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Hilary Ball

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Blooming Girls and Bad Girls: “In the Cage” and the Ha’penny Novel

By Hilary Ball, *University of British Columbia*

In his 1908 preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James suggests that part of his impetus for embracing the “mere young thing” as a literary subject is his sense of the limitations of many of her previous incarnations, even in the hands of some of his favorite writers (*FW* 1078). In novels like *Portrait*, however, the task of navigating the representational history of the girl is not reserved for the novelist alone but is also a central concern for the female character herself. James’s mere young things are frequently readers of fiction, and James’s fiction frequently insists, as Donatella Izzo observes, on “literature’s role in shaping the individual and collective imagination by disseminating ideological representations” (352)—its power of “colonizing” the mind and thereby contributing to the girl’s self-conception as a desiring subject and desired object. Thus, the primary narrative question of *Portrait*—“Well, what will she *do*?” (*FW* 1081)—can be read as being preceded by another, unspoken one: “Well, what will she *be*?”

This question of what a girl should do and be in the wake of how she has been “done” before is especially relevant to James’s 1898 portrait of working-class life, “In the Cage,” in which a young telegraphist with an active imagination and a penchant for “very greasy” ha’penny novels struggles to position herself in relation to the conventional female types she has encountered in cheap fictions of sentiment and sensation (*IC* 119). While much has been written of the telegraphist’s role as surrogate author figure, significantly less has been said of her status as voracious reader, of her assimilation of popular tropes, and of her curious yet often confused experimentation with different voices and identities. Even more so than in *Portrait*, the girl’s inner life subsumes “In the Cage”—the action of which consists, in James’s words, of “the girl’s ‘subjective’ adventure” (*FW* 1170)—and every character reaches the reader already mediated by the girl’s narrativizing consciousness. While the telegraphist certainly writes and rewrites her customers, she also consistently writes and rewrites herself,

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a process that gains increased consequence and even urgency when considered in the context of anxieties surrounding the emergence of the "New Woman" in the years leading up to this novella's publication. In "In the Cage," I will argue, James invokes two well-established popular literary types with which his heroine might choose to identify: the "blooming girl" of the sentimental domestic novel and the "bad girl" of the sensational novel, the former appealing to her sense of her own social superiority and the latter to her repressed yet insistent sexuality. The girl's recognition of both of these polarizing figures as equally unsuitable, however, as well as James's proclivity for collapsing them signal the old stories' and symbols' insufficiency in the face of the *fin-de-siècle*'s ambivalent acknowledgement of new possibilities for female agency and desire.

Not nearly enough critical attention has been paid to the poignantly comedic relationship between the telegraphist and her flower-arranging friend Mrs. Jordan, and I would therefore like to begin by addressing the tacit note of competition between these two working-class women, especially in reference to their careers—careers that map onto the tension between blooming and badness I see as crucial to James's depiction of the telegraphist's emerging identity. Flowers, like telegrams, are objects of luxury and as such provide livelihoods for those who cannot themselves afford to decorate their houses or communicate frequently and expensively. The implications surrounding these two livelihoods, however, differ significantly, especially when pursued by women. Mrs. Jordan, on the one hand, works predominantly in the private homes of the "happy" upper classes (120), locales that imbue her career with both increased respectability and, in her opinion, increased intimacy with her customers. Haunted, like the telegraphist, with memories of a long-lost higher social status, Mrs. Jordan claims that her access to grand houses and her communication with their owners give her the feeling of living "again with one's own people" (133). In the practice of her art "she more than peep[s] in—she penetrate[s]" (134), and she seems confident that "a single step more would socially, would absolutely, introduce her" (120). The telegraphist's work, on the other hand, provides none of these advantages, and her confined status reinforces her separateness from the customers who treat her as if she has "no more feeling than a letter box" (168). Stuck behind the bars of her cage in the public corner of a grocery store provocatively named "Cocker's" and presenting to the world "the picture of servitude and promiscuity" (136), the telegraphist does not penetrate the homes of the wealthy as Mrs. Jordan does but is in fact penetrated by the customers who from morning to night "thrust" their correspondence and cash into her enclosure (117)—an image of sexual vulnerability and impersonality that accords with the contemporary view of female telegraphists as on "a continuum with the prostitute" (Galvan 297).

Despite the telegraphist's visually reinforced difference from and subservience to her customers, however, she still considers her relation to them to be more intimate than Mrs. Jordan's. While her friend's responsibility is to the decorative, the telegraphist sees herself as participating in the interpersonal—as she puts it, "Combinations of flowers and green-stuff, forsooth! What *she* could handle freely . . . was combinations of men and women" (120). Mrs. Jordan sees her customers as they wish to be seen and, in adorning their tables with blooms, contributes to their appearance of respectability and affluence. The telegraphist, by contrast, handles "[t]heir affairs, their appointments and arrangements, their little games and secrets and vices" (138),

vices of which Mrs. Jordan claims ignorance. Having established that they probably share many of the same customers ("I daresay it's some of your people that *I* do"), the two women find themselves tersely competing over who knows them better ("I doubt if you 'do' them as much as I!" [138])—Mrs. Jordan claiming to "love" them (199), the telegraphist claiming to "hate" them (139), and each woman insisting that her knowledge and accompanying feeling is more intimate and authentic. The two women's distinct modes for "reading" the wealthy, as informed by their distinct work environments, situate their workplaces, I will suggest, within discursive and narrative frameworks associated with popular literature. Specifically, Mrs. Jordan's fawning admiration of the rich associates her floral vocation with the sentimental domestic genre, whereas the telegraphist's simultaneous hatred and fascination summon the sensational.

Blooming Girl

James's association of the floral with the domestic has its precedent in both English and American literary traditions, although since the heroine of "In the Cage" is living and reading in London, I will primarily be addressing the English literary context here. My examination of the floral preoccupations of "In the Cage" builds on the foundations laid by Amy M. King's work on what she calls the "botanical vernacular" in the nineteenth-century English courtship novel, a literary language she traces back to Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus's eighteenth-century "sexual system" of plant classification (3). Linnaeus, responsible for disseminating the late seventeenth-century discovery that the flower is the sexual organ of the plant, termed the sexual reproduction of flowers "marriage," thus, as King observes, making "a horticultural fact a human fact, and by extension a human act (marriage) a horticultural, 'natural' act (blooming)" (4). This conflation of the natural and social in reference to the sexual both drew attention to the sexual dimension of courtship and provided authors with a language with which to write about it: "[s]ex became spoken," King explains, "because flowers, always a suitable subject for representation, were revealed as sexual" (13). While the Linnaean theory was extremely popular and the sexual implications of floral imagery would have been widely understood, the image was able to maintain its previous associations with virginity, purity, and innocence. Thus, the flower's various overlapping cultural meanings allowed it to perform several simultaneous roles in a text.

King's study concentrates on representations of the young girl "in bloom," a figure of the courtship novel of which James himself was most likely aware, having encountered her in the works of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope, among others. Blooming heroines, according to King, are defined "by a presentation that conflates a putatively bodily fact—the fact of being 'in bloom'—and a social position: the fact of the girl's imminent insertion into a marriage plot" (4). A girl's bloom signals sexual maturation but is sanitized by its attachment to courtship; her readiness for sex is necessarily also a readiness for marriage. By the time James tackled the blooming girl, the Linnaean system was, of course, quite old, and the bloom narrative that had grown out of it had developed its own formal characteristics independent of any more recent developments in botanical sciences (King 43). James's blooming girl narratives, therefore, enter into conversation not primarily

with past or present scientific innovations but rather with a history of nineteenth-century literary representation inspired by Linnaeus's eighteenth-century scientific model. James's awareness of the blooming type, King observes, is most evident in his literary criticism, in which he contrasts Trollope's characterization of his young girls (the "simple maiden in her flower" [*EL* 1349]) to his spinsters (who have "ceased to belong to the blooming season" [1350]) and Eliot's depiction of her Dorothea ("that perfect flower of conception" [959]) to her Rosamond (a "veritably mulish domestic flower" [963]). As King suggests, James "seems to understand, if not name, the bloom narrative" (46), and his recognition that the blooming girl has reached the status of trope becomes motivation to revive her in novels such as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove* through an increased self-consciousness about the effect of her prior incarnations.

"In the Cage," never mentioned in King's study, is not an obvious example of James's engagement with the blooming trope, especially insofar as neither the telegraphist nor Mrs. Jordan is a typical blooming girl by King's definition—the telegraphist being already engaged and Mrs. Jordan, a widow, well past her sexual prime. Nevertheless, James's recourse throughout the text to a consistent pattern of floral images seems to indicate that the sexual and social connotations surrounding literary blooming were not far from his thoughts. The adulterous protagonists of the telegraphist's workplace fantasy, for instance, Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard, are both characterized as "blooming"—she with "an unwitting insolence" (123) and he with "beatitude" (128); the telegraphist's grocer-fiancé Mr. Mudge has the sort of mind whose "natural flowers" are "preparation and precaution" (171); Mrs. Jordan's definition of her profession is "like a tinkle of bluebells" (137); and the telegraphist herself, who daily facilitates the excessive habits of the wealthy, is described as having her nose "brushed by the bouquet" yet being unable to "really pluck even a daisy" (129). The telegraphist's reading habits, Mrs. Jordan's incessant hinting, and James's own flowery language work together to conjure up the ghost of the blooming girl that the telegraphist imagines she might have been had she not settled for a socially unambitious engagement to Mr. Mudge.

The telegraphist's own awareness of the blooming girl type can be confirmed by a glance at the only one of her "ha'pennyworths" that James mentions by name: "the charming tale of *Picciola*" (122), a popular French novel by X. B. Saintine, the title of which "became a byword for sentimentality, moral purity and aspiration" (Hutchison 181).[1] An especially literal execution of the logic of the blooming girl narrative, *Picciola* tells the story of a political prisoner, Count Charney, who falls in love with a flower, affectionately named "Picciola," that he discovers sprouting between the paving stones of the prison courtyard. While there are many parallels to be drawn between "In the Cage" and the plot of *Picciola*, most relevant for my purposes is Charney's personification of the flower as a beautiful young girl. When Charney first dreams of Picciola, Saintine describes how "the young girl and the flower seemed to melt one into the other; the open and fragrant petals encircled the lovely face, and soon hid it entirely" (76).[2] Later in the novel, Charney finds himself falling in love with his fellow prisoner's daughter, Theresa, whom he has never met but whom he knows to have done him great service. His two beloveds—"the young maiden Picciola, that sweet image born of the perfumes of his flower; the other, the angel of his prison, his second providence, Theresa Girhardi"—begin to occupy all his reveries, but

as he has glanced but briefly at Theresa's face, only Picciola appears under a "fixed, distinct form" in his imagination, whereas Theresa appears veiled (226); if he lifts Theresa's veil, "it was always the face of Picciola that was revealed" (227). When Charney and Theresa finally meet face to face, Charney realizes that Theresa's face *is* the face of Picciola—that his fleeting glimpse of Theresa, many months ago, must have been "impressed upon his brain, and reproduced in his dreams" (230). Thus, the flower and the maiden converge in the figure of Theresa, who wears at her heart a medallion in which she has preserved one of Picciola's blossoms (231). Charney is eventually released from prison, marries Theresa, and fathers a daughter, and the flower Picciola dies from neglect.

Despite Saintine's sanctimonious tone and his idealized depiction of the "angelic" Theresa (236), *Picciola* is not devoid of the sexualized undertones embedded in scientific and literary perceptions of blooming. In fact, Linnaeus's *Species Plantarum* is specifically named as one of several books Charney reads in his attempt to learn more about his beloved flower (176). Charney spends much of his time in prison examining Picciola with a magnifying glass—"carefully open[ing] the leaves at the extremities of the stems" (45–46), searching for signs of a blossom—and when a bud finally appears, Saintine describes how Charney's "heart beat violently, he laid his hand upon it, and the blood suffused his face" (46). These hours of study and analysis Charney follows with "agreeable relaxation and pastime in turning from Picciola the plant to Picciola the maiden" (91). His fervent examinations of the sexual organs of his plant prompt meditations on her beauty personified in female form. While Saintine emphasizes Picciola's spiritual influence on the formerly atheist Charney, his obsession with the flower also indicates a sexual awakening. Yet despite the raciness often expected from French novels, *Picciola* was well received in England—the *Morning Post* even congratulated France as a whole on "this indication of a tendency to return to simpler and purer tastes, to renounce the human diabolism, the impotent and morbid excesses, the unnatural and revolting caricatures of vice and of virtue, which for the last half century have characterised their works of fiction" (qtd. in Hutchison 181). Charney's sexual attraction to Picciola and by extension Theresa is consummated only through the happy marriage that concludes the novel, and Theresa's own sexuality is never in itself addressed. Thus, *Picciola*'s representation of human sexuality, while easily discernible, remains safely contained within the more acceptable taxonomies of marriage and the floral.

As the only directly named representative of the telegraphist's reading tastes, *Picciola* provides crucial insight into the kind of narrative James's heroine might construct around the professional flower arranger and the implications surrounding Mrs. Jordan's suggestion that she join the business. Having sensed from Mrs. Jordan's hints that her profession has put her in a potentially advantageous relation with the aristocratic Lord Rye, the telegraphist considers that "[a] thousand tulips at a shilling clearly took one further than a thousand words at a penny" and "with a twinge of her easy jealousy" finds herself wondering "if it mightn't after all then, for *her* also, be better—better than where she was—to follow some such scent" (136). When she asks Mrs. Jordan whether she'd actually see the aristocracy if she gave up her job at the telegraph office, Mrs. Jordan archly remarks, "I'd send you to all the bachelors!" (138), giving the telegraphist the distinct impression that there might be "something auspicious in the mixture of bachelors and flowers"—that she might, if she were to

follow Mrs. Jordan's path, "do much better" than an engagement to a grocer (140). Although irritated by Mrs. Jordan's implied slight of Mr. Mudge, the telegraphist senses that she would "almost hate" Mrs. Jordan, should her friend succeed in marrying a Lord Rye, unless, of course, she might herself be "conciliated in advance by a successful rescue" (140). Vacillating between loyalty to her fiancé and jealousy of her friend, the telegraphist apparently perceives "rescue" as achievable for any girl who follows the sweet scent of roses into the homes of wealthy young men.

Both Hutchison and Nicola Nixon have remarked upon James's invocation of *Picciola*'s implausible trajectory of imprisonment and rescue, suggesting that greasy novels like Saintine's "perpetually offer the bright improbability that [the telegraphist's] prison is synonymous with the literary heroines' mouldering gothic dungeon or cage of genteel poverty in the domestic romance—that, in effect, physical, financial, and social rescue could be imminent" (Nixon 187). What neither Hutchison nor Nixon notices, however, is how the very association between the floral and the socially sanctioned sexuality of marriage, so clearly depicted in *Picciola*, renders the combination of bachelors and flowers so apparently "auspicious" in the telegraphist's eyes (140). Mrs. Jordan, who has "grand long talks" with Lord Rye while holding in her arms "a thousand tulips" (136), seems, to the telegraphist, to be planting herself into a blooming girl narrative of her own—as if by surrounding herself with literal flowers she might take on the bloom's physical and social connotations. Even her initial announcement of her profession—"I *do* flowers"—can be read as a triple entendre on "doing," combining a sexually provocative phrasing (taken up again in the two women's discussion of who "does" the aristocracy more authentically) and the speaking of a marriage vow (I do) (137). Mrs. Jordan's job offer, therefore, is received by the telegraphist as an invitation to read herself as a blooming girl in the image of Saintine's Theresa. While working with telegrams "doesn't lead to much" (139), working with flowers might help her become flower-like, resulting in the delicate balance of sexual attractiveness and eligibility that elicits proposals rather than propositions.

This is not to say that the telegraphist's engagement to Mr. Mudge is not in itself a bloom narrative of sorts but that James depicts it as neither socially ambitious nor sexually stimulating. The telegraphist considers her fiancé to be relatively good-looking, but his beauty is "the beauty of a grocer," and she cannot imagine it expanding, even if meticulously treated by a tailor or barber, to any resemblance of a gentleman (142). Nor, as the novella opens, can she imagine "what it was that marriage would be able to add to a familiarity so final," indicating an apparent lack of enthusiasm for the sexual component of their relationship that marriage will inevitably introduce (118). His conversation she generally finds tedious, and his insistence on constantly revising their plans means that "every little flower of a foretaste was pulled up as soon as planted" (157)—an image of a low-to-the-ground garden, inhibited from growing to its full potential by an overly cautious gardener. James presents this same image again in reverse when he describes "Preparation and precaution" as the "natural flowers" of Mr. Mudge's mind, which "in proportion as these things declined in one quarter . . . inevitably bloomed elsewhere" (171–72). A garden he may provide, but it is low and weedy, with none of the luscious blossoms the telegraphist's reading may have led her to envision for herself. Even his name—Mudge—sounds like mud or sludge, and the neighborhood they will live in—Chalk Farm—suggests sterility rather than growth. Why, then, we may ask, does the telegraphist remain in this apparently

disappointing union rather than follow Mrs. Jordan toward what she believes to be more fertile ground?

Bad Girl

Certainly James's heroine is no mere conniving social climber, and her acute "sense of the race for life" is tempered by a conflicted yet unyielding loyalty to the man she has consented to marry (136). I would suggest, however, that another significant factor in her rejection of the opportunity for blooming offered by Mrs. Jordan is her ambivalent attraction to a different narrative altogether, a narrative entangled in the sensational world of non-marital sexuality revealed to her by her work in the telegraph office. Nixon has noted the girl's inclination toward reading her customers' telegrams through the familiar paradigms of her ha'pennyworths, awaiting "each new telegraphic hint to their story as if it were the next instalment of a serialized novel" (190). Yet, whereas Nixon presents the telegraphist's glimpse of aristocratic high reality—"marriages in danger, exciting liaisons, secret codes, lush country houses, and glorious costumes"—as representative of a lavish *domestic* life she cannot have for herself, I read her fascination with the affair as an attraction to the very *transgressiveness* of her customers' behavior, to their rejection of traditional domesticity. The titillation the telegraphist experiences in witnessing this rejection, moreover, positions her vision of the aristocracy, in stark contrast to Mrs. Jordan's, in the tradition of the sensational genre rather than the sentimental or domestic.

Sensation novels of the nineteenth century, as Lyn Pykett has extensively demonstrated, consistently disrupted fictional stereotypes of proper femininity and problematized the domestic ideals of family and marriage. In fact, the genre reached its period of greatest popularity and prominence in the 1860s, the decade following "the Divorce Act of 1857 . . . the press campaigns on the 'social evil' of prostitution . . . and the 'surplus women' controversy and the associated campaigns for educational and employment opportunities for women" (*Nineteenth* 71). In other words, the anxieties exploited by sensation literature converged on the question of woman—her rejection of domesticity, her dangerous sexuality, and her invasion of the masculine workplace. Most of all, Pamela Gilbert claims, sensationalism was a genre that drew attention to traditional boundaries by emphasizing their transgression and violation, depicting slippage not only within categorizations of gender, class, and race but also between reader and text, "with the text's reaching out to touch the reader's body, acting directly 'on the nerves'" (4). This genre even managed to trouble generic classification itself, insofar as novels like Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Ouida's *Under Two Flags* (1867) oscillated between sensational subplots and domestic melodrama, as well as, in the case of the latter, wartime adventure and *bildungsroman* (Gilbert 11). Since sensationalism was predominantly associated with women readers and writers, therefore, it received significant critical backlash from reviewers who believed its transgressive content might corrupt and contaminate.

Presenting complicated and exciting narratives involving adultery, blackmail, prostitution, crime, and murder, sensation novels remained immensely popular despite the backlash, exerting an appeal that was frequently aligned with voyeurism and spying. James himself wrote of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, "she knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know, but that they are apparently very glad to learn" (*EL*

745)—an evaluation of Braddon's appeal that corresponds with what he describes in his preface to "In the Cage" as his initial narrative question: "what it might 'mean,' . . . for confined and cramped and yet considerably tutored young officials of either sex to be made so free, intellectually, of a range of experience *otherwise quite closed to them*" (*FW* 1168, emphasis mine). Reading other people's telegrams and reading sensation fiction spring from the same morbid fascination, not with the domestic elegance and virtue of "fine folks" (*IC* 119) but with the affairs, appointments, and arrangements, the little games and secrets and vices that the telegraphist has flaunted at Mrs. Jordan as the sweetest fruits of her labor (138). In fact, hints of all the typical sensational scenarios I listed above—adultery, blackmail, prostitution, crime, and murder—surface with more or less subtlety in this novella's long, twisting sentences and cryptic dialogue.[3] The telegraphist's glimpse into her customers' private affairs, moreover, aligns her not only with the intended reader of authors like Braddon but also with a common figure from within her pages: the ever-observant servant who, as in novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), can either protect her employers' secrets or exploit them. By portraying the telegraphist as both potential reader of and character from sensation fiction, James partakes in that same blurring of boundaries between reader and text for which sensation fiction was condemned and feared, thus both enacting and complicating nineteenth-century perceptions of young female readers' impressionability.

James's evocation of the sensational is perhaps most apparent in his depiction of the telegraphist's intensely corporeal reactions to Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen's presence, an emphasis on the body that reflects what the opponents of sensationalism described as its "penchant for inspiring physical excitement in the reader" (Garrison 1). Throughout the novella, in fact, James's close attention to touch and to small sensory details that verge on sensual seem to participate in the aesthetic of the sensational. The first time the telegraphist sees the adulterous Captain Everard, for instance, she feels all her speculations as to his type "settled with a thump that seemed somehow addressed straight to her heart" (125). Playing with the common critique of sensation writing as "an appeal to the nerves rather than to the heart" (qtd. in Garrison 3), James describes how at Everard's approach, "[t]hat organ *literally beat faster*" (125, emphasis mine). The impression he provokes is "addressed" to her heart, but it reaches the physical organ rather than the seat of emotions. As the telegraphist's familiarity with Everard increases, she considers that her greatest torment is her inability to "*touch* with him on some individual fact" (147, emphasis mine). She longs "to show him in some sharp, sweet way that she had *perfectly penetrated*" the secret of his difficulty (emphasis mine), and yet she can only "*rub along* with the hope" that by some accident she might find a way to assist him (148, emphasis mine). The girl's conviction that Everard "did like her!" James figures as a "small throbbing spot" in which all her "native distinction, her refinement of personal grain, of heredity, of pride, took refuge" (152), and several lines later James describes her as wondering "what other spot [i.e., place] his presence might just then happen to sanctify. For she thought of them, the other spots, as ecstatically conscious of it, expressively happy in it" (153). This meditation on the various "spots" where Everard has been (all, I would suggest, meant to be read as "small" and "throbbing" as well as "ecstatically conscious" and "expressively happy") is immediately followed by the telegraphist's examination of his lover Lady Bradeen's face—"the eyes and lips that must so often

have been so near his own"—the sight of which fills her with a "strange passion." Although she imagines Everard's presence as "sanctifying" the spots, and although she seems determined to paint his clandestine affair as high romance, she is by no means unaware of his and Lady Bradeen's sexuality—of their bodies' physical proximity—and, whether she likes it or not, their bodies both fascinate and stimulate her.

If, then, the telegraphist finds herself beckoned up toward the homes of the wealthy and into a bloom narrative of her own, facilitated by Mrs. Jordan, she simultaneously feels drawn down toward the secretive, illicit world of non-marital sexuality revealed to her by her work at the post-office, a world that evokes a very different narrative: that of the bad girl or the fallen woman. This temptation is articulated most clearly in the telegraphist's imagined confrontation with Everard about the dangerous implications of her knowledge:

> She quite thrilled herself with thinking what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do. It would be a scene better than many in her ha'penny novels, this going to him in the dusk of evening at Park Chambers and letting him at last have it. "I know too much about a certain person now not to put it to you—excuse my being so lurid—that it's quite worth your while to buy me off. Come, therefore; buy me!" There was a point indeed at which such flights had to drop again—the point of an unreadiness to name, when it came to that, the purchasing medium. It wouldn't, certainly, be anything so gross as money, and the matter accordingly remained rather vague, all the more that *she* was not a bad girl. (149–50)

On that command, "buy me!," the fantasy of blackmail that animates this passage converges with a fantasy of prostitution, thus conflating two types of "bad girls"—the girl who is bought off and the girl who is bought. As Eric Savoy points out, the imperative "signifies the cash nexus in which blackmail was comparable to, and might accompany, prostitution, and demonstrates the contingent power that accrued to the working-class servant when the secrets of private life circulated in the public medium of telegraphy" (292). The telegraphist's immediate revocation of "gross" money as the purchasing medium, therefore, is significant. What is the purchasing medium if not money? What exactly does she want from Captain Everard? His attention? His love? His body? Unsure of how to navigate or even name these desires, she allows the matter to remain vague, reassured by the knowledge that she is not, in fact, a bad girl.

And yet, when the long-awaited conversation between the telegraphist and Captain Everard finally occurs, the shadow of the bad girl lingers. As they stroll together toward the Park Chambers Hotel, having crossed paths outside his hotel, the telegraphist finds herself wondering "whether people of his sort still asked girls up to their rooms when they were so awfully in love with other women" or whether it counted as being "false to their love" (160). She concludes quickly that "the true answer was that people of her sort didn't, in such cases, matter—didn't count as infidelity, counted only as something else: she might have been curious, since it came to that, to see exactly what." This possibility of engaging in "something else" with Everard remains in the air throughout the scene, as does the possibility of blackmailing him. As they sit together on a bench in the Park, she imagines "the trouble she had taken" for him materializing as "a little hoard of gold in her lap" and considers

that he might "look at it, handle it, take up the pieces" (162), an image that, like the exclamation, "buy me!," positions cash at the nexus between transgressive knowledge and transgressive sexuality. Later in the scene, after her grand promise "I'd do anything for you," she feels him "take it [her promise] up, take it down, as if they had been on a satin sofa in a boudoir," a thought that coincides with the first moment of physical contact in the novella, a movement on Everard's part that "had the result of placing his hand on her own" (165). The fact that she has never seen a boudoir but that "there had been lots of boudoirs in the telegrams" (*IC* 165) further illustrates, as Laura James notes, "the complicated intertwining of sexual knowledge and her roles as telegraphist and medium" (98). The telegraphist's voyeuristic glimpse into the sexual secrets of others has wakened in her an alternate self, a self that, like the embracing couples on the other benches in the Park, "it was impossible not to see, yet at whom it was impossible to look" (162).

The unsettlingly awkward dialogue in this scene, which ends with the telegraphist's promise not to "abandon" Everard and Everard's confused exclamation of "See here!" (170), seems to indicate a fundamental misunderstanding between the two interlocutors, and yet this misunderstanding should be attributed not to the telegraphist's innocence—a quality that critics of this text overemphasize—but rather to her refusal to look directly at what she nevertheless knows to exist. Although the telegraphist recognizes the sensational implications of her "relation" to Everard, her sense of her own respectability compels her to rewrite these implications as romantic. Nixon, who reads the bench scene's conversational confusion as "genre specific," observes that the telegraphist's remarks "come straight from the pages of romantic fiction," whereas Everard's "suggest the apprehension that he is reading the teasing beginnings of tabloid journalism" (192). In other words, Everard assumes she is trying to blackmail him and the telegraphist assumes they are star-crossed lovers who must give each other up. "[T]his crisis of interpretation," Nixon claims, "serves to mark, albeit ironically, the degree to which the telegraphist has succumbed to the optimistic seduction of pulp novels to the point where she reads the real as if it were an attestation of the verisimilitude of her romances," thus also marking "the high point of her naiveté as a reader" (192). While I am convinced by Nixon's reading of Everard's strange behavior both during the bench scene and afterward, I read the telegraphist's response to his behavior not as a misunderstanding of his motives but as a refusal to understand them. "Didn't the place, the associations and circumstances, perfectly make it sound what it was not?" the telegraphist wonders, "and wasn't that exactly the beauty?" (165). Her insistence that it is not what it seems inevitably accompanies an acknowledgement of what it seems: she sees the hoard of gold in her lap, she knows what vulgar things he might say, and the "conscious joy" with which she tests him "with chances he didn't take" does not erase her knowledge of what those chances might be (161).

The telegraphist's romanticization of her and Everard's "relation," therefore, can be more accurately understood as a defense both against seeing herself as a bad girl in his eyes and admitting her own dangerous proximity to becoming one. The next time Everard shows up at the telegraph office after their conversation in the park, in fact, she finds herself longing "to bound straight out" of the cage and "perhaps be with him there again on a bench" (179). The restraints of respectability crumbling under the pressure of her desire, she considers that

> if she *were* out of the cage she wouldn't in the least have minded, this time, its not yet being dark. She would have gone straight toward Park Chambers and have hung about there till no matter when. She would have waited, stayed, rung, asked, have gone in, sat on the stairs.

She even begins to compose in her mind an excuse to leave work early and the "pale, hard face" with which she would deliver it (180), until Everard's sudden reappearance shocks her out of setting the plan in motion. Having recognized her fantasy's closeness to actualization, she becomes "strangely and portentously afraid" of Everard (181): afraid that he might be waiting for her outside, that he might propose supper (183), that he might ask her "to do for him the 'anything' she had promised" (181). She resists this fear, however, through elaborate justifications of his behavior. When he seems to be sliding "redundant money" across the counter—presumably trying to pay for her silence—she constructs the incoherent excuse that "[h]e wanted to pay her because there was nothing to pay her for. He wanted to offer her things that he knew she wouldn't take. He wanted to show her how much he respected her by giving her the supreme chance to show *him* she was respectable" (184). When he slips her the message "Absolutely impossible," she insists on interpreting it as "an abject little exposure of dreadful, impossible passion" (185)—a declaration that under different circumstances, with the Lady Bradeen chapter of his life closed, he might have loved her. Most telling, perhaps, is the final conversation with Everard that she desperately hopes for, in which she imagines he will "thank and acquit and release" her, bidding her goodbye and then, "once more, for the sweetest, faintest flower of all: 'Only, I say—see here!'" (187). She clings to the faint flower of forbidden love, of the impossible bloom narrative, to disguise how literally close she has been to entering his room, accepting his money.

The telegraphist is not, ultimately, a "bad girl"—she does not blackmail Everard or attempt to become his mistress—but she does, nevertheless, find herself absorbed into his sensational narrative on the day he shows up at Cocker's demanding information about an intercepted telegram. "[H]aggard with anxiety," fear and exhaustion in his eyes, Everard looks at the telegraphist without any sense of "reference or memory" (188), kindling in her a strange emotion between fear and excitement:

> She felt she scarce knew what—as if she might soon be pounced upon for some lurid connection with a scandal. It was the queerest of all sensations, for she had heard, she had read, of these things, and the wealth of her intimacy with them at Cocker's might be supposed to have schooled and seasoned her. This particular one that she had really quite lived with was, after all, an old story; yet what it had been before was dim and distant beside the touch under which she now winced. Scandal?—it had never been but a silly word. Now it was a great palpable surface, and the surface was, somehow, Captain Everard's wonderful face. Deep down in his eyes was a picture, the vision of a great place like a chamber of justice where, before a watching crowd, a poor girl, exposed but heroic, swore with a quavering voice to a document, proved an *alibi*, supplied a link. In this picture she bravely took her place. (193)

Nixon reads this passage as evidence of the telegraphist's "conversion" into a more critical reader, one who can finally view the "old story" of Everard's scandal as "yet another tale of upper class, adulterous intrigue, a tired replay of domestic rearrangements gone awry and not a romantic 'high reality' at all" (194). What her reading overlooks, however, is the almost magical sense in which the sensational narrative actually does become, at long last, the telegraphist's lived reality; "scandal," once just "a silly word," becomes a "great palpable surface" that she "bravely" and "heroic[ally]" penetrates (193). Her recognition of the "oldness" of Everard's story is accompanied by a feeling that she has been drawn into its pages—that what was once "dim and distant" is now vivid and all around her, literally touching her. For a moment, as she writes the forgotten code on Everard's card, she holds him and her two male colleagues in the palm of her hand, and after Everard's departure she considers that "[n]o happiness she had ever known came within miles of it" (194).

And yet, of course, at this crucial moment in which the telegraphist does finally become an active agent in Everard's story, the role she plays is neither that of blooming girl nor of bad girl but that of a prim young woman from Paddington, a condescending yet competent civil servant. Triggered by Everard's suddenly impersonal tone to a realization of "how much she had missed in the gaps and blanks and absent answers," the telegraphist takes shelter under a pretense of disinterest, telling herself "[s]he wanted no detail, no fact—she wanted no nearer vision of discovery or shame" (189). She speaks in a "flute-like" Paddington voice; she patronizes him; she increases his agitation by feigning stupidity, taking her time, quibbling over bureaucratic details. This performance certainly does bequeath her some temporary power—such that she feels she "held the whole thing in her hand, held it as she held her pencil, which might have broken at that instant in her tightened grip" (190)—but it is also, significantly, through this performance that she definitively relinquishes that power. The vision she has glimpsed of a "chamber of justice" in Everard's eyes evokes, as Savoy points out, the 1889 Cleveland Street scandal, during which various members of the upper middle class and aristocracy were "implicated, and nearly convicted, on the basis of testimony given by working-class boys" (290). As soon as she has provided Everard with his coveted series of coded numbers, however, the threatening implications of her knowledge seem, strangely, to dissipate; in the very act of writing herself into Everard's story, she *has* broken her pencil, for she never sees him again. The girl from Paddington is, after all, a mere bit part in a much larger and more complicated narrative, "an abyss quite measureless," the depths of which are beyond her reach (205).

New Woman

The telegraphist's ultimate refusal to give in to badness, therefore, and her eventual recognition of the emptiness behind Mrs. Jordan's promises and hints position her between the two coveted ha'penny figures, unable to identify meaningfully with either. Mrs. Jordan has not, in fact, procured a rich bachelor through her "auspicious" profession but has instead engaged herself to the butler. Her nose, like the telegraphist's, is "brushed by the bouquet" and yet her poverty prohibits her from picking a daisy or even, James notes, keeping flowers in her own home (129, 197). The telegraphist, moreover, has not given in to her desires. Her sexual nature may have been ignited but her sense of decency and social standing have prevented her

from acting on her fantasies. The only role she has played with any sort of success is that of the civil servant, whose competence is appreciated but quickly forgotten. In her working-class cage of windows, the telegraphist can see both ways, up into aristocratic domesticity and down into criminality and transgression, but she is too aware of her own highness to stoop to pleasure and too aware of her lowness to reach for a rose. In a similar formulation, she recalls a translation of a French proverb she once encountered in one of her ha'pennyworths, "according to which a door had to be either open or shut," and she reflects that "it seemed a part of the precariousness of Mrs. Jordan's life that hers mostly managed to be neither. There had been occasions when it appeared to gape wide . . . there had been others . . . when it was all but banged in her face" (195). In Mrs. Jordan, the telegraphist sees "the vivid reflection of her own dreams and delusions and her own return to reality"—a reality that, "for the poor things they both were, could only be ugliness and obscurity, could never be the escape, the rise" (203). Ha'penny wisdom—its proverbs and promises—proves to be insufficient, and the telegraphist decides at last to exchange her cage with windows for a cage with none, to exchange Cocker's for Chalk Farm, where she will no longer "see things" (143) but no longer be taunted, either, with visions of the stories that do not concern her.

That being said, although the telegraphist's dismissal of ha'penny wisdom draws attention to the sturdiness of her cage's bars and motivates her retreat into a life of dull domestic comfort with Mr. Mudge, "In the Cage" does present some indication of a changing cultural atmosphere, as if certain seemingly locked doors may be beginning to creak ajar. Early in the text, for instance, the telegraphist notices that it is much more the women pursuing the men via telegrams than vice versa, that "the general attitude of the one sex was that of the object pursued and defensive, apologetic and attenuating, while the light of her own nature helped her more or less to conclude as to the attitude of the other" (131–32). Much later, she learns from Mrs. Jordan of the enthusiasm for flowers among "City men" (195). In particular, Mrs. Jordan describes a "certain type of awfully smart stockbroker—Lord Rye called them Jews and 'bounders,' but she didn't care—whose extravagance, she more than once threw out, had really, if one had any conscience, to be forcibly restrained." Read side by side, these two observations present an unexpected image of women facilitated by telegraph technology, pursuing lovers, and having affairs while men obsess over home décor and surround themselves with flowers. Lord Rye's disparagement of the City men, moreover, as "Jews and 'bounders'" and Mrs. Jordan's description of flower arrangement as "one of their weapons" and a means to "crush their rivals" signal a restructuring of class relations and repurposing of conventional symbols. Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen may belong to an "old story," but change is in the air, hailed by the emergence of new money and, more significantly still, a New Woman.

In his 1908 preface, James claims that the idea for "In the Cage" had become for him "an old story by the time . . . [he] cast it into this particular form" in 1898 (*FW* 1168) and that any observant person who had visited a telegraph office might easily have arrived at a similar concept. In fact, since neither telegraph technology nor either of the popular genres I have been tracing were new or novel by 1898, "In the Cage" can be accurately described as an old story about old stories. By way of concluding, therefore, I would like to touch briefly on what I read as this text's ambivalent engagement with the very new debates surrounding "the new woman,"

a controversial *fin-de-siècle* figure christened three years prior to the publication of "In the Cage," in Sarah Grand's 1895 essay, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (271). Primarily a "journalistic phenomenon, a product of discourse" (Ledger 3), the New Woman shared many qualities with the sensational heroine, such as her rejection of conventional domesticity, her sexual liberality, and her perceived threat to the institution of marriage. While critics of the New Woman equated her to her sensational precursor, the New Woman writers of the 1890s were involved in what Pykett describes as "a reworking of those discourses on prostitution and female sexuality within which the sensation novelists wrote"—and particularly a reworking of the stereotypical presentation of female sexuality as either "non-existent or all-pervading" (*Improper* 154). My reading, therefore, of the telegraphist's "subjective adventure" as a navigation of several (old) polarizing literary types drawn from popular literature seems especially relevant in a context of emerging options for (new) female trajectories, both inside and outside the novel.

James's ambiguous view of the New Woman has been discussed extensively in reference to novels like *The Bostonians*, which explicitly features characters engaged in the politics of "the woman question" and the demand for women's suffrage. "In the Cage" is less overtly political, but I would suggest that the telegraphist's confusions and anxieties concerning her gendered identity are nevertheless entangled in the cultural and literary dismantling of conventional womanhood taking place in the peripheries of this novella. The telegraphist feels profoundly the "immensity of her difference" (141), and yet her interactions are frequently performative and imitative. She is, in fact, remarkably adept at adopting the voices of others: "the low intonation of the counter-clerk" (144); "the accent they had at Paddington when they stared like dead fish" (191); Mrs. Jordan's pretentious exclamation, "It's quite too dreadful!" (144). Her namelessness, moreover, emphasizes her lack of fixed identity; she is to James at times "our young lady" (136), at others "our young critic" (138), "our young friend" (206), "our heroine" (207), or "[t]he betrothed of Mr. Mudge" (140), but most often she is just "the girl." James never, as I and most critics of this text have done, defines her merely by her function, "the telegraphist." The girl's subjective adventure, therefore—her search for identification, both timeless and extraordinarily timely—reflects both her own and her cultural moment's preoccupation with the question with which I opened:

Well, what will she be?

NOTES

[1]*Picciola* was first translated into English in 1837, when it was published by Henry Colburn in London—the same year, Hutchison points out, that Cooke and Wheatstone patented the electric telegraph (180). Extremely popular in France and England, the novel was serialized and republished in book form several times throughout the latter half of the century.

[2]This image of the girl merging with the flower is reminiscent of the lavish illustrations in J. J. Grandville's *The Flowers Personified* (1847), which depicts species of flowers as species of women, adorned in petals. Grandville's was one of many gift books published in the midcentury—in France, England, and America—that encouraged women to "cultivate flower-like qualities—essentially to be a flower" (Beam 40). See Beam and Seaton for detailed accounts of the gendered implications of the popular "Flower Dictionary" gift book genre.

[3]Captain Everard's involvement in "[s]omething bad" (*IC* 206), as indicated by Mrs. Jordan in the novella's final scene, certainly sounds criminal, and Lord Bradeen's "sudden" and extremely convenient death can easily be interpreted as suspicious. James's evocation of adultery, blackmail, and prostitution I will discuss in more detail.

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