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Excerpt
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WATCH AND WARD

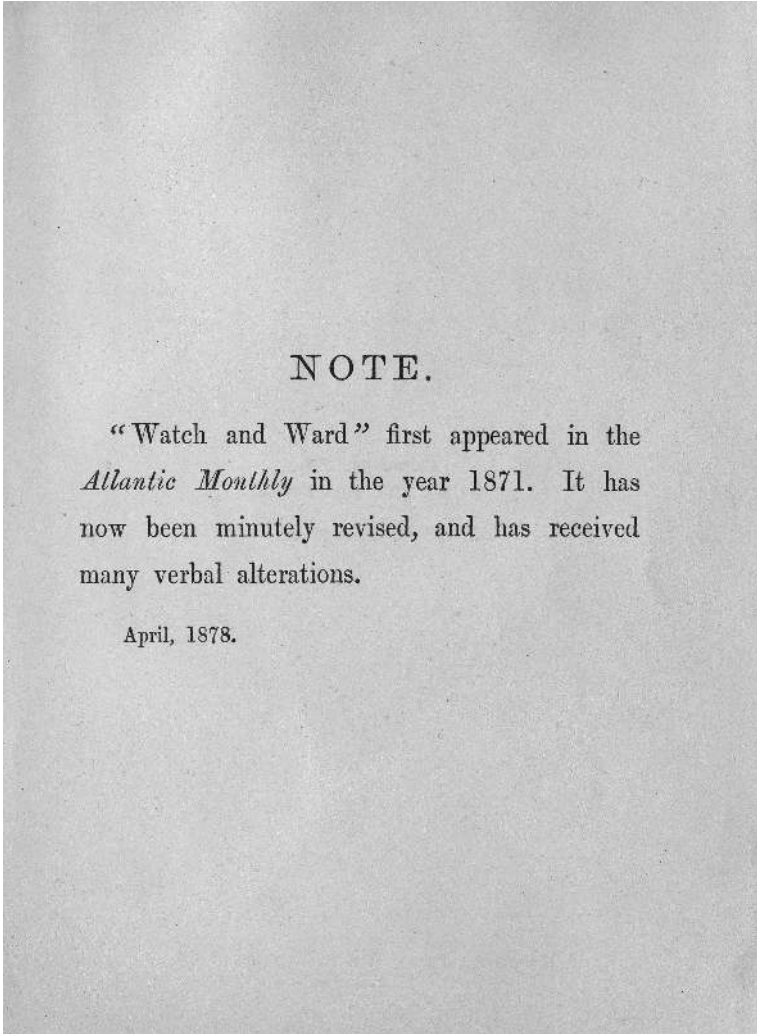


Figure 2: James’s note; when published as a volume, *Watch and Ward* included this preliminary ‘Note’ to the reader (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, and Company, 1878). (Courtesy of Pennsylvania State University Library.)

I

ROGER LAWRENCE had come to town for the express purpose of doing a certain act, but as the hour for action approached he felt his ardor rapidly ebbing. Of the ardor that comes from hope, indeed, he had felt little from the first; so little that as he whirled along in the train he wondered to find himself engaged in this fool's errand. But in default of hope he was sustained, I may almost say, by despair. He should fail, he was sure, but he must fail again before he could rest. Meanwhile he was restless enough. In the evening, at his hotel, having roamed aimlessly about the streets for a couple of hours in the dark December cold, he went up to his room and dressed, with a painful sense of having but partly succeeded in giving himself the figure of an impassioned suitor. He was twenty-nine years old, sound and strong, with a tender heart, and a genius, almost, for common-sense; his face told clearly of youth and kindness and sanity, but it had little other beauty. His complexion was so fresh as to be almost absurd in a man of his age,—an effect rather enhanced by a too early baldness. Being extremely short-sighted, he went with his head thrust forward; but as this infirmity is considered by persons who have studied the picturesque to impart an air of distinction, he may have the benefit of the possibility. His figure was compact and sturdy, and, on the whole, his best point; although, owing to an incurable personal shyness, he had a good deal of awkwardness of movement. He was fastidiously neat in his person, and extremely precise and methodical in his habits, which were of the sort supposed to mark a man for bachelorhood. The desire to get the better of his diffidence had given him a certain formalism of manner which many persons found extremely amusing. He was remarkable for the spotlessness of his linen, the high polish of his boots, and the smoothness of his hat. He carried in all weathers a peculiarly neat umbrella. He never smoked; he drank in moderation. His voice, instead of being the robust barytone which his capacious chest led you to expect, was a mild, deferential tenor. He was fond of going early to bed, and was suspected of what is called “fussing” with his health. No one had ever accused him of meanness, yet he passed universally for a

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cunning economist. In trifling matters, such as the choice of a shoemaker or a dentist, his word carried weight; but no one dreamed of asking his opinion on politics or literature. Here and there, nevertheless, an observer less superficial than the majority would have whispered you that Roger was an undervalued man, and that in the long run he would come out even with the best. "Have you ever studied his face?" such an observer would say. Beneath its simple serenity, over which his ruddy blushes seemed to pass like clouds in a summer sky, there slumbered a fund of exquisite human expression. The eye was excellent; small, perhaps, and somewhat dull, but with a certain appealing depth, like the tender dumbness in the gaze of a dog. In repose Lawrence may have looked stupid; but as he talked his face slowly brightened by gradual fine degrees, until at the end of an hour it inspired you with a confidence so perfect as to be in some degree a tribute to its owner's intellect, as it certainly was to his integrity. On this occasion Roger dressed himself with unusual care and with a certain sober elegance. He debated for three minutes over two cravats, and then, blushing in his mirror at his puerile vanity, he reassumed the plain black tie in which he had travelled. When he had finished dressing it was still too early to go forth on his errand. He went into the reading-room of the hotel, but here soon appeared two smokers. Wishing not to be infected by their fumes, he crossed over to the great empty drawing-room, sat down, and beguiled his impatience with trying on a pair of lavender gloves.

While he was so engaged there came into the room a person who attracted his attention by the singularity of his conduct. This was a man of less than middle age, good-looking, pale, with a pretentious, pointed mustache and various shabby remnants of finery. His face was haggard, his whole aspect was that of grim and hopeless misery. He walked straight to the table in the centre of the room, and poured out and drank without stopping three full glasses of ice-water, as if he were striving to quench some fever in his vitals. He then went to the window, leaned his forehead against the cold pane, and drummed a nervous tattoo with his long stiff finger-nails. Finally he strode over to the fireplace, flung himself into a chair, leaned forward with his head in his hands, and groaned audibly. Lawrence, as he smoothed down his lavender gloves, watched him and reflected. "What an image of fallen prosperity, of degradation and despair! I have been fancying myself in trouble; I have been dejected, doubtful, anxious. I am hopeless. But what is my

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sentimental sorrow to this?” The unhappy gentleman rose from his chair, turned his back to the chimney-piece, and stood with folded arms gazing at Lawrence, who was seated opposite to him. The young man sustained his glance, but with sensible discomfort. His face was as white as ashes, his eyes were as lurid as coals. Roger had never seen anything so tragic as the two long harsh lines which descended from his nose, beside his mouth, in seeming mockery of his foppish, relaxed mustache. Lawrence felt that his companion was going to address him; he began to draw off his gloves. The stranger suddenly came towards him, stopped a moment, eyed him again with insolent intensity, and then seated himself on the sofa beside him. His first movement was to seize the young man’s arm. “He is simply crazy!” thought Lawrence. Roger was now able to appreciate the pathetic despair of his appearance. His open waistcoat displayed a soiled and crumpled shirt-bosom, from whose empty buttonholes the studs had recently been wrenched. In his normal freshness he must have looked like a gambler with a run of luck. He spoke in a rapid, excited tone, with a hard, petulant voice.

“You’ll think me crazy, I suppose. Well, I shall be soon. Will you lend me a hundred dollars?”

“Who are you? What is your trouble?” Roger asked.

“My name would tell you nothing. I’m a stranger here. My trouble,—it’s a long story! But it’s grievous, I assure you. It’s pressing upon me with a fierceness that grows while I sit here talking to you. A hundred dollars would stave it off,—a few days at least. Don’t refuse me!” These last words were uttered half as an entreaty, half as a threat. “Don’t say you haven’t got them,—a man that wears such pretty gloves! Come; you look like a good fellow. Look at me! I’m a good fellow, too. I don’t need to swear to my being in distress.”

Lawrence was touched, disgusted, and irritated. The man’s distress was real enough, but there was something horribly disreputable in his manner. Roger declined to entertain his request without learning more about him. From the stranger’s persistent reluctance to do more than simply declare that he was from St. Louis,¹ and repeat that he was in a tight place, in a d—d tight place, Lawrence was led to believe that he had been dabbling in crime. The more he insisted upon some definite statement of his circumstances, the more fierce and peremptory became the other’s petition. Lawrence was before all things deliberate and perspicacious; the last man in the world to be hustled and bullied. It was quite out of his nature to do

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a thing without distinctly knowing why. He of course had no imagination, which, as we know, should always stand at the right hand of charity; but he had good store of that wholesome discretion whose place is at the left. Discretion told him that his companion was a dissolute scoundrel, who had sinned through grievous temptation, perhaps, but who had certainly sinned. His misery was palpable, but Roger felt that he could not patch up his misery without in some degree condoning his vices. It was not in his power, at any rate, to present him, out of hand, a hundred dollars. He compromised. "I can't think of giving you the sum you ask," he said. "I have no time, moreover, to investigate your case at present. If you will meet me here to-morrow morning, I will listen to anything you shall have made up your mind to say. Meanwhile, here are ten dollars."

The man looked at the proffered note and made no movement to accept it. Then raising his eyes to Roger's face,—eyes streaming with tears of helpless rage and baffled want,—"O, the devil!" he cried. "What can I do with ten dollars? D——n it, I don't know how to beg. Listen to me! If you don't give me what I ask, I shall cut my throat! Think of that. On your head be the penalty!"

Lawrence pocketed his note and rose to his feet. "No, decidedly," he said, "you don't know how to beg!" A moment after, he had left the hotel and was walking rapidly toward a well-remembered dwelling. He was shocked and discomposed by this brutal collision with want and vice; but as he walked, the cool night-air suggested sweeter things. The image of his heated petitioner was speedily replaced by the calmer figure of Isabel Morton.

He had come to know Isabel Morton three years before, through a visit she had then made to one of his neighbors in the country. In spite of his unventurous tastes and the even tenor of his habits, Lawrence was by no means lacking, as regards life, in what the French call *les grandes curiosités*; but from an early age his curiosity had chiefly taken the form of a timid but strenuous desire to fathom the depths of matrimony. He had dreamed of this gentle bondage as other men dream of the "free unhoused condition" of celibacy.² He had been born a marrying man, with a conscious desire for progeny. The world in this respect had not done him justice. It had supposed him to be wrapped up in his petty comforts: whereas, in fact, he was serving a devout apprenticeship to the profession of husband and father. Feeling at twenty-six that he had something to offer a woman, he allowed himself to

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become interested in Miss Morton. It was rather odd that a man of tremors and blushes should in this line have been signally bold; for Miss Morton had the reputation of being extremely fastidious, and was supposed to wear some dozen broken hearts on her girdle, as an Indian wears the scalps of his enemies.

It is said that, as a rule, men fall in love with their opposites; certainly Lawrence's mistress was not fashioned in his own image. He was the most unobtrusively natural of men; she, on the other hand, was pre-eminently artificial. She was pretty, but not really so pretty as she seemed; clever, but not intelligent; amiable, but not sympathetic. She possessed in perfection the manner of society, which she lavished with indiscriminate grace on the just and the unjust, and which very effectively rounded and completed the somewhat meagre outline of her personal character. In reality, Miss Morton was keenly ambitious. A woman of simpler needs, she might very well have accepted our hero. He offered himself with urgent and obstinate warmth. She esteemed him more than any man she had known,—so she told him; but she added that the man she married must satisfy her heart. Her heart, she did not add, was bent upon a carriage and diamonds.

From the point of view of ambition, a match with Roger Lawrence was not worth discussing. He was therefore dismissed with gracious but inexorable firmness. From this moment the young man's sentiment hardened into a passion. Six months later he heard that Miss Morton was preparing to go to Europe. He sought her out before her departure, urged his suit afresh, and lost it a second time. But his passion had cost too much to be flung away unused. During her residence abroad he wrote her three letters, only one of which she briefly answered, in terms which amounted to little more than this: "Dear Mr. Lawrence, *do* leave me alone!" At the end of two years she returned, and was now visiting her married brother. Lawrence had just heard of her arrival, and had come to town to make, as we have said, a supreme appeal.

Her brother and his wife were out for the evening; Roger found her in the drawing-room, under the lamp, teaching a stitch in crochet to her niece, a little girl of ten, who stood leaning at her side. She seemed to him prettier than before; although, in fact, she looked older and stouter. Her prettiness, for the most part, however, was a matter of coquetry; and naturally, as youth departed, coquetry filled the vacancy. She was fair and plump, and she had

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a very pretty trick of suddenly turning her head and showing a charming white throat and ear. Above her well-filled corsage these objects produced a most agreeable effect. She always dressed in light colors, but with unerring taste. Charming as she may have been, there was, nevertheless, about her so marked a want of the natural, that, to admire her particularly, it was necessary to be, like Roger, in love with her. She received him with such flattering friendliness and so little apparent suspicion of his purpose, that he almost took heart and hope. If she did not fear a declaration, perhaps she desired one. For the first half-hour Roger's attack hung fire. Isabel talked to better purpose than before she went abroad, and for the moment he sat tongue-tied for very modesty. Miss Morton's little niece was a very pretty child; her hair was combed out into a golden cloud, which covered her sloping shoulders. She kept her place beside her aunt, clasping one of the latter's hands, and staring at Lawrence with that sweet curiosity of little girls. There glimmered mistily in the young man's brain a vision of a home-scene in the future,—a lamp-lit parlor on a winter night, a placid wife and mother wreathed in household smiles,³ a golden-haired child, and, in the midst, his sentient self, drunk with possession and gratitude. As the clock struck nine the little girl was sent to bed, having been kissed by her aunt and rekissed—or un-kissed shall I say?—by her aunt's lover. When she had disappeared, Roger proceeded to business. He had proposed so often to Miss Morton, that, actually, practice had begun to tell. It took but a few moments to make his meaning plain. Miss Morton addressed herself to her niece's tapestry, and, as her lover went on with manly eloquence, glanced up at him from her work with feminine keenness. He spoke of his persistent love, of his long waiting and his passionate hope. Her acceptance of his hand was the only thing that could make him happy. He should never love another woman; if she now refused him, it was the end of all things; he should continue to exist, to work and act, to eat and sleep, but he should have ceased to *live*.

"In Heaven's name," he said, "don't answer me as you have answered me before."

She folded her hands, and with a serious smile, "I shall not, altogether," she said. "When I have refused you before, I have simply told you that I could not love you. I cannot love you, Mr. Lawrence! I must repeat it again to-night, but with a better reason than before. I love another man; I am engaged."

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Roger rose to his feet like a man who has received a heavy blow and springs forward in self-defence. But he was indefensible, his assailant inattackable. He sat down again and hung his head. Miss Morton came to him and took his hand and demanded of him, as a right, that he should be resigned. "Beyond a certain point," she said, "you have no right to thrust your regrets upon me. The injury I do you in refusing you is less than that I should do you in accepting you without love."

He looked at her with his eyes full of tears. "Well! I shall never marry," he said. "There is something you cannot refuse me. Though I shall never possess you, I may at least espouse your memory and live in intimate union with your image. I shall live with my eyes fixed upon it." She smiled at this fine talk; she had heard so much in her day! He had fancied himself prepared for the worst, but as he walked back to his hotel, it seemed intolerably bitter. Its bitterness, however, quickened his temper, and prompted a violent reaction. He would now, he declared, cast his lot with pure reason. He had tried love and faith, but they would none of him. He had made a woman a goddess, and she had made him a fool. He would henceforth care neither for woman nor man, but simply for comfort, and, if need should be, for pleasure. Beneath this gathered gust of cynicism the future lay as hard and narrow as the silent street before him. He was absurdly unconscious that good-humor was lurking round the very next corner.

It was not till near morning that he was able to sleep. His sleep, however, had lasted less than an hour when it was interrupted by a loud noise from the adjoining room. He started up in bed, lending his ear to the stillness. The sound was immediately repeated; it was that of a pistol-shot. This second report was followed by a loud, shrill cry. Roger jumped out of bed, thrust himself into his trousers, quitted his room, and ran to the neighboring door. It opened without difficulty, and revealed an astonishing scene. In the middle of the floor lay a man, in his trousers and shirt, his head bathed in blood, his hand grasping the pistol from which he had just sent a bullet through his brain. Beside him stood a little girl in her nightdress, her long hair on her shoulders, shrieking and wringing her hands. Stooping over the prostrate body, Roger recognized, in spite of his bedabbled visage, the person who had addressed him in the parlor of the hotel. He had kept the spirit, if not the letter, of his menace. "O father, father, father!" sobbed the little girl. Roger, overcome with horror and pity, stooped towards her and opened his

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arms. She, conscious of nothing but the presence of human help, rushed into his embrace and buried her head in his grasp.

The rest of the house was immediately aroused, and the room invaded by a body of lodgers and servants. Soon followed a couple of policemen, and finally the proprietor in person. The fact of suicide was so apparent that Roger's presence was easily explained. From the child nothing but sobs could be obtained. After a vast amount of talking and pushing and staring, after a physician had affirmed that the stranger was dead, and the ladies had passed the child from hand to hand through a bewildering circle of caresses and questions, the multitude dispersed, and the little girl was borne away in triumph by the proprietor's wife, further investigation being appointed for the morrow. For Roger, seemingly, this was to have been a night of sensations. There came to him, as it wore away, a cruel sense of his own accidental part in his neighbor's tragedy. His refusal to help the poor man had brought on the catastrophe. The idea haunted him awhile; but at last, with an effort, he dismissed it. The next man, he assured himself, would have done no more than he; might possibly have done less. He felt, however, a certain indefeasible fellowship in the sorrow of the little girl. He lost no time, the next morning, in calling on the wife of the proprietor. She was a kindly woman enough, but so thoroughly the mistress of a public house that she seemed to deal out her very pity over a bar. She exhibited toward her protégée a hard, business-like charity which foreshadowed vividly to Roger's mind the poor child's probable portion in life, and repeated to him the little creature's story, as she had been able to learn it. The father had come in early in the evening, in great trouble and excitement, and had made her go to bed. He had kissed her and cried over her, and, of course, made her cry. Late at night she was aroused by feeling him again at her bedside, kissing her, fondling her, raving over her. He bade her good night and passed into the adjoining room, where she heard him fiercely knocking about. She was very much frightened; she fancied he was out of his mind. She knew that their troubles had lately been thickening fast; now the worst had come. Suddenly he called her. She asked what he wanted, and he bade her get out of bed and come to him. She trembled, but she obeyed. On reaching the threshold of his room she saw the gas turned low, and her father standing in his shirt against the door at the other end. He ordered her to stop where she was. Suddenly she heard a loud report and felt beside her cheek the wind of