

The Age of Innocence

by Edith Wharton

(Adapted book. Upper-Intermediate level)

Chapter 1. At the Opera

High society in New York in the early 1870s was a very small world. Everyone knew everyone else's business. They all went out in the evenings, dressed in their finest clothes, to attend the theater, the ballet, or the opera; to visit people and to be seen. They gossiped about upcoming marriages and recent scandals. The ladies approved or disapproved of one another's dresses and hairstyles. Hundreds of pairs of eyes watched out for something irregular, something scandalous or ridiculous, and hundreds of tongues were ready to talk about it.

One January evening, Newland Archer went to the opera. The famous soprano Christine Nilsson was singing in Faust at the New York Academy of Music. Everyone was there. As Madame Nilsson was singing a passionate love song, Newland looked over at Mrs Manson Mingott's box. Mrs Mingott herself was far too old and fat to go to the opera, but her family used the box. Tonight her daughter Augusta Welland was there beside her sister-in-law, Mrs Lovell Mingott. Behind them sat a young woman in a white dress. This was Mrs Welland's daughter, May. She was staring at the love scene on the stage. Her eyes were bright, and she was blushing, as the blonde soprano sang out "Mama!" triumphantly.

"The darling!" thought Newland with pride and satisfaction. "She doesn't even know what it's all about. When we're married, we'll read Faust together by the Italian lakes." That afternoon, he and May had told each other their feelings. They were now engaged to be married, although they hadn't yet made a formal announcement. He was glad that May was innocent, but once they were married he'd educate her. When she was his wife, he'd teach her to be charming and sophisticated, like the married woman who had fascinated him for two years. He wanted May to have all that woman's charm but none of her weaknesses.

Newland looked back at the stage, where Madame Nilsson was reaching the climax of her love song.

Larry Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson were standing next to Newland. Mr Jackson was an old society gossip: he knew the secrets and scandals of all of New York society for the past fifty years. Lefferts was an elegant young gentleman, an expert on what was appropriate and inappropriate behavior in New York high society. "How's the law, Archer?" Lefferts asked a little ironically. Newland was a lawyer in a distinguished New York law firm, but everyone knew that he didn't care much about his work.

"It's all right," said Newland. "A little dull, but a gentleman must do something, so I go to Mr Letterblair's office every morning."

Suddenly, Lefferts, who had been looking at the people in the boxes opposite, said, "My God!"

Newland saw that he was staring at Mrs Mingott's box. Another lady had just entered it - a slim young woman wearing a band of diamonds in her dark hair and a very elegant Empire-style dress. Everyone in the opera house was looking at that dress. "Augusta Welland shouldn't have brought her here," said Lefferts.

Newland said nothing but in his heart he agreed. He was a generous young man, and he was glad that May and her family were kind to her unfortunate cousin Countess Olenska. But being kind to her at home was one thing: bringing her to the opera was another thing entirely. Mrs Welland shouldn't have done it.

"What happened to the Countess?" asked a young man close by. "Everyone says that she's 'unfortunate', but I've never heard her story."

"She left her husband," replied Lefferts.

"I heard her husband was horrible," said the young man, who obviously wanted to defend the lady.

"Yes, he was," Lefferts agreed.

The young man looked satisfied, but then Lefferts added, "She ran away with his secretary."

"Oh dear!" said the young man.

"It didn't last long, though," said Mr Jackson. "Last month she was living alone in Venice. Lovell Mingott went there and brought her home. That's fine - a family should take care of its unfortunate members - but bringing her to the opera is a mistake."

"Especially with Miss Welland," said Lefferts.

Newland suddenly wanted to go to Mrs Mingott's box, to show the world that he was engaged to May, and to protect her from any difficulties she might have as a result of her cousin's scandalous reputation. He hurried through the red corridors to the other side of the opera house. When he entered the box, his eyes met May's, and he saw that she instantly understood his motive.

"Do you know my niece, Countess Olenska?" asked Augusta Welland.

Newland had not seen the Countess since she was little Ellen Mingott - a lively, pretty child of nine. Ellen's parents had liked traveling. When Ellen was little, they took her all over Europe. They died when she was nine, and her aunt Mrs Medora Manson took care of her after that. Mrs Manson was also a traveler. Occasionally she came back to New York with a new husband. Shortly after the death of Ellen's parents, Mrs Manson brought her niece to New York. New York society was shocked to see that the little girl wasn't wearing black, even though her parents had died recently. Instead she wore bright red silk and amber beads.

For a few months, Newland had seen her often in the houses of her aunts or his, but then Mrs Medora Manson had taken her back to Europe. Nothing was heard of them for ten years, then there was news: Ellen had married a very rich Polish nobleman she had met at a ball in Paris. Apparently the Count had beautiful houses in Paris, Nice, and Florence.

Newland sat next to the Countess. He did this so that everybody at the opera could see him.

"We used to play together when we were children," said Countess Olenska. "You were a horrible boy. You kissed me once behind a door, but I was in love with your cousin Vandie Newland, who never looked

at me." She looked around the opera house and said, "Yes. Being here brings back all the old memories. I can imagine everybody here in children's clothing just like long ago."

Newland was shocked by the flippant way she referred to New York high society, which, at that very moment, was judging her.

"You've been away a very long time," he said.

"Oh yes," replied the lady. "Centuries and centuries; so long that I feel as if I'm dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven."

To Newland, her way of speaking seemed very strange. He didn't like her tone - it was too European, too subtle. He thanked God that he was an honest New Yorker and that he was about to marry one of his own kind.

Chapter 2. Invitations

That evening, Mr Julius Beaufort and his wife Regina gave a ball. They had a splendid house, and their annual ball was always a great event in New York society. Regina Beaufort was from the Dallas family of South Carolina, and Mrs Mingott was her aunt, but her husband Julius - though rich and charming - was a mystery. He was a very successful banker and he claimed to be English, but nobody knew his family, and his behavior wasn't at all what New York generally approved of: he had a mistress called Fanny Ring. Everybody - including his wife - knew about this mistress, but nobody discussed her openly. Beaufort kept another house and a carriage for Fanny Ring. When they whispered to each other, the members of New York high society said that it was a terrible scandal. Nevertheless, they continued to accept Beaufort's invitations.

When Newland and May became engaged that afternoon they had decided not to make a public announcement for some time, but now Newland told May that he wanted to announce it at once, at the Beauforts' ball. They did so, and they were both very happy. Newland was sure that it was the right thing to do. In announcing his engagement, he was announcing the connection of two important New York families:

the Archers and the Wellands. If people wanted to gossip about Countess Olenska, now they would be going against two powerful families, not just one.

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A few days later, Sillerton Jackson came to dinner at Newland's house, where he lived with his mother, Mrs Archer, and his sister Janey. When dinner was over, the ladies went to the drawing room. Newland and Mr Jackson stayed in the dining room to enjoy their brandy and cigars.

"Have you ever met Count Olenski?" asked Newland.

"Yes, once," Mr Jackson replied. "He's a very handsome fellow. He collects china - and women. I hear he'll pay any price for them."

"It's a good thing she left him. He sounds horrible."

"There are rumors about the Countess," said Mr Jackson.

"I know," said Newland impatiently. "Olenski's secretary helped her to run away from him. I hear the Count was almost keeping her a prisoner in that house, while he went out and spent his time with prostitutes. I admire the secretary for helping her. Any gentleman in his position would have done the same!"

Mr Jackson smiled and looked at his cigar. "I hear he was still helping her a year later," he said. "They were seen together in Lausanne, Switzerland. They were living together."

Newland hesitated for a moment and then said, "And why not? Just because she made a mistake in marriage, why should her whole life be over?"

"They say she wants to get a divorce," said Mr Jackson.

"Good idea!" Newland replied. "Women ought to be free! As free as we are!"

Mr Jackson poured himself more brandy and said, "Apparently Count Olenski agrees with you. He never made any effort to get her back."

When Newland had spoken so warmly about freedom for women, he had been entirely sincere, but in fact he wasn't quite so radical as his

words suggested. Privately, he thought that a "nice" woman would never take advantage of such freedom, even if it were given to her.

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A few days later a terrible thing happened. Mrs Lovell Mingott sent invitations out, asking people to a dinner party at her house "to meet Countess Olenska". Of those invited, only three accepted. Everyone else said that they couldn't come. They gave no reason: they simply refused the invitation. This was an insult. Clearly New York high society refused "to meet Countess Olenska".

"This is awful!" cried Mrs Archer when Newland told her about it. "We can't tolerate this. Our family is now linked to theirs through your engagement to dear May. We must do something. I know! Let's go and visit cousin Henry and see what he has to say about it!"

Newland agreed. It was an excellent idea. Mr and Mrs van der Luyden were at the very top of New York society. Their family was old, not just by New York standards but also by European standards, and they had several aristocratic relatives in Europe. If Mr and Mrs van der Luyden accepted Countess Olenska, the rest of New York society would have to accept her too.

Newland and his mother went to see the van der Luydens that evening. When Mrs Archer had explained all about Countess Olenska and the refusals of Mrs Mingott's dinner invitations, the van der Luydens looked very worried indeed.

"Well," said cousin Henry after a while. "The Wellands and the Mingotts are connected to our family now, so we must do something about this. It is the principle of the thing that worries me: if an established New York family supports one of its members in her misfortune, the rest of society ought to accept that and support her too." He looked at his wife.

"My wife's cousin the Duke of St Austrey is coming to stay with us next week," said Mr van der Luyden. "We'll give a little dinner party for him and invite the Countess."

"Thank you so much!" said Newland. "That is sure to solve the problem."

After the Archers had left, Mrs van der Luyden took her elegant carriage and went to visit Mrs Mingott. Two hours later, everybody knew that Mrs van der Luyden's carriage had been seen outside Mrs Mingott's door. By the next morning they also knew that the purpose of Mrs van der Luyden's visit had been to invite Countess Olenska to a dinner party for the Duke of St Austrey.

A week later, as he sat in the van der Luyden's drawing room waiting for Ellen to arrive, Newland thought about her history and her strange, unconventional education. She walked into the drawing room half an hour late, wearing one glove and fastening a bracelet around her wrist, but she didn't look hurried or anxious. On the contrary, she was quite serene.

As Henry van der Luyden introduced her to his wife's cousin, the Duke of St Austrey, it was clear that he thought he was doing her a great honor, but she didn't seem to think so. Apparently she had already met the Duke in Nice. After dinner, the Duke sat beside her on the sofa in the drawing room, but after twenty minutes of conversation Ellen left him and crossed the room to sit beside Newland. It wasn't traditional in New York for a lady to leave the company of one gentleman and seek that of another, but Ellen seemed unaware of this.

"You know the Duke already?" asked Newland, as she sat down beside him.

"Yes. He likes to gamble. He was often at our house in Nice. I think he's the dullest man I ever met, but people here seem to admire him."

Newland was a little shocked, but he laughed.

"Tell me all about May," said Ellen. "Are you very much in love?"

"As much as a man can be," Newland replied.

"Do you think there's a limit?"

"If there is, I haven't found it."

She smiled with real pleasure. "Then it really is a romance? It wasn't arranged by your families?"

"We don't allow our families to arrange our marriages here," said Newland.

She blushed. "Ah, yes!" she said. "I had forgotten that everything here is good that was bad where I've come from." She looked down at her hands, and her lips trembled.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "You are among friends here, you know."

"Yes, I know. Look! May has arrived. You'll want to hurry away and be with her."

The drawing room was filling up with after-dinner guests. May was with her mother. She was wearing a beautiful white and silver dress. She looked like the goddess Diana.

"She's already surrounded by other men," said Newland. "Look! The Duke is being introduced to her."

"Then stay with me a little longer," said Ellen quietly.

"Yes," replied Newland.

Mr van der Luyden came up and introduced Ellen to another gentleman. Newland stood up. Ellen turned to him and said, "I'll see you tomorrow after five, then."

"Yes, after five," Newland replied, though he was confused. It was the first time she had mentioned an appointment.

Chapter 3. Samarkand and New York

Countess Olenska lived in a bohemian part of the city, the kind of place where artists and writers live. At five-thirty the next day, Newland arrived at the house. An Italian maid showed him into the drawing room. She said that the Countess was out but that she'd probably be home soon.

Newland had spent the afternoon with May and her mother, going to visit friends and relatives. He had hardly had a moment to speak to May alone, so he hadn't told her about Countess Olenska's request - her command - that he should visit her after five, but he knew that May would approve: she was always asking him to be kind to her cousin. After all, it had been in part to protect the Countess that he and May had

announced their engagement sooner than they had planned. If Countess Olenska hadn't come to New York, he would still have been a free man.

The drawing room was beautiful and unconventional. It smelled of spices. Several modern paintings in old frames hung on the red walls. French novels lay on the table, and beside them stood a vase with two roses in it. In New York, no one ever left books in the drawing room, and no one ever bought less than a dozen roses. He tried to imagine the drawing room in his future home with May. May and her mother would decide exactly how it should look, and it would be completely conventional, nothing like this room.

Hearing a carriage arrive at the door, he went to the window and looked out. There he saw Countess Olenska getting out of Beaufort's carriage, followed by Beaufort himself. Beaufort kissed her hand and got back into the carriage.

"Ah!" cried Countess Olenska, coming into the drawing room. "How do you like my house?"

"It's lovely," said Newland.

"I like it. I'm glad it's here in New York - in my own country and my own town. And I'm glad I live alone in it."

"Do you like being alone?" asked Newland.

"Yes, as long as my friends visit me so that I don't feel lonely." She sat down near the fire and said, "This is the time of day I like best."

"I was afraid you'd forgotten the time. Beaufort can be very charming."

"Mr Beaufort took me to see some houses. My family don't like this one. I don't know why. This street is respectable."

"But it isn't fashionable," Newland replied.

"Is that so important?" she asked with a laugh, then she added, "but I want to do what you all do. I want to feel cared for and safe."

"New York is terribly safe," he said ironically.

"Yes. I feel that," she replied. She hadn't noticed his irony. She offered him a cigarette and lit one herself. "You must help me. You must tell me what I should and shouldn't do."

He wanted to say, "Don't drive around with Beaufort". But that was New York advice, and he didn't feel as if he were in New York here. This seemed more like a drawing room in Samarkand. "There are plenty of people to tell you what to do," he said.

"Yes - my aunts and my grandmother. They've all been so kind. But they don't want to hear anything unpleasant. I tried to talk to them, but my Aunt Augusta told me it's better not to discuss these things. Doesn't anyone here want to know the truth, Mr Archer? I feel so lonely living among all these kind people who want me to pretend!" She began to cry.

"Countess Olenska! Ellen! Don't cry!" he said, touching one of her hands.

"Does no one cry here, either?" she asked, moving her hand to wipe her tears away.

Just then the Italian maid came in and announced the Duke of St Austrey. Newland rose to his feet. "I'd better go," he said.

Out in the street, he felt that he was in New York once more. He stopped at a florist's shop to send lilies of the valley to May. He did this every morning, but today he had forgotten. Looking round the shop, he saw a vase full of yellow roses. He asked the florist to send them to Countess Olenska's address. He didn't sign the card.

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The next day Newland went to see May. "Thank you for my lilies of the valley! They smell so lovely. It's so good of you to remember to send them every day!"

"They were late yesterday," said Newland. "I didn't have time to send them in the morning. I sent your cousin some yellow roses at the same time. I hope that was the right thing to do."

"How kind of you! She had lunch with us today, but she didn't mention the roses. She said she'd received flowers from Mr Beaufort and from Mr van der Luyden. She seemed so pleased."

Newland was annoyed that his own flowers had not been mentioned, even though he had failed to sign the card. Impulsively, he said, "May, let's get married sooner than we planned. Why wait?"

"Well, it's usual to wait a little while. Most New York couples are engaged for a year or two."

"Why can't we be different?"

"Oh, Newland! I love you so much! You're so original!"

"Original!" he cried. "On the contrary, we're all like paper dolls, exactly the same: we do the same things; we say the same things." He had an irritating sense that May was playing the part of a young woman in love, saying all the things such young women were supposed to say.

"Mother wouldn't like it if we were different," said May. She looked a little bored and irritated, but then she smiled and said, "Oh! Did I tell you? I showed my engagement ring to Ellen. She thinks it's the most beautiful ring she's ever seen. She says there is nothing like it in Paris! I do love you, Newland, for being so artistic!"

Chapter 4. Marriage is Marriage

Two weeks later at the office, Newland was summoned by the head of the firm, Mr Letterblair, who said to him, "Mrs Manson Mingott sent for me yesterday. She says her granddaughter, Countess Olenska, wants to divorce her husband. Mrs Mingott gave me all the relevant papers and asked me to act for the family. She made it quite clear that the family don't want a divorce. It'd be a terrible scandal. I want you to go to the Countess and persuade her not to ask for a divorce."

"Can't someone else do it?" asked Newland. "The fact that I'm engaged to her cousin makes it rather difficult for me."

"It is precisely because you're engaged to her cousin that we're asking you to do it. Mrs Mingott asked for you. It is a very private matter and nobody else in the firm knows about it. Please take these papers and read them."

"Perhaps divorce is the best thing in this case. I can't promise to persuade the Countess not to divorce her husband unless I'm convinced that it's the right thing to do."

"I don't understand you, Archer," said Mr Letterblair. "You're going to marry into her family. Do you want that family to be the subject of scandal?"

"No, of course not, but what I want is irrelevant."

"The Countess is here; the Count is in Europe: the Atlantic is between them. The Count has already given her some of her money back. He won't give any more. Why should he? The marriage agreement doesn't require him to do so, even in the case of divorce. Besides, they say she doesn't care about the money. If that is the case, she should just let things remain as they are."

Reluctantly, Newland took the papers to his office and read them. The last was a letter from the Count in which he threatened to create a scandal over the Countess's relationship with his secretary if she insisted upon a divorce. It was a very nasty letter. Newland felt a sudden compassion for the Countess. The older ladies in New York society were very severe in their judgment of any woman who had a relationship outside marriage. They spoke of "that kind of woman" and showed no pity to her. They always pitied the man: they considered him a foolish creature who couldn't resist "that kind of woman"; the man was always the poor victim who had to be saved. Newland had never really questioned these beliefs, but now he suspected that in Europe things were less simple. There, he thought, it was possible for a good woman - an honest, sensitive woman - to fall into a relationship like that just because she was lonely and desperate.

The next day he went to see the Countess. As he entered the drawing room, Newland was unpleasantly surprised to see Julius Beaufort standing by the fire.

"Why are you going to the van der Luydens' again?" Beaufort was asking the Countess as Newland came in. The Countess turned to Newland and offered him her hand. Beaufort nodded at him and continued talking to the Countess. "You'll be bored to death there. Come to dinner with me instead. I've planned a dinner for you at Delmonico's. I want to invite all the artists to meet you."

"Ah!" said the Countess. "That does tempt me! I haven't met any artists since I've been here."

"I know some painters," said Newland. "I'll introduce them to you if you like."

"Painters? Are there any painters in New York?" asked Beaufort with an ironic smile.

"Thank you," said the Countess to Newland, "but I meant dramatic artists: singers, actors, and musicians. My husband's house was always full of them." Then she turned to Beaufort, offered him her hand and said, "Goodnight. I have to discuss business with Mr Archer."

Beaufort kissed her hand, but he didn't look pleased. As he was leaving, he said, "Archer, if you can persuade the Countess to come to Delmonico's on Sunday, you can come too."

"So you care about art, Mr Archer?" asked the Countess, when they were alone.

"Oh yes. I always go to the exhibitions when I'm in London and Paris."

"I used to care about art too, but now I want a new life. I want to leave my old life behind and become an American just like everyone else."

"You'll never be like everyone else," said Newland.

"Don't say that. I hate to be different. I want a new start."

"I know. Mr Letterblair told me. In fact, he asked me to come to see you. That's why I'm here."

"Ah!" said the Countess with a smile. "You mean I can talk to you? You'll help me?"

"Yes."

"Have you read the papers? Do you know about my life with my husband?"

"Yes," said Newland, blushing.

"Then you agree with me that I should get a divorce?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Your family don't want a divorce, and they've sent me, or rather my partner, Mr Letterblair, has sent me to explain to you their point of view."

"Have you read my husband's letter?"

"Yes."

"And isn't it horrible?"

Newland looked down. "Yes."

"I'm a Protestant," said the Countess. "Our Church doesn't forbid divorce in such cases."

"But," said Newland, "in his letter the Count threatens to cause a scandal if you insist upon divorce."

"What harm could that do me here?" asked the Countess.

"I'm afraid it could do you more harm here than anywhere. You see, New York society is a very small world, ruled by people with rather conventional ideas."

"Yes," she replied, and her lips trembled a little as she spoke. "That's what my family tell me. And do you agree with them?"

He stood up and walked to the fireplace. Staring into the fire, he said, "It's my business to explain how your family see these things. The Mingotts, the Wellands, the van der Luydens - all your friends and relations."

"Tell me what you think - sincerely," she said.

"Well, what would you gain from a divorce?" he said, looking into the fire.

"My freedom! Is that nothing?"

He thought perhaps she wanted a divorce so that she could marry the secretary, and this thought made him angry.

"But you're free now, aren't you?" he replied impatiently. "Is it worthwhile to make a scandal that will upset all your family and friends?"

"No," she said, and her voice sounded sad.

She stood up quickly, as if to indicate that their talk was over. "All right," she said. "I'll do as you say. I won't ask for a divorce."

Newland blushed and took both her hands in his. "I do want to help you," he said.

"I know. You do help me. Goodnight," she replied. He bent his head, kissed her hands, and left her.

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"The Count has written to her," said Mrs Mingott. "He has asked her to go back. He has offered to give her back a lot of the money he received when they were married. Lovell and Augusta think she should go back, and I agree with them."

Newland was sitting with her in her drawing room drinking tea. "I'd rather see her dead," he said.

"Would you?" the old lady replied. "But here, you see, my granddaughter is at risk. A woman alone is always at risk. In Europe she has everything she could desire: jewels, fur coats, splendid houses, the company of artists and intellectuals. Marriage is still marriage, Mr Archer, and my granddaughter is still a wife."

Chapter 5. The Wedding

In March, May went to St Augustine in Florida with her parents for a month. Newland went down to see her. He returned two days later and went straight to Countess Olenska.

"I went to St Augustine to ask May to marry me after Easter, instead of waiting for another year, but she wouldn't agree."

"Why not?" asked the Countess, lighting a cigarette.

"She wants to give me time."

"For what?"

"She thinks my impatience is a bad sign. She thinks I want to marry her soon to get away from someone else I love more."

"She wants to give you time to give her up for another woman? That's very noble of her."

"Yes, but it's ridiculous."

"Why? Because you don't love anyone else?"

"Because I don't plan to marry anyone else," said Newland.

"Ah!" There was a long silence. "And is there another woman?"

"Yes. May's right. There is someone else." He put his hand on hers.

She stood up quickly and walked to the other side of the room.

"Don't do that!" she cried.

Newland stood up. "I'll never do anything to offend you," he said. "But you're the woman I would've married if it had been possible for either of us."

"Possible for either of us?" she cried in amazement. "But you're the one who made it impossible! You made me give up the idea of getting a divorce! You told me to save my family from scandal! And because my family was soon to be your family - for May's sake and for yours - I did what you told me to do."

"I thought -" began Newland. "I thought you were afraid of the scandal if the accusations in your husband's letter were made public."

"I had nothing to fear from that letter! All I feared was bringing scandal on the family - on you and May."

"Good God!" he cried, putting his face in his hands. Then he heard her crying by the fire. He went over to her and said, "Ellen. I'm still free, and you can get a divorce. We can be happy!" He took her in his arms and kissed her wet face.

"No, we can't," she said. "You're engaged to May, and I'm married."

"How can I marry May after this?" he cried.

"You must. You don't understand how you've changed things for me. I didn't realize that people disapproved of me. I didn't know that they all refused Granny's invitation to a dinner to meet me. Later, one day when she was angry with me, Granny told me everything. She said that you went to the van der Luyden's and asked them to invite me to dinner. She told me that you and May announced your engagement early so that I would have the protection of two families, not just one. I hadn't understood anything. Everyone seemed so kind. But no one was as kind as you. You explained to me why it was bad to ask for a divorce, and you were right. You showed me that it is wrong to find happiness by making other people suffer."

As she spoke, he sat beside her, looking at the tip of her satin shoe sticking out from under her dress. Suddenly he fell to his knees on the floor and kissed the shoe.

"I don't want to go back to my old way of thinking," she said. "Don't you see? I can't love you unless I give you up."

Newland replied bitterly: "And Beaufort? Is he going to replace me?"

He expected her to be angry, but she just went a little paler. "No," she said.

"Why not?" cried Newland. "You say that you're lonely." "I won't be lonely anymore," she said. "Now that I know you love me."

Just then, the maid came in and handed a telegram to Ellen. She opened it, read it, and handed it to Newland. It was from St Augustine:

Papa and Mama have agreed that Newland and I can marry after Easter. I'm sending a telegram to Newland now. I'm so happy!

*Love,
May.*

Newland and May were married the first Saturday after Easter. As he went through the ceremony and received everyone's congratulations, Newland felt cold and empty. They went on their honeymoon to all the usual destinations: London, Paris, Florence, Rome. Every hour of every day he was with May, listening to her innocent chatter. Often she irritated him. Her ideas were so conventional that - away from New York - she seemed narrow-minded and dull.

They went home in July. There, Newland felt more at ease with May. She was one of the prettiest and most popular young wives in New York, and he was proud of her. A year passed. Newland now thought of his passion for Ellen as a moment of madness. How could he ever have thought of marrying her? It was ridiculous. Now she lived on in his memory only as a strange eccentric fascination.

In August, New York's best families went to Newport. Newland and May were no exception. They were there with their families -

Newland's mother and sister; May's parents, aunt, and uncle. One day, they went to visit May's grandmother Mrs Manson Mingott. She'd just arrived from the city and was staying in her house by the sea. They found her sitting in a garden chair beneath a big tree. Newland and May sat beside her, and Mrs Mingott rang the bell for tea.

"How nice to see you, Newland!" cried the old lady. "Will you be here for the whole month of August?"

"May will," Newland replied. "I must return to the city for business reasons from time to time."

"Ah! Business! Many husbands find it impossible to join their wives here except at the weekends. Marriage is one long sacrifice, as often say to Ellen."

Newland's heart seemed to stop at the mention of her name.

"Julius Beaufort is here now, but poor Regina has had to spend most of the month here alone. Julius's business keeps him in the city most of the time." Here Mrs Mingott raised an ironic eyebrow, because everyone knew that the business that kept Beaufort in the city was a lady named Fanny Ring. "From what I hear," continued Mrs Mingott, "his business isn't going very well. Apparently he invested in railways and lost a lot of money. That doesn't stop him spending money here, though. He came this morning to see Ellen, and he was telling me all about his new racehorses."

"Is Ellen here?" asked May.

Newland didn't breathe as he waited for the reply. "Well, actually she's staying with the Blenkers in Portsmouth, but she has come to see me for the day," said Mrs Mingott, then she cried out, "Ellen! Ellen!"

The maid came out of the house and said, "The Countess has gone for a walk by the sea, madam."

"Newland, will you go and find her?" asked Mrs Mingott.

"Certainly."

As Newland walked through the woods towards the sea, his heart beat fast.

He'd heard her name mentioned often enough in the eighteen months since he'd last seen her. He even knew the main events of her

life. She'd spent the previous summer in Newport, but, in the autumn, she'd moved to Washington. Hearing about her had never disturbed him before, but now that he was going to see her again she became once more a warm living presence for him, and he remembered the lovely drawing room with the red walls...

Newland came out of the woods and looked down at the sea. There was a lighthouse and a pier. The sun was sinking and the whole scene was bathed in golden light. Ellen stood on the pier, looking out to sea. Beyond her, a sailboat was crossing the bay. Newland thought, "If she turns round before the sailboat passes behind the lighthouse, I'll go to her." He watched her intently, but she didn't move. She stood perfectly still, looking out to sea. He waited until the boat was well past the lighthouse, then he turned and walked back to the house.

As he and May drove away from Mrs Mingott's, May said, "I'm sorry that Ellen wasn't there. She doesn't seem to care about her old friends anymore. I suppose she moved to Washington because New York bores her. And now, instead of staying with Granny in Newport, she's staying with the Blenkers in Portsmouth. Perhaps, after all, Ellen would be happier with her husband."

"I've never heard you say anything cruel before," replied Newland.

"Why cruel?" asked May in surprise.

"Life with her husband was hell. Do you think she'd be happier in hell?"

"Well, she shouldn't have married a foreigner, then," said May.

Chapter 6. Boston

Mrs Archer said they'd all been invited by Professor and Mrs Emerson Sillerton to a party for the Blenkers. "It's a terrible bore, of course, but the Sillertons are related to Sillerton Jackson, so I suppose at least some of us will have to go."

"I'll go with Mother," said May.

"I'm afraid I can't go," said Newland. "I've arranged to go to a farm in the north to look at some horses."

Having said that he'd be gone all afternoon, it actually took him just an hour to drive up, see the horses, decide that he didn't want to buy them, and leave. The rest of the afternoon was free. He drove to the Blenkers' house near Portsmouth. He told himself that he didn't want to see Ellen, but he had a strong desire to see the house she was living in. He'd go there and look at the place. Then later he'd be able to imagine her eating breakfast there or walking in the garden. If he could do that, perhaps the world around him would feel less empty.

The Blenkers' house was a big old place. All the windows were open, but it was completely silent. Everyone had gone to the party. As Newland walked through the garden, he saw something pink. Someone had left a pink parasol on the wall. Newland felt absolutely certain that it was Ellen's. He picked up the parasol and put its handle to his lips. Just then he heard the sound of someone approaching: a woman in a rustling silk dress. He didn't look up. He had always known that this might happen...

"Oh! Mr Archer!" cried a loud young voice. Looking up, he saw the youngest and largest of the Blenker girls standing before him. "Where did you come from? No one's home except for me. They all went to the party. Mother said I couldn't go because I have a cold. I was very disappointed, but it's not so bad now that you're here." She smiled at him.

"Has Countess Olenska gone to the party too?" he asked.

"No. She received a telegram yesterday and had to go to Boston." Then she saw the parasol in his hands and cried, "Oh! You've found it! Thank goodness! I've been looking for it everywhere." She took the parasol from him, opened it, and put it over her large blonde head.

"Do you know where Countess Olenska is staying in Boston?" said Newland. "I'm going there tomorrow on business, and I'd like to -"

"How kind of you! She's staying at the Parker House."

When he got home, Newland saw a letter from the office waiting for him on the table by the door. He opened it as he went into the

drawing room, where he could hear voices. May and Mrs Welland were back from the party. The letter contained nothing important. When he'd read it, Newland put it in his pocket and said to May, "I've had a letter from the office. They want me to go to Boston tomorrow on business."

The next morning he took the train to Boston and a taxi straight to the Parker House, but the receptionist told him that the Countess was out.

"Out?" repeated Newland, as if it were a word in a foreign language. He left the hotel and went for a walk in the park. As he was walking there, feeling anxious and frustrated, he suddenly saw her sitting on a bench under a tree. She looked rather tired and sad. She was holding a grey silk parasol. How could he ever have thought she'd have a pink one? He walked up to her.

She looked up, startled, and said, "Oh!" But then a lovely smile spread over her face. "Oh," she said again, in a different tone.

Newland sat beside her on the bench. "I'm here on business," he said. "What a surprise to see you here!" He didn't know what he was saying. He felt as though he were shouting at her across a large distance and that she might vanish before he could get to her.

"I'm here on business too," she said.

"What business?" he asked.

"Very unconventional business," she said with a smile. "I've just refused to take back a sum of money that belonged to me."

"Your husband has come here to meet you?"

"No! At this time of year he is always at Baden-Baden. He sent a messenger. His secretary." She said the word as casually as if it were any other word in her vocabulary. "But I've refused, and I'll go back to Portsmouth by the afternoon train." She looked at Newland for a while then said, "You haven't changed."

He felt like saying, "I had, till I saw you again." Instead he stood up and said, "Let's go out to lunch together. Why not? Haven't we done all we could?"

"You mustn't say things like that to me."

"I'll say anything you like or nothing. I won't open my mouth unless you tell me to. I just want to listen to your voice. It's a hundred years since we met. It may be another hundred before we meet again."

"Why didn't you come down to meet me by the sea that day at Granny's?" she asked suddenly.

"Because you didn't look round - you didn't know I was there. I told myself that I wouldn't go to you unless you looked round." He laughed at his own childishness.

"But I didn't look round deliberately. I knew you were there. When you drove in, I recognized the carriage, so I went down to the beach."

"To get as far away from me as you could?"

"Yes."

He laughed again. "Well, you see, it's no use. My 'business' in Boston was simply to find you. Come on. Let's go to lunch."

At the restaurant, they talked and were silent. The silences weren't embarrassing: they were just as natural as the conversation. She told him what she'd been doing in the eighteen months since they'd last met.

"I was so glad to come home to my friends and relatives in New York," she said, "but, after a while, I realized that was too different to feel at home there, so I moved to Washington. I'll probably stay in Washington. You meet a greater variety of people and opinions there. People in New York blindly follow tradition, and the tradition they follow is somebody else's. Do you think Christopher Columbus would have taken all that trouble to cross the Atlantic if he had known that people in America would make a bad copy of European society?"

She smiled, but Newland felt irritated by her criticism of New York.

"Do you say that kind of thing to Beaufort?" he asked.

"I haven't seen him for a long time, but I used to, and he understood me."

"You don't like us," cried Newland, "and you like Beaufort because he's European. You think we're boring. Why don't you go back to Europe?"

He thought she'd be angry with him for saying that, but instead she sat in thoughtful silence for a while and then said, "I stay here because of you."

He blushed and waited in silence, hoping that she would say more.

"At least," she added after a while, "it was you who taught me that under the conventionality there are fine values - that people here care about their families and look after each other in a way that would seem strange where I come from. All the exquisite pleasures of Europe seemed empty and cheap then."

He wanted to say, "At least you've experienced exquisite pleasures! I never have!" But he looked at her in silence.

"I've wanted to have this conversation for a long time," she said. "I wanted to tell you how much you've changed me."

"You've changed me too!" cried Newland. "Don't forget: I'm the man who married one woman because another one told him to."

She blushed and said, "You promised not to say things like that to me."

"Ah! How like a woman!" said Newland. "None of you has the courage to talk about the bad things!"

"Is it a bad thing - for May?" she asked.

He heard the tenderness with which she spoke her cousin's name.

"Well," she continued, "didn't you tell me that we always have to think of the feelings of others? We always have to think of the family - to try to make them happy?"

"If you think that my marriage is a success, you're mistaken. If you think that by giving me up you've made May happy, you're wrong! You gave me my first glimpse of real life, and then you told me to continue the false life. No one could endure that!"

"I'm enduring it!" she cried, her eyes full of tears. Suddenly her entire soul - everything she was feeling - was expressed in her face.

"You too? Oh, all this time, you've been going through this misery too?"

For answer, the tears flowed down her face.

"Don't go back to Europe. Please, don't go," he said.

"I won't," she replied, "as long as we can stand it."

He sat in silence, trying to fix her words in his memory. He knew that he would never again feel entirely alone.

Chapter 7. Beaufort's Disgrace

Four months passed, and Newland didn't see Ellen again. She went back to Washington, and he went back to his false, empty life. One evening, he and May went to dinner at his mother's house with Sillerton Jackson. When the ladies had left them to their brandy and cigars, Mr Jackson said, "It looks as though Beaufort will go bankrupt. If that happens, it will be a big scandal. He didn't spend all that money on Regina."

"Well, everyone knows that," replied Newland impatiently.

"It's a pity that Countess Olenska didn't accept her husband's offer."

"Why do you think it's a pity?"

"Well, what's she going to live on now? If Beaufort -"

Newland leapt to his feet and banged his fist on the table. "What the devil do you mean, sir?" he cried indignantly.

Mr Jackson smoked his cigar and looked serenely at the young man's angry face. At length he said with a smile, "Well, she hasn't got much money, and what she did have was invested with Beaufort. So I could ask you, my dear boy, what do you mean by asking me what I mean?"

"You know perfectly well that what you said seemed to suggest -"

"Yes, but I'm not the only one who's suggesting it. Larry Lefferts told me, and he isn't the only one talking about them either."

Newland was afraid of having shown too much to this observant old man. "I think it's time we joined the ladies," he said.

* * *

Newland decided to go to Washington to visit Ellen. He could wait no longer. He had to see her. He told May that he had business in

Washington and would be gone for several days. He made arrangements to leave on Tuesday.

Early on Sunday morning, however, Mrs Manson Mingott had a stroke. On Saturday evening, Regina Beaufort had come to visit her. She'd begged Mrs Mingott to lend Beaufort the money he needed to avoid bankruptcy. She'd insisted that the whole family's honor depended on this. "I'm a Dallas!" Regina had cried to her aunt.

"No, Regina!" the old lady had replied. "Your husband has ruined himself and hundreds of innocent people who trusted him with their money. He has brought shame on anyone associated with him. You were a Beaufort when he covered you in diamonds, and you're still a Beaufort now that he has covered you in shame!"

At three in the morning, Mrs Mingott had called her maid. The maid found her sitting up in bed, unable to speak properly or to move her left arm. She sent a messenger to the doctor's house and to the houses of Mrs Welland and Mr Lovell Mingott - the old lady's children. The rest of the family arrived at six and went in to see her one by one. They were relieved to see that she was a little better. She could speak clearly now. When Mr Lovell Mingott came out of his mother's room, he said, "She said she'll never speak to Regina Beaufort again. She also says we must send a telegram to Ellen, telling her to come here immediately."

The whole family was rather shocked by this last bit of news. They felt offended that their own presence wasn't comfort enough. Obviously the old lady cared for no one but Ellen. They were also alarmed: clearly if the old lady asked for Ellen she must be very ill indeed. She must be afraid of dying. Why else would she command Ellen to come to New York? May thought perhaps her grandmother wanted to try one last time to persuade Ellen to return to her husband.

Newland listened to these discussions in silence.

"Will you go to the Post Office, Newland, and send the telegram?" asked May.

"Of course," Newland replied.

As he walked to the Post Office, Newland saw Beaufort's disgrace announced on every newsstand. The whole of New York was shocked at his dishonor, and fashionable young gentlemen were gossiping about it on every corner.

The next day, a telegram arrived in reply to the one Newland had sent. It said that Countess Olenska would arrive at Jersey City station on Tuesday evening.

"Somebody must meet her. It's two hours' drive from Jersey City. We can't let her come back to New York on her own," said Mrs Welland. "Lovell and I must be here with mother, and Mr Welland isn't well enough to go."

"I'll go," said Newland.

"But Newland!" cried May. "You'll be in Washington then. You told me you were leaving on Tuesday morning for a business meeting."

"It's been cancelled," said Newland. "So, I can go and meet Countess Olenska. It's no trouble at all."

"Really?" said May in amazement. "What a coincidence!" She looked at him, and her eyes at that moment seemed so blue that Newland wondered if there were tears in them.

"Oh, thank you so much, Newland," said Mrs Welland, and May looked down.

Chapter 8. Snow

It was a dark, snowy afternoon. When Ellen got off the train, Newland was startled by her pale face. She looked at him in surprise.

"Come," he said. "I have a carriage waiting."

He hurried her into the carriage and sat down beside her. He told her all about her grandmother's illness and Beaufort's ruin. "Poor Regina!" she said softly.

"Were you surprised to see me at the station?" he asked then.

"Yes!" she replied with a smile.

"So was I," said Newland. "When I saw you, I was surprised. I hardly remembered you."

"Hardly remembered me?" she repeated in amazement.

"I mean - how can I say it? - each time I see you, you happen to me all over again."

"Oh, yes. I know!" she said.

"Is it the same for you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, looking out of the window.

"Ellen, Ellen, Ellen!"

She didn't reply, so he sat in silence, watching her profile against the snowy window. The precious moments were slipping away, and he'd forgotten everything he'd planned to say to her.

"What a pretty carriage!" she said after a while. "Is it May's?"

"Yes."

"Did May send you to meet me? How kind of her!"

With a jolt, the carriage went over a bump in the road, and she was thrown against him. He put his arm around her and said, "We can't go on like this, Ellen. We can't be together and not be together."

"You shouldn't have come today!" she cried. Suddenly, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him; then she turned away and looked out of the window, trying to keep as far away from him as possible.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I know you don't want a squalid affair, and neither do I. I want us to be together - really together - not just for an hour in secret with days of longing in between."

"You chose a good place to tell me that!" she said, laughing.

"Why? Because this is my wife's carriage? All right. Let's get out and walk. I'm sure you're not afraid of a little snow."

"No. I won't get out and walk, because I must go to Granny's. That's what I'm here for. And you'll sit beside me and talk to me, not about visions but about realities."

"This is the only reality," he said.

She sat silent as the carriage turned into Fifth Avenue.

"Do you want me to live with you as your mistress, since I can't be your wife?" she asked.

The crudeness of the question startled him. Women in New York high society never used that word, even when they were talking about Fanny Ring. Ellen spoke it clearly and simply as if it were a normal word in her vocabulary.

"I want to go away with you to a world where words like that - ideas like that - don't exist, a world where we'll just be two human beings who love each other."

She laughed again. "Oh, my dear - where is that country?" she said. "Have you ever been there?"

The carriage had crossed Forty-Second Street. May's excellent horses were pulling them quickly to the end of their journey. Soon the precious two hours would be over. "So what is your plan for us?" asked Newland.

"For us? There is no 'us', in that sense. We're near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise, we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trusted them."

"I'm beyond that," said Newland.

"No you're not!" cried Ellen. "You've never been beyond. But I have! And it isn't a place you and I want to be."

He sat in silence, full of pain. Then he called to the driver and asked him to stop the carriage.

"Why are we stopping? This isn't Granny's!" said Ellen in surprise.

"No, but I'll get out here," he replied, opening the door and stepping out into the snow. "You're right. I shouldn't have come to meet you," he whispered to her, then he called to the driver, "Drive on!"

* * *

That evening, May returned from Mrs Mingott's house just before dinner. Newland and May dined alone. "Why didn't you come back to Granny's?" asked May, as the servant filled her wine glass.

"I had some letters to write. Besides, I didn't know you were staying there. I thought you'd be at home."

She didn't reply, and he noticed that she looked tired and sad. For the first time, Newland thought that perhaps the monotony of their life together caused her pain too. Then he remembered that, as he was leaving Mrs Mingott's house to go to Jersey City, she'd said to him. "I'll see you back here, then." He'd replied, "Yes," but he'd immediately forgotten about it. He had had other things to think of. Now he felt slightly irritated that she should be offended by so trivial an omission after two years of marriage.

After dinner they went to the library for coffee. He sat down to read a history book. When they were engaged, he used to read poetry aloud to her, but after their marriage he'd stopped doing that: her comments on the poems were too depressing. Now he preferred to read history in peace. May took out her embroidery and started working on it. She wasn't very good at embroidering, but all the other wives embroidered cushion-covers for their husbands, so May did it too. Every time he looked up from his book, there she was. Her sapphire engagement ring and gold wedding ring gleamed in the lamp light. "She'll always be the same", thought Newland. "In all the years to come, she'll never surprise me with a new idea or emotion." She was maturing into a copy of her mother. He put down his book, went to the window, opened it, and leaned out into the icy air. The snow was still falling; big soft flakes of it were blowing in the wind.

"Newland!" said May. "What are you doing?"

"I want some fresh air. It's stifling in here."

"Please shut the window. You'll catch your death!"

He shut the window and turned to her. "Catch my death!" he repeated in a sarcastic voice. He wanted to say, "I've caught my death already! I've been dead for months and months!" But then he had another thought: "What if May dies? Young healthy people like May sometimes get ill and die. What if that happened to May? Then I would be free!"

She looked up at him in surprise. "Newland, are you all right? Are you feeling ill?"

"No," he said, returning to his chair, and as he passed by her he put his hand on her hair. "Poor May!"

"Poor? Why poor?" she said with a nervous laugh.

"Because I'll never be able to open a window without worrying you," he replied.

For a moment she was silent and then she said, "I'll never worry if you're happy."

"Ah, my dear! I'll never be happy unless I can open windows!"

"In this weather?" she cried.

Newland sighed and returned to his book.

Chapter 9. Decisions

Six or seven days passed. Newland didn't see Ellen and no one in the family mentioned her name in his presence. He didn't mind. He could wait. That night when he'd leaned out of the window in the icy cold, he'd made a decision. When Ellen left New York, he would leave with her. He would go with her to Washington or somewhere else, if she agreed. Japan, for instance. They could go to Japan. For days he'd been thinking about this plan. Then one day May told him that Mrs Mingott wanted to see him. There was nothing strange about the request: she was getting better, and Newland was her favorite grandson-in-law. It was natural that she would ask to see him.

Standing outside Mrs Mingott's door, Newland felt his heart beating fast. In another minute he would see Ellen. He would speak to her. He would ask her when she was going back to Washington.

The maid answered the door and took him into Mrs Mingott's room. He looked around for Ellen, but she was nowhere to be seen. The old woman sat in an enormous armchair by her bed. She was pale, and there were dark shadows under her eyes, but she was much better than she'd been that first morning after the stroke. She cried out in delight when she saw him, "Hello, my dear! Am I terribly ugly?"

"You're prettier than ever!" replied Newland, laughing and taking her hand.

She laughed too and said, "But not as pretty as Ellen! That day when she came from Jersey City, she looked very pretty. I thought perhaps you'd told her so, and that's why she made you walk home in the snow."

She was still laughing, so he laughed too, waiting for the joke to be over.

"It's a pity she didn't marry you!" said Mrs Mingott suddenly. "Then I wouldn't have had all this worry about Olenski."

Newland wondered if her illness had affected her brain.

"Anyway, it's all over now. She has agreed to stay here with me. You know, they all tried to persuade me to cut off her allowance, so that she would have to go back to her husband. Yes, they did! Lovell and Augusta and Letterblair and the rest - they all tried to persuade me. And they nearly did persuade me, especially after that secretary came with the Count's new offer. It was a very generous offer, and I thought, 'Money is money, and marriage is marriage!' But when I saw her, I thought, 'You sweet bird, we can't put you back in that cage again!' I decided then that I wouldn't force her to go back. Now she has agreed to stay and take care of her Granny, and of course I've told Letterblair that she must have her proper allowance."

As Newland listened, his heart beat fast. At first, he felt confused and perplexed. He'd made a decision, and now everything was changed. Then slowly he realized that this change made things easier. If Ellen had agreed to come and live with her grandmother, surely it meant that she now understood that they couldn't live apart anymore. This was her answer to what he'd said to her in the carriage. She wouldn't take the extreme step of running away to live with him, but she would come back to New York so that they could see each other more frequently. He'd been ready to risk everything to be with her, but that was no longer necessary.

"The family are still opposed to it," Mrs Mingott continued. "They still want her to go back to her husband, and they say that I'm too old and too ill to make a proper decision about it. You'll have to help me, Newland."

"Why me?" asked Newland.

"Why not?" The old lady looked at him with her quick intelligent eyes.

"I'm too insignificant. They won't listen to me."

"You're Letterblair's partner. You must persuade Letterblair to persuade them!"

"I'll try my best."

"Good. I knew you would, because they never quoted you when they were saying that everyone thought it was her duty to go home."

He wondered if they had quoted May, but he didn't ask.

"Is Countess Olenska in?" he asked instead.

"No. She went to see Regina Beaufort. I told her that I'll never speak to Regina Beaufort again, but she said, 'Come on, Granny. She's your niece, and she's a very unhappy woman.' Then I said, 'And she's the wife of a very bad man!' and Ellen replied, 'So am I, and my family want me to go back to him!' Well, I didn't know what to say to that, so I lent her my carriage and let her go."

"I have to go now," said Newland. He kissed the old lady's hand, which was still in his.

"Ah! Whose hand do you imagine you're kissing?" cried Mrs Mingott, laughing at him. "Your wife's, I hope!"

* * *

He left Mrs Mingott's house and walked quickly to the Beauforts' on Fifth Avenue. He remembered the house blazing with lights on the night of the Beauforts' ball, when he and May had announced their engagement. Now it looked dead. There was only one lighted window. Some people were saying that Beaufort had left New York with Fanny Ring, but that seemed improbable. Mrs Mingott's carriage was waiting outside the door. Newland felt full of admiration for Ellen: she alone had rushed to Regina's side to show her solidarity and affection for her cousin in troubled times.

Suddenly the front door opened, and she came out. She turned and said something to someone inside the house, then she descended the steps.

"Ellen," he said in a low voice.

She stopped in surprise. He noticed two men walking along the other side of the street. They passed under a street lamp, and he saw they were Larry Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson. They looked over at Newland and Ellen with interest.

"Tomorrow I must see you somewhere where we can be alone," he whispered.

She laughed. "In New York?"

"There's the Art Museum in the park," he said. "I'll wait for you at the door at half past two."

She turned away without answering and got into the carriage.

* * *

The next day they met at the museum. "Why have you come back to New York?" he asked.

"Because I thought at Granny's house I would be safer," she said.

"Safer from me?"

She looked down at her hands and didn't reply.

"Safer from loving me?" he asked.

He saw that her eyes were full of tears. "Safer from doing irreparable harm!" she cried. "Let's not be like the others!"

She meant all the people in New York society who had affairs and lived a life of lies with their husbands and wives. She didn't want to be like those people, and neither did he, but something made him say, "What others? I'm no different from anyone else. I have the same desires."

She blushed and looked at him. "Shall I come to you once, then go home?" she asked in a clear low voice.

"Oh my dearest!" he said, but then he hesitated. "What do you mean by 'go home'?"

"Home to my husband."

"No! Of course you can't go home!"

"Well, I can't stay here and lie to people who have been good to me."

Newland looked at her in despair. It would be easy to say, "Yes, come once." He was sure that he would be able to persuade her later not to go back to her husband. But he couldn't deceive her. He wanted to be as honest as she was.

"That's why I want you to come away with me," he said. "What we're trying to do is impossible."

She stood up and said, "I must go."

He held her wrist. The thought of losing her was unbearable. "Well, then. Come to me once," he said. For a moment they looked at each other like enemies.

"Send me a note saying where and when," she said.

"Will you come to me tomorrow?"

She hesitated. "The day after," she said finally. Her face was very pale but full of love.

Chapter 10. A Farewell Dinner

The next evening Faust was playing at the New York Academy of Music again. Everything was as it had been two years before on the evening that he and May had announced their engagement: Newland stood in the box rented by his gentlemen's club with Mr Jackson and Lefferts; May was in her grandmother's box with her mother and aunt; the large blonde soprano on the stage sang out "Mama!" triumphantly. Newland looked at May. He had a strong desire to tell her the truth and ask for the freedom he had once refused, when she offered it to him in St Augustine.

He ran through the red corridor to Mrs Mingott's box. Entering quietly, he leaned close to May and said, "I have a terrible headache. Will you come home with me?"

May whispered to her mother who nodded sympathetically, and in fifteen minutes they were at home, in the library Newland lit a cigarette.

"I want to tell you something, May."

"Yes, dear?" said May, sitting down.

"It's time I told you something about myself," he began.
"Countess Olenska -"

"Oh, why should we talk about Ellen tonight?" said May impatiently. "I know I've been unfair to her. You've understood her better than most people. You've always been kind to her. But it doesn't matter now, does it, now that it's all over?"

"What do you mean?" asked Newland.

"Well, she's going back to Europe soon, and Granny approves of the idea and has given her enough money to be independent of her husband. I thought you knew. I thought they would have told you at the office." She blushed and looked down.

"How do you know?" Newland asked at last.

"Ellen and I had a long talk yesterday evening, when I was at Granny's house. She was so kind to me. I think she understands everything. Then, this afternoon, she sent me a note. She has gone back to Washington to pack her things. She says she is going to sail from New York for Europe in ten days. She's going to live in Paris. You know, Newland, we haven't given a big dinner party yet. Let's give one for Ellen before she leaves."

* * *

The dinner was very formal and elegant. Lamplight shone on the ladies' bare shoulders and on their red and blue and gold silk dresses. The gentlemen wore elegant black jackets with white flowers. There were five vases full of orchids on the long dining table. Nine days had passed since Ellen had returned to Washington, and Newland had heard nothing from her. Now she was back in New York, and the next day she would sail for Europe, but she wasn't going back to her husband. Therefore, he could follow her. And, if he did that, he was sure she wouldn't send him away. This thought gave him the strength to get through the dinner party. As the guest of honor, Ellen sat on Newland's right at dinner. Her face looked pale and tired - almost ugly - and he had never loved it so much. He looked down at her hands. All the beauty that seemed to have deserted her face was there in her hands: her long

pale fingers and slender wrists. He thought to himself, "I would follow her just for the chance of seeing her hands again!"

Now that she was leaving, everyone was affectionate. People kept mentioning her name, referring to her as "Ellen" and "the dear Countess", as though they had never gossiped about her, never thought her life was scandalous, never said she should go back to her husband. Newland looked at them: his eyes went from one well-fed face to another, and suddenly he realized that, for months, all these people had believed that he and Ellen were lovers. And now they were glad because they had succeeded in separating the lovers. It was New York's way of doing things, without scenes, without scandal. They had all come this evening to support May, and May understood this. She too believed that Newland and Ellen were lovers. She too approved of this way of avoiding unpleasant scenes. Ellen would go back to Europe, and everything would return to normal.

Mrs van der Luyden sat on Newland's left. She, Mrs Welland and Sillerton Jackson were discussing Beaufort and Regina. They were merciless. "They're doing this," thought Newland, "to show me what would happen to me if I offended them." He laughed out loud.

"Do you think it's funny?" asked Mrs van der Luyden indignantly. "Well, I suppose Regina's idea of staying in New York has its ridiculous side..." and she continued talking to the others.

Newland suddenly realized that he had said nothing to Ellen since the dinner began. He had to speak to her, to have a polite conversation.

"How was your journey from Washington?" he asked.

She looked at him, and her eyes said clearly, "Oh yes! Let's play our parts well!"

"It was fine," she replied, "but the train was very hot."

"You won't have that problem in France," he said. "I remember one train ride from Calais to Paris. I've never been so cold in my life!"

She laughed.

"But no matter how uncomfortable it is, travel has its advantages," said Newland, raising his voice to address Larry Lefferts on the other side of Ellen. "You get away - you see something new. I'm planning to

do some traveling myself soon. Hey, Larry, let's take a trip around the world, starting next month!"

"I can't go next month," replied Lefferts. "There's the charity ball for the blind. I can't miss that."

At this point, the ladies went to the drawing room. The gentlemen lit their cigars and returned to their conversation about Beaufort. "All the old values are changing now," said Lefferts. "In a few years we'll all be marrying our children to Beaufort's bastards!"

"Oh, dear!" cried Sillerton Jackson. "What a terrible thing to say!"

Henry van der Luyden sat at the end of the table, with an expression of sadness and disgust upon his face.

* * *

Two hours later, everyone left. Suddenly, Newland was by the front door and Ellen was in front of him, offering him her hand.

"Goodbye," he said. "I'll see you in Paris." He spoke in a loud voice: he wanted everyone to hear.

"Oh," she replied. "I would be so happy if you and May could visit me there!"

Then she was gone.

He walked up the stairs slowly and went into the library. He lit a cigarette and stood gazing into the fire.

May came in and sat down in the big armchair beside him. "Well! I think that was a great success, don't you?" she said brightly. "Do you mind if I stay here with you and talk about the party?"

"All right." He sat down in the armchair opposite her. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you first. You see, I'm tired, May. Very, very tired."

"Oh, my dear! I thought so. You've been working too hard!"

"Perhaps. Anyway, I need a break -"

"You mean from the law? You want to give up the law?"

"I want to go away - to travel for a while - to get away from everything."

"Where to?" asked May.

"Oh, I don't know. India - or Japan."

"But I'm afraid you can't do that, my dear," said May gently. "Not unless you take me with you, and I don't think the doctor would let me go..."

She came over and put her arms around him. She was blushing and there were tears in her eyes. "I found out this morning that I'm expecting a baby!"

"Oh, my dear!" said Newland. He stood up and embraced her. She was warm and trembling in his arms. "Have you told anyone else?"

"Only Mamma and your mother," she replied. He couldn't see her face: it was buried in his shoulder. "Oh, and Ellen. I told Ellen. You remember I told you that we had a long talk and she was very kind to me."

"Yes. I remember. But wasn't that two weeks ago? I thought you said you just found out this morning..."

"Yes," said May. "It's true. I wasn't sure about it then, but I told her I was. And, you see, I was right!" She raised her head and looked at him, her blue eyes wet with victory.

Chapter 11. Paris

Almost twenty-six years later, Newland Archer stood in his library, looking at the fire. His hair was now gray. This room had seen the most important moments of his family life. Here his wife had told him that she was expecting their first child - their eldest son, Dallas. Here Dallas had been christened by their old friend the Bishop of New York because he was too delicate to be taken to church. Here their second child, Mary - who looked very like her mother but was not as pretty - had announced her engagement to a boring and reliable young man from an old New York family. Here he and May had always discussed their children's futures. Mary had a passion for sports. Dallas was "artistic" and had finally found work in the office of an important New York architect. For the past six months, Dallas had been engaged to Fanny Beaufort. Lefferts had been right. Fanny was the illegitimate daughter of Julius Beaufort and Fanny Ring, but no one seemed to mind

about that now. She was a delightful young woman, and Newland was glad to welcome her into the family. Perhaps May might not have approved, but she had died two years before, so her approval wasn't necessary.

But above all, it was in that library that his friend Theodore Roosevelt, who was then Governor of New York, had said to Newland, "You're the kind of man this country needs, if we're ever going to solve its problems!"

Newland had tried to be elected to public office but without success. However, he continued his useful work for the city of New York and its people. For many years, for every public, artistic or philanthropic project, people always wanted opinion. This was a big change for a man of his generation. Newland had escaped from the narrow world of old New York when men thought about nothing except sport, moneymaking and society-

Even so, Newland knew he had missed something: the flower of life. When he thought of Ellen Olenska, it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of an imaginary beloved in a book or a picture. She had become the image of all he had missed in life, and that image had kept him from other women. He had been a faithful husband, and when May had died he had honestly mourned her. Their long years together had taught him that it doesn't really matter if marriage is a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty. The phone rang.

"Hello, Dad?" said a lively young voice from Chicago. "It's Dallas. Listen: I'm leaving for Paris on Wednesday, and I want you to come with me. I have to go for business, but, if you come too, we can make it a holiday - our last father-and-son holiday before I get married. Newland felt a little nervous. May hadn't liked traveling. Now he was used to that quiet life, and the idea of going abroad was a little frightening. But Dallas was right: it was their last chance to take a holiday alone together. "Yes, all right," he said, laughing.

It was strange to be in Paris. For the first few years after Ellen had left New York, Newland had often thought of Paris as the setting of her life. He had imagined the horse-chestnut trees on the boulevards

flowering in the spring, the great river rolling under its splendid bridges, the life of art and study and pleasure, and now here it was! He was walking down those boulevards with his son, and his heart was beating fast. Looking at Dallas, he wondered if his son's heart beat like that in the presence of Fanny Beaufort. He thought probably not. Can your heart beat fast for something that is permitted? He remembered the calm way Dallas had announced his engagement, absolutely sure that no one would object. "The difference between his generation and mine," Newland thought, "is that they assume they will get everything they want, whereas we almost always assumed that we would not."

"Isn't this lovely, Dad?" said Dallas, putting his hand on his father's shoulder as they walked along. "We've had the whole day to ourselves, but now we must hurry: we're going to visit Countess Olenska at half past five - Fanny made me promise to visit her. She said the Countess was so kind to her when she was in Paris."

Newland stared at him in amazement. "You told her I was here?"

"Of course - why not? Tell me, what was she like?"

Newland blushed and was silent under his son's curious gaze.

"Come on, Dad! You and she were great friends, weren't you? They say she was really lovely."

"Lovely?" said Newland. "I don't know. She was different."

"Ah, yes! That's how I feel about Fanny."

"What do you mean?" asked Newland.

"Oh, Dad! You're so old-fashioned! Don't be so prehistoric! Why can't we talk about it? Didn't you once feel about her just like I feel about Fanny? She was the woman you really loved. I know. Mother told me the day before she died. She said she knew we would be safe with you because once, when she'd asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted."

Newland walked on in silence. Then he said, "She never asked me"

"No - I forgot. You never did ask each other anything did you? Or tell each other anything. You just sat and watch each other and tried to

guess what the other was thinking. You're not angry with me, are you, Dad?"

"No - no, of course not."

And it was true: he wasn't angry with Dallas for saying those things. It was a relief to know that someone had guess and pitied him, and it was terribly moving to know that it had been his wife. And he wasn't angry that Dallas had arranged for them to go and visit Countess Olenska. She had never returned to her husband, and, when he had died some years earlier, she hadnt changed her way of life. There was nothing now to keep them apart. "After all, I'm only fifty-seven," he thought.

They walked to the quiet square where Countess Olenska lived. The early evening light was golden. For thirty years, her life of which he knew so little - had been lived in this golden light. Her life must have been full of interests - art, conversation, people - which he could hardly understand.

"Here it is," said Dallas, stopping in front of a modern building. "She lives on the top floor. Come on, it's almost time

"I think I'll sit here for a while," said Newland. He sat down on a bench under a flowering horse-chestnut tree.

"Why - are you ill?"

"No. I'm fine. But, please, go up without me."

"You mean you'll come up later?"

"I don't know," replied Newland slowly.

"If you don't, she won't understand."

"Go on. I'll follow you."

Dallas stared at him. "But what shall I say to her?"

"My dear boy, you always know what to say."

"All right. Shall I say that you're old-fashioned and prefer to walk up five flights of stairs because you don't like lifts?"

"Just say I'm old-fashioned. That'll be enough."

Looking perplexed, Dallas turned and walked into the building.

Newland sat on the bench and gazed up at the balcony and the windows on the top floor. He calculated the time it would take Dallas to

go up in the lift, ring the door bell, be admitted, and walk into the drawing room. He wondered if it was true, as people said, that Dallas took after him.

He tried to imagine the people in the drawing room. Six was the hour for visiting. He was sure there would be more than one person there. Among them would be a pale lady with dark hair. She would hold out her hand to Dallas. He thought she would be sitting near the fire. There would be flowers on the table beside her. "It's more real to me here than if I went up," he thought. He sat on the bench for a long time, as the golden light faded and the evening came. He watched the lights come on in the room behind the windows on the top floor. Then a maid came out and closed the shutters.

Newland Archer got up from the bench and walked back alone to the hotel.

- THE END -

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