

DISINTEGRATION

Wharton's extant, unfinished novel, *Disintegration*, consists of seventy-four typescript pages (complete chapters 1 to 7 inclusive) and seventeen manuscript pages of chapter 8. The typescript (black type on cream paper) has corrections marked in black ink, pencil and blue crayon, plus one red pencil addition, suggesting a total of four separate proofreadings of the material. The seventeen manuscript pages of chapter 8 offer remnants of two different drafts: thirteen pages are written in blue ink on unlined blue note-paper with red margins on the reverse, with corrections primarily in blue ink, but also in pencil and blue crayon; four pages are written in black ink on cream paper, providing a second set of pages numbered 106—9. The familiar cut and pasting process is in evidence. Several pages consist of two-part sheets joined together, reforming an extended page; while several others are of reduced length, having been cut to one-half or two-thirds of the standard sheet size, and the pagination of nine manuscript sheets has been amended. Sadly, there is no surviving chapter outline or general synopsis to be certain of the direction in which *Disintegration* was to have travelled beyond chapter 8.

While the bulk of the surviving materials for *Disintegration* appear to have been written in 1902, the narrative was conceived before Wharton wrote her first novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902). In a letter to Sally Norton in May 1902 the writer confirmed: 'I am slowly getting to work on a new novel, which I planned before I began the Valley'¹ — the dating, combined with *Disintegration's* setting, rendering the (in)famous August 1902 advice of Henry James to 'Do *New York!*' obsolete.² The busy *Donnée Book* of 1900, a notebook containing fragments of dialogue and descriptions, names of characters, titles, and brief preparatory sketches of works, features the novel's title and several *bons mots* which would ultimately find their way into the typescript and manuscript.

The precise date on which Wharton subsequently abandoned *Disintegration* is difficult to confirm. Biographers have variously suggested August or, more generally, the summer or autumn of 1902³. There is, however, circumstantial evidence to indicate that Wharton may have continued the writing of *Disin-*

tegration after 1902. On a cover slip, preceding the manuscript of chapter 8, Wharton has written in large, title-size letters:

~~Disintegrate~~ [sic]

~~Italian Villas.~~

Disintegration

The sequence and timing of the titles above are intriguing. Partly due to the success of *The Valley of Decision*, with its Italian setting, the author was commissioned to write a series of articles on Italian villas and their gardens for *Century Magazine*. Wharton agreed terms with the editor Richard Gilder on 10 October 1902 (though she would later seek to change them when the work proved more extensive and expensive than originally planned). By early 1903, she was absorbed in the practical Italian research, ‘continually on the hunt’ for villas.⁴ Following a fairly fraught editorial process (not aided by disagreements over the tone of her earliest submission, illustrations, spelling and proofreading), the first article appeared in November 1903, and a book version, *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, was published in November 1904, once the serialization was complete. While the cover slip with both titles above (the novel listed both before and after the Italian study) may simply be part of a belated cataloguing process, the sequence also opens the possibility that Wharton returned to *Disintegration* during or immediately after work on *Italian Villas*, the research, revision and publication process of which spanned a two year period from 1903 to late 1904. Certainly the surviving *Disintegration* drafts, with their revisions, multiple proofreadings and cut and pastings, evidence that considerable time, commitment and energy were invested in the work — even though, ultimately, *The House of Mirth* would take its place as Wharton’s second novel.

Notes

1. Letter of 18 May 1902, cited by Wolff in *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, p. 95.
2. Letter from Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August 1902, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, p. 71, n. 2.
3. See Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance*, p. 144; Lee, *Edith Wharton*, p. 178; Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 107; Wolff, *A Feast of Words*, p. 95.
4. Letter from Wharton to Richard Gilder, 18 March 1903, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, p. 82.

Disintegration.

Book 1.

Was hat man dir, du armes Kind, gethan?¹

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1.

“There she goes!” Val whispered, twitching her nurse’s sleeve.

In the ~~€spring barouche~~ <shining violet> which seemed to gather up <attract> and reflect in its ~~harness and panels~~ <cushions panels> all the afternoon glitter of the [deleted word unclear] <dense> procession up Fifth Avenue, the slender lady, erect under her sunshade, passed so close that Valeria could see the pearls about her neck and the bracelets slipping back from her wrist.

“Don’t, lovey, don’t,” Mary Noonan entreated, averting her head from the forbidden enchantment of the sight, and her ears from the child’s inevitable question: “Why mayn’t I look at my own mamma?”²

“The Lord in His mercy knows, darling³ — and your own papa asking you not to!”

“That’s what you always say, Noony; but why does papa ask me not to? Did you see the big blue stone in her bracelet? I never saw her wear that hat before. Noony, isn’t she the beautifulest mother in the world?”

“That she is, darling, and used to nurse you in her arms as innocent-like — and don’t you ever speak of her again, lovey, or Noon’ll have to leave you.”

This threat always reduced Valeria to silence, not from any fear of its fulfillment — Noony being obviously one of the fundamental facts of life — but because it was the accepted signal of the nurse’s surrender, and Valeria scorned the tame diversion of arguing with a routed opponent. If Noony had a fault, it was her dialectical weakness, and her haste to take sanctuary in the threat of leaving Valeria. For this defect, however, she atoned by qualities unmatched within the range of Val’s experience: such as her power of sustained attention while pages of “story-book” were poured into her ear in the monotonous shout of infancy; her familiarity with the wants and habits of puppies, rabbits, squirrels, and other small mammals; her tolerance of messy live things in basins, and her unfailing readiness to “tidy up” the nursery after those holiday afternoons which, to most children, are dimmed by the impending obligation of having to put things away. Noony was as full of moral axioms as a copy-book; but there was a genial discrepancy between her principles and conduct, and most of her rules were no more meant for use than the “Sunday silk” which she kept in the bottom of an old brindled trunk in the attic. On essential points she was inexorable; but Valeria knew that the malum prohibitum of dabbling in the <with> ink-stand or wading in a clean frock was divided by the whole width of her nurse’s cheerful tolerance from the malum in se of meanness or falsehood. Noony had the Irish gift of evading a moral, and her ingenuity in finding reasons for overlooking Valeria’s infraction of nursery laws kept pace with her charge’s versatility in breaking them.⁴

“If it ’ud bring her mother back I’d do it!” Val once heard her say to a Presbyterian housemaid zealous for the child’s chastisement; and this hint of the unavailingness of any peril to evoke the protecting arms of motherhood gave Val her first clear <real> sense of loneliness. She knew, of course — had known, since the cataclysmic day when the nursery fire remained unlit, and there were no lessons, and her supper was forgotten — that some change had come over that part of her universe known as Mamma. The change was mainly geographical, consisting in a closing of doors once intermittently open to infantile peepings, and in a vast disgorgement of closets and upheaval of trunks that resulted in the submergence of the French maid who had ruled these chaotic elements. Other, less tangible losses, there were too — the faint scent which had led one as straight to Mamma’s threshold as though her wardrobes were violet beds in spring; the afternoon door-bell that heralded thrilling glimpses of smoothly-brushed or glossily <sleekly> bald heads on their way up to the drawing-room, punctually followed by a tea-tray laden with seductions in pastry (so that Val pictured society as a glorified nursery-party, with holiday privileges in the matter of cake and jam); and, intensest of all, the bedtime vision of a glittering lady sweeping down to the nightly brougham. Of more personal changes the child remained unconscious, and after the first day she hardly noticed an absence which affected none of the fundamental laws of nursery life. Noony, at that time, was the ocean bounding her world; the continent “Mamma” forming an outer region of wonder and fable, to be dreamed over <of> rather than lived in.

The child’s clearest realization of her mother’s absence came through her father’s presence. Val’s father had always been more remote than her mother, more conjectural, perhaps because less vividly embodied. The child, on Noony’s estimate, accepted him as a great man; but her personal observation of him, restricted by opportunity, was further hampered by fear. It was not that he was unkind: he was gentler than her mother; but he had a quick unexpected <sudden> way with him, unpleasantly suggestive of <at times almost as disconcerting as> the doctor’s command to show one’s tongue. Val<,> accustomed to lord it over Noony’s mental processes, <slower mind> hung back bewildered from her father’s abrupt transitions. Even as a child she was too much concerned with her own part in any transaction to resign herself to an admiring receptivity; and her father’s wonderfulness, which was food for pride in his absence, became an obstacle when they were together.

It was on the day of her mother’s departure that, for the first time, she lost this sense of constraint. Supperless and cold, she was sitting in the nursery, wondering what mysterious catastrophe had swept nurse and fire and bread-and-milk out of her suddenly depopulated life, when the door opened and <Henry> Clephane walked in.

“Hu<a>llo,” he said, “what are you doing here all alone?”

"I don't know," said Valeria, though it was a ~~confession~~ <an admission> she always hated to make.

The answer seemed to find an echo in her father's mood, for he ~~shrugged his shoulders and~~ smiled <down on her> not unkindly.

"Haven't you had your supper?"

"No." ~~she answered <said> with a swelling throat.~~

"Why, what a shame! And your little nose is blue. I'll tell you what — you'll come down and dine with me."

She clapped her hands joyfully. "Oh, father — shall I? May I? And have *méringue*<s>, too?"

<Still smiling,> He <he> lifted her against his shoulder. "I shouldn't wonder. ~~If the house furnishes such things nowadays.~~ But why *méringue*<s>, especially?"

Valeria stretched her arms to the infantile limit of the superlative. "Because I love them better than anything else in the world."

"Upon my soul! ~~Why,~~ I didn't suppose you'd ever been allowed to taste one."

She looked at him expressively. "I never have — that's why!"

His hold loosened and he let her slip to his feet with an odd murmur. "They're all alike!" she heard him say, in supposed allusion to *méringues*; then his hand clasped hers, and he added, with the sudden listlessness that often followed his fitful condescensions: "Well, come on then; we'll see what we can find."

That dinner — with her feet dangling for the first time under the pink-shaded table where a reminiscence of Mamma still lingered in the flowers and bonbons, and the little baskets of salted almonds — remained one of the most vivid ~~land marks~~ <pictures> of Valeria's childhood. It must have been that very evening, amid the glorious license of almonds, caramels, and *méringues* fetched hastily from the ~~pastry cooks~~ <confectioner's>, that she had her first intuition of her father's need of her: a need expressing itself, pathetically enough to maturer observation, in his ~~sudden~~ sense of the responsibility she represented. Even to her ~~undeveloped~~ <infant> perceptions there was a trace of dependence in his groping questions about her lessons, her exercise, and all the details of Noony's ~~administration~~ <management>. She felt that she was "entertaining" him, as mamma entertained the gentlemen who came to tea; a feeling ~~fortified~~ <increased> by the ~~perception~~ <discovery> that her being allowed to do so was somehow distinctly connected with her mother's being away. Mamma had been away before; but this absence was different: it was at once an end and a beginning. In a dim effort to account for the difference, Val, after dinner, in the security of her father's arms, ventured ~~the~~ <a> question which she ~~vaguely guessed that~~ <was sure> Noony would have forbidden: — "Will mamma be a long time away, father?"

Clephane seemed not to have heard. He continued to gaze at the fire, a brooding hand in her hair.

“A long time,” he said at length.

His daughter made a movement that brought her face close to his.

“Then I’ll take care of you, father, shan’t I? And see that everything’s all right?”

“Of course you will.” He met her movement with a kiss. She flung ~~coercing~~ *<persuasive>* arms about him. “And you’ll tell Noony — make Noony understand?”

“Understand what?”

“That I’m to take care of you while mother’s away.”

“Of course. We’ll tell her together.”

“Oh, father — ” she sidled ecstatically closer.⁵

“Oughtn’t I always to dine downstairs, then — so that you’ll never be alone?”

And incomprehensibly — yet with a look that included her ~~in his unguessed emotion~~ — her father put her from him and ~~bowed~~ *<dropped>* his face upon his hands.

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II.

Had Valeria been of an age to ~~formulate~~ <sum up> her impressions, she might have defined her mother's departure as the first in a series of eliminations, of subtractions from the ~~sum~~ total of existence, so that Mrs. Clephane's going seemed in the end to carry away more than her brilliant presence had ever bestowed.

There was hardly a corner of the house from which she had been so perennially absent that did not testify to this effect of her final ~~removal~~ <departure>. The flowers vanished first, unrenewed in the drawing-room vases; the orris-scented cushions followed; the drawing-room fire went out, and a tearful housemaid closed the door ~~upon~~ <on> a hearth restored to midsummer bareness. No afternoon door-bell announced the approach of glossy-headed gentlemen; no passing tea-tray left its <appetizing> wake ~~upon~~ the stairs; no ladies called in dazzling ~~victorias~~ <motors>; no messengers waiting for notes languished on the hall-bench; no dressmakers' boxes bumped the angles of the narrow stair-case; no <taxi-> cabs were suddenly called and as abruptly countermanded; the pink candle-shades faded from the dining-table, and the cook sank into a penitential routine of rice-pudding and mutton. Hard on these lesser exclusions a greater followed, and Val, dismayed, beheld the closing of her father's door. He had come home one evening too tired to do more than smile at her across the <dinner> table at <over> which she was still permitted to preside; and sending away his food untasted, had finally dismissed her also with an ~~impatient~~ <brief> kiss that ~~drove~~ <sent> her to the nursery in tears. The next morning she woke to the <sound of the> doctor's voice on the stairs; Noony checked her flight from her crib; and the servants hovered outside in <silent> groups that scattered at her approach.

The long days that followed were marked only by the doctor's visits and the gliding presence of her father's cousin, Mrs. Neafe. Mrs. Neafe was one of the women who scent illness from afar<,> and are on the spot at once with a bag and the assurance that they can "sleep anywhere." It was Val's bitterest grievance that this lady was admitted to the sick-room from which she was herself shut out. To the eager ~~questions~~ <queries> with which the child awaited her<,> ~~on the threshold~~, Mrs. Neafe accorded only the ~~incoherent~~ <mysterious> cry — "That woman, oh, that woman!" <and though> Val's soul was tremulous with the sense that this might mean her mother <,> ~~but~~ she dared not ask <put the question.> In some ~~mysterious~~ way, however, she was aware that the whole household connected her father's illness with her mother's departure. When she

asked Noony if Mamma would now come back, the nurse's ~~corrugated~~ face grew red, and turning away with excessively bright blue eyes, she muttered vaguely <: > "Where's <Wherever's> my spectacles <gone to> now, I wonder?"

Between Mrs. Neafe and Noony there reigned a veiled antagonism, shown on the nurse's side by an apparent inability to understand or transmit ~~the other's~~ [deleted word unclear] <Mrs. Neafe's> orders, on Mrs. Neafe's by the extravagance of pity with which she enveloped Valeria in her nurse's presence. Mrs. Neafe's ~~compassionate~~ i<n>nuendoes slowly ~~widened the rift of perception~~ through which it was borne in on <made it more & more clear to> Valeria that Mrs. Clephane's absence was permanent. To the child's fancy, her mother had gone as summer goes, taking with her warmth and light and flowers, but as certain to return in the punctual rotation of the year; ~~now~~ <now> Mrs. Neafe's ~~allusions~~ <insinuations> hinted <at> a ~~deeper loss~~ <permanent exile>, and one desolate night Val whispered the terrified question — was her mother dead?

From Mrs. Neafe's damp endearments she extricted a cheerless "No."

"She'll come back then, by and bye?" Val persisted; and Mrs. Neafe [deleted word unclear] <tearfully> <evasively> answered that she did hope Mary Noonan was particular about making her say her prayers.

Valeria was too shrewd not to understand the meaning of <to be put off by> such ~~conversational deflections~~ <evasions>. They all slammed the same door in her face, and such unanimity of opposition kept her curiosity glued to the crack.

It was one of Mrs. Neafe's ideas — an idea especially offensive to Noony — that Valeria was too much alone; in pursuance of which theory the child was frequently sent to Mrs. Neafe's own house to play with that lady's little girl. Betty Neafe was a small adroit person<,> of Val's age, but <no older than Val but> infinitely beyond her in the exercise of those intuitions which are supposed to distinguish <be the attributes of> her sex. The children had little in common, though Val's admiration <sense> of her cousin's superiority <found expression> <expressed itself> in a resigned acceptance of the games <that> ~~that~~ Betty preferred. These were chiefly connected with the social life of dolls, and ~~involved~~ a ~~minute~~ <cluded an accurate> reproduction of the conversations overheard in Mrs. Neafe's drawing-room. Valeria had no great taste for such ~~diversions~~ <games>; and her ~~subservience~~ <jection> to her cousin was <not disturbed> [deleted word unclear] ~~marked by~~ <but without> intermittent flashes of rebellion.

"Oh, I'm so tired of playing visits," she protested one day.

Betty stared with soft ~~blue~~ <grey> eyes. "Why, it's what you'll have to do when you grow up."

"Well, I shan't<,> then!"

"If you don't, nobody'll visit you."

"I don't want them to," declared Valeria, ~~indifferent to this threat.~~
<unmoved.>

Betty's eyes widened. "But it's perfectly dreadful not to be visited <.>" ~~she insisted.~~

"How do you know?"

"Because I do. It's <being> like your M<m>amma."

"Like my M<m>amma?"

Betty nodded. "She isn't visited."

Valeria flared up. "She is, too! ~~Crowds~~ <Heaps> of ~~people~~ <people gentlemen used to> come every day. More than ever come ~~here~~. <to see your mother.>"

Betty ~~dimpled derisively.~~ <smiled compassionately.> "Used to, you silly, before she went away. Nobody visits her now."

There was a ~~long~~ [deleted word unclear] silence. Valeria was trembling with inarticulate rage, but ~~no retort came to her aid~~ <she could think of no retort>. At last she said: "How do you know?"

Betty was affecting to dress one of her dolls with an air of extreme preoc<c>upation. Her small definite face was as impassive as the doll's. ~~but in reality she was afraid of Valeria.~~

"I hear all the ladies <mothers friends> say it," she returned with an assumption of carelessness — "every one who comes to see mamma <her>. They're so sorry for mamma <mother>, because your mamma <mother> is her cousin — but then, as mamma <mother> says, she's only a cousin by marriage."

Valeria's anger was mingled with perplexity. "Why are they sorry for your mamma <mother>?" ~~she faltered.~~

"Because it's so dreadful to be related to anybody improper."

"Improper?" Val dropped her doll with a crash: the word was the more dreadful for its lack of precise meaning.⁶ She flung herself suddenly on Betty, blindly, wildly, with the fury of a young <an infant> savage. Betty's screams resounded, and Mrs. Neafe rushed in, followed by a breathless nurse-maid.

"Children — Elizabeth — Valeria — what's the matter <in the world are you doing>?"

Betty stood sobbing, her frock disordered, her fair ruffled hair looking like the halo of a rebel cherub.

"Elizabeth, what have you been doing <?>"

"I didn't do anything. She hit me and tore my new frock.<?>"

"Why did you do it, Valeria?"

Valeria raised her head defiantly. "Because she said my mother was improper."

"Betty!" Mrs. Neafe heaved a despairing sigh. "I'm sure I don't know where you learn such words. Haven't I told you never to mention Valeria's mother?"

Val seized on this in a flash. "Why mayn't she mention my mother?"

Mrs. Neafe saw her mistake, and prudently took refuge in anger.

"You're both very naughty children," she said, assuming a judicial tone. "<I'm afraid I shan't <shall not> be able to let you come here any longer, Valeria, if you are so rough with Betty. And, Betty, you are to ask Valeria's pardon <to forgive you> for having been rude. I can't imagine <think> why you <re> are both so unladylike <naughty>. Valeria, Noonan will be coming for you soon, and you <d> had better put on your hat and make yourself tidy."

After that, for a long time, Val did not speak of her mother. She knew it was useless to question Mary Noonan, who could be as secret as a priest under <for all> her tender Irish garrulity; and though Clephane was now better, and able to see his daughter for a few moments daily, his pale face looked out at her so strangely from the pillows that she was too shy to do more than lay her cheek against the thin hand he extended: <held out to her.>

When he was able to be up again spring had come, and they left town and went down to Long Island. The return to the country was always the climax of Valeria's year. and <I>n the first confusing sweetness of recovered acquaintance with lop-eared rabbits and guinea-hens, she threw off the problem of her mother's fate; As <but as> custom staled these delights the perplexity returned, and at night in her little bed, or at dusk when she stole upstairs past the deserted drawing-room, her heart swelled with its unshared mystery. But she had waited too long: a secretion of dread had formed about her mother's name, and she dared not speak it, even to herself.

The next winter a strange thing happened. They went back to town at the usual season, and Val sank into her narrower winter existence, with its horizon bounded by lesson-books, and its monotonous daily walk at Noony's side. On one of these walks, on a brilliant December day, a carriage flashed by them in Fifth Avenue, and in the carriage sat her mother, more radiant and wonderful than ever. Val gave a cry and tugged at her nurse's hand.

"Noony — <N>oony; there's mother! Look! Look! Don't you see her? Noony — do you think she's coming home?"

The nurse, queerly pale, dragged her on without answering.

"Noony — Noony — don't you see her?"

Noony, standing still, caught the child to her breast in the crowded street. Val felt the pressure of a wet cheek against her own, and the contact silenced her, she knew not why. Noony set her down, and the two walked on without speaking.

After that they met Val's mother almost daily, and the little girl lived on the sight. Mrs. Clephane always flashed past them in the same way, dazzling, sumptuous, remote, enclosed in an aurea of light and fragrance. Almost at once, Val had understood that she was not coming home — could never again be coming home; and, after the first shock of disappointment, the child was glad that it was

so. She knew how her mother would have hated the new house they had moved into — the narrow mean house, with its blotchy wall-papers and the dreary oil-cloth in the hall. The other house had been small too, but clear and sunny as a globe of gold-fish. In this one there were no fresh muslin curtains, no flowers or cushions or rosy candle-shades: everything was as dull and dog-eared as a lesson-book. Val, who had inherited Mrs. Clephane's taste for the external finish of life, had from the first felt the change in an unformulated childish way; and at the sight of her mother the feeling took shape in a distinct repudiation of her new surroundings. She was ashamed of the house, and hoped her mother would never come there. She began to be ashamed of her own appearance, too, of her old-fashioned frocks, made at home under Noony's supervision, of her shabby shoes and ugly woollen gloves. Now, when her mother passed, in that circumambient brightness which seemed her native element, Val would shrink behind Noony's skirts, like a votary veiling his face as his divinity is carried by. In Val's mind the maternal image was slowly entering on its apotheosis.

If the apparition of Mrs. Clephane had the effect of lifting her daughter for a moment above the dull level of reality, the fall back seemed to take place daily from a greater height, to be a sharper plunge to a lower depth of disillusionment. Val's intimacy with her father had ended with his return to health. During the summer he had been much away, and once in town he resumed his daily disappearances, that morning plunge into the unpredictable known in New York households as "going down town".⁷ From this submersion he returned at night-fall, fagged and listless, to drop an absent-minded kiss on the brown head she was bending above her supper, and ask a few questions which he did not expect her to answer. Val was no longer his companion: she had gone back to being his little girl. To a child of her susceptibilities the change was humiliating: it robbed her of the one advantage her mother's going had seemed to give, and in this depressing relapse to the half-light of the usual, that mother's personality acquired a supernatural brightness.

Two years had passed thus, and on the afternoon on which Val⁸ had celebrated the wonders of her mother's new bonnet and of the blue stone in her bracelet, a young man to whom such phenomena had once been hardly less engrossing, stood for the first time in that interval on the Clephanes' doorstep. Val, on turning the corner, saw him at once, and releasing her hand from Noony's, ran toward him with a cry.

"Sevvy! Sevvy!" she sang, and found herself instantly swung up to the commanding height of his shoulder.

"Is this giantess Val?" he asked; and she cried back joyfully — "We thought you'd forgotten all about us."

"I've been to the ends of the earth — back of beyond," he answered. "But you are big, Val! Why, you've quite outgrown me — and you're <a> head and shoulders taller than I am."

The joke struck a familiar chord, and Val answered with an ecstatic: "Sevvy, oh, Sevvy," while the young man continued to gaze up at her with grey eyes capable of a complexity of emotions. Presently he let her slip to the ground, and she dragged him into the hall, and stood in rapt contemplation while he laid aside his hat and stick. It was long since the house had had a visitor like Severance, and the parlour-maid was almost as much impressed as Valeria.

"I am taller, really," the latter said, with a proud shake which challenged verification. "Father doesn't notice — but my chin is up to his watch-chain now."

"Dear me!" said Severance, with amiable exaggeration, "he must wear his watch around his neck like a lady's locket."

A gust of merriment shook Valeria. "<>Father — father wear his watch around his neck!" For richness and subtlety of humour no one, in her estimation, had ever equalled Severance. But the name laid a sudden constraint upon them.

"How is you father?" Severance asked; and Val, replying that he was very well, lapsed immediately into the little girl who is polite to visitors. George Severance was silent, glancing about the narrow hall. To each of the two, the other's presence recalled a past which seemed hardly less remote and fantastic to the man than to the child; for Severance's had been among the most assiduous of the glossy heads which Val had seen, day after day, devotionally ascending the stairs to her mother's drawing-room.

"This house is not as nice as the other," she said, with a vague instinct of apology.

"Isn't it?" he returned absently; and at that moment the rattle of Clephane's latch-key relieved them from farther effort.

<III>

Clephane took the meeting with less surprise than his daughter, but with hardly less satisfaction.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, "this is uncommonly pleasant! I'd no notion you were in these parts."

Their strong hand-clasp bridged over the awkwardness of farther speech, and they stood looking at each other in the unconstrained silence which simplifies masculine friendship.

In the library, however, with the door closed on them, the silence prolonged itself to the verge of embarrassment. It was Clephane who spoke first.

"It's good to see you, old man," he said, pushing a cigar-box toward Severance. "When did you get back?"

"Only yesterday."

"And where have you been all this time?"

"Oh, in the wilds — South America chiefly."

"Looking after those mines of your uncle's?"

Severance nodded. He had prolonged the rite of cutting and lighting his cigar, perhaps as a means of evading consecutive speech.

Clephane, who had thrown himself into an armchair near the fire, stirred uneasily, like a sick man turning on his pillow. "I wish I could get away into the wilds!" he muttered. "There are times when New York is like a giant microscope, and one's self the lone atom wriggling under the lens." Severance made no answer, and the other went on nervously: "You've been gone over two years, haven't you? You must have left just before I got my knock on the head."

"Yes," said the younger man slowly.

Clephane raised himself on one elbow and turned to look at him.

"You'd heard about it, I suppose?"

Severance weighed his words. "I heard that you and Mrs. Clephane had separated."

"Is that all?"

"Practically. I haven't many New York correspondents, and for much of the time I was out of range of the papers."

"But you heard there was another man?"

"Something of the sort; but no name was mentioned."

Clephane threw back his head with a laugh. "Ah, then you've missed the culmination — the bouquet of the whole business. The other man was Tillotson Wing."

Severance stared. "Wing? Tillotson Wing?"

"There's a co-respondent to flatter a man's vanity, eh?"

"Good God!" said Severance.

There was a pause, punctuated by Clephane's rasping laugh.

"And since then — what has become of her?" Severance asked at length.

"What has become of her? Oh, she's done the straight thing — made an honest man of him. They're married."

"She married Wing?"

"Within a week after she got the divorce."

"After she got it — ? But I thought — "

Clephane leaned back, knocking the ashes from his cigar.

"You thought I'd shown her the door? Well — I did, of course; but for the child's sake we came to an understanding — a — a kind of compromise, you see —"

Severance continued to gaze at him. "No, I don't see," he said bluntly.

"Why, I let Alice get the divorce — on the ground of desertion — but of course with the understanding that Val was to stay with me."

"< ¶ > "But Val would have stayed with you in any case."

"Yes — but there would have been the scandal."

Severance stood up and tossed aside his cigar. "Oh, damn the scandal," he said energetically.

Clephane followed him with a reflective eye. "You think it a mistake to dodge facts in that way?"

"On general principles I think an open scandal less unwholesome than one that's covered up."

"Most people wouldn't agree with you — at least not where there's a child concerned," Clephane rejoined, in his calm judicial tone, as though the question were purely hypothetical. "With a boy it wouldn't have mattered<, > but a girl is different."

"Do you expect to keep the facts from Valeria after she is grown up?"

"Oh, I don't know; by that time I may have resigned my paternal responsibilities." He stretched himself with a sigh. "Lord knows I wasn't made for them."

Severance glanced at him with a shade of impatience. "You were always devoted to the child."

"My dear fellow, it's one thing to be devoted to a child and another to know how to take care of it. Nature apparently designed me to be Valeria's father, but it presumably didn't intend me to be her mother too."

He threw his head back, gazing up at Severance with his smile of ironical self-depreciation, and as the two thus confronted each other the contrast in their attitude and expression suddenly revealed a fundamental difference of nature. Severance, lean, compact, with an almost dry precision of feature softened by musing eyes, had straightened himself instinctively against the first hint of compromise; while Clephane, relaxed in his chair, betrayed in every line of his lounging figure and evasive face the temperament which avenges itself on its weaknesses by satirizing them.

It was a side i<o>f his nature of which Severance had never before been conscious. Through their long years of intimacy, he had classified Clephane as a clever chap, who thought out things which he himself acted on without much thought; but it had not occurred to him that this habit of scrutiny might have slowly weakened by the springs of action. Now he saw that Clephane had appeared to act because he had, as it were, the headway of habit upon him. On the current of an organized happiness he had kept up a fair semblance of progression; but, left to himself, he had soon drifted into a backwater of inertia. It was characteristic of Clephane that his first word implied a recognition of his weakness.

“Who was the Johnny who said that animals were automata? I don’t know whether it’s true of animals, but it is of men — some men. I’m an automaton, for instance. It didn’t show as long as I could run along in my groove — I didn’t suspect it myself; but as soon as I was jolted out I found myself whizzing about aimlessly in the air, and then I fell over on my back and have been lying there ever since.” He leaned forward and stirred the languishing fire. “People grumble about living in a rut — good God, it’s the normal way of living. A rut of habit, a rut of self-sacrifice, a rut of illusion — it’ [*sic*] all one, as long as the bounds are fixed. We’re like travellers crossing a ravine on a single plank — if the plank gives way, we find ourselves with a broken back in the bottom of the ravine. I’d like to strip some of the strong characters that are held up to us for admiration, and find out how much of their strength is genuine backbone, and how much the iron brace of habit that they wear under their clothes. The strongest man on earth may be kept going by the knowledge that there’s a woman waiting for him at home, in a certain chair by the fire — just let him come back some night and find that chair empty!”

He took a turn through the room and flung himself down again. He had never been a communicative man, and this sudden letting-down of the barriers of reticence struck Severance more painfully than his actual words.

“And that isn’t all — that isn’t the worst of it,” he broke out. “There are depths below depths in such a hole as I’ve dropped into.¹⁰ Suppose, when you come back and find the woman gone, you sit down and tot up what she’s taken with her<;> not in mere happiness, *bien être*, the kind of domestic comfort that is the moral equivalent of good housekeeping, but in your fundamental stock of

beliefs, the actual capital you were living on. Suppose you find yourself stripped bare — drugged, robbed and chucked out — what on earth is there left to set up living with?” He rose again and laid a nervous hand on Severance’s arm. “I tell you what it is, if a woman throws you over for a man, you’re a man yourself and can face it; but if she throws you over for an income you’re no more than an empty purse in the gutter.”

Severance, as he listened, had penetrated in a flash to the heart of the disaster. It mattered nothing that Clephane had sacrificed himself, had narrowed his life, deflected his ambitions: the bitterness of the loss lay in the perception of its futility. Though the two men had been friends since the younger’s college days, Severance, never given to analysis, had left whole tracts of Clephane’s nature unexplored. Now they were suddenly laid bare to him. Severance, like all Clephane’s friends, had been aware of his **complete** subjection to his wife, though it may not have occurred to any of them to think of love as the power that bound him. Clephane was not the man to formulate his emotions, or Mrs. Clephane the woman to encourage their expression, and the tradition of taste ~~amid~~ which they had grown up forbade any outward signs of conjugality; but it was precisely this enforced reserve which emphasized the man’s [deleted word unclear] subserviency of will and intellect — that immersion of the larger in the smaller nature that is one of the mysteries of the moral life.

It was characteristic of Mrs. Clephane that the divergences between her husband and herself seemed, to most of her afternoon visitors, to ~~predominate~~ distinctly in her favour. Like most pretty women, she had a way of obscuring the sense of relativity, of projecting a universe of which she was herself the centre. But Severance’s perceptions had never been thus disturbed. Though he had been one of the most devoted frequenters of Mrs. Clephane’s drawing-room, he had come deliberately, as it were, with his eyes open, as an amused but never dazzled observer of an interesting social phenomenon. Severance, since the inevitable first love of his graduate year, had ~~relegated women to the rank of bric à brac~~, had regarded his relations with ~~them~~ *<women>* as the interludes of serious living. The gratification he asked of them was of a rather delicate order, since, like many men of action, he took his rare pleasures fastidiously; but women seemed to him, at best, an embodied form of fiction, better than the best novel, but not appreciably nearer to reality. This opinion did not, indeed, preclude the vision of that exceptional “nice girl” whom he might some day wish to marry; but this predestined being had not as yet taken even transient shape in any of the women he had known. Men of energetic temper and limited imagination are usually bored by clever women, and Severance was no exception to the rule. Mere beauty, once the wonder of it had passed, bored him almost as much as mere brains, and coarseness simply repelled him. He was therefore reduced to seeking distraction in the type of woman who exists simply for social purposes, who is inconceivable apart

from a highly organized society, and who is at once the cause and effect of such a society: its culmination and its excuse for being. He did not, indeed, formulate any such theory. He simply tended toward certain women because they were "jolly" without being coarse and easy without being vulgar; because they wore good clothes, and had good cooks, and made things pleasant for a man who was naturally shy and silent, and who liked to take out his share of social intercourse in smoking cigarettes and listening. Mrs. Clephane was a finished example of this class, and her prettiness, her grace, her somewhat obvious feminine arts, had been to Severance but so many undefined ingredients in the congenial atmosphere of her house. He was like a man who enjoys travelling through fine scenery without conscious appreciation of its details.

Severance combined with his mildly Mahometan conception of woman's social function a naïve theory of the sanctity of marriage. He had accepted long ago, at a gulp, all the current generalizations about the hallowing influences of family life. The subject had never come into his own experience, and he had kept it in that lumber-room of platitudes where the man of action stores the impedimenta of sentiment. In obedience to this habit, Severance had regarded the Clephanes as a model couple, and had cherished a sort of Christmas-lithograph idea of their family relations, with the child as a link between them, and their devotion to each other forming an immovable substructure to the frivolous surface of their life<ves>.

Clephane's outburst brought this pretty theory to the ground. Severance, looking back over his friend's past, saw for the first time what his happiness had cost him. Clephane had started in life with an income sufficient for the maintenance of an intelligent leisure. He had fancied he could maintain a wife and child on it as well, and having a great sense of the value of leisure as a social factor in money-making communities, he had planned an existence which should be a sort of moral light-house to toilers on the foggy seas of commercialism. He meant to prove, by means of a charming wife and a simple but studied <enlightened> hospitality, the essential insignificance of mere wealth in the scale of social values. Incidentally, these theories were to be illustrated by occasional contributions to the literature of criticism; he had already published a volume on the "Aesthetics of Conduct", and a series of sociological essays called "Readjustments". But in the main he meant to let his life speak for him, and for two years he fancied that it had spoken with a certain eloquence. There was one person, however, to whom it had failed to carry conviction, and that person was Mrs. Clephane. Severance saw it all now. He understood, with retrospective pity, the poignancy of disillusionment that had lain under Clephane's decision to "go into business."

At the time, people had taken it as a matter of course to see him suddenly tied to a desk in a broker's office. The office was an important one, and it was hinted, but not uncharitably, that Mrs. Clephane's "push" had probably made him a place

in it. All this seemed natural enough to most of his associates. The logic of it was in fact quite obvious. In a community where idleness and leisure are still interchangeable terms no man is excused for being idle unless his wealth is so large that the care of it is as arduous as its acquisition might have been. The real idler, whose bank-account denies him this plea, is at most tolerated on sufferance, and the retributive sense of the community finds satisfaction in the thought that, sooner, or later, he will probably have to turn to and work for his family. Severance, with the rest, accepted this view. He had the American's innate sense that a husband's first duty is to provide his wife with pin-money, and he had thought it rather manly of a dawdler like Clephane to pull himself together and set to work with that chivalrous object in view. Even now, he was prepared to admit that the exchange might have been worth making. The tragedy of course lay deeper: not in Mrs. Clephane's taste for pretty gowns and smart carriages, but in the fact that the man who had sold his birthright to provide her with these commodities had been no more to her than the soil from which she wrung her crops.

At this point it struck Severance that, in his survey of the situation, he had hardly given a thought to Mrs. Clephane. Severance <He> smiled to think of the movement of pity which the idea of her punishment had provoked. Adrift on the world, face to face with destructive forces ignorantly set in motion, she had seemed, by very reason of her insignificance, a pathetic, almost a tragic figure: re-married — and married to Tillotson Wing — she simply ceased to count. He had pictured her as reaping the consequences of her fault; but he saw now that she belonged to the class who have such reaping done for them by others. Clephane, Valeria — perhaps Wing himself — would gather in this particular harvest. Severance felt a shiver of disgust. His interest in her had been based on the assumption of sentient depths beneath her surface; and this assumption removed, there remained a sense of something thin and larval, a glittering emanation of decay.

Severance's impressions slowly summed themselves up in the question with which at length he turned to Clephane: "And what do you mean to do with yourself?"

Clephane had regained control of his twitching nerves, and his tone showed the Anglo-Saxon dislike of <shrinking from> self-betraye<a>l.

"Oh, I'm tied to the oar for awhile at least. I'm paying for my shot now — there were a good many bills to settle. By and bye, perhaps, when I've straightened my accounts, I may chuck the money-grubbing and go back to my natural way of living — I remember you defined it once as a tendency to lie on my back under a tree and plan essays on the minor poets. But just now I rather prefer Wall Street and double entries. Perhaps I may be the chrysalis of a millionaire." He lifted an ironical eye to Severance. "There would be a certain zest in eclipsing Wing, wouldn't there?"

IV.

George Severance had begun life at the bar, with some promise of success in his profession; but the drudgery of routine work and the long months of town life had combined to break down his health, and he found himself, at twenty-seven or eight, in the drifting state of a man who has mistaken his calling. Luckily for Severance, he could not afford to drift long. If he gave up the law, he must find an alternative means of livelihood; and a boyish taste for adventure and the primitive activities, reasserting itself with fresh vigour in the reaction from his office bondage, urged him to undertake the inspection of his uncle's South American mines. He had taken, on leaving college, a course in civil engineering, and this made him enough of a specialist to serve his uncle's purpose. The life had suited him in many ways, and the isolation it necessitated had given him a chance to keep his studies abreast of his practical work. He had returned to New York with a certain reluctance, mitigated by the fact that his coming back was connected with his work, since he was to establish a New York office for his uncle's mining company. His mixed training made him the fittest person to be at the head of this branch of the business, and he had agreed to undertake, for a time, the management of the office; but there lurked in him an undercurrent of restlessness which made him secretly regard the agreement as a provisional one. He was glad of the chance to take up old ties from a new stand-point of experience; but he had a sub-conscious <latent> sense of the instability of the renewed relation. <¶ ¶>Severance's absence from New York had been sufficiently prolonged to give a certain relief to the first impressions of his return. People and conditions stood out in the round, instead of forming the tapestry background of existence, and he found plenty of work for the perceptions which solitude had sharpened.¹¹

He had not been a week in town before he discovered <learned> that the Tillotson Wings were the chief conversational resource of the waning season. At the dinners he went to they came on with the Little Neck clams and lingered till the Florida strawberries. Society was divided between those who believed they would "pull it off," and those who believed they wouldn't. The majority believed they wouldn't, and the few who predicted their ultimate success were set down as inexperienced or reproved as cynical. The case had really been too flagrant: society must protect itself, must draw the line somewhere. Divers reasons made it desirable to draw the line at Mrs. Wing. A great many ladies, it appeared, had always suspected her of being "horrid". She had abandoned a devoted husband

and a charming child, and her motives for doing so were too crudely utilitarian to be condoned by a society accustomed to drape expediency with sentiment. As Maud Dulacey put it, to elope with Tillotson Wing was like running away with a cheque-book.

It was at one of Mrs. Dulacey's Sunday luncheons that Severance heard the subject most exhaustively discussed. Maud Dulacey was a distant cousin of Severance's, and would have been a near friend if he had not, in the long run, found her too continuously clever. She knew this, and described herself as a dish that he enjoyed tasting occasionally. "He thinks me," she said, "too highly seasoned for human nature's daily food, but now and then he likes to make a meal of me."

She took his intermittent attentions philosophically, and on his return to New York he found her house the best point from which to gather up dropped threads and make a general survey of the social woof. Maud Dulacey herself occupied a little pinnacle of observation on which she was always ready to make room for a friend. She was a cheerful widow of forty, without money or beauty, who consoled herself for the lack of these gifts by an amused sense of their relativity. "If you're rich," she said "there's always somebody richer; and if you're pretty there's always somebody prettier — or younger, which is worse. If you're ugly, you're at least spared the strain of competition: nobody is trying to be uglier, and if some woman succeeds without trying, why you're just that much to the good. And as to the money, it robs a plain woman of her last hope of being loved for herself."

So impartial an observer of the human ant-heap could not but find food for philosophy in the case of Mrs. Wing; but what Mrs. Dulacey really enjoyed was hearing her friends talk about it. It was her ~~fixed~~ belief that people are never so foolish as when they are expatiating on the folly of others, and human foolishness was a phenomenon she never tired of studying.

The means whereby the Wings hoped to gain recognition were as earnestly discussed as their chances of gaining it; and here again opinion was divided. It was generally agreed that, they had done wisely in going abroad as soon as they were married: the battle raged about the expediency of their return, and the wisdom of the course they had since followed.

"The case is hopeless, my dear," Mrs. Van Arkell said, leaning forward to catch her hostess's ear. Mrs. Van Arkell was an emphatic woman, who did not propose to trust her deliverances to chance currents [sic] of attention. "The case is hopeless," she repeated. "They have come home too soon. It is impossible to pretend that we've forgotten: they haven't given us time."

"It is unfortunate for them," remarked Mr. Vimpry, "that no conspicuous scandal has occurred in the interval. They are still the most striking objects on

the horizon.” He adjusted his glass to examine the lamb cutlets at his elbow, and waved them aside with a disenchanted gesture of ~~disaste~~.

Mr. Vimpry was a small dry man who had adopted disparagement as a career.¹² It had introduced him to the most select circles, and usually secured him the best seat at table and his host’s oldest Madeira. The fact that he lived obscurely in lodgings, and, in spite of a comfortable income, made no effort to return the hospitality [sic] he criticized, did not detract from the ~~potency~~ <force> of his ~~depreciation~~ <criticism>. Even Mrs. Van Arkell stood in awe of his verdict, and wavered in her established conviction that her cuisine must be good because it was expensive. It was against all the laws of fitness that Mr. Vimpry should adjust his glass as caus<t>iously before helping himself to her mousse de foie gras en Bellecne<vue>, as before risking himself on one of Maud Dulacey’s cutlets; but he did it, and no matter how far down the table he sat, Mrs. Van Arkell could feel his rejection through her panoply of gold plate and orchids.

“I can’t agree with you in regard to their coming home,” Mr. Vimpry continued, turning to her from the repudiated cutlets. “If they had stayed abroad longer they would have seemed to admit that they were afraid. Their only course is to assume that everything is as it should be, and secure the best cook they can find.”

Mrs. Van Arkell murmured her disapproval. “Oh, if you think it’s a mere question of money —”

Mr. Vimpry dropped his glass in a pitying stare. “Money? A good cook a question of money?” Mrs. Van Arkell felt his commiseration down her spine. “If that is the case,” he enquired urbanely, “why does one invariably eat the worst dinners in the biggest houses?”

“Ah, a big house — a big house,” interposed Mr. Willowby Bence, an immature old man whose satiny upholstered appearance suggested a fly-blown bonbonnière, while his remarks recalled the mottoes wrapped about chocolate creams.¹³ “A big house,” repeated Mr. Bence, whose idea of conversation was to carry it on from the last word of the previous speaker. “That’s what they want, you know — the biggest house they can find; the kind of house that makes people want to get inside. I wonder they haven’t built near the Park; I call it bad policy to hire in a side street.”

“I should call it bad taste to build near the Park,” interposed Mrs. Van Arkell, who lived there herself, and felt that virtuous wealth should have a monopoly of the neighbourhood. Mrs. Van Arkell believed in keeping a snub in circulation, and it was convenient to pass on to Mr. Bence the one she had just received from Mr. Vimpry. Mr. Bence, however, was too intent on catching her last word to be disturbed by the context.

“Ah, taste — “ he said, turning the word over in his mouth like a sugar-plum. “There’s where Mrs. Wing excels, isn’t it? I always tell her that she is the Muse of Millinery. Her gowns are poems, her bonnets sonnets — “

“Her gloves couplets,” Severance obligingly suggested.

“Couplets? Ah, couples — to be sure! Pretty — very pretty,” cried Mr. Bence, with a gesture which seemed to confer the laurel on Severance.

“I hope her boots are not alexandrines,” said Mrs. Dulacey, laughing; but this carried the joke out of range, and Mr. Vimpry, laying down an olive of which he had taken a tentative bite, said judicially: “I believe the truth of the matter is that Wing is too close to buy back his place in society. He ought to spend money, as Bence says; chuck it out of the window — the upper window, so that it makes a clatter when it falls; but I’m told he is already finding Mrs. Wing a more expensive luxury than he’d bargained for.”

“Poor Henry Clephane,” Mrs. Van Arkell sighed; “you know he is still paying off her debts.”

“It would really take a syndicate to dress Alice Wing,” said Mrs. Dulacey thoughtfully.

The lady next to Severance emitted a deprecating murmur. She was a pretty nun-like woman, who wore the most expensive gowns with a penitential [sic] air<,> as though she were under a vow of wealth.

“I don’t see how you can joke about it,” she said. “It all seems to me so very dreadful — especially when one remembers that Henry Clephane is an agnostic, if not worse, and that her mother’s desertion will deprive poor little Valeria of that early religious training which nothing else can ever replace. It seems to me that if Mr. Wing spends any money it ought to be in charity — in good works —”

“A chappelle expiatoire, eh?” said Mr. Vimpry. “My dear Mrs. Dawnay, perhaps Wing has already set up a private one that we don’t know anything about.”

Mrs. Dawnay cast down her eyes: she always thought irony indelicate. “It has been a dreadful blow to the Church,” she said. “Did you hear the Bishop’s sermon last Sunday on the Sanctity of Marriage? There was no mistaking the reference to the Wings.”

<¶> “A sermon à clef?” said Mrs. Dulacey laughing. “That’s a clever idea of the Bishop’s. If his clergy adopt it they will have no difficulty in filling their churches. What fun it will be to puzzle out the allusions to one’s best friends!”

“My dear Maud,” exclaimed Mrs. Van Arkell, “I hope you don’t mean that expression to apply to the Wings?”

Mrs. Dulacey made a slight grimace. “Everything is relative,” she said. “I’m sure we all used to enjoy dining with Alice Clephane.”

“She had a cook who had some faint inkling of a Julienne,” murmured Mr. Vimpry, in a regretful parenthesis.

"I can't see that that makes any difference — our having dined with her," said Mrs. Van Arkell. "Except that it makes her conduct the more inexcusable. But I can't agree with Mrs. Dawnay. I don't think the Church ought to accept money from such a source."

<¶> Mrs. Dawnay smiled faintly. In worldly matters she was willing to submit her judgement to Mrs Van Arkell's; but, as the Bishop's Egeria and the holder of an ecclesiastical salon, she could not allow herself to be set right on points of religious discipline.

<¶> "You seem to forget, dear Mrs. Van Arkell," she said in a tone of Christian suavity, "that the Church sanctifies any gift she consents to receive, no matter how contaminated its source ~~may have been~~."

Vimpry leaned towards Severance. "Considering where the Claymore money came from," he said in an undertone, "that doctrine must be a great consolation to your neighbour."

"I have it on very good authority," Mrs. Dawnay continued, "<>that, in the Wings' case, a large contribution to the Diocesan Fund — or possibly to Foreign Missions — might —"

Mrs. Van Arkell interrupted her. "You don't mean to say it would make the Bishop recognize them?" she gasped.

"Oh — in his prayers," said Mrs. Dawnay gently.

Mrs. Van Arkell tossed her head disparagingly. "Yes — that's as far as they are likely to get," she said.

"In that case," murmured Mr. Vimpry, "they would be like people who had taken tickets to the wrong station. I fancy it would be rather annoying to the Wings to find themselves on the through train to heaven."

"Oh, never fear," said his hostess rising. "We shan't have to go to heaven to meet them. I'm afraid they won't afford us such a direct incentive to good conduct."

"I can't understand you, Maud," exclaimed Mrs. Van Arkell, following her; "<> you don't seem to realize their position. All Alice's relations have cut her. Even Isabella Neafe, to whom she used to give all her old gowns, won't speak to her."

"Let her try giving her some new ones, then," said Mrs. Dulacey with cheerful scepticism, as she led the way into her small sunny drawing-room; and Mrs. Van Arkell, with a ~~discouraged~~ sense of crying in the wilderness, turned to murmur to Severance: "Dear Maud makes a joke of everything; but it is sickening to hear Louisa<e> Dawnay talk in that way about <the> religious training of children, when one knows that Phil Dawnay is the worst boy of his age at St Leo's, and that Dr. Wessel has twice threatened to expel him."

Severance, as he walked up Fifth Avenue after Mrs. Dulacey's luncheon, found his thoughts less engaged with the Wings than with the persons who had

been discussing them. These formed a part of the little group amid which he had grown up, so that Mrs. Van Arkell's auburn front and axiomatic utterances, Mr. Vimpry's fault-finding and Louise Dawnay's sacerdotalism, were inwoven with his earliest states of ~~special~~ consciousness. He was surprised to find how unchanged they were. Their ideas grazed in the same circle, though the space they fed on had long since been cropped bare. Things that seemed to them to loom large and imminent were to Severance mere specks on the horizon; and they themselves had become to him at once more remote and more definite, so that he saw them from a greater distance yet with a new distinctiveness — saw the surprising naïveté of Mrs. Van Arkell's social ambitions, the simplicity of goodness hidden under Mr. Bence's perfumed manner, the immaculate <skill with which Mrs. Dawnay had raised her> structure of worldly pietism which Mrs. Dawnay had built upon the muddy Claymore millions. He was aware that the sense of incongruity would lose its edge as he slipped back into the old grooves of thought and feeling; but there would remain a difference bred of his wider contact with life, a difference which would cause him to see people and conditions in relation to larger issues than were dreamed of in his old philosophy.

As he reached this point in his reflections he found himself caught in the cross-current of fashionable church-goers pouring in <into> the pseudo-Gothic doorway of Saint Andrew's, and drew back for a moment to observe the procession. He did not expect to find any friends in it. His own familiars, at that hour, were more likely to be playing bridge in drawing-rooms hazy with cigarette smoke; but he was mildly interested in noting the usual types of afternoon piety: old maids, incipient and evolved, middle-aged ladies swathed in chronic crape, and solid-looking men in whom the bank-president and church-warden were judiciously blent. It was a species differing totally from the showy morning congregation, and representing, as it were, the scant survival of earlier devotional forms. But as Severance watched, a brougham glossy with recent varnish and drawn by a pair of flamboyant chestnuts drew up at the door with a jangle of pole-chains which broke flippantly on the drowsy prelude of the organ. From this mundane equipage there emerged a gentleman, impeccably frock-coated and pearl-gloved, but descending somewhat cautiously, as though afraid to trust the whole weight of his plethoric person to the patent-leather foot which preceded it. He turned to help his companion, and as he did so Severance recognized the vague countenance and cloudy eye of Tillotson Wing. The eye had grown cloudier, the features more indefinite, as though the man's identity were disappearing under a steady accretion of fat. But no such effacement threatened the lady who accompanied him. Time and absence restored her to Severance's sight in a completer fulness of youth, of health, of smooth untarnished loveliness, than his memory of her had retained. Never, surely, had there been such harmony between the rich discretion of her toilet and the temperate brilliance of

her mien. There was a classical balance, a delicate finality, about her outline, her movements, her way of turning to receive her prayer-book from the foot-man, as though every line and gesture implied that here was the accepted standard of beauty, to which other women must conform or be found wanting. But as she turned her eye caught Severance's, and at once the look of competence, of security, vanished. She flushed red, with the redness that spreads relentlessly from throat to brow, her hand nearly missed the turquoise-studded prayer-book, and for a moment she fixed on Severance a gaze of mingled deprecation and entreaty. For a moment only; then he raised his hat, and as she caught his bow and returned it, she became once more the unruffled beauty dispensing her impartial smiles.

It was over in a flash; but after she had passed into the church, Severance, for an appreciable time, continued to stare at the wake of impressions she had left.

"They must cut her; how damnable!" he murmured; and as he turned to resume his walk up Fifth Avenue, his inferences summed themselves up in the mental ejaculation: "She couldn't have realized that she'd have to go to afternoon church!"

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essay, 'A Cycle of Reviewing,' Wharton cleverly disputed the charge that her work dealt exclusively with the world of the wealthy, while she simultaneously undermines the very basis of the charge itself:

But of late a far more serious charge has been brought against me. It is that I write only about the rich! I will not pause to controvert this by giving a list of my tales, which deal with divers classes of people; my point is other. Supposing I *did* write only about the rich – what then? If I did, the chances would be that it was because they happened to be the material most "to my hand." Twenty years ago the same charge was brought against a man of genius: it is no secret that a leading review reject *Du Côté de chez Swann*, because Proust dealt in it with the fashionable, and tales of the fashionable were not then in demand.

(‘A Cycle of Reviewing,’ *Spectator*, 3 November 1928, reprinted in F. Wegener (ed.), *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, pp.161–2)

15. *They did not ... Madeline's silent happiness*: Though the portrayal of Madeline is almost entirely insipid (a point not lost on the uncompromising *Pall Mall Budget* ‘reviewer’ who labelled her the ‘sickliest goddess’), her character appears to be sacrificed for the purposes of plot and convention. The physical depiction, however, effectively displays the symbolic opposition that will be repeated for *The Age of Innocence* – *Fast and Loose*’s dark, passionate character of Georgie, with her brown eyes and brown curls, and the pure, fair, childlike ‘rival’ Madeline, with the pale golden hair and blue eyes. (Each of the ‘love rivals’ in both texts will also be associated with flowers for the male protagonist; yet, while the characters of May and Ellen attract opposing bouquets from Newland Archer in ‘pure’ lilies of the valley and rich yellow roses respectively, the contrasting figures of the early text, Georgie and Madeline – the latter with her ‘pretty’ ‘passion for flowers’ – will both be linked to violets at points, the flower adorning Georgie’s grave).
16. *Could it be ... in his life?:* ‘Could it be that he too suffered, & felt a bitter want in his life?’ Even in this youthful text, we can apply Showalter’s observation that ‘Wharton’s critique of the marriage system is not limited to the economic dependency of women but also extends to consider the loneliness, dehumanization, and anxiety of men’ (E. Showalter, ‘The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*’ in E. Ammons (ed.) *The House of Mirth* (New York: Norton, 1990), p/ 366.) Lord Breton is also miserable in his marriage. *Fast and Loose* takes a perturbing turn, however, when Georgie appears, literally, to kill her husband with an unexpected moment of kindness.
17. *But Guy Hastings’ ... Georgie’s grave*: In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton remembers the closing line of *Fast and Loose* as: ‘And every year when April comes the violets bloom again on Georgie’s grave’ (*BG*, p. 51).

Disintegration

1. *Was hat man ... Kind, gethan?:* ‘What have they done to you, poor child?’ From Mignon’s Song in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Wharton’s love of Goethe developed at a precocious age. In *Life and I*, she describes herself, as a child, having ‘...plunged with rapture into the great ocean of Goethe’ (*Life and I*, see p. 196). Though Lucretia Jones had decreed her daughter ‘should never read a novel without asking her permission’ (*BG*, p. 45), *Wilhelm Meister* evaded censorship: ‘At fifteen I had read every word of his plays & poems, Dichtung und Wahrheit, & Wilhelm Meister. (The other novels were novels, & therefore prohibited!)’ (*Life and I*, see p. 196). *Wilhelm*

Meister is also referenced in the final, mock review of *Fast and Loose* (see p. 63), the novel written when she was only fourteen.

2. *Don't, lovey, don't ... my own mamma?:* This episode echoes an incident described in Wharton's last reminiscence 'A Further Glance', published posthumously as 'A Little Girl's New York'. In it, Wharton recalls, as a seventeen-year-old, being instructed by her mother to look away when 'New York's first fashionable hetaera' ('*femme entretenue*' in the manuscript) passed them in a 'small canary-yellow brougham' – 'an apparition surpassing in elegance and mystery any that Fifth Avenue had ever seen.' 'A Little Girl's New York', reprinted in F. Wegener (ed.), *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 275–6.
3. : Throughout the typescript, most of these dashes appear to have been added by hand. Where the typist has originally used four or five typed dots or three hyphens as ellipses, these have been inked over in black pen with a single line. As noted in Volume 1, this stylistic amendment was also evident in the typescript of the play, *The Man of Genius*.
4. *Noony had the ... in breaking them:* A number of Wharton's biographers read Noony as a fictional version of Edith Jones's much loved childhood nurse, Hannah Doyle ('Doyley'). See Lee, *Edith Wharton*, p. 178 and Wolff, *A Feast of Words*, p. 95. In *A Backward Glance* (which also opens very precisely located on Fifth Avenue), Doyley inspires an extraordinary homage:

...there was one rich all-permeating presence: Doyley. How I pity all children who have not had a Doyley – a nurse who has always been there, who is as established as the sky and as warm as the sun, who understands everything, feels everything, can arrange everything, and combines all the powers of the Divinity with the compassion of a mortal heart like one's own! Doyley's presence was the warm cocoon in which my infancy lived safe and sheltered; the atmosphere without which I could not have breathed. It is thanks to Doyley that not one bitter memory, one uncomprehended injustice, darkened the days when the soul's flesh is so tender, and the remembrance of wrongs so acute (*BG*, p. 19).
5. *closer ... oughtn't:* A line is inked in the typescript from the word 'closer' to 'Oughtn't' to join the end of one sentence to the next. For reference to the language employed for the father/daughter relationship, see note 20 below.
6. *Improper? ... of precise meaning:* Valeria's endeavours to comprehend situations and events that her elders refuse to explain – or, at times, even acknowledge – recall Wharton's descriptions of her own groping to understanding of 'adult' affairs in the autobiographical writings: her imaginative definitions of 'consort' and 'adultery'; her mother's stern refusal to explain 'the whole dark mystery' of 'what will happen' after marriage (*Life and I*, see pp. 188 and 197).
7. *Val's intimacy with ... going down town:* With his return to business to pay off his wife's debts ('tied to a desk in a broker's office'), Henry Clephane is an early entry on the list of largely absent male breadwinners in Wharton's fiction. ('...what did men go "down town" for but to bring back the spoils to their women?' (*CC*, p. 54)). In *The House of Mirth*, Mr Bart is only a 'hazy outline' to his daughter, filling 'an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks' (*HM*, p. 52). In his wife's eyes, once he loses his money he 'no longer counted: he had become extinct' (*HM*, p. 58). Like *The Custom of the Country's* Ralph Marvell, Clephane sets aside his literary ambitions to move into business. All three men have expensive assets in their choice of wives.
8. *Two years had ... Clephane's doorstep:* The section from 'Val had celebrated the wonders of her mother's new bonnet...' in the final section of chapter 2 to '... I was out of the range

of the papers' in chapter three (three pages of original typescript in total – typescript pages 16 to 18 inclusive), evidences Wharton's cut and pasting processes. Pages 16 and 17 of the typescript have been scissored, leaving two-thirds of the sheets remaining. The surviving, shortened page 17 consists of two part sheets pasted together, while page 18 is made up of three strips of paper glued to make a whole. While other chapter numbers are typed, the number of chapter three is added by hand in black ink. The insertion is made at the top of the page, not part way down like all the typed versions, indicating that Wharton may not have originally intended a chapter break at this point or that she had rewritten or removed a section of the chapter, necessitating the manual insertion of the number III. The cut and pasting and revisions to this section, describing the arrival of Severance and the opening of his discussion with Clephane, may evidence that Wharton hesitated over the most effective use of Severance as both a perspective and a physical plot device – his return after a two year absence prompting Clephane to reveal to his friend (and, crucially, to the reader) the background to his wife's 'desertion'.

9. *Alice*: This is the first of the rare occasions on which the absent female protagonist of *Disintegration* is referred to by her name: Alice. She is typically defined as Valeria's mother, or known only by her first husband's name, and then predominantly by the second. *Disintegration* reminds us of Wharton's practice of recycling names in her work. Notably, in her untitled play (see Volume 1, pp. 67–89), Alice Wing is the maid around whom the drama revolves; in the early story 'Souls Belated' (1899), Tillotson is the first husband who divorces Lydia after she has eloped; and the name Severance will be reused decades later for both 'Confession' and *Kate Spain*.
10. *There are depths ... I've dropped into*: Lily Bart will use a similar metaphor to describe her plight, though – as a woman – her fall takes her to the lower social depths: "I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap – and you don't know what it's like in the rubbish heap!" (*HM*, p. 433).
11. *sharpened*: Having inserted a paragraph break two sentences earlier, Wharton inks a line in the typescript from the word 'sharpened' to link to the next sentence 'He had not been a week in town...'
12. *Mr. Vimpry was ... as a career*: This line is rehearsed in Wharton's *Donnée Book* of 1900, an unnumbered page featuring the single sentence: 'M^r Vimpry had adopted disparagement as a career' (Beinecke).
13. *Ah, a big house ... house*: The description of Mr Bence's conversation here and its delivery two paragraphs later is also adapted from a reference in the 1900 *Donnée Book* (p. 47): 'M^r Elderby Fynkle [?] – a fly-blown bonbonniere [*sic*] – his conversation like the mottoes wrapp'd around sugar-plums.' (Beinecke).
14. *She felt herself ... hostage to fate*: The descriptions of Valeria's situation appear increasingly to prefigure the imagery of constriction, imprisonment and entrapment that punctuates Wharton's most famous works. (See General Introduction, Volume 1, p. 9–10.)
15. *purpose ... Mrs. Neafe*: Wharton combines two paragraphs at this point by drawing a line to link 'beneficent purpose', to 'Mrs. Neafe never did anything...'
16. *Val and I ... old girl?*: Gianfranca Balestra suggests the 'oedipal character' of this father-daughter attachment is 'very frankly depicted' ('What the Children Knew...', p. 9), while Joslin sees 'a little of the Electra impulse' in the relationship' (*Edith Wharton*, p. 115). Many critics have noted an incest motif in Wharton's writings, for example in *The Reef*, *Summer*, *The Mother's Recompense*, while Gloria Erlich, David Holbrook and others