XVIII.

The terrible stroke sobered Ferris; he woke from his long debauch of hate and jealousy and despair; for the first time since that night in the garden he faced his fate with a clear mind. Death had set his seal for ever to a testimony which he had been able neither to refuse nor to accept; in abject sorrow and shame he thanked God that he had been kept from dealing that last cruel blow; but if Don Ippolito had come back from the dead to repeat his witness, Ferris felt that the miracle could not change his own passive state. There was now but one thing in the world for him to do: to see Florida, to confront her with his knowledge of all that had been, and to abide by her word, whatever it was. At the worst, there was the war, whose drums had already called to him for a refuge.

He thought at first that he might perhaps overtake the Vervains before they sailed for America, but he remembered that they had left Venice six weeks before. It seemed impossible that he could wait, but when he landed in New York, he was tormented in his impatience by a strange reluctance and
hesitation. A fantastic light fell upon his plans; a sense of its wildness enfeebled his purpose. What was he going to do? Had he come four thousand miles to tell Florida that Don Ippolito was dead? Or was he going to say, "I have heard that you love me, but I don't believe it: is it true?"

He pushed on to Providence, stifling these antic misgivings as he might, and without allowing himself time to falter from his intent, he set out to find Mrs. Vervain's house. He knew the street and the number, for she had often given him the address in her invitations against the time when he should return to America. As he drew near the house a tender trepidation filled him and silenced all other senses in him; his heart beat thickly; the universe included only the fact that he was to look upon the face he loved, and this fact had neither past nor future.

But a terrible foreboding as of death seized him when he stood before the house, and glanced up at its close-shuttered front, and round upon the dusty grass-plots and neglected flower-beds of the door-yard. With a cold hand he rang and rang again, and no answer came. At last a man lounged up to the fence from the next house-door. "Guess you won't make anybody hear," he said, casually,
"Doesn't Mrs. Vervain live in this house?" asked Ferris, finding a husky voice in his throat that sounded to him like some other's voice lost there.

"She used to, but she isn't at home. Family's in Europe."

They had not come back yet.

"Thanks," said Ferris mechanically, and he went away. He laughed to himself at this keen irony of fortune; he was prepared for the confirmation of his doubts; he was ready for relief from them, Heaven knew; but this blank that the turn of the wheel had brought, this Nothing!

The Vervains were as lost to him as if Europe were in another planet. How should he find them there? Besides, he was poor; he had no money to get back with, if he had wanted to return.

He took the first train to New York, and hunted up a young fellow of his acquaintance, who in the days of peace had been one of the governor's aides. He was still holding this place, and was an ardent recruiter. He hailed with rapture the expression of Ferris's wish to go into the war. "Look here!" he said after a moment's thought, "didn't you have some rank as a consul?"

"Yes," replied Ferris with a dreary smile, "I have been equivalent to a commander in
the navy and a colonel in the army—I don’t mean both, but either."

"Good!" cried his friend. "We must strike high. The colonelcies are rather inaccessible, just at present, and so are the lieutenant-colonelcies; but a majorship, now"—

"Oh no; don’t!" pleaded Ferris. "Make me a corporal—or a cook. I shall not be so mischievous to our own side, then, and when the other fellows shoot me, I shall not be so much of a loss."

"Oh, they won’t shoot you," expostulated his friend, high-heartedly. He got Ferris a commission as second lieutenant, and lent him money to buy a uniform.

Ferris’s regiment was sent to a part of the south-west, where he saw a good deal of fighting and fever and ague. At the end of two years, spent alternately in the field and the hospital, he was riding out near the camp one morning in unusual spirits, when two men in butternut fired at him: one had the mortification to miss him; the bullet of the other struck him in the arm. There was talk of amputation at first, but the case was finally managed without. In Ferris’s state of health it was quite the same an end of his soldiering.

He came north sick and maimed and poor. He smiled now to think of confronting
Florida in any imperative or challenging spirit; but the current of his hopeless melancholy turned more and more towards her. He had once, at a desperate venture, written to her at Providence, but he had got no answer. He asked of a Providence man among the artists in New York, if he knew the Vervains; the Providence man said that he did know them a little when he was much younger; they had been abroad a great deal; he believed in a dim way that they were still in Europe. The young one, he added, used to have a temper of her own.

"Indeed!" said Ferris stiffly.

The one fast friend whom he found in New York was the governor's dashing aide. The enthusiasm of this recruiter of regiments had not ceased with Ferris's departure for the front; the number of disabled officers forbade him to lionise any one of them, but he befriended Ferris; he made a feint of discovering the open secret of his poverty, and asked how he could help him.

"I don't know," said Ferris, "it looks like a hopeless case, to me."

"Oh no, it isn't," retorted his friend, as cheerfully and confidently as he had promised him that he should not be shot. "Didn't you bring back any pictures from Venice with you?"
"I brought back a lot of sketches and studies. I'm sorry to say that I loafed a good deal there; I used to feel that I had eternity before me; and I was a theorist and a purist and an idiot generally. There are none of them fit to be seen."

"Never mind; let's look at them."

They hunted out Ferris's property from a catch-all closet in the studio of a sculptor with whom he had left them, and who expressed a polite pleasure in handing them over to Ferris rather than to his heirs and assigns. "Well, I'm not sure that I share your satisfaction, old fellow," said the painter ruefully; but he unpacked the sketches.

Their inspection certainly revealed a disheartening condition of half-work. "And I can't do anything to help the matter for the present," groaned Ferris, stopping midway in the business, and making as if to shut the case again.

"Hold on!" said his friend. "What's this? Why, this isn't so bad." It was the study of Don Ippolito as a Venetian priest, which Ferris beheld with a stupid amaze, remembering that he had meant to destroy it, and wondering how it had got where it was, but not really caring much. "It's worse than you can imagine," said he, still looking at it with this apathy.
"No matter; I want you to sell it to me. Come!"

"I can't!" replied Ferris piteously. "It would be flat burglary."

"Then put it into the Exhibition."

The sculptor, who had gone back to scraping the chin of the famous public man on whose bust he was at work, stabbed him to the heart with his modelling-tool, and turned to Ferris and his friend. He slanted his broad red beard for a sidelong look at the picture, and said: "I know what you mean, Ferris. It's hard, and it's feeble in some ways; and it looks a little too much like experimenting. But it isn't so infernally bad."

"Don't be fulsome," responded Ferris, jadedly. He was thinking in a thoroughly vanquished mood what a tragico-comic end of the whole business it was that poor Don Ippolito should come to his rescue in this fashion, and as it were offer to succour him in his extremity. He perceived the shamefulness of suffering such help; it would be much better to starve; but he felt cowed, and he had not courage to take arms against his sarcastic destiny, which had pursued him with a mocking smile from one lower level to another. He rubbed his forehead and brooded upon the picture. At least it
would be some comfort to be rid of it; and Don Ippolito was dead; and to whom could it mean more than the face of it? A

His friend had his way about framing it, and it was got into the Exhibition. The hanging-committee offered it the hospitali-
ties of an obscure corner; but it was there, and it stood its chance. Nobody seemed to know that it was there, however, unless confronted with it by Ferris's friend, and then no one seemed to care for it, much less want to buy it. Ferris saw so many much worse pictures sold all around it, that he began gloomily to respect it. At first it had shocked him to see it on the Academy's wall; but it soon came to have no other relation to him than that of creatureship, like a poem in which a poet celebrates his love or laments his dead, and sells for a price. His pride as well as his poverty was set on having the picture sold; he had nothing to do, and he used to lurk about, and see if it would not interest somebody at last. But it remained unsold throughout May, and well into June, long after the crowds had ceased to frequent the Exhibition, and only chance visitors from the country struggled in by twos and threes.

One warm, dusty afternoon, when he turned into the Academy out of Fourth
A FOUREGONE CONCLUSION. 299

Avenue, the empty hall echoed to no footfall but his own. A group of weary women, who wore that look of wanting lunch which characterises all picture-gallery-goers at home and abroad, stood faint before a certain large Venetian subject which Ferris abhorred, and the very name of which he spat out of his mouth with loathing for its unreality. He passed them with a sombre glance, as he took his way toward the retired spot where his own painting hung.

A lady whose crapes would have betrayed to her own sex the latest touch of Paris stood a little way back from it, and gazed fixedly at it. The pose of her head, her whole attitude, expressed a quiet dejection; without seeing her face one could know its air of pensive wistfulness. Ferris resolved to indulge himself in a near approach to this unwonted spectacle of interest in his picture; at the sound of his steps the lady slowly turned a face of somewhat heavily moulded beauty, and from low-growing, thick pale hair and level brows, stared at him with the sad eyes of Florida Vervain. She looked fully the last two years older.

As though she were listening to the sound of his steps in the dark instead of having him there visibly before her, she kept her eyes upon him with a dreamy unreognition.
"Yes, it is I," said Ferris, as if she had spoken.

She recovered herself, and with a subdued, sorrowful quiet in her old directness, she answered, "I supposed you must be in New York," and she indicated that she had supposed so from seeing this picture.

Ferris felt the blood mounting to his head. "Do you think it is like?" he asked.

"No," she said, "it isn't just to him; it attributes things that didn't belong to him, and it leaves out a great deal."

"I could scarcely have hoped to please you in a portrait of Don Ippolito." Ferris saw the red light break out as it used on the girl's pale cheeks, and her eyes dilate angrily. He went on recklessly: "He sent for me after you went away, and gave me a message for you. I never promised to deliver it, but I will do so now. He asked me to tell you when we met, that he had acted on your desire, and had tried to reconcile himself to his calling and his religion; he was going to enter a Carmelite convent."

Florida made no answer, but she seemed to expect him to go on, and he was constrained to do so.

"He never carried out his purpose," Ferris said, with a keen glance at her; "he died the night after I saw him."
"Died?" The fan and the parasol and the two or three light packages she had been holding slid down one by one, and lay at her feet. "Thank you for bringing me his last words," she said, but did not ask him anything more.

Ferris did not offer to gather up her things; he stood irresolute; presently he continued with a downcast look: "He had had a fever, but they thought he was getting well. His death must have been sudden." He stopped, and resumed fiercely, resolved to have the worse out: "I went to him, with no good-will toward him, the next day after I saw him; but I came too late. That was God's mercy to me. I hope you have your consolation, Miss Vervain."

It maddened him to see her so little moved, and he meant to make her share his remorse.

"Did he blame me for anything?" she asked.

"No!" said Ferris, with a bitter laugh, "he praised you."

"I am glad of that," returned Florida, "for I have thought it all over many times, and I know that I was not to blame, though at first I blamed myself. I never intended him anything but good. That is my consolation, Mr. Ferris. But you," she added,
"you seem to make yourself my judge. Well, and what do you blame me for? I have a right to know what is in your mind."

The thing that was in his mind had rankled there for two years; in many a black reverie of those that alternated with his moods of abject self-reproach and perfect trust of her, he had confronted her and flung it out upon her in one stinging phrase. But he was now suddenly at a loss; the words would not come; his torment fell dumb before her; in her presence the cause was unspeakable. Her lips had quivered a little in making that demand, and there had been a corresponding break in her voice.

"Florida! Florida!" Ferris heard himself saying, "I loved you all the time!"

"Oh indeed, did you love me?" she cried, indignantly, while the tears shone in her eyes. "And was that why you left a helpless young girl to meet that trouble alone? Was that why you refused me your advice, and turned your back on me, and snubbed me? Oh, many thanks for your love!" She dashed the gathered tears angrily away, and went on. "Perhaps you knew, too, what that poor priest was thinking of?"

"Yes," said Ferris, stolidly, "I did at last: he told me."

"Oh, then you acted generously and
nobly to let him go on! It was kind to him, and very, very kind to me!"

"What could I do?" demanded Ferris, amazed and furious to find himself on the defensive. "His telling me put it out of my power to act."

"I'm glad that you can satisfy yourself with such a quibble! But I wonder that you can tell me—any woman of it!"

"By Heavens, this is atrocious!" cried Ferris. "Do you think—Look here!" he went on rudely. "I'll put the case to you, and you shall judge it. Remember that I was such a fool as to be in love with you. Suppose Don Ippolito had told me that he was going to risk everything—going to give up home, religion, friends—on the ten thousandth part of a chance that you might some day care for him. I did not believe he had even so much chance as that; but he had always thought me his friend, and he trusted me. Was it a quibble that kept me from betraying him? I don't know what honour is among women; but no man could have done it. I confess to my shame that I went to your house that night longing to betray him. And then suppose your mother sent me into the garden to call you, and I saw—what has made my life a hell of doubt for the last two years; what—No, excuse
me! I can’t put the case to you after all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Florida.
“I don’t understand you!”

“What do I mean? You don’t understand? Are you so blind as that, or are you making a fool of me? What could I think but that you had played with that priest’s heart till your own”—

“Oh!” cried Florida with a shudder, starting away from him, “did you think I was such a wicked girl as that?”

It was no defence, no explanation, no denial; it simply left the case with Ferris as before. He stood looking like a man who does not know whether to bless or curse himself, to laugh or blaspheme.

She stooped and tried to pick up the things she had let fall upon the floor; but she seemed not able to find them. He bent over, and, gathering them together, returned them to her with his left hand, keeping the other in the breast of his coat.

“Thanks,” she said; and then asked timidly, “Have you been hurt?”

“Yes,” said Ferris in a sulky way, “I have had my share.” He glanced down at his arm askance. “It’s rather conventional,” he added. “It isn’t much of a hurt; but then I wasn’t much of a soldier.”
The girl's eyes looked reverently at the conventional arm; those were the days, so long past when women worshipped men for such things. But she said nothing, and, as Ferris's eyes wandered to her, he received a novel and painful impression. He said, hesitatingly, "I have not asked before: but your mother, Miss Vervain—I hope she is well?"

"She is dead," answered Florida with stony quiet.

They were both silent for a time. Then Ferris said, "I had a great affection for your mother."

"Yes," said the girl, "she was fond of you, too. But you never wrote or sent her any word; it used to grieve her."

Her unjust reproach went to his heart, so long preoccupied with its own troubles; he recalled with a tender remorse the old Venetian days, and the kindliness of the gracious, silly woman who had seemed to like him so much; he remembered the charm of her perfect ladylikeness, and of her winning, weak-headed desire to make everyone happy to whom she spoke; the beauty of the good-will, the hospitable soul that in an imaginably better world than this will outvalue a merely intellectual or aesthetic life. He humbled himself before her memory, and as keenly reproached himself as
if he could have made her hear from him at any time during the past two years. He could only say, "I am sorry that I gave your mother pain; I loved her very truly. I hope she did not suffer much before"—

"No," said Florida, "it was a peaceful end; but finally it was very sudden. She had not been well for many years, with that sort of decline; I used sometimes to feel troubled about her before we came to Venice; but I was very young. I never was really alarmed till that day I went to you."

"I remember," said Ferris contritely.

"She had fainted, and I thought we ought to see a doctor; but afterwards, because I thought that I ought not to do so without speaking to her, I did not go to the doctor; and that day we made up our minds to get home as soon as we could; and she seemed so much better, for a while; and then, everything seemed to happen at once. When we did start home, she could not go any farther than Switzerland, and in the fall we went back to Italy. We went to Sorrento, where the climate seemed to do her good. But she was growing fatter the whole time. She died in March. I found some old friends of hers in Naples, and came home with them."

The girl hesitated a little over the words,
which she nevertheless uttered unbroken, while the tears fell quietly down her face. She seemed to have forgotten the angry words that had passed between her and Ferris, to remember him only as one who had known her mother, while she went on to relate some little facts in the history of her mother's last days; and she rose into a higher, serener atmosphere, inaccessible to his resentment or his regret, as she spoke of her loss. The simple tale of sickness and death inexpressibly belittled his passionate woes, and made them look theatrical to him. He hung his head as they turned at her motion and walked away from the picture of Don Ippolito, and down the stairs toward the street-door; the people before the other Venetian picture had apparently yielded to their craving for lunch, and had vanished.

"I have very little to tell you of my own life," Ferris began awkwardly. "I came home soon after you started, and I went to Providence to find you, but you had not got back."

Florida stopped him and looked perplexedly into his face and then moved on.

"Then I went into the army. I wrote once to you."

"I never got your letter," she said.

They were now in the lower hall, and near the door.
"Florida," said Ferris, abruptly, "I'm poor and disabled; I've no more right than any sick beggar in the street to say it to you; but I loved you, I must always love you. I—Good-bye!"

She halted him again, and "You said," she grieved, "that you doubted me; you said that I had made your life a"—

"Yes, I said that; I know it," answered Ferris.

"You thought I could be such a false and cruel girl as that!"

"Yes, yes: I thought it all, God help me!"

"When I was only sorry for him, when it was you that I"—

"Oh, I know it," answered Ferris in a heartsick, hopeless voice. "He knew it, too. He told me so the day before he died."

"And didn't you believe him?"

Ferris could not answer.

"Do you believe him now?"—"I believe anything you tell me. When I look at you, I can't believe I ever doubted you."

"Why?"—"Because—I love you."

"Oh! that's no reason."—"I know it; but I'm used to being without a reason."

Florida looked gravely at his penitent face, and a brave red colour mantled her own, while she advanced an unanswerable argument: "Then what are you going away for?"
The world seemed to melt and float away from between them. It returned and solidified at the sound of the janitor’s steps as he came towards them on his round through the empty building. Ferris caught her hand; she leaned heavily upon his arm as they walked out into the street. It was all they could do at the moment except to look into each other’s faces, and walk swiftly on.

At last, after how long a time he did not know, Ferris cried: “Where are we going, Florida?”

“Why, I don’t know!” she replied. “I’m stopping with those friends of ours at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. We were going on to Providence to-morrow. We landed yesterday; and we stayed to do some shopping”

“And may I ask why you happened to give your first moments in America to the fine arts?”

“The fine arts? Oh! I thought I might find something of yours there!”

At the hotel she presented him to her party as a friend whom her mother and she had known in Italy; and then went to lay aside her hat. The Providence people received him with the easy, half-southern warmth of manner which seems to have floated northward as far as their city on the Gulf Stream bathing the Rhode Island shores.
The matron of the party had, before Florida came back, an outline history of their acquaintance, which she evolved from him with so much tact that he was not conscious of parting with information; and she divined indefinitely more when she saw them together again. She was charming; but to Ferris’s thinking she had a fault, she kept him too much from Florida, though she talked of nothing else, and at the last she was discreetly merciful.

"Do you think," whispered Florida, very close against his face, when they parted, "that I’ll have a bad temper?"

"I hope you will—or I shall be killed with kindness," he replied.

She stood a moment, nervously buttoning his coat across his breast. "You mustn’t let that picture be sold, Henry," she said, and by this touch alone did she express any sense, if she had it, of his want of feeling in proposing to sell it. He winced, and she added with a soft pity in her voice, "He did bring us together, after all. I wish you had believed him, dear!"

"So do I," said Ferris, most humbly.

People are never equal to the romance of their youth in after life, except by fits, and Ferris especially could not keep himself at what he called the operatic pitch of their
brief betrothal and the early days of their marriage. With his help, or even his encouragement, his wife might have been able to maintain it. She had a gift for idealising him, at least, and as his hurt healed but slowly, and it was a good while before he could paint with his wounded arm, it was an easy matter for her to believe in the meanwhile that he would have been the greatest painter of his time, but for his honourable disability; to hear her, you would suppose no one else had ever been shot in the service of his country.

It was fortunate for Ferris, since he could not work, that she had money; in exalted moments he had thought this a barrier to their marriage; yet he could not recall any one who had refused the hand of a beautiful girl because of the accident of her wealth, and in the end he silenced his scruples. It might be said that in many other ways he was not her equal; but one ought to reflect how very few men are worthy of their wives in any sense. After his fashion he certainly loved her always,—even when she tried him most, for it must be owned that she really had that hot temper which he had dreaded in her from the first. Not that her imperiousness directly affected him. For a long time after their marriage, she seemed to
have no other desire than to lose her outworned will in his. There was something a little pathetic in this; there was a kind of bewilderment in her gentleness, as though the relaxed tension of her long self-devotion to her mother left her without a full motive; she apparently found it impossible to give herself with a satisfactory degree of abandon to a man who could do so many things for himself. When her children came they filled this vacancy, and afforded her scope for the greatest excesses of self-devotion. Ferris laughed to find her protecting them and serving them with the same tigerish tenderness, the same haughty humility, as that with which she used to care for poor Mrs. Vervain; and he perceived that this was merely the direction away from herself of that intense arrogance of nature which, but for her power and need of loving, would have made her intolerable. What she chiefly exacted from them in return for her fierce devotedness was the truth in everything; she was content that they should be rather less fond of her than of their father, whom, indeed, they found much more amusing.

The Ferrises went to Europe some years after their marriage, revisiting Venice, but sojourning for the most part in Florence. Ferris had once imagined that the tragedy
which had given him his wife would always invest her with the shadow of its sadness, but in this he was mistaken. There is nothing has really so strong a digestion as love, and this is very lucky, seeing what manifold experiences love has to swallow and assimilate; and when they got back to Venice, Ferris found that the customs of their joint life exorcised all the dark associations of the place. These simply formed a sombre background, against which their wedded happiness relieved itself. They talked much of the past, with free minds, unashamed and unafraid. If it is a little shocking, it is nevertheless true, and true to human nature, that they spoke of Don Ipolito as if he were a part of their love.

Ferris had never ceased to wonder at what he called the unfathomable innocence of his wife, and he liked to go over all the points of their former life in Venice, and bring home to himself the utter simplicity of her girlish ideas, motives, and designs, which both confounded and delighted him.

"It's amazing, Florida," he would say, "it's perfectly amazing that you should have been willing to undertake the job of importing into America that poor fellow with his whole stock of helplessness, dreamery, and unpracticality. What were you about?"
"Why, I've often told you, Henry. I thought he oughtn't to continue a priest."

"Yes, yes; I know." Then he would remain lost in thought, softly whistling to himself. On one of these occasions he asked, "Do you think he was really very much troubled by his false position?"

"I can't tell, now. He seemed to be so."

"That story he told you of his childhood and of how he became a priest; didn't it strike you at the time like rather a made-up, melodramatic history?"

"No, no! How can you say such things, Henry? It was too simple not to be true."

"Well, well. Perhaps so. But he baffles me. He always did, for that matter."

Then came another pause, while Ferris lay back upon the gondola cushions, getting the level of the Lido just under his hat-brim.

"Do you think he was very much of a sceptic, after all, Florida?"

Mrs. Ferris turned her eyes reproachfully upon her husband. "Why, Henry, how strange you are! You said yourself, once, that you used to wonder if he were not a sceptic."—"Yes; I know. But for a man who had lived in doubt so many years, he certainly slipped back into the bosom of mother Church pretty suddenly. Don't you think he was a person of rather light feelings?"
"I can't talk with you, my dear, if you go on in that way."

"I don't mean any harm. I can see how in many things he was the soul of truth and honour. But it seems to me that even the life he lived was largely imagined. I mean that he was such a dreamer that once having fancied himself afflicted at being what he was, he could go on and suffer as keenly as if he really were troubled by it. Why mightn't it be that all his doubts came from anger and resentment towards those who made him a priest, rather than from any examination of his own mind? I don't say it was so. But I don't believe he knew quite what he wanted. He must have felt that his failure as an inventor went deeper than the failure of his particular attempts. I once thought that perhaps he had a genius in that way, but I question now whether he had. If he had, it seems to me he had opportunity to prove it—certainly, as a priest he had leisure to prove it. But when that sort of sub-consciousness of his own inadequacy came over him, it was perfectly natural for him to take refuge in the supposition that he had been baffled by circumstances."

Mrs. Ferris remained silently troubled. "I don't know how to answer you, Henry;
but I think that you're judging him narrowly and harshly."

"Not harshly. I feel very compassionate towards him. But now, even as to what one might consider the most real thing in his life,—his caring for you,—it seems to me there must have been a great share of imagined sentiment in it. It was not a passion; it was a gentle nature's dream of a passion."

"He didn't die of a dream," said the wife.

"No, he died of a fever."

"He had got well of the fever."

"That's very true, my dear. And whatever his head was, he had an affectionate and faithful heart. I wish I had been gentler with him. I must often have bruised that sensitive soul. God knows I'm sorry for it. But he's a puzzle, he's a puzzle!"

Thus lapsing more and more into a mere problem as the years have passed, Don Ippolito has at last ceased to be even the memory of a man with a passionate love and a mortal sorrow. Perhaps this final effect in the mind of him who has realised the happiness of which the poor priest vainly dreamed is not the least tragic phase of the tragedy of Don Ippolito."

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