THE REVERBERATOR

BY

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I.

"I GUESS my daughter's in here," the old man said, leading the way into the little *salon de lecture*. He was not of the most advanced age, but that is the way George Flack[1] considered him, and indeed he looked older than he was. George Flack had found him sitting in the court of the hotel[2] (he sat a great deal in the court of the hotel), and had gone up to him with characteristic directness and asked him for Miss Francina. Poor Mr. Dosson had with the greatest docility disposed himself to wait upon the young man: he had as a matter of course got up and made his way across the court, to announce to the personage in question that she had a visitor. He looked submissive, almost servile, as he preceded the visitor, thrusting his head forward in his quest; but it was not in Mr. Flack's line to notice that sort of thing. He accepted the old gentleman's good offices as he would have accepted those of a waiter, murmuring no protest for the sake of making it appear that he had come to see him as well. An observer of these two persons would have assured himself that the degree to which Mr. Dosson thought it natural that any one should want to see his daughter was only equalled by the degree to which the young man thought it natural her father should find her for him. There was a superfluous drapery in the doorway of the *salon de lecture*, which Mr. Dosson pushed aside while George Flack stepped in after him.

The reading-room of the Hôtel de l'Univers et de Cheltenham[3] was not of great proportions, and had seemed to Mr. Dosson from the first to consist principally of a bare, highly-polished floor, on which it was easy for a relaxed elderly American to slip. It was composed further, to his perception, of a table with a green velvet cloth, of a fireplace with a great deal of fringe and no fire, of a window with a great deal of curtain and no light, and of the Figaro, which he couldn't read, and the New York Herald,[4] which he had already read. A single person was just now in possession of these conveniences—a young lady who sat with her back to the window, looking

straight before her into the conventional room. She was dressed as for the street; her empty hands rested upon the arms of her chair (she had withdrawn her long gloves, which were lying in her lap), and she seemed to be doing nothing as hard as she could. Her face was so much in shadow as to be barely distinguishable; nevertheless as soon as he saw her the young man exclaimed— "Why, it ain't Miss Francie—it's Miss Delia!"

"Well, I guess we can fix that," said Mr. Dosson, wandering further into the room and drawing his feet over the floor without lifting them. Whatever he did he ever seemed to wander: he had a transitory air, an aspect of weary yet patient non-arrival, even when he sat (as he was capable of sitting for hours) in the court of the inn. As he glanced down at the two newspapers in their desert of green velvet he raised a hopeless, uninterested glass to his eye. "Delia, my dear, where is your sister?"

Delia made no movement whatever, nor did any expression, so far as could be perceived, pass over her large young face. She only ejaculated, "Why, Mr. Flack, where did you drop from?"

"Well, this is a good place to meet," her father remarked, as if mildly, and as a mere passing suggestion, to deprecate explanations.

"Any place is good where one meets old friends," said George Flack, looking also at the newspapers. He examined the date of the American sheet and then put it down. "Well, how do you like Paris?" he went on to the young lady.

"We quite enjoy it; but of course we're familiar now."

"Well, I was in hopes I could show you something," Mr. Flack said.

"I guess they've seen most everything," Mr. Dosson observed.

"Well, we've seen more than you!" exclaimed his daughter.

"Well, I've seen a good deal—just sitting there."

A person with a delicate ear might have suspected Mr. Dosson of saying "setting;"[5] but he would pronounce the same word in a different manner at different times.

"Well, in Paris you can see everything," said the young man. "I'm quite enthusiastic about Paris."

"Haven't you been here before?" Miss Delia asked.

"Oh, yes, but it's ever fresh. And how is Miss Francie?"

"She's all right. She has gone up stairs to get something; we are going out again."

"It's very attractive for the young," said Mr. Dosson to the visitor.

"Well, then, I'm one of the young. Do you mind if I go with you?" Mr. Flack continued, to the girl.

"It'll seem like old times, on the deck," she replied. "We're going to the Bon Marché."

"Why don't you go to the Louvre?[6] It's much better."

"We have just come from there: we have had quite a morning."

"Well, it's a good place," the visitor continued.

"It's good for some things but it doesn't come up to my idea for others."

"Oh, they've seen everything," said Mr. Dosson. Then he added, "I guess I'll go and call Francie."

"Well, tell her to hurry," Miss Delia returned, swinging a glove in each hand.

"She knows my pace," Mr. Flack remarked.

"I should think she would, the way you raced!" the girl ejaculated, with memories of the Umbria.[7] "I hope you don't expect to rush round Paris that way."

"I always rush. I live in a rush. That's the way to get through."

"Well, I *am* through, I guess," said Mr. Dosson, philosophically.

"Well, I ain't!" his daughter declared, with decision.

"Well, you must come round often," the old gentleman continued, as a leave-taking.

"Oh, I'll come round! I'll have to rush, but I'll do it."

"I'll send down Francie." And Francie's father crept away.

"And please to give her some more money!" her sister called after him.

"Does she keep the money?" George Flack inquired.

"*Keep* it?" Mr. Dosson stopped as he pushed aside the *portière*. "Oh, you innocent young man!"

"I guess it's the first time you were ever called innocent," Delia remarked, left alone with the visitor.

"Well, I *was*—before I came to Paris."

"Well, I can't see that it has hurt us. We are *not* extravagant."

"Wouldn't you have a right to be?"

"I don't think any one has a right to be."

The young man, who had seated himself, looked at her a moment. "That's the way you used to talk."

"Well, I haven't changed."

"And Miss Francie—has she?"

"Well, you'll see," said Delia Dosson, beginning to draw on her gloves.

Her companion watched her, leaning forward with his elbows on the arms of his chair and his hands interlocked. At last he said, interrogatively: "Bon Marché?"

"No, I got them in a little place I know."

"Well, they're Paris, anyway."

"Of course they're Paris. But you can get gloves anywhere."

"You must show me the little place, anyhow," Mr. Flack continued, sociably. And he observed further, with the same friendliness—"The old gentleman seems all there."

"Oh, he's the dearest of the dear."

"He's a real gentleman—of the old stamp," said George Flack.

"Well, what should you think our father would be?"

"I should think he would be delighted!"

"Well, he is, when we carry out our plans."

"And what are they—your plans?" asked the young man.

"Oh, I never tell them."

"How then does he know whether you carry them out?"

"Well, I guess he'd know it if we didn't," said the girl.

"I remember how secretive you were last year. You kept everything to yourself."

"Well, I know what I want," the young lady pursued.

He watched her button one of her gloves, deftly, with a hairpin which she disengaged from some mysterious function under her bonnet. There was a moment's silence and then they looked up at each other. "I have an idea you don't want me," said George Flack.

"Oh, yes, I do—as a friend."

"Of all the mean ways of trying to get rid of a man, that's the meanest!" he exclaimed.

"Where's the meanness, when I suppose you are not so peculiar as to wish to be anything more!"

"More to your sister, do you mean—or to yourself?"

"My sister *is* myself—I haven't got any other," said Delia Dosson.

"Any other sister?"

"Don't be idiotic. Are you still in the same business?" the girl went on.

"Well, I forget which one I *was* in."

"Why, something to do with that newspaper—don't you remember?"

"Yes, but it isn't that paper any more—it's a different one."

"Do you go round for news—in the same way?"

"Well, I try to get the people what they want.[8] It's hard work," said the young man.

"Well, I suppose if you didn't some one else would. They will have it, won't they?"

"Yes, they will have it." But the wants of the people did not appear at the present moment to interest Mr. Flack as much as his own. He looked at his watch and remarked that the old gentleman didn't seem to have much authority.

"Much authority?" the girl repeated.

"With Miss Francie. She is taking her time, or rather, I mean, she is taking mine."

"Well, if you expect to do anything with her you must give her plenty of that."

"All right: I'll give her all I have." And Miss Dosson's interlocutor leaned back in his chair with folded arms, as if to let his companion know that she would have to count with his patience. But she sat there in her expressionless placidity, giving no sign of alarm or defeat. He was the first indeed to show a symptom of restlessness: at the end of a few moments he asked the young lady if she didn't suppose her father had told her sister who it was.

"Do you think that's all that's required?" Miss Dosson demanded. But she added, more graciously— "Probably that's the reason. She's so shy."

"Oh, yes—she used to look it."

"No, that's her peculiarity, that she never looks it, and yet she is intensely so."

"Well, you make it up for her then, Miss Delia," the young man ventured to declare.

"No, for her, I'm not shy—not in the least."

"If it wasn't for you I think I could do something," the young man went on.

"Well, you've got to kill me first!"

"I'll come down on you, somehow, in the Reverberator,"[9] said George Flack.

"Oh, that's not what the people want."

"No, unfortunately they don't care anything about *my* affairs."

"Well, we do: we are kinder, Francie and I" said the girl. "But we desire to keep them quite distinct from ours."

"Oh, yours—yours: if I could only discover what they are!" the young journalist exclaimed. And during the rest of the time that they sat there waiting he tried to find out. If an auditor had happened to be present for the quarter of an hour that elapsed and had had any attention to give to these vulgar young persons he would have wondered perhaps at there being so much mystery on one side and so much curiosity on the other—wondered at least at the elaboration of inscrutable projects on the part of a girl who looked to the casual eye as if she were stolidly passive. Fidelia Dosson, whose name had been shortened, was twenty-five years old and had a large white face, with the eyes very far apart. Her forehead was high, but her mouth was small: her hair was light and colourless, and a certain inelegant thickness of figure made her appear shorter than she was. Elegance indeed had not been conferred upon her by Nature, and the Bon Marché and other establishments had to make up for that. To a feminine eye they would scarcely have appeared to have acquitted themselves of their office; but even a woman would not have guessed how little Fidelia cared. She always looked the same; all the contrivances of Paris could not make her look different, and she held them, for herself, in no manner of esteem. It was a plain, blank face, not only without movement, but with a suggestion of obstinacy in its repose; and yet, with its limitations, it was neither stupid nor displeasing. It had an air of intelligent calm—a considering, pondering look that was superior, somehow, to diffidence or anxiety; moreover, the girl had a clear skin and a gentle, dim smile. If she had been a young man (and she had, a little, the head of one) it would probably have been thought of her that she nursed dreams of eminence in some scientific or even political line.

An observer would have gathered, further, that Mr. Flack's acquaintance with Mr. Dosson and his daughters had had its origin in his crossing the Atlantic eastward in their company more than a year before and in some slight association immediately after disembarking; but that each party had come and gone a good deal since then—come and gone however without meeting again. It was to be inferred that in this interval Miss Dosson had

led her father and sister back to their native land and had then a second time directed their course to Europe. This was a new departure, said Mr. Flack, or rather a new arrival: he understood that it was not, as he called it, the same old visit. She did not repudiate the accusation, launched by her companion as if it might have been embarrassing, of having spent her time at home in Boston, and even in a suburban portion of it: she confessed that, as Bostonians,[10] they had been capable of that. But now they had come abroad for longer—ever so much: what they had gone home for was to make arrangements for a European sojourn of which the limits were not to be told. So far as this prospect entered into her plans she freely acknowledged it. It appeared to meet with George Flack's approval—he also had a big job on that side and it might take years, so that it would be pleasant to have his friends right there. He knew his way about in Paris—or any place like that—much more than in Boston; if they had been poked away in one of those clever suburbs[11] they would have been lost to him.

"Oh, well, you'll see as much as you want to of us— the way you'll have to take us," Delia Dosson said: which led the young man to inquire what way that was and to remark that he only knew one way to take anything—just as it came. "Oh, well, you'll see," the girl rejoined; and she would give for the present no further explanation of her somewhat chilling speech. In spite of it, however, she professed an interest in Mr. Flack's "job"—an interest which rested apparently upon an interest in the young man himself. The slightly surprised observer whom we have supposed to be present would have perceived that this latter sentiment was founded on a conception of Mr. Flack's intrinsic brilliancy. Would his own impression have justified that?—would he have found such a conception contagious? I forbear to say positively no, for that would charge me with the large responsibility of showing what right our accidental observer might have had to his particular standard. I prefer therefore to note simply that George Flack was quite clever enough to seem a person of importance to Delia Dosson. He was connected (as she supposed) with literature, and was not literature one of the many engaging attributes of her cherished little sister? If Mr. Flack was a writer Francie was a reader: had not a trail of forgotten Tauchnitzes marked the former line of travel of the party of three? The elder sister grabbed them up on leaving hotels and railway-carriages, but usually found that she had brought odd volumes.[12] She considered,

however, that as a family they had a sort of superior affinity with the young journalist, and would have been surprised if she had been told that his acquaintance was not a high advantage.

Mr. Flack's appearance was not so much a property of his own as a prejudice on the part of those who looked at him: whoever they might be what they saw mainly in him was that they had seen him before. And, oddly enough, this recognition carried with it in general no ability to remember—that is to recall—him: you could not have evoked him in advance, and it was only when you saw him that you knew you *had* seen him. To carry him in your mind you must have liked him very much, for no other sentiment, not even aversion, would have taught you what distinguished him in his group: aversion in especial would have made you conscious only of what confounded him. He was not a particular person, but a sample or memento—reminding one of certain "goods" for which there is a steady popular demand. You would scarcely have expected him to have a name other than that of his class: a number, like that of the day's newspaper, would have been the most that you would count on, and you would have expected vaguely to find the number high—somewhere up in the millions. As every copy of the newspaper wears the same label, so that of Miss Dosson's visitor would have been "Young commercial American". Let me add that among the accidents of his appearance was that of its sometimes striking other young commercial Americans as fine. He was twenty-seven years of age and had a small square head, a light gray overcoat, and in his right forefinger a curious natural crook which might have served, under pressure, to identify him. But for the convenience of society he ought always to have worn something conspicuous—a green hat or a scarlet necktie. His job was to obtain material in Europe for an American "society-paper."[13]

If it be objected to all this that when Francie Dosson at last came in she addressed him as if she easily placed him, the answer is that she had been notified by her father—more punctually than was indicated by the manner of her response. "Well, the way you *do* turn up," she said, smiling and holding out her left hand to him: in the other hand, or the hollow of her right arm, she had a largeish parcel. Though she had made him wait she was evidently very glad to see him there; and she as evidently required and enjoyed a great deal of that sort of indulgence. Her sister's attitude would have

told you so even if her own appearance had not. There was that in her manner to the young man—a perceptible but indefinable shade—which seemed to legitimate the oddity of his having asked in particular for her, as if he wished to see her to the exclusion of her father and sister: a kind of special pleasure which had the air of pointing to a special relation. And yet a spectator, looking from Mr. George Flack to Miss Francie Dosson, would have been much at a loss to guess what special relation could exist between them. The girl was exceedingly, extraordinarily pretty, and without discoverable resemblance to her sister; and there was a brightness in her—a kind of still radiance— which was quite distinct from what is called animation. Rather tall than short, slim, delicate and evidently as light of hand and of foot as it was possible to be, she yet gave no impression of quick movement, of abundant chatter, of excitable nerves and irrepressible life—no hint of being of the most usual (which is perhaps also the most graceful) American type. She was brilliantly but quietly pretty, and your suspicion that she was a little stiff was corrected only by your perception that she was extremely soft. There was nothing in her to confirm the implication that she had rushed about the deck of a Cunarder[14] with a newspaper-man. She was as straight as a wand and as fine as a gem; her neck was long and her gray eyes had colour; and from the ripple of her dark brown hair to the curve of her unaffirmative chin every line in her face was happy and pure. She had an unformed voice and very little knowledge.

Delia got up, and they came out of the little reading-room—this young lady remarking to her sister that she hoped she had got all the things. "Well, I had a fiendish hunt for them, we have got so many," Francie replied, with a curious soft drawl. "There were a few dozens of the pocket-handkerchiefs I couldn't find; but I guess I've got most of them, and most of the gloves."

"Well, what are you carting them about for?" George Flack inquired, taking the parcel from her. "You had better let me handle them. Do you buy pocket-handkerchiefs by the hundred?"

"Well, it only makes fifty apiece," said Francie, smiling. "They ain't nice—we're going to change them."

"Oh, I won't be mixed up with that—you can't work that game on these Frenchmen!" the young man exclaimed.

"Oh, with Francie they will take anything back," Delia Dosson declared. "They just love her, all over."

"Well, they're like me then," said Mr. Flack, with friendly hilarity. "I'll take her back, if she'll come."

"Well, I don't think I am ready quite yet," the girl replied. "But I hope very much we shall cross with you again."

"Talk about crossing—it's on these boulevards we want a life-preserver!"[15] Delia remarked. They had passed out of the hotel and the wide vista of the Rue de la Paix[16] stretched up and down. There were many vehicles.

"Won't this thing do? I'll tie it to either of you," George Flack said, holding out his bundle. "I suppose they won't kill you if they love you," he went on, to the younger girl.

"Well, you've got to know me first," she answered, laughing and looking for a chance, while they waited to pass over.

"I didn't know you when I was struck." He applied his disengaged hand to her elbow and propelled her across the street. She took no notice of his observation, and Delia asked her, on the other side, whether their father had given her that money. She replied that he had given her loads—she felt as if he had made his will; which led George Flack to say that he wished the old gentleman was *his* father.

"Why, you don't mean to say you want to be our brother!" Francie exclaimed, as they went down the Rue de la Paix.

"I should like to be Miss Delia's, if you can make that out," said the young man.

"Well, then, suppose you prove it by calling me a cab," Miss Delia returned. "I presume you and Francie don't think this is the deck."[17]

"Don't she feel rich?" George Flack demanded of Francie. "But we do require a cart for our goods;" and he hailed a little yellow carriage,[18] which presently drew up beside the pavement. The three got into it and, still emitting innocent pleasantries, proceeded on their way, while at the Hôtel de l'Univers et de Cheltenham Mr. Dosson wandered down into the court again and took his place in his customary chair.