

THE LIFTED VEIL

found it profitable to know all he could learn about each of his parishioners, without paying attention to gossip. For him Miss Higgins was more than an old maid, struggling, probably on narrow means, to keep a footing in New York. In spite of her mildly grotesque appearance and her simpering smiles she was a human being, like any other—a human being with hopes and cares and heartaches, to whom he might on some occasion possibly be useful.

Miss Higgins, according to Mrs. Palliser, had never really been "in society," but then she had never really been out of it. She was asked to big things—things to which every one to whom any one owed anything came in hordes. No one knew exactly what was owing to Miss Higgins beyond the fact that on such occasions she was generally invited. It would have been taxing the memory too far to go back to the period in the middle eighties when old Peter Higgins had begun to make a splurge, for the splurge, having risen and come in like a tidal wave, had subsided and gone out in the same way, leaving Miss Higgins landed and stranded on the shore. On the shore she had remained, never climbing up the bank, but never slipping back into the water.

"It isn't so much that people know her," Mrs. Palliser continued to explain, "as it is that they're used to seeing her, in the way they're used to seeing certain shadows at certain hours of the day. She minces in and out of drawing-rooms as inoffensively as a spirit and almost as unperceived. From November to May you'll find her standing in corners and drinking uncountable cups of tea, but the poor soul doesn't do any one any harm and makes an enemy of no one."

"Not even of you?" Bainbridge smiled.