a nervous animation that seemed to multiply his presence. He became really, for the moment, under this impression, the thing I was most conscious of; I heard him, I felt him even while I exchanged greetings with the sorceress by whose wand he had been touched.<sup>19</sup> To be touched myself was doubtless not quite what I wanted; yet I wanted, distinctly, a glimpse; so that, with the smart welcome Lady John gave me, I might certainly have felt that I was on the way to get it. The note of Long's predominance deepened during these minutes in a manner I can't describe, and I continued to feel that though we pretended to talk it was to him only we listened. He had us all in hand; he controlled for the moment all our attention and our relations. He was in short, as a consequence of our attitude, in possession of the scene to a tune he couldn't have dreamed of a year or two before—inasmuch as at that period he could have figured at no such eminence without making a fool of himself. And the great thing was that if his eminence was now so perfectly graced he yet knew less than any of us what was the matter with him. He was unconscious of how he had “come out”<sup>20</sup>—which was exactly what sharpened my wonder. Lady John, on her side, was thoroughly conscious, and I had a fancy that she looked at me to

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measure how far *I* was. I cared, naturally, not in the least what she guessed; her interest for me was all in the operation of her influence. I am afraid I watched to catch it in the act—watched her with a curiosity of which she might well have become aware.

What an intimacy, what an intensity of relation, I said to myself, so successful a process implied! It was of course familiar enough that when people were so deeply in love they rubbed off on each other—that a great pressure of soul to soul usually left on either side a sufficient show of tell-tale traces. But for Long to have been so stamped as I found him, how the pliant wax must have been prepared and the seal of passion applied! What an affection the woman working such a change in him must have managed to create as a preface to her influence! With what a sense of her charm she must have paved the way for it! Strangely enough, however—it was even rather irritating—there was nothing more than usual in Lady John to assist my view of the height at which the pair so evoked must move. These things—the way other people could feel about each other, the power not one's self, in the given instance, that made for passion<sup>21</sup>—were of course at best the mystery of mysteries; still, there were cases in which fancy, sounding the depths or the shallows, could at least drop the lead.<sup>22</sup> Lady John, perceptibly, was no such case; imagination, in her presence, was but the weak wing of the insect that bumps against the glass. She was pretty, prompt, hard, and, in a way that was special to her, a mistress at once of “culture” and of slang.<sup>23</sup> She was like a hat—with one of Mrs. Briss's hat-pins—askew on the bust of Virgil.<sup>24</sup> Her ornamental information—as strong as a coat of furniture-polish—almost knocked you down. What I felt in her now more than ever was that, having a reputation for “point”<sup>25</sup> to keep up, she was always under arms, with absences and anxieties like those of a celebrity at a public dinner. She thought too much of her “speech”—of how soon it would have to come. It was none the less wonderful, however, that, as Grace Brissenden had said, she should still find herself with intellect to spare—have lavished herself by precept and example on Long and yet have remained for each other interlocutor as fresh as the clown bounding into the ring.<sup>26</sup> She cracked, for my benefit, as many jokes and turned as many somersaults as might have been expected; after which I thought it fair to let her off. We all faced again to the house, for dressing and dinner were in sight.