WHAT MAISIE KNEW

by

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The litigation seemed interminable and had in fact been complicated; but

by the decision on the appeal the judgement of the divorce-court was

confirmed as to the assignment of the child. The father, who, though

bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance

of this triumph, appointed to keep her: it was not so much that the

mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the

brilliancy of a lady's complexion and this lady's, in court, was

immensely remarked might be more regarded as showing the spots.

Attached, however, to the second pronouncement was a condition that

detracted, for Beale Farange, from its sweetness - an order that he

should refund to his late wife the twenty-six hundred pounds put down

by her, as it was called, some three years before, in the interest of

the child's maintenance and precisely on a proved understanding that he

would take no proceedings: a sum of which he had had the administration

and of which he could render not the least account. The obligation thus

attributed to her adversary was no small balm to Ida's resentment; it

drew a part of the sting from her defeat and compelled Mr. Farange

perceptibly to lower his crest. He was unable to produce the money or to

raise it in any way; so that after a squabble scarcely less public and

scarcely more decent than the original shock of battle his only issue

from his predicament was a compromise proposed by his legal advisers and

finally accepted by hers.

His debt was by this arrangement remitted to him and the little girl

disposed of in a manner worthy of the judgement-seat of Solomon. She was

divided in two and the portions tossed impartially to the disputants.

They would take her, in rotation, for six months at a time; she would

spend half the year with each. This was odd justice in the eyes of those

who still blinked in the fierce light projected from the tribunal - a

light in which neither parent figured in the least as a happy example to

youth and innocence. What was to have been expected on the evidence was

the nomination, in loco parentis , of some proper third person, some

respectable or at least some presentable friend. Apparently, however,

the circle of the Faranges had been scanned in vain for any such

ornament; so that the only solution finally meeting all the difficulties

was, save that of sending Maisie to a Home, the partition of the

tutelary office in the manner I have mentioned. There were more reasons

for her parents to agree to it than there had ever been for them to

agree to anything; and they now prepared with her help to enjoy the

distinction that waits upon vulgarity sufficiently attested. Their

rupture had resounded, and after being perfectly insignificant

together they would be decidedly striking apart. Had they not produced

an impression that warranted people in looking for appeals in the

newspapers for the rescue of the little one - reverberation, amid a

vociferous public, of the idea that some movement should be started or

some benevolent person should come forward? A good lady came indeed a

step or two: she was distantly related to Mrs. Farange, to whom she

proposed that, having children and nurseries wound up and going, she

should be allowed to take home the bone of contention and, by working it

into her system, relieve at least one of the parents. This would make

every time, for Maisie, after her inevitable six months with Beale, much

more of a change.

"More of a change?" Ida cried. "Won't it be enough of a change for her

to come from that low brute to the person in the world who detests him

most?"

"No, because you detest him so much that you'll always talk to her about

him. You'll keep him before her by perpetually abusing him."

Mrs. Farange stared. "Pray, then, am I to do nothing to counteract his

villainous abuse of ME?"

The good lady, for a moment, made no reply: her silence was a grim

judgement of the whole point of view. "Poor little monkey!" she at

last exclaimed; and the words were an epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's

childhood. She was abandoned to her fate. What was clear to any

spectator was that the only link binding her to either parent was this

lamentable fact of her being a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep

little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed. They had

wanted her not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they

could, with her unconscious aid, do each other. She should serve

their anger and seal their revenge, for husband and wife had been

alike crippled by the heavy hand of justice, which in the last resort

met on neither side their indignant claim to get, as they called it,

everything. If each was only to get half this seemed to concede that

neither was so base as the other pretended, or, to put it differently,

offered them both as bad indeed, since they were only as good as each

other. The mother had wished to prevent the father from, as she said,

'so much as looking" at the child; the father's plea was that the

mother's lightest touch was 'simply contamination." These were the

opposed principles in which Maisie was to be educated - she was to fit

them together as she might. Nothing could have been more touching at

first than her failure to suspect the ordeal that awaited her little

unspotted soul. There were persons horrified to think what those in

charge of it would combine to try to make of it: no one could conceive

in advance that they would be able to make nothing ill.

This was a society in which for the most part people were occupied

only with chatter, but the disunited couple had at last grounds for

expecting a time of high activity. They girded their loins, they felt

as if the quarrel had only begun. They felt indeed more married than

ever, inasmuch as what marriage had mainly suggested to them was the

unbroken opportunity to quarrel. There had been 'sides" before, and

there were sides as much as ever; for the sider too the prospect

opened out, taking the pleasant form of a superabundance of matter for

desultory conversation. The many friends of the Faranges drew together

to differ about them; contradiction grew young again over teacups

and cigars. Everybody was always assuring everybody of something

very shocking, and nobody would have been jolly if nobody had been

outrageous. The pair appeared to have a social attraction which failed

merely as regards each other: it was indeed a great deal to be able

to say for Ida that no one but Beale desired her blood, and for Beale

that if he should ever have his eyes scratched out it would be only by

his wife. It was generally felt, to begin with, that they were awfully

good-looking - they had really not been analysed to a deeper residuum.

They made up together for instance some twelve feet three of stature,

and nothing was more discussed than the apportionment of this

quantity. The sole flaw in Ida's beauty was a length and reach of

arm conducive perhaps to her having so often beaten her ex-husband

at billiards, a game in which she showed a superiority largely

accountable, as she maintained, for the resentment finding expression

in his physical violence. Billiards was her great accomplishment

and the distinction her name always first produced the mention of.

Notwithstanding some very long lines everything about her that might

have been large and that in many women profited by the licence was,

with a single exception, admired and cited for its smallness. The

exception was her eyes, which might have been of mere regulation size,

but which overstepped the modesty of nature; her mouth, on the other

hand, was barely perceptible, and odds were freely taken as to the

measurement of her waist. She was a person who, when she was out - and

she was always out - produced everywhere a sense of having been seen

often, the sense indeed of a kind of abuse of visibility, so that it

would have been, in the usual places rather vulgar to wonder at her.

Strangers only did that; but they, to the amusement of the familiar,

did it very much: it was an inevitable way of betraying an alien

habit. Like her husband she carried clothes, carried them as a train

carries passengers: people had been known to compare their taste and

dispute about the accommodation they gave these articles, though

inclining on the whole to the commendation of Ida as less overcrowded,

especially with jewellery and flowers. Beale Farange had natural

decorations, a kind of costume in his vast fair beard, burnished like

a gold breastplate, and in the eternal glitter of the teeth that his

long moustache had been trained not to hide and that gave him, in

every possible situation, the look of the joy of life. He had been

destined in his youth for diplomacy and momentarily attached, without

a salary, to a legation which enabled him often to say "In MY time in

the East": but contemporary history had somehow had no use for him,

had hurried past him and left him in perpetual Piccadilly. Every one

knew what he had - only twenty-five hundred. Poor Ida, who had run

through everything, had now nothing but her carriage and her paralysed

uncle. This old brute, as he was called, was supposed to have a lot

put away. The child was provided for, thanks to a crafty godmother, a

defunct aunt of Beale's, who had left her something in such a manner

that the parents could appropriate only the income.

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The child was provided for, but the new arrangement was inevitably

confounding to a young intelligence intensely aware that something had

happened which must matter a good deal and looking anxiously out for

the effects of so great a cause. It was to be the fate of this patient

little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even

at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient,

had perhaps ever understood before. Only a drummer-boy in a ballad or

a story could have been so in the thick of the fight. She was taken

into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she

might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a

magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric - strange shadows

dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given

for her - a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre. She was

in short introduced to life with a liberality in which the selfishness

of others found its account, and there was nothing to avert the

sacrifice but the modesty of her youth.

Her first term was with her father, who spared her only in not letting

her have the wild letters addressed to her by her mother: he confined

himself to holding them up at her and shaking them, while he showed his

teeth, and then amusing her by the way he chucked them, across the room,

bang into the fire. Even at that moment, however, she had a scared

anticipation of fatigue, a guilty sense of not rising to the occasion,

feeling the charm of the violence with which the stiff unopened

envelopes, whose big monograms - Ida bristled with monograms - she would

have liked to see, were made to whizz, like dangerous missiles, through

the air. The greatest effect of the great cause was her own greater

importance, chiefly revealed to her in the larger freedom with which

she was handled, pulled hither and thither and kissed, and the

proportionately greater niceness she was obliged to show. Her features

had somehow become prominent; they were so perpetually nipped by the

gentlemen who came to see her father and the smoke of whose cigarettes

went into her face. Some of these gentlemen made her strike matches and

light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees violently jolted,

pinched the calves of her legs till she shrieked - her shriek was much

admired - and reproached them with being toothpicks. The word stuck in

her mind and contributed to her feeling from this time that she was

deficient in something that would meet the general desire. She found

out what it was: it was a congenital tendency to the production of a

substance to which Moddle, her nurse, gave a short ugly name, a name

painfully associated at dinner with the part of the joint that she

didn't like. She had left behind her the time when she had no desires

to meet, none at least save Moddle's, who, in Kensington Gardens, was

always on the bench when she came back to see if she had been playing

too far. Moddle's desire was merely that she shouldn't do that, and she

met it so easily that the only spots in that long brightness were the

moments of her wondering what would become of her if, on her rushing

back, there should be no Moddle on the bench. They still went to the

Gardens, but there was a difference even there; she was impelled

perpetually to look at the legs of other children and ask her nurse if

THEY were toothpicks. Moddle was terribly truthful; she always said: "Oh

my dear, you'll not find such another pair as your own." It seemed to

have to do with something else that Moddle often said: "You feel the

strain - that's where it is; and you'll feel it still worse, you know."

Thus from the first Maisie not only felt it, but knew she felt it. A

part of it was the consequence of her father's telling her he felt it

too, and telling Moddle, in her presence, that she must make a point of

driving that home. She was familiar, at the age of six, with the fact

that everything had been changed on her account, everything ordered to

enable him to give himself up to her. She was to remember always the

words in which Moddle impressed upon her that he did so give himself:

"Your papa wishes you never to forget, you know, that he has been

dreadfully put about." If the skin on Moddle's face had to Maisie the

air of being unduly, almost painfully, stretched, it never presented

that appearance so much as when she uttered, as she often had occasion

to utter, such words. The child wondered if they didn't make it hurt

more than usual; but it was only after some time that she was able to

attach to the picture of her father's sufferings, and more particularly

to her nurse's manner about them, the meaning for which these things

had waited. By the time she had grown sharper, as the gentlemen who had

criticised her calves used to say, she found in her mind a collection of

images and echoes to which meanings were attachable - images and echoes

kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers,

like games she wasn't yet big enough to play. The great strain meanwhile

was that of carrying by the right end the things her father said about

her mother - things mostly indeed that Moddle, on a glimpse of them, as

if they had been complicated toys or difficult books, took out of her

hands and put away in the closet. A wonderful assortment of objects of

this kind she was to discover there later, all tumbled up too with the

things, shuffled into the same receptacle, that her mother had said

about her father.

She had the knowledge that on a certain occasion which every day brought

nearer her mother would be at the door to take her away, and this would

have darkened all the days if the ingenious Moddle hadn't written on a

paper in very big easy words ever so many pleasures that she would enjoy

at the other house. These promises ranged from "a mother's fond love"

to "a nice poached egg to your tea," and took by the way the prospect

of sitting up ever so late to see the lady in question dressed, in

silks and velvets and diamonds and pearls, to go out: so that it was a

real support to Maisie, at the supreme hour, to feel how, by Moddle's

direction, the paper was thrust away in her pocket and there clenched in

her fist. The supreme hour was to furnish her with a vivid reminiscence,

that of a strange outbreak in the drawing-room on the part of Moddle,

who, in reply to something her father had just said, cried aloud: "You

ought to be perfectly ashamed of yourself - you ought to blush, sir, for

the way you go on!" The carriage, with her mother in it, was at the

door; a gentleman who was there, who was always there, laughed out very

loud; her father, who had her in his arms, said to Moddle: "My dear

woman, I'll settle you presently!" - after which he repeated, showing

his teeth more than ever at Maisie while he hugged her, the words for

which her nurse had taken him up. Maisie was not at the moment so fully

conscious of them as of the wonder of Moddle's sudden disrespect and

crimson face; but she was able to produce them in the course of five

minutes when, in the carriage, her mother, all kisses, ribbons, eyes,

arms, strange sounds and sweet smells, said to her: "And did your

beastly papa, my precious angel, send any message to your own loving

mamma?" Then it was that she found the words spoken by her beastly papa

to be, after all, in her little bewildered ears, from which, at her

mother's appeal, they passed, in her clear shrill voice, straight to

her little innocent lips. "He said I was to tell you, from him," she

faithfully reported, "that you're a nasty horrid pig!"