

# The Blond Beast

By Edith Wharton

## I

It had been almost too easy—that was young Millner's first feeling, as he stood again on the Spence door-step, the great moment of his interview behind him, and Fifth Avenue rolling its grimy Pactolus at his feet.

Halting there in the winter light, with the clang of the ponderous vestibule doors in his ears, and his eyes carried down the perspective of the packed interminable thoroughfare, he even dared to remember Rastignac's apostrophe to Paris, and to hazard recklessly under his small fair moustache: "Who knows?"

He, Hugh Millner, at any rate, knew a good deal already: a good deal more than he had imagined it possible to learn in half an hour's talk with a man like Orlando G. Spence; and the loud-rumouring city spread out there before him seemed to grin like an accomplice who knew the rest.

A gust of wind, whirling down from the dizzy height of the building on the next corner, drove sharply through his overcoat and compelled him to clutch at his hat. It was a bitter January day, a day of fierce light and air, when the sunshine cut like icicles and the wind sucked one into black gulfs at the street corners. But Millner's complacency was like a warm lining to his shabby coat, and heaving steadied his hat he continued to stand on the Spence threshold, lost in the vision revealed to him from the Pishah of its marble steps. Yes, it was wonderful what the vision showed him. . . . In his absorption he might have frozen fast to the door-step if the Rhadamanthine portals behind him had not suddenly opened to let out a slim fur-coated figure, the figure, as he perceived, of the youth whom he had caught in the act of withdrawal as he entered Mr. Spence's study, and whom the latter, with a wave of his affable hand, had detained to introduce as "my son Draper."

It was characteristic of the odd friendliness of the whole scene that the great man should have thought it worth while to call back and name his heir to a mere humble applicant like Millner; and that the heir should shed on him, from a pale high-browed face, a smile of such deprecating kindness. It was characteristic, equally, of Millner, that he should at once mark the narrowness of the shoulders sustaining this ingenuous head; a narrowness, as he now observed, imperfectly concealed by the wide fur collar of young Spence's expensive and badly cut coat. But the face took on, as the youth smiled his surprise at their second meeting, a look of almost plaintive goodwill: the kind of look that Millner scorned and yet could never quite resist.

"Mr. Millner? Are you—er—waiting?" the lad asked, with an intention of serviceableness that was like a finer echo of his father's resounding cordiality.

"For my motor? No," Millner jested in his frank free voice. "The fact is, I was just standing here lost in the contemplation of my luck"—and as his companion's pale blue eyes seemed to shape a question, "my extraordinary luck," he explained, "in having been engaged as your father's secretary."

"Oh," the other rejoined, with a faint colour in his sallow cheek. "I'm so glad," he murmured: "but I was sure—" He stopped, and the two looked kindly at each other.

Millner averted his gaze first, almost fearful of its betraying the added sense of his own strength and dexterity which he drew from the contrast of the other's frailness.

"Sure? How could any one be sure? I don't believe in it yet!" he laughed out in the irony of his triumph.

The boy's words did not sound like a mere civility—Millner felt in them an homage to his power.

"Oh, yes: I was sure," young Draper repeated. "Sure as soon as I saw you, I mean."

Millner tingled again with this tribute to his physical straightness and bloom. Yes, he looked his part, hang it—he looked it!

But his companion still lingered, a shy sociability in his eye.

"If you're walking, then, can I go along a little way?" And he nodded southward down the shabby gaudy avenue.

That, again, was part of the high comedy of the hour—that Millner should descend the Spence steps at young Spence's side, and stroll down Fifth Avenue with him at the proudest moment of the afternoon; O. G. Spence's secretary walking abroad with O. G. Spence's heir! He had the scientific detachment to pull out his watch and furtively note the hour. Yes—it was exactly forty minutes since he had rung the Spence door-bell and handed his card to a gelid footman, who, openly sceptical of his claim to be received, had left him unceremoniously planted on the cold tessellations of the vestibule.

"Some day," Miller grinned to himself, "I think I'll take that footman as furnace-man—or to do the boots." And he pictured his marble palace rising from the earth to form the mausoleum of a footman's pride.

Only forty minutes ago! And now he had his opportunity fast! And he never meant to let it go! It was incredible, what had happened in the interval. He had gone up the Spence steps an unknown young man, out of a job, and with no substantial hope of getting into one: a needy young man with a mother and two limp sisters to be helped, and a lengthening figure of debt that stood by his bed through the anxious nights. And he went down the steps with his present assured, and his future lit by the hues of the rainbow above the pot of gold. Certainly a fellow who made his way at that rate had it "in him," and could afford to trust his star.

Descending from this joyous flight he stooped his ear to the discourse of young Spence.

"My father'll work you rather hard, you know: but you look as if you wouldn't mind that."

Millner pulled up his inches with the self-consciousness of the man who had none to waste. "Oh, no, I shan't mind that: I don't mind any amount of work if it leads to something."

"Just so," Draper Spence assented eagerly. "That's what I feel. And you'll find that whatever my father undertakes leads to such awfully fine things."

Millner tightened his lips on a grin. He was thinking only of where the work would lead him, not in the least of where it might land the eminent Orlando G. Spence. But he looked at his companion sympathetically.

"You're a philanthropist like your father, I see?"

"Oh, I don't know." They had paused at a crossing, and young Draper, with a dubious air, stood striking his agate-headed stick against the curb-stone. "I believe in a purpose, don't you?" he asked, lifting his blue eyes suddenly to Millner's face.

"A purpose? I should rather say so! I believe in nothing else," cried Millner, feeling as if his were something he could grip in his hand and swing like a club.

Young Spence seemed relieved. "Yes—I tie up to that. There *is* a Purpose. And so, after all, even if I don't agree with my father on minor points . . ." He coloured quickly, and looked again at Millner. "I should like to talk to you about this some day."

Millner smothered another smile. "We'll have lots of talks, I hope."

"Oh, if you can spare the time—!" said Draper, almost humbly.

"Why, I shall be there on tap!"

"For father, not me." Draper hesitated, with another self-confessing smile. "Father thinks I talk too much—that I keep going in and out of things. He doesn't believe in analyzing: he thinks it's destructive. But it hasn't destroyed my ideals." He looked wistfully up and down the clanging street. "And that's the main thing, isn't it? I mean, that one should have an Ideal." He turned back almost gaily to Millner. "I suspect you're a revolutionist too!"

"Revolutionist? Rather! I belong to the Red Syndicate and the Black Hand!" Millner joyfully assented.

Young Draper chuckled at the enormity of the joke. "First rate! We'll have incendiary meetings!" He pulled an elaborately armorial watch from his enfolding furs. "I'm so sorry, but I must say good-bye—this is my street," he explained. Millner, with a faint twinge of envy, glanced across at the colonnaded marble edifice in the farther corner. "Going to the club?" he said carelessly.

His companion looked surprised. "Oh, no: I never go *there*. It's too boring." And he brought out, after one of the pauses in which he seemed rather breathlessly to measure the chances of his listener's indulgence: "I'm just going over to a little Bible Class I have in Tenth Avenue."

Millner, for a moment or two, stood watching the slim figure wind its way through the mass of vehicles to the opposite corner; then he pursued his own course down Fifth Avenue, measuring his steps to the rhythmic refrain: "It's too easy—it's too easy—it's too easy!"

His own destination being the small shabby flat off University Place where three tender females awaited the result of his mission, he had time, on the way home, after abandoning himself to a general sense of triumph, to dwell specifically on the various aspects of his achievement. Viewed materially and practically, it was a thing to be proud of; yet it was chiefly on aesthetic grounds—because he had done so exactly what he had set out to do—that he glowed with pride at the afternoon's work. For, after all, any young man with the proper "pull" might have applied to Orlando G. Spence for the post of secretary, and even have penetrated as far as the great man's study; but that he, Hugh Millner, should not only have forced his way to this fastness, but have established, within a short half hour, his right to remain there permanently: well, this, if it proved anything, proved that the first rule of success was to know how to live up to one's principles.

"One must have a plan—one must have a plan," the young man murmured, looking with pity at the vague faces which the crowd bore past him, and feeling almost impelled to detain them and expound his doctrine. But the planlessness of average human nature was of course the measure of his opportunity; and he smiled to think that every purposeless face he met was a guarantee of his own advancement, a rung in the ladder he meant to climb.

Yes, the whole secret of success was to know what one wanted to do, and not to be afraid to do it. His own history was proving that already. He had not been afraid to give up his small but safe position in a real-estate office for the precarious adventure of a private secretaryship; and his first glimpse of his new employer had convinced him that he had not mistaken his calling. When one has a "way" with one—as, in all modesty, Millner knew he had—not to utilize it is a stupid

waste of force. And when he had learned that Orlando G. Spence was in search of a private secretary who should be able to give him intelligent assistance in the execution of his philanthropic schemes, the young man felt that his hour had come. It was no part of his plan to associate himself with one of the masters of finance: he had a notion that minnows who go to a whale to learn how to grow bigger are likely to be swallowed in the process. The opportunity of a clever young man with a cool head and no prejudices (this again was drawn from life) lay rather in making himself indispensable to one of the beneficent rich, and in using the timidities and conformities of his patron as the means of his scruples about formulating these principles to himself. It was not for nothing that, in his college days, he had hunted the hypothetical "moral sense" to its lair, and dragged from their concealment the various self-advancing sentiments dissembled under its edifying guise. His strength lay in his precocious insight into the springs of action, and in his refusal to classify them according to the accepted moral and social sanctions. He had to the full the courage of his lack of convictions.

To a young man so untrammelled by prejudice it was self-evident that helpless philanthropists like Orlando G. Spence were just as much the natural diet of the strong as the lamb is of the wolf. It was pleasanter to eat than to be eaten, in a world where, as yet, there seemed to be no third alternative; and any scruples one might feel as to the temporary discomfort of one's victim were speedily dispelled by that larger scientific view which took into account the social destructiveness of the benevolent. Millner was persuaded that every individual woe mitigated by the philanthropy of Orlando G. Spence added just so much to the sum-total of human inefficiency, and it was one of his favourite subjects of speculation to picture the innumerable social evils that may follow upon the rescue of one infant from Mount Taygetus.

"We're all born to prey on each other, and pity for suffering is one of the most elementary stages of egotism. Until one has passed beyond, and acquired a taste for the more complex forms of the instinct—"

He stopped suddenly, checked in his advance by a sallow wisp of a dog which had plunged through the press of vehicles to hurl itself between his legs. Millner did not dislike animals, though he preferred that they should be healthy and handsome. The dog under his feet was neither. Its cringing contour showed an injudicious mingling of races, and its meagre coat betrayed the deplorable habit of sleeping in coal-holes and subsisting on an innutritious diet. In addition to these physical disadvantages, its shrinking and inconsequent movements revealed a congenital weakness of character which, even under more favourable conditions, would hardly have qualified it to become a useful member of society; and Millner was not sorry to notice that it moved with a limp of the hind leg that probably doomed it to speedy extinction.

The absurdity of such an animal's attempting to cross Fifth Avenue at the most crowded hour of the afternoon struck him as only less great than the irony of its having been permitted to achieve the feat; and he stood a moment looking at it, and wondering what had moved it to the attempt. It was really a perfect type of the human derelict which Orlando G. Spence and his kind were devoting their millions to perpetuate, and he reflected how much better Nature knew her business in dealing with the superfluous quadruped.

An elderly lady advancing in the opposite direction evidently took a less dispassionate view of the case, for she paused to remark emotionally: "Oh, you poor thing!" while she stooped to caress the object of her sympathy. The dog, with characteristic lack of discrimination, viewed her gesture with suspicion, and met it with a snarl. The lady turned pale and shrank away, a chivalrous male repelled the animal with his umbrella, and two idle boys backed his action by a vigorous "Hi!" The object of these hostile demonstrations, apparently attributing them not to its

own unsocial conduct, but merely to the chronic animosity of the universe, dashed wildly around the corner into a side street, and as it did so Millner noticed that the lame leg left a little trail of blood. Irresistibly, he turned the corner to see what would happen next. It was deplorably clear that the animal itself had no plan; but after several inconsequent and contradictory movements it plunged down an area, where it backed up against the iron gate, forlornly and foolishly at bay.

Millner, still following, looked down at it, and wondered. Then he whistled, just to see if it would come; but this only caused it to start up on its quivering legs, with desperate turns of the head that measured the chances of escape.

“Oh, hang it, you poor devil, stay there if you like!” the young man murmured, walking away.

A few yards off he looked back, and saw that the dog had made a rush out of the area and was limping furtively down the street. The idle boys were in the offing, and he disliked the thought of leaving them in control of the situation. Softly, with infinite precautions, he began to follow the dog. He did not know why he was doing it, but the impulse was overmastering. For a moment he seemed to be gaining upon his quarry, but with a cunning sense of his approach it suddenly turned and hobbled across the frozen grass-plot adjoining a shuttered house. Against the wall at the back of the plot it cowered down in a dirty snow-drift, as if disheartened by the struggle. Millner stood outside the railings and looked at it. He reflected that under the shelter of the winter dusk it might have the luck to remain there unmolested, and that in the morning it would probably be dead of cold. This was so obviously the best solution that he began to move away again; but as he did so the idle boys confronted him.

“Ketch yer dog for yer, boss?” they grinned.

Millner consigned them to the devil, and stood sternly watching them till the first stage of the journey had carried them around the nearest corner; then, after pausing to look once more up and down the empty street, laid his hand on the railing, and vaulted over it into the grass-plot. As he did so, he reflected that, since pity for suffering was one of the most elementary forms of egotism, he ought to have remembered that it was necessarily one of the most tenacious.

## II

“My chief aim in life?” Orlando G. Spence repeated. He threw himself back in his chair, straightened the tortoise-shell *pince-nez*, on his short blunt nose, and beamed down the luncheon table at the two young men who shared his repast.

His glance rested on his son Draper, seated opposite him behind a barrier of Georgian silver and orchids; but his words were addressed to his secretary who, stylograph in hand, had turned from the seductions of a mushroom *soufflé* in order to jot down, for the Sunday *Investigator*, an outline of his employer’s views and intentions respecting the newly endowed Orlando G. Spence College for Missionaries. It was Mr. Spence’s practice to receive in person the journalists privileged to impart his opinions to a waiting world; but during the last few months—and especially since the vast project of the Missionary College had been in process of development—the pressure of business and beneficence had necessitated Millner’s frequent intervention, and compelled the secretary to snatch the sense of his patron’s elucubrations between the courses of their hasty meals.

Young Millner had a healthy appetite, and it was not one of his least sacrifices to be so often obliged to curb it in the interest of his advancement; but whenever he waved aside one of the triumphs of Mr. Spence’s *chef* he was conscious of rising a step in his employer’s favour. Mr. Spence did not despise the pleasures of the table, though he appeared to regard them as the

reward of success rather than as the alleviation of effort; and it increased his sense of his secretary's merit to note how keenly the young man enjoyed the fare which he was so frequently obliged to deny himself. Draper, having subsisted since infancy on a diet of truffles and terrapin, consumed such delicacies with the insensibility of a traveller swallowing a railway sandwich; but Millner never made the mistake of concealing from Mr. Spence his sense of what he was losing when duty constrained him to exchange the fork for the pen.

"My chief aim in life!" Mr. Spence repeated, removing his eye-glass and swinging it thoughtfully on his finger. ("I'm sorry you should miss this *soufflé*, Millner: it's worth while.) Why, I suppose I might say that my chief aim in life is to leave the world better than I found it. Yes: I don't know that I could put it better than that. To leave the world better than I found it. It wouldn't be a bad idea to use that as a head-line. '*Wants to leave the world better than he found it.*' It's exactly the point I should like to make in this talk about the College."

Mr. Spence paused, and his glance once more reverted to his son, who, having pushed aside his plate, sat watching Millner with a dreamy intensity.

"And it's the point I want to make with you, too, Draper," his father continued genially, while he turned over with a critical fork the plump and perfectly matched asparagus which a footman was presenting to his notice. "I want to make you feel that nothing else counts in comparison with that—no amount of literary success or intellectual celebrity."

"Oh, I *do* feel that," Draper murmured, with one of his quick blushes, and a glance that wavered between his father and Millner. The secretary kept his eyes on his notes, and young Spence continued, after a pause: "Only the thing is—isn't it?—to try and find out just what *does* make the world better?"

"To *try* to find out?" his father echoed compassionately. "It's not necessary to try very hard. Goodness is what makes the world better."

"Yes, yes, of course," his son nervously interposed; "but the question is, what *is* good—"

Mr. Spence, with a darkening brow, brought his fist down emphatically on the damask. "I'll thank you not to blaspheme, my son!"

Draper's head reared itself a trifle higher on his thin neck. "I was not going to blaspheme; only there may be different ways—"

"There's where you're mistaken, Draper. There's only one way: there's my way," said Mr. Spence in a tone of unshaken conviction.

"I know, father; I see what you mean. But don't you see that even your way wouldn't be the right way for you if you ceased to believe that it was?"

His father looked at him with mingled bewilderment and reprobation. "Do you mean to say that the fact of goodness depends on my conception of it, and not on God Almighty's?"

"I do . . . yes . . . in a specific sense . . ." young Draper falteringly maintained; and Mr. Spence turned with a discouraged gesture toward his secretary's suspended pen.

"I don't understand your scientific jargon, Draper; and I don't want to.—What's the next point, Millner? (No; no *Savarin*. Bring the fruit—and the coffee with it.)"

Millner, keenly aware that an aromatic *Savarin au rhum* was describing an arc behind his head previous to being rushed back to the pantry under young Draper's indifferent eye, stiffened himself against this last assault of the enemy, and read out firmly: "*What relation do you consider that a man's business conduct should bear to his religious and domestic life?*"

Mr. Spence mused a moment. "Why, that's a stupid question. It goes over the same ground as the other one. A man ought to do good with his money—that's all. Go on."

At this point the butler's murmur in his ear caused him to push back his chair, and to arrest Millner's interrogatory by a rapid gesture. "Yes; I'm coming. Hold the wire." Mr. Spence rose and plunged into the adjoining "office," where a telephone and a Remington divided the attention of a young lady in spectacles who was preparing for Zenana work in the East.

As the door closed, the butler, having placed the coffee and liqueurs on the table, withdrew in the rear of his battalion, and the two young men were left alone beneath the Rembrandts and Hobbemas on the dining-room walls.

There was a moment's silence between them; then young Spence, leaning across the table, said in the lowered tone of intimacy: "Why do you suppose he dodged that last question?"

Millner, who had rapidly taken an opulent purple fig from the fruit-dish nearest him, paused in surprise in the act of hurrying it to his lips.

"I mean," Draper hastened on, "the question as to the relation between business and private morality. It's such an interesting one, and he's just the person who ought to tackle it."

Millner, despatching the fig, glanced down at his notes. "I don't think your father meant to dodge the question."

Young Draper continued to look at him intently. "You think he imagined that his answer really covers the ground?"

"As much as it needs to be covered."

The son of the house glanced away with a sigh. "You know things about him that I don't," he said wistfully, but without a tinge of resentment in his tone.

"Oh, as to that—(may I give myself some coffee?)" Millner, in his walk around the table to fill his cup, paused a moment to lay an affectionate hand on Draper's shoulder. "Perhaps I know him *better*, in a sense: outsiders often get a more accurate focus."

Draper considered this. "And your idea is that he acts on principles he has never thought of testing or defining?"

Millner looked up quickly, and for an instant their glances crossed. "How do you mean?"

"I mean: that he's an unconscious instrument of goodness, as it were? A—a sort of blindly beneficent force?"

The other smiled. "That's not a bad definition. I know one thing about him, at any rate: he's awfully upset at your having chucked your Bible Class."

A shadow fell on young Spence's candid brow. "I know. But what can I do about it? That's what I was thinking of when I tried to show him that goodness, in a certain sense, is purely subjective: that one can't do good against one's principles." Again his glance appealed to Millner. "*You* understand me, don't you?"

Millner stirred his coffee in a silence not unclouded by perplexity. "Theoretically, perhaps. It's a pretty question, certainly. But I also understand your father's feeling that it hasn't much to do with real life: especially now that he's got to make a speech in connection with the founding of this Missionary College. He may think that any hint of internecine strife will weaken his prestige. Mightn't you have waited a little longer?"

"How could I, when I might have been expected to take a part in this performance? To talk, and say things I didn't mean? That was exactly what made me decide not to wait."

The door opened and Mr. Spence re-entered the room. As he did so his son rose abruptly as if to leave it.

"Where are you off to, Draper?" the banker asked.

"I'm in rather a hurry, sir—"

Mr. Spence looked at his watch. "You can't be in more of a hurry than I am; and I've got seven minutes and a half." He seated himself behind the coffee-tray, lit a cigar, laid his watch on the table, and signed to Draper to resume his place. "No, Millner, don't you go; I want you both." He turned to the secretary. "You know that Draper's given up his Bible Class? I understand it's not from the pressure of engagements—" Mr. Spence's narrow lips took an ironic curve under the straight-clipped stubble of his moustache—"it's on principle, he tells me. He's *principled* against doing good!"

Draper lifted a protesting hand. "It's not exactly that, father—"

"I know: you'll tell me it's some scientific quibble that I don't understand. I've never had time to go in for intellectual hair-splitting. I've found too many people down in the mire who needed a hand to pull them out. A busy man has to take his choice between helping his fellow-men and theorizing about them. I've preferred to help. (You might take that down for the *Investigator*, Millner.) And I thank God I've never stopped to ask what made me want to do good. I've just yielded to the impulse—that's all." Mr. Spence turned back to his son. "Better men than either of us have been satisfied with that creed, my son."

Draper was silent, and Mr. Spence once more addressed himself to his secretary. "Millner, you're a reader: I've caught you at it. And I know this boy talks to you. What have you got to say? Do you suppose a Bible Class ever *hurt* anybody?"

Millner paused a moment, feeling all through his nervous system the fateful tremor of the balance. "That's what I was just trying to tell him, sir—"

"Ah; you were? That's good. Then I'll only say one thing more. Your doing what you've done at this particular moment hurts me more, Draper, than your teaching the gospel of Jesus could possibly have hurt those young men over in Tenth Avenue." Mr. Spence arose and restored his watch to his pocket. "I shall want you in twenty minutes, Millner."

The door closed on him, and for a while the two young men sat silent behind their cigar fumes. Then Draper Spence broke out, with a catch in his throat: "That's what I can't bear, Millner, what I simply can't *bear*: to hurt him, to hurt his faith in *me*! It's an awful responsibility, isn't it, to tamper with anybody's faith in anything?"

### III

The twenty minutes prolonged themselves to forty, the forty to fifty, and the fifty to an hour; and still Millner waited for Mr. Spence's summons.

During the two years of his secretaryship the young man had learned the significance of such postponements. Mr. Spence's days were organized like a railway time-table, and a delay of an hour implied a casualty as far-reaching as the breaking down of an express. Of the cause of the present derangement Hugh Millner was ignorant; and the experience of the last months allowed him to fluctuate between conflicting conjectures. All were based on the indisputable fact that Mr. Spence was "bothered"—had for some time past been "bothered." And it was one of Millner's discoveries that an extremely parsimonious use of the emotions underlay Mr. Spence's expansive manner and fraternal phraseology, and that he did not throw away his feelings any more than (for all his philanthropy) he threw away his money. If he was bothered, then, it could be only because a careful survey of his situation had forced on him some unpleasant fact with which he was not immediately prepared to deal; and any unpreparedness on Mr. Spence's part was also a significant symptom.



Obviously, Millner's original conception of his employer's character had suffered extensive modification; but no final outline had replaced the first conjectural image. The two years spent in Mr. Spence's service had produced too many contradictory impressions to be fitted into any definite pattern; and the chief lesson Millner had learned from them was that life was less of an exact science, and character a more incalculable element, than he had been taught in the schools. In the light of this revised impression, his own footing seemed less secure than he had imagined, and the rungs of the ladder he was climbing more slippery than they had looked from below. He was not without the reassuring sense of having made himself, in certain small ways, necessary to Mr. Spence; and this conviction was confirmed by Draper's reiterated assurance of his father's appreciation. But Millner had begun to suspect that one might be necessary to Mr. Spence one day, and a superfluity, if not an obstacle, the next; and that it would take superhuman astuteness to foresee how and when the change would occur. Every fluctuation of the great man's mood was therefore anxiously noted by the young meteorologist in his service; and this observer's vigilance was now strained to the utmost by the little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, adumbrated by the banker's unpunctuality.

When Mr. Spence finally appeared, his aspect did not tend to dissipate the cloud. He wore what Millner had learned to call his "back-door face": a blank barred countenance, in which only an occasional twitch of the lids behind his glasses suggested that some one was on the watch. In this mood Mr. Spence usually seemed unconscious of his secretary's presence, or aware of it only as an arm terminating in a pen. Millner, accustomed on such occasions to exist merely as a function, sat waiting for the click of the spring that should set him in action; but the pressure not being applied, he finally hazarded: "Are we to go on with the *Investigator*, sir?"

Mr. Spence, who had been pacing up and down between the desk and the fireplace, threw himself into his usual seat at Millner's elbow.

"I don't understand this new notion of Draper's," he said abruptly. "Where's he got it from? No one ever learned irreligion in my household."

He turned his eyes on Millner, who had the sense of being scrutinized through a ground-glass window which left him visible while it concealed his observer. The young man let his pen describe two or three vague patterns on the blank sheet before him.

"Draper has ideas—" he risked at last.

Mr. Spence looked hard at him. "That's all right," he said. "I want my son to have everything. But what's the point of mixing up ideas and principles? I've seen fellows who did that, and they were generally trying to borrow five dollars to get away from the sheriff. What's all this talk about goodness? Goodness isn't an idea. It's a fact. It's as solid as a business proposition. And it's Draper's duty, as the son of a wealthy man, and the prospective steward of a great fortune, to elevate the standards of other young men—of young men who haven't had his opportunities. The rich ought to preach contentment, and to set the example themselves. We have our cares, but we ought to conceal them. We ought to be cheerful, and accept things as they are—not go about sowing dissent and restlessness. What has Draper got to give these boys in his Bible Class, that's so much better than what he wants to take from them? That's the question I'd like to have answered?"

Mr. Spence, carried away by his own eloquence, had removed his *pince-nez* and was twirling it about his extended fore-finger with the gesture habitual to him when he spoke in public. After a pause, he went on, with a drop to the level of private intercourse: "I tell you this because I know you have a good deal of influence with Draper. He has a high opinion of your brains. But you're a practical fellow, and you must see what I mean. Try to make Draper see it. Make him

understand how it looks to have him drop his Bible Class just at this particular time. It was his own choice to take up religious teaching among young men. He began with our office-boys, and then the work spread and was blessed. I was almost alarmed, at one time, at the way it took hold of him: when the papers began to talk about him as a formative influence I was afraid he'd lose his head and go into the church. Luckily he tried University Settlement first; but just as I thought he was settling down to that, he took to worrying about the Higher Criticism, and saying he couldn't go on teaching fairy-tales as history. I can't see that any good ever came of criticizing what our parents believed, and it's a queer time for Draper to criticize *my* belief just as I'm backing it to the extent of five millions."

Millner remained silent; and, as though his silence were an argument, Mr. Spence continued combatively: "Draper's always talking about some distinction between religion and morality. I don't understand what he means. I got my morals out of the Bible, and I guess there's enough left in it for Draper. If religion won't make a man moral, I don't see why irreligion should. And he talks about using his mind—well, can't he use that in Wall Street? A man can get a good deal farther in life watching the market than picking holes in Genesis; and he can do more good too. There's a time for everything; and Draper seems to me to have mixed up week-days with Sunday."

Mr. Spence replaced his eye-glasses, and stretching his hand to the silver box at his elbow, extracted from it one of the long cigars sheathed in gold-leaf which were reserved for his private consumption. The secretary hastened to tender him a match, and for a moment he puffed in silence. When he spoke again it was in a different note.

"I've got about all the bother I can handle just now, without this nonsense of Draper's. That was one of the Trustees of the College with me. It seems the *Flashlight* has been trying to stir up a fuss—" Mr. Spence paused, and turned his *pince-nez* on his secretary. "You haven't heard from them?" he asked.

"From the *Flashlight*? No." Millner's surprise was genuine.

He detected a gleam of relief behind Mr. Spence's glasses. "It may be just malicious talk. That's the worst of good works; they bring out all the meanness in human nature. And then there are always women mixed up in them, and there never was a woman yet who understood the difference between philanthropy and business." He drew again at his cigar, and then, with an unwonted movement, leaned forward and mechanically pushed the box toward Millner. "Help yourself," he said.

Millner, as mechanically, took one of the virginally cinctured cigars, and began to undo its wrappings. It was the first time he had ever been privileged to detach that golden girdle, and nothing could have given him a better measure of the importance of the situation, and of the degree to which he was apparently involved in it. "You remember that San Pablo rubber business? That's what they've been raking up," said Mr. Spence abruptly.

Millner paused in the act of striking a match. Then, with an appreciable effort of the will, he completed the gesture, applied the flame to his cigar, and took a long inhalation. The cigar was certainly delicious.

Mr. Spence, drawing a little closer, leaned forward and touched him on the arm. The touch caused Millner to turn his head, and for an instant the glance of the two men crossed at short range. Millner was conscious, first, of a nearer view than he had ever had of his employer's face, and of its vaguely suggesting a seamed sandstone head, the kind of thing that lies in a corner in the court of a museum, and in which only the round enamelled eyes have resisted the wear of time. His next feeling was that he had now reached the moment to which the offer of the cigar

had been a prelude. He had always known that, sooner or later, such a moment would come; all his life, in a sense, had been a preparation for it. But in entering Mr. Spence's service he had not foreseen that it would present itself in this form. He had seen himself consciously guiding that gentleman up to the moment, rather than being thrust into it by a stronger hand. And his first act of reflection was the resolve that, in the end, his hand should prove the stronger of the two. This was followed, almost immediately, by the idea that to be stronger than Mr. Spence's it would have to be very strong indeed. It was odd that he should feel this, since—as far as verbal communication went—it was Mr. Spence who was asking for his support. In a theoretical statement of the case the banker would have figured as being at Millner's mercy; but one of the queerest things about experience was the way it made light of theory. Millner felt now as though he were being crushed by some inexorable engine of which he had been playing with the lever. .

..

He had always been intensely interested in observing his own reactions, and had regarded this faculty of self-detachment as of immense advantage in such a career as he had planned. He felt this still, even in the act of noting his own bewilderment—felt it the more in contrast to the odd unconsciousness of Mr. Spence's attitude, of the incredible candour of his self-abasement and self-abandonment. It was clear that Mr. Spence was not troubled by the repercussion of his actions in the consciousness of others; and this looked like a weakness—unless it were, instead, a great strength. . . .

Through the hum of these swarming thoughts Mr. Spence's voice was going on. "That's the only rag of proof they've got; and they got it by one of those nasty accidents that nobody can guard against. I don't care how conscientiously a man attends to business, he can't always protect himself against meddlesome people. I don't pretend to know how the letter came into their hands; but they've got it; and they mean to use it—and they mean to say that you wrote it for me, and that you knew what it was about when you wrote it. . . . They'll probably be after you tomorrow—"

Mr. Spence, restoring his cigar to his lips, puffed at it slowly. In the pause that followed there was an instant during which the universe seemed to Hugh Millner like a sounding-board bent above his single consciousness. If he spoke, what thunders would be sent back to him from that intently listening vastness?

"You see?" said Mr. Spence.

The universal ear bent closer, as if to catch the least articulation of Millner's narrowed lips; but when he opened them it was merely to re-insert his cigar, and for a short space nothing passed between the two men but an exchange of smoke-rings.

"What do you mean to do? There's the point," Mr. Spence at length sent through the rings.

Oh, yes, the point was there, as distinctly before Millner as the tip of his expensive cigar: he had seen it coming quite as soon as Mr. Spence. He knew that fate was handing him an ultimatum; but the sense of the formidable echo which his least answer would rouse kept him doggedly, and almost helplessly, silent. To let Mr. Spence talk on as long as possible was no doubt the best way of gaining time; but Millner knew that his silence was really due to his dread of the echo. Suddenly, however, in a reaction of impatience at his own indecision, he began to speak.

The sound of his voice cleared his mind and strengthened his resolve. It was odd how the word seemed to shape the act, though one knew how ancillary it really was. As he talked, it was as if the globe had swung around, and he himself were upright on its axis, with Mr. Spence underneath, on his head. Through the ensuing interchange of concise and rapid speech there

sounded in Millner's ears the refrain to which he had walked down Fifth Avenue after his first talk with Mr. Spence: "It's too easy—it's too easy—it's too easy." Yes, it was even easier than he had expected. His sensation was that of the skilful carver who feels his good blade sink into a tender joint.

As he went on talking, this surprised sense of mastery was like wine in his veins. Mr. Spence was at his mercy, after all—that was what it came to; but this new view of the case did not lessen Millner's sense of Mr. Spence's strength, it merely revealed to him his own superiority. Mr. Spence was even stronger than he had suspected. There could be no better proof of that than his faith in Millner's power to grasp the situation, and his tacit recognition of the young man's right to make the most of it. Millner felt that Mr. Spence would have despised him even more for not using his advantage than for not seeing it; and this homage to his capacity nerved him to greater alertness, and made the concluding moments of their talk as physically exhilarating as some hotly contested game.

When the conclusion was reached, and Millner stood at the goal, the golden trophy in his grasp, his first conscious thought was one of regret that the struggle was over. He would have liked to prolong their talk for the purely aesthetic pleasure of making Mr. Spence lose time, and, better still, of making him forget that he was losing it. The sense of advantage that the situation conferred was so great that when Mr. Spence rose it was as if Millner were dismissing him, and when he reached his hand toward the cigar-box it seemed to be one of Millner's cigars that he was taking.

#### IV

There had been only one condition attached to the transaction: Millner was to speak to Draper about the Bible Class.

The condition was easy to fulfil. Millner was confident of his power to deflect his young friend's purpose; and he knew the opportunity would be given him before the day was over. His professional duties despatched, he had only to go up to his room to wait. Draper nearly always looked in on him for a moment before dinner: it was the hour most propitious to their elliptic interchange of words and silences.

Meanwhile, the waiting was an occupation in itself. Millner looked about his room with new eyes. Since the first thrill of initiation into its complicated comforts—the shower-bath, the telephone, the many-jointed reading-lamp and the vast mirrored presses through which he was always hunting his scant outfit—Millner's room had interested him no more than a railway-carriage in which he might have been travelling. But now it had acquired a sort of historic significance as the witness of the astounding change in his fate. It was Corsica, it was Brienne—it was the kind of spot that posterity might yet mark with a tablet. Then he reflected that he should soon be leaving it, and the lustre of its monumental mahogany was veiled in pathos. Why indeed should he linger on in bondage? He perceived with a certain surprise that the only thing he should regret would be leaving Draper. . . .

It was odd, it was inconsequent, it was almost exasperating, that such a regret should obscure his triumph. Why in the world should he suddenly take to regretting Draper? If there were any logic in human likings, it should be to Mr. Spence that he inclined. Draper, dear lad, had the illusion of an "intellectual sympathy" between them; but that, Millner knew, was an affair of reading and not of character. Draper's temerities would always be of that kind; whereas his own—well, his own, put to the proof, had now definitely classed him with Mr. Spence rather

than with Mr. Spence's son. It was a consequence of this new condition—of his having thus distinctly and irrevocably classed himself—that, when Draper at length brought upon the scene his shy shamle and his wistful smile, Millner, for the first time, had to steel himself against them instead of yielding to their charm.

In the new order upon which he had entered, one principle of the old survived: the point of honour between allies. And Millner had promised Mr. Spence to speak to Draper about his Bible Class. . . .

Draper, thrown back in his chair, and swinging a loose leg across a meagre knee, listened with his habitual gravity. His downcast eyes seemed to pursue the vision which Millner's words evoked; and the words, to their speaker, took on a new sound as that candid consciousness refracted them.

"You know, dear boy, I perfectly see your father's point. It's naturally distressing to him, at this particular time, to have any hint of civil war leak out—"

Draper sat upright, laying his lank legs knee to knee.

"That's it, then? I thought that was it!"

Millner raised a surprised glance. "*What's it?*"

"That it should be at this particular time—"

"Why, naturally, as I say! Just as he's making, as it were, his public profession of faith. You know, to men like your father convictions are irreducible elements—they can't be split up, and differently combined. And your exegetical scruples seem to him to strike at the very root of his convictions."

Draper pulled himself to his feet and shuffled across the room. Then he turned about, and stood before his friend.

"Is it that—or is it this?" he said; and with the word he drew a letter from his pocket and proffered it silently to Millner.

The latter, as he unfolded it, was first aware of an intense surprise at the young man's abruptness of tone and gesture. Usually Draper fluttered long about his point before making it; and his sudden movement seemed as mechanical as the impulsion conveyed by some strong spring. The spring, of course, was in the letter; and to it Millner turned his startled glance, feeling the while that, by some curious cleavage of perception, he was continuing to watch Draper while he read.

"Oh, the beasts!" he cried.

He and Draper were face to face across the sheet which had dropped between them. The youth's features were tightened by a smile that was like the ligature of a wound. He looked white and withered.

"Ah—you knew, then?"

Millner sat still, and after a moment Draper turned from him, walked to the hearth, and leaned against the chimney, propping his chin on his hands. Millner, his head thrown back, stared up at the ceiling, which had suddenly become to him the image of the universal sounding-board hanging over his consciousness.

"You knew, then?" Draper repeated.

Millner remained silent. He had perceived, with the surprise of a mathematician working out a new problem, that the lie which Mr. Spence had just bought of him was exactly the one gift he could give of his own free will to Mr. Spence's son. This discovery gave the world a strange new topsy-turvyness, and set Millner's theories spinning about his brain like the cabin furniture of a tossing ship.

"You *knew*," said Draper, in a tone of quiet affirmation.

Millner righted himself, and grasped the arms of his chair as if that too were reeling. "About this blackguardly charge?"

Draper was studying him intently. "What does it matter if it's blackguardly?"

"Matter—?" Millner stammered.

"It's that, of course, in any case. But the point is whether it's true or not." Draper bent down, and picking up the crumpled letter, smoothed it out between his fingers. "The point, is, whether my father, when he was publicly denouncing the peonage abuses on the San Pablo plantations over a year ago, had actually sold out his stock, as he announced at the time; or whether, as they say here—how do they put it?—he had simply transferred it to a dummy till the scandal should blow over, and has meanwhile gone on drawing his forty per cent interest on five thousand shares? There's the point."

Millner had never before heard his young friend put a case with such unadorned precision. His language was like that of Mr. Spence making a statement to a committee meeting; and the resemblance to his father flashed out with ironic incongruity.

"You see why I've brought this letter to you—I couldn't go to *him* with it!" Draper's voice faltered, and the resemblance vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

"No; you couldn't go to him with it," said Millner slowly.

"And since they say here that *you* know: that they've got your letter proving it—" The muscles of Draper's face quivered as if a blinding light had been swept over it. "For God's sake, Millner—it's all right?"

"It's all right," said Millner, rising to his feet.

Draper caught him by the wrist. "You're sure—you're absolutely sure?"

"Sure. They know they've got nothing to go on."

Draper fell back a step and looked almost sternly at his friend. "You know that's not what I mean. I don't care a straw what they think they've got to go on. I want to know if my father's all right. If he is, they can say what they please."

Millner, again, felt himself under the concentrated scrutiny of the ceiling. "Of course, of course. I understand."

"You understand? Then why don't you answer?"

Millner looked compassionately at the boy's struggling face. Decidedly, the battle was to the strong, and he was not sorry to be on the side of the legions. But Draper's pain was as awkward as a material obstacle, as something that one stumbled over in a race.

"You know what I'm driving at, Millner." Again Mr. Spence's committee-meeting tone sounded oddly through his son's strained voice. "If my father's so awfully upset about my giving up my Bible Class, and letting it be known that I do so on conscientious grounds, is it because he's afraid it may be considered a criticism on something *he* has done which—which won't bear the test of the doctrines he believes in?"

Draper, with the last question, squared himself in front of Millner, as if suspecting that the latter meant to evade it by flight. But Millner had never felt more disposed to stand his ground than at that moment.

"No—by Jove, no! It's not *that*." His relief almost escaped him in a cry, as he lifted his head to give back Draper's look.

"On your honour?" the other passionately pressed him.

"Oh, on anybody's you like—on *yours!*" Millner could hardly restrain a laugh of relief. It was vertiginous to find himself spared, after all, the need of an altruistic lie: he perceived that they were the kind he least liked.

Draper took a deep breath. "You don't—Millner, a lot depends on this—you don't really think my father has any ulterior motive?"

"I think he has none but his horror of seeing you go straight to perdition!"

They looked at each other again, and Draper's tension was suddenly relieved by a free boyish laugh. "It's his convictions—it's just his funny old convictions?"

"It's that, and nothing else on earth!"

Draper turned back to the arm-chair he had left, and let his narrow figure sink down into it as into a bath. Then he looked over at Millner with a smile. "I can see that I've been worrying him horribly. So he really thinks I'm on the road to perdition? Of course you can fancy what a sick minute I had when I thought it might be this other reason—the damnable insinuation in this letter." Draper crumpled the paper in his hand, and leaned forward to toss it into the coals of the grate. "I ought to have known better, of course. I ought to have remembered that, as you say, my father can't conceive how conduct may be independent of creed. That's where I was stupid—and rather base. But that letter made me dizzy—I couldn't think. Even now I can't very clearly. I'm not sure what *my* convictions require of me: they seem to me so much less to be considered than his! When I've done half the good to people that he has, it will be time enough to begin attacking their beliefs. Meanwhile—meanwhile I can't touch his. . . ." Draper leaned forward, stretching his lank arms along his knees. His face was as clear as a spring sky. "I *won't* touch them, Millner—Go and tell him so. . . ."

## V

In the study a half hour later Mr. Spence, watch in hand, was doling out his minutes again. The peril conjured, he had recovered his dominion over time. He turned his commanding eye-glasses on Millner.

"It's all settled, then? Tell Draper I'm sorry not to see him again to-night—but I'm to speak at the dinner of the Legal Relief Association, and I'm due there in five minutes. You and he dine alone here, I suppose? Tell him I appreciate what he's done. Some day he'll see that to leave the world better than we find it is the best we can hope to do. (You've finished the notes for the *Investigator*? Be sure you don't forget that phrase.) Well, good evening: that's all, I think."

Smooth and compact in his glossy evening clothes, Mr. Spence advanced toward the study door; but as he reached it, his secretary stood there before him.

"It's not quite all, Mr. Spence."

Mr. Spence turned on him a look in which impatience was faintly tinged with apprehension. "What else is there? It's two and a half minutes to eight."

Millner stood his ground. "It won't take longer than that. I want to tell you that, if you can conveniently replace me, I'd like—there are reasons why I shall have to leave you."

Millner was conscious of reddening as he spoke. His redness deepened under Mr. Spence's dispassionate scrutiny. He saw at once that the banker was not surprised at his announcement.

"Well, I suppose that's natural enough. You'll want to make a start for yourself now. Only, of course, for the sake of appearances—"

"Oh, certainly," Millner hastily agreed.

"Well, then: is that all?" Mr. Spence repeated.

“Nearly.” Millner paused, as if in search of an appropriate formula. But after a moment he gave up the search, and pulled from his pocket an envelope which he held out to his employer. “I merely want to give this back.”

The hand which Mr. Spence had extended dropped to his side, and his sand-coloured face grew chalky. “Give it back?” His voice was as thick as Millner’s. “What’s happened? Is the bargain off?”

“Oh, no. I’ve given you my word.”

“Your word?” Mr. Spence lowered at him. “I’d like to know what that’s worth!”

Millner continued to hold out the envelope. “You do know, now. It’s worth *that*. It’s worth my place.”

Mr. Spence, standing motionless before him, hesitated for an appreciable space of time. His lips parted once or twice under their square-clipped stubble, and at last emitted: “How much more do you want?”

Millner broke into a laugh. “Oh, I’ve got all I want—all and more!”

“What—from the others? Are you crazy?”

“No, you are,” said Millner with a sudden recovery of composure. “But you’re safe—you’re as safe as you’ll ever be. Only I don’t care to take this for making you so.”

Mr. Spence slowly moistened his lips with his tongue, and removing his *pince-nez*, took a long hard look at Millner.

“I don’t understand. What other guarantee have I got?”

“That I mean what I say?” Millner glanced past the banker’s figure at his rich densely coloured background of Spanish leather and mahogany. He remembered that it was from this very threshold that he had first seen Mr. Spence’s son.

“What guarantee? You’ve got Draper!” he said.