Best Stories of WALTER DE LA MARE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The stories contained in this volume have been selected from four collections entitled *The Riddle, The Connoisseur, On the Edge*, and *The Wind Blows Over*. Their arrangement is not in order of date of publication. Needless to say, the 'best' in the title of this volume merely implies a personal preference. No tale from the collections entitled *Broomsticks, Told Again*, and *The Lord Fish*, which are intended for children, has been included.

W. DE LA M.

1941

[Pg 7]

THE ALMOND TREE

My old friend, 'the Count' as we used to call him, made very strange acquaintances at times. Let but a man have plausibility, a point of view, a crotchet, an enthusiasm, he would find in him an eager and exhilarating listener. And though he was often deceived and disappointed in his finds, the Count had a heart proof against lasting disillusionment. I confess, however, that these planetary cronies of his were rather disconcerting at times. And I own that meeting him one afternoon in the busy High Street, with a companion on his arm even more than usually voluble and odd—I own I crossed the road to avoid meeting the pair.

But the Count's eyes had been too sharp for me. He twitted me unmercifully with my snobbishness. 'I am afraid we must have appeared to avoid you to-day,' he said; and received my protestations with contemptuous indifference.

But the next afternoon we took a walk together over the heath; and perhaps the sunshine, something in the first freshness of the May weather, reminded him of bygone days.

'You remember that rather out-of-the-world friend of mine yesterday that so shocked your spruce proprieties, Richard? Well, I'll tell you a story.'

As closely as I can recall this story of the Count's childhood I have related it. I wish, though, I had my old friend's[Pg 8] gift for such things; then, perhaps, his story might retain something of the charm in the reading which he gave to it in the telling. Perhaps that charm lies wholly in the memory of his voice, his companionship, his friendship. To revive these, what task would be a burden?...

'The house of my first remembrance, the house that to my last hour on earth will seem home to me, stood in a small green hollow on the verge of a wide heath. Its five upper windows faced far eastwards towards the weather-cocked tower of a village which rambled down the steep inclination of a hill. And, walking in its green old garden—ah, Richard, the crocuses, the wallflowers, the violets!—you could see in the evening the standing fields of corn, and the dark furrows where the evening star was stationed; and a little to the south, upon a crest, a rambling wood of fir-trees and bracken.

'The house, the garden, the deep quiet orchard, all had been a wedding gift to my mother from a great-aunt, a very old lady in a kind of turban, whose shrewd eyes used to watch me out of her picture sitting in my high cane chair at meal-times—with not a little keenness; sometimes, I fancied, with a faint derision. Here passed by, to the singing of the lark, and the lamentation of autumn wind and rain, the first long nine of all these heaped-up inextricable years. Even now, my heart leaps up with longing to see again with those untutored eyes the lofty clouds of evening; to hear again as then I heard it the two small notes of the yellow-hammer piping from his green spray. I remember every room of the old house, the steep stairs, the cool apple-scented pantry; I remember the cobbles by the scullery, the well, my old dead raven, the bleak and whistling elms; but best of all I remember the unmeasured splendour of the heath, with its gorse, and its deep canopy of sunny air, the haven of every wild bird of the morning.

'Martha Rodd was a mere prim snippet of a maid then, pale and grave, with large contemplative, Puritan eyes. Mrs. Ryder, in her stiff blue martial print and twisted gold brooch, was[Pg 9] cook. And besides these, there was only old Thomas the gardener (as out-of-doors, and as distantly seen a creature as a dryad); my mother; and that busy-minded little boy, agog in wits and stomach and spirit—myself. For my father seemed but a familiar guest in the house, a guest ever eagerly desired and welcome, but none too eager to remain. He was a dark man with grey eyes and a long chin; a face unusually impassive, unusually mobile. Just as his capricious mood

suggested, our little household was dejected or wildly gay. I never shall forget the spirit of delight he could conjure up at a whim, when my mother would go singing up and down stairs, and in her tiny parlour; and Martha in perfect content would prattle endlessly on to the cook, basting the twirling sirloin, while I watched in the firelight. And the long summer evenings too, when my father would find a secret, a magic, a mystery in everything; and we would sit together in the orchard while he told me tales, with the small green apples overhead, and beyond contorted branches, the first golden twilight of the moon.

'It's an old picture now, Richard, but true to the time.

'My father's will, his word, his caprice, his frown, these were the tables of the law in that small household. To my mother he was the very meaning of her life. Only that little boy was in some wise independent, busy, inquisitive, docile, sedate; though urged to a bitterness of secret rebellion at times. In his childhood he experienced such hours of distress as the years do not in mercy bring again to a heart that may analyse as well as remember. Yet there also sank to rest the fountain of life's happiness. In among the gorse bushes were the green mansions of the fairies; along the furrows before his adventurous eyes stumbled crooked gnomes, hopped bewitched robins. Ariel trebled in the sunbeams and glanced from the dewdrops; and he heard the echo of distant and magic waters in the falling of the rain.

'But my father was never long at peace in the house. Noth[Pg 10]ing satisfied him; he must needs be at an extreme. And if he was compelled to conceal his discontent, there was something so bitter and imperious in his silence, so scornful a sarcasm in his speech, that we could scarcely bear it. And the knowledge of the influence he had over us served only at such times to sharpen his contempt.

'I remember one summer's evening we had been gathering strawberries. I carried a little wicker basket, and went rummaging under the aromatic leaves, calling ever and again my mother to see the "tremenjous" berry I had found. Martha was busy beside me, vexed that her two hands could not serve her master quick enough. And in a wild race with my mother my father helped us pick. At every ripest one he took her in his arms to force it between her lips; and of those pecked by the birds he made a rhymed offering to Pan. And when the sun had descended behind the hill, and the clamour of the rooks had begun to wane in the elm-tops, he took my mother on his arm, and we trooped all together up the long straggling path, and across the grass, carrying our spoil of fruit into the cool dusky corridor. As we passed into the gloaming I saw my mother stoop impulsively and kiss his arm. He brushed off her hand impatiently, and went into his study. I heard the door shut. A moment afterwards he called for candles. And, looking on those two other faces in the twilight, I knew with the intuition of childhood that he was suddenly sick to death of us all; and I knew that my mother shared my intuition. She sat down, and I beside her, in her little parlour, and took up

her sewing. But her face had lost again all its girlishness as she bent her head over the white linen.

'I think she was happier when my father was away; for then, free from anxiety to be forever pleasing his variable moods, she could entertain herself with hopes and preparations for his return. There was a little summer-house, or arbour, in the garden, where she would sit alone, while the swallows coursed in the evening air. Sometimes, too, she would take me for a[Pg 11] long walk, listening distantly to my chatter, only, I think, that she might entertain the pleasure of supposing that my father might have returned home unforeseen, and be even now waiting to greet us. But these fancies would forsake her. She would speak harshly and coldly to me, and scold Martha for her owlish-ness, and find nothing but vanity and mockery in all that but a little while since had been her daydream.

'I think she rarely knew where my father stayed in his long absences from home. He would remain with us for a week, and neglect us for a month. She was too proud, and when he was himself, too happy and hopeful to question him, and he seemed to delight in keeping his affairs secret from her. Indeed, he sometimes appeared to pretend a mystery where none was, and to endeavour in all things to make his character and conduct appear quixotic and inexplicable.

'So time went on. Yet, it seemed, as each month passed by, the house was not so merry and happy as before; something was fading and vanishing that would not return; estrangement had pierced a little deeper. I think care at last put out of my mother's mind even the semblance of her former gaiety. She sealed up her heart lest love should break forth anew into the bleakness.

'On Guy Fawkes' Day Martha told me at bedtime that a new household had moved into the village on the other side of the heath. After that my father stayed away from us but seldom.

'At first my mother showed her pleasure in a thousand ways, with dainties of her own fancy and cooking, with ribbons in her dark hair, with new songs (though she had but a small thin voice). She read to please him; and tired my legs out in useless errands in his service. And a word of praise sufficed her for many hours of difficulty. But by and by, when evening after evening was spent by my father away from home, she began to be uneasy and depressed; and though she made no complaint, her anxious face, the incessant[Pg 12] interrogation of her eyes vexed and irritated him beyond measure.

'"Where does my father go after dinner?" I asked Martha one night, when my mother was in my bedroom, folding my clothes.

'"How dare you ask such a question?" said my mother, "and how dare you talk to the child about your master's comings and goings?"

'"But where does he?" I repeated to Martha, when my mother was gone out of the room.

'"Ssh now, Master Nicholas," she answered, "didn't you hear what your mamma said? She's vexed, poor lady, at master's never spending a whole day at home, but nothing but them cards, cards, cards, every night at Mr. Grey's. Why, often it's twelve and one in the morning when I've heard his foot on the gravel beneath the window. But there, I'll be bound, she doesn't *mean* to speak unkindly. It's a terrible scourge is jealousy, Master Nicholas; and not generous or manly to give it cause. Mrs. Ryder was kept a widow all along of jealousy, and but a week before her wedding with her second."

'"But why is mother jealous of my father playing cards?"

'Martha slipped my nightgown over my head. "Ssh, Master Nicholas, little boys mustn't ask so many questions. And I hope when you are grown up to be a man, my dear, you will be a comfort to your mother. She needs it, poor soul, and sakes alive, just now of all times!" I looked inquisitively into Martha's face; but she screened my eyes with her hand; and instead of further questions, I said my prayers to her.

'A few days after this I was sitting with my mother in her parlour, holding her grey worsted for her to wind, when my father entered the room and bade me put on my hat and muffler. "He is going to pay a call with me," he explained curtly. As I went out of the room, I heard my mother's question, "To your friends at the Grange, I suppose?"[Pg 13]

'"You may suppose whatever you please," he answered. I heard my mother rise to leave the room, but he called her back and the door was shut....

'The room in which the card-players sat was very low-ceiled. A piano stood near the window, a rosewood table with a fine dark crimson work-basket upon it by the fireside, and some little distance away, a green card-table with candles burning. Mr. Grey was a slim, elegant man, with a high, narrow forehead and long fingers. Major Aubrey was a short, red-faced, rather taciturn man. There was also a younger man with fair hair. They seemed to be on the best of terms together; and I helped to pack the cards and to pile the silver coins, sipping a glass of sherry with Mr. Grey. My father said little, paying me no attention, but playing gravely with a very slight frown.

'After some little while the door opened, and a lady appeared. This was Mr. Grey's sister, Jane, I learned. She seated herself at her work-table, and drew me to her side.

'"Well, so this is Nicholas!" she said. "Or is it Nick?"

'"Nicholas," I said.

'"Of course," she said, smiling, "and I like that too, much the best. How very kind of you to come to see me! It was to keep *me* company, you know, because I am very stupid at games, but I love talking. Do you?"

'I looked into her eyes, and knew we were friends. She smiled again, with open lips, and touched my mouth with her thimble. "Now, let me see, business first, and—me afterwards. You see I have three different kinds of cake, because, I thought, I cannot in the least tell which kind he'll like best. Could I now? Come, you shall choose."

'She rose and opened the long door of a narrow cupboard, looking towards the card-players as she stooped. I remember the cakes to this day; little oval shortbreads stamped with a beehive, custards and mince-pies; and a great glass jar of goodies which I carried in both arms round the little square[Pg 14] table. I took a mince-pie, and sat down on a footstool nearby Miss Grey, and she talked to me while she worked with slender hands at her lace embroidery. I told her how old I was; about my great-aunt and her three cats. I told her my dreams, and that I was very fond of Yorkshire pudding, "from under the meat, you know". And I told her I thought my father the handsomest man I had ever seen.

'"What, handsomer than Mr. Spencer?" she said laughing, looking along her needle.

'I answered that I did not very much like clergymen.

'"And why?" she said gravely.

'"Because they do not talk like real," I said.

'She laughed very gaily. "Do men ever?" she said.

'And her voice was so quiet and so musical, her neck so graceful, I thought her a very beautiful lady, admiring especially her dark eyes when she smiled brightly and yet half sadly at me; I promised, moreover, that if she would meet me on the heath, I would show her the rabbit warren and the "Miller's Pool".

'"Well, Jane, and what do you think of my son?" said my father when we were about to leave.

'She bent over me and squeezed a lucky four-penny-piece into my hand. "I love four-pence, pretty little four-pence, I love four-pence better than my life," she whispered into my ear. "But that's a secret," she added, glancing up over her shoulder. She kissed lightly the top of my head. I was looking at my father while she was caressing me, and I fancied a faint sneer passed over his face. But when we had come out of the village on to the heath, in the bare keen night, as we walked along the path together between the gorse-bushes, now on turf, and now on stony ground, never before had he seemed so wonderful a companion. He told me little stories; he began a hundred, and finished

none; yet with the stars above us, they seemed a string of beads all of bright colours. We stood still in the vast darkness, while he whistled that strangest of all old[Pg 15] songs—"the Song the Sirens sang". He pilfered my wits and talked like my double. But when—how much too quickly, I thought with sinking heart—we were come to the house-gates, he suddenly fell silent, turned an instant, and stared far away over the windy heath.

'"How weary, flat, stale——" he began, and broke off between uneasy laughter and a sigh. "Listen to me, Nicholas," he said, lifting my face to the starlight, "you must grow up a man—a Man, you understand; no vapourings, no posings, no caprices; and above all, no sham. No sham. It's your one and only chance in this unfaltering Scheme." He scanned my face long and closely. "You have your mother's eyes," he said musingly. "And that," he added under his breath, "*that's* no joke." He pushed open the squealing gate and we went in.

'My mother was sitting in a low chair before a dying and cheerless fire.

'"Well, Nick," she said very suavely, "and how have you enjoyed your evening?"

'I stared at her without answer. "Did you play cards with the gentlemen; or did you turn over the music?"

'"I talked to Miss Grey," I said.

'"Really," said my mother, raising her eyebrows, "and who then is Miss Grey?" My father was smiling at us with sparkling eyes.

'"Mr. Grey's sister," I answered in a low voice.

'"Not his wife, then?" said my mother, glancing furtively at the fire. I looked towards my father in doubt but could lift my eyes no higher than his knees.

'"You little fool!" he said to my mother with a laugh, "what a sharpshooter! Never mind, Sir Nick; there, run off to bed, my man."

'My mother caught me roughly by the sleeve as I was passing her chair. "Aren't you going to kiss me good night, then," she said furiously, her narrow underlip quivering, "you too!" I kissed her cheek. "That's right, my dear," she said scorn[Pg 16]fully, "that's how little fishes kiss." She rose and drew back her skirts. "I refuse to stay in the room," she said haughtily, and with a sob she hurried out.

'My father continued to smile, but only a smile it seemed gravity had forgotten to smooth away. He stood very still, so still that I grew afraid he must certainly hear me thinking. Then with a kind of sigh he sat down at my mother's writing table, and scribbled a few words with his pencil on a slip of paper.

'"There, Nicholas, just tap at your mother's door with that. Good night, old fellow," he took my hand and smiled down into my eyes with a kind of generous dark appeal that called me straight to his side. I hastened conceitedly upstairs, and delivered my message. My mother was crying when she opened the door.

'"Well?" she said in a low, trembling voice.

'But presently afterwards, while I was still lingering in the dark corridor, I heard her run down quickly, and in a while my father and mother came upstairs together, arm in arm, and by her light talk and laughter you might suppose she had no knowledge of care or trouble at all.

'Never afterwards did I see so much gaiety and youthfulness in my mother's face as when she sat next morning with us at breakfast. The honeycomb, the small bronze chrysanthemums, her yellow gown seemed dainty as a miniature. With every word her eyes would glance covertly at my father; her smile, as it were, hesitating between her lashes. She was so light and girlish and so versatile I should scarcely have recognized the weary and sallow face of the night before. My father seemed to find as much pleasure, or relief, in her good spirits as I did; and to delight in exercising his ingenuity to quicken her humour.

'It was but a transient morning of sunshine, however, and as the brief and sombre day waned, its gloom pervaded the house. In the evening my father left us to our solitude as[Pg 17] usual. And that night was very misty over the heath, with a small, warm rain falling.

'So it happened that I began to be left more and more to my own devices, and grew so inured at last to my own narrow company and small thoughts and cares, that I began to look on my mother's unhappiness almost with indifference, and learned to criticize almost before I had learned to pity. And so I do not think I enjoyed Christmas very much the less, although my father was away from home and all our little festivities were dispirited. I had plenty of good things to eat, and presents, and a picture-book from Martha. I had a new rocking-horse—how changeless and impassive its mottled battered face looks out at me across the years! It was brisk, clear weather, and on St. Stephen's Day I went to see if there was any ice yet on the Miller's Pool.

'I was stooping down at the extreme edge of the pool, snapping the brittle splinters of the ice with my finger, when I heard a voice calling me in the still air. It was Jane Grey, walking on the heath with my father, who had called me having seen me from a distance stooping beside the water.

'"So you see I have kept my promise," she said, taking my hand.

'"But you promised to come by yourself," I said.

'"Well, so I will then," she answered, nodding her head. "Good-bye," she added, turning to my father. "It's three's none, you see. Nicholas shall take me home to tea, and you can call for him in the evening, if you will; that is, if you are coming."

'"Are you asking me to come?" he said moodily, "do you care whether I come or not?"

'She lifted her face and spoke gravely. "You are my friend," she said, "of course I care whether you are with me or not." He scrutinized her through half-closed lids. His face was haggard, gloomy with *ennui*. "How you harp on the word, you punctilious Jane. Do you suppose I am still in my teens?[Pg 18] Twenty years ago, now—— It amuses me to hear you women talk. It's little you ever really feel."

'"I don't think I am quite without feeling," she replied, "you are a little difficult, you know."

'"Difficult," he echoed in derision. He checked himself and shrugged his shoulders. "You see, Jane, it's all on the surface; I boast of my indifference. It's the one rag of philosophy age denies no one. It is so easy to be mock-heroic—debonair, iron-grey, rhetorical, dramatic—you know it only too well, perhaps? But after all, life's comedy, when one stops smiling, is only the tepidest farce. Or the gilt wears off and the pinchbeck tragedy shows through. And so, as I say, we talk on, being past feeling. One by one our hopes come home to roost, our delusions find themselves out, and the mystery proves to be nothing but sleight-of-hand. It's age, my dear Jane—age; it turns one to stone. With you young people life's a dream; ask Nicholas here!" He shrugged his shoulders, adding under his breath, "But one wakes on a devilish hard pallet."

'"Of course," said Jane slowly, "you are only talking cleverly, and then it does not matter whether it's true or not, I suppose. I can't say. I don't think you mean it, and so it comes to nothing. I can't and won't believe you feel so little—I can't." She continued to smile, yet, I fancied, with the brightness of tears in her eyes. "It's all mockery and make-believe; we are not the miserable slaves of time you try to fancy. There must be some way to win through." She turned away, then added slowly, "You ask me to be fearless, sincere, to speak my heart; I wonder, do you?"

'My father did not look at her, appeared not to have seen the hand she had half held out to him, and as swiftly withdrawn. "The truth is, Jane," he said slowly, "I am past sincerity now. And as for *heart* it is a quite discredited organ at forty. Life, thought, selfishness, egotism, call it what you will; they have all done their worst with me; and I really haven't the sentiment to pretend that they haven't. And when bright[Pg 19] youth and sentiment are gone; why, go too, dear lady! Existence proves nothing but brazen inanity afterwards. But there's always that turning left to the dullest and dustiest road—oblivion." He remained silent a moment. Silence deep and strange lay all around us. The air was still, the wintry sky unutterably calm. And again that low dispassionate voice continued: "It's only when right seems too easy a thing, too trivial,

and not worth the doing; and wrong a foolish thing—too dull.... There, take care of her, Nicholas; take care of her, 'snips and snails,' you know. *Au revoir*, 'pon my word, I almost wish it was good-bye."

'Jane Grey regarded him attentively. "So then do I," she replied in a low voice, "for I shall never understand you; perhaps I should hate to understand you."

'My father turned with an affected laugh, and left us.

'Miss Grey and I walked slowly along beside the frosty bulrushes until we came to the wood. The bracken and heather were faded. The earth was dark and rich with autumnal rains. Fir-cones lay on the moss beneath the dark green branches. It was all now utterly silent in the wintry afternoon. Far away rose tardily, and alighted, the hoarse rooks upon the ploughed earth; high in the pale sky passed a few on ragged wing.

'"What does my father mean by wishing it was good-bye?" I said.

'But my companion did not answer me in words. She clasped my hand; she seemed very slim and gracious walking by my side on the hardened ground. My mother was small now and awkward beside her in my imagination. I questioned her about the ice, about the red sky, and if there was any mistletoe in the woods. Sometimes she, in turn, asked me questions too, and when I answered them we would look at each other and smile, and it seemed it was with her as it was with me—of the pure gladness I found in her company. In the middle of our walk to the Thorns she bent down in the cold twilight, and putting her hands on my shoulders, "My dear,[Pg 20] dear Nicholas," she said, "you must be a good son to your mother—brave and kind; will you?"

'"He hardly ever speaks to mother now," I answered instinctively.

'She pressed her lips to my cheek, and her cheek was cold against mine, and she clasped her arms about me. "Kiss me," she said, "We must do our best, mustn't we?" she pleaded, still holding me. I looked mournfully into the gathering darkness. "That's easy when you're grown up," I said. She laughed and kissed me again, and then we took hands and ran till we were out of breath, towards the distant lights of the Thorns....

'I had been some time in bed, lying awake in the warmth, when my mother came softly through the darkness into my room. She sat down at the bedside, breathing hurriedly. "Where have you been all the evening?" she said.

'"Miss Grey asked me to stay to tea," I answered.

'"Did I give you permission to go to tea with Miss Grey?"

'I made no answer.

'"If you go to that house again, I shall beat you. You hear me, Nicholas? Alone, or with your father, if you go there again, without my permission, I shall beat you. You have not been whipped for a long time, have you?" I could not see her face, but her head was bent towards me in the dark, as she sat—almost crouched—on my bedside.

'I made no answer. But when my mother had gone, without kissing me, I cried noiselessly on in to my pillow. Something had suddenly flown out of memory, never to sing again. Life had become a little colder and stranger. I had always been my own chief company; now another sentimental barrier had arisen between the world and me, past its heedlessness, past my understanding to break down.

'Hardly a week passed now without some bitter quarrel. I seemed to be perpetually stealing out of sound of angry voices; fearful of being made the butt of my father's serene taunts, of[Pg 21] my mother's passions and desperate remorse. He disdained to defend himself against her, never reasoned with her; he merely shrugged his shoulders, denied her charges, ignored her anger; coldly endeavouring only to show his indifference, to conceal by every means in his power his own inward weariness and vexation. I saw this, of course, only vaguely, yet with all a child's certainty of insight, though I rarely knew the cause of my misery; and I continued to love them both in my selfish fashion, not a whit the less.

'At last, on St. Valentine's Day, things came to a worse pass than ever. It had always been my father's custom to hang my mother a valentine on the handle of her little parlour door, a string of pearls, a fan, a book of poetry, whatever it might be. She came down early this morning, and sat in the window-seat, looking out at the falling snow. She said nothing at breakfast, only feigned to eat, lifting her eyes at intervals to glance at my father with a strange intensity, as if of hatred, tapping her foot on the floor. He took no notice of her, sat quiet and moody with his own thoughts. I think he had not really forgotten the day, for I found long afterwards in his old bureau a bracelet purchased but a week before with her name written on a scrap of paper, inside the case. Yet it seemed to be the absence of this little gift that had driven my mother beyond reason.

'Towards evening, tired of the house, tired of being alone, I went out and played for a while listlessly in the snow. At nightfall I went in; and in the dark heard angry voices. My father came out of the dining-room and looked at me in silence, standing in the gloom of the wintry dusk. My mother followed him. I can see her now, leaning in the doorway, white with rage, her eyes ringed and darkened with continuous trouble, her hand trembling.

'"It shall learn to hate you," she cried in a low, dull voice. "I will teach it every moment to hate and despise you as I—— Oh, *I* hate and despise you."[Pg 22]

'My father looked at her calmly and profoundly before replying. He took up a cloth hat and brushed it with his hand. "Very well then, you have chosen," he said coldly. "It has always lain with you. You have exaggerated, you have raved, and now you have said what can never be recalled or forgotten. Here's Nicholas. Pray do not imagine, however, that I am defending myself. I have nothing to defend. I think of no one but myself—no one. Endeavour to understand me, no one. Perhaps, indeed, you yourself—no more than—— But words again—the dull old round!" He made a peculiar gesture with his hand. "Well, life is...ach! I have done. So be it." He stood looking out of the door. "You see, it's snowing," he said, as if to himself.

'All the long night before and all day long, snow had been falling continuously. The air was wintry and cold. I could discern nothing beyond the porch but a gloomy accumulation of cloud in the twilight air, now darkened with the labyrinthine motion of the snow. My father glanced back for an instant into the house, and, as I fancy, regarded me with a kind of strange, close earnestness. But he went out and his footsteps were instantly silenced.

'My mother peered at me in a dreadful perplexity, her eyes wide with terror and remorse. "What? What?" she said. I stared at her stupidly. Three snowflakes swiftly and airily floated together into the dim hall from the gloom without. She clasped her hand over her mouth. Overburdened her fingers seemed to be, so slender were they, with her many rings.

'"Nicholas, Nicholas, tell me; what was I saying? What was I saying?" She stumbled hastily to the door. "Arthur, Arthur," she cried from the porch, "it's St. Valentine's Day. That was all I meant; come back, come back!" But perhaps my father was already out of hearing; I do not think he made any reply.

'My mother came in doubtfully, resting her hand on the wall. And she walked very slowly and laboriously upstairs.[Pg 23] While I was standing at the foot of the staircase, looking out across the hall into the evening, Martha climbed primly up from the kitchen with her lighted taper, shut-to the door and lit the hall lamp. Already the good smell of the feast cooking floated up from the kitchen, and gladdened my spirits. "Will he come back?" Martha said, looking very scared in the light of her taper. "It's such a fall of snow, already it's a hand's breadth on the window-sill. Oh, Master Nicholas, it's a hard world for us women." She followed my mother upstairs, carrying light to all the gloomy upper rooms.

'I sat down in the window-seat of the dining-room, and read in my picture-book as well as I could by the flame-light. By and by, Martha returned to lay the table.

'As far back as brief memory carried me, it had been our custom to make a Valentine's feast on the Saint's day. This was my father's mother's birthday also. When she was alive I well remember her visiting us with her companion, Miss Schreiner, who talked

in such good-humoured English to me. This same anniversary had last year brought about a tender reconciliation between my father and mother, after a quarrel that meant how little then. And I remember on this day to have seen the first fast-sealed buds upon the almond tree. We would have a great spangled cake in the middle of the table, with marzipan and comfits, just as at Christmas-time. And when Mrs. Merry lived in the village, her little fair daughters used to come in a big carriage to spend the evening with us and to share my Valentine's feast.

'But all this was changed now. My wits were sharper, but I was none the less only the duller for that; my hopes and dreams had a little fallen and faded. I looked idly at my picture-book, vaguely conscious that its colours pleased me less than once upon a time; that I was rather tired of seeing them, and they just as tired of seeing me. And yet I had nothing else to do, so I must go on with a hard face, turning listlessly the pictured pages.[Pg 24]

'About seven o'clock my mother sent for me. I found her sitting in her bedroom. Candles were burning before the looking-glass. She was already dressed in her handsome black silk gown, and wearing her pearl necklace. She began to brush my hair, curling its longer ends with her fingers, which she moistened in the pink bowl that was one of the first things I had set eyes on in this world. She me on a clean blouse and my buckle shoes, talking to me the while, almost as if she were telling me a story. Then she looked at herself long and earnestly in the glass; throwing up her chin with a smile, as was a habit of hers in talk. I wandered about the room, fingering the little toilet-boxes and nick-nacks on the table. By mischance I upset one of these, a scent-bottle that held rose-water. The water ran out and filled the warm air with its fragrance. "You foolish, clumsy boy!" said my mother, and slapped my hand. More out of vexation and tiredness than because of the pain, I began to cry. And then, with infinite tenderness, she leaned her head on my shoulder. "Mother can't think very well just now," she said; and cried so bitterly in silence that I was only too ready to extricate myself and run away when her hold on me relaxed.

'I climbed slowly upstairs to Martha's bedroom, and kneeling on a cane chair looked out of the window. The flakes had ceased to fall now, although the snowy heath was encompassed in mist. Above the snow the clouds had parted, drifting from beneath the stars, and these in their constellations were trembling very brightly, and here and there burned one of them in solitude, larger and wilder in its radiance than the rest. But though I did not tire of looking out of the window, my knees began to ache; and the little room was very cold and still so near the roof. So I went down to the dining-room, with all its seven candlesticks kindled, seeming to my unaccustomed eyes a very splendid blaze out of the dark. My mother was kneeling on the rug by the fireside. She looked very small, even dwarfish, I thought. She was gazing into the[Pg 25]flames; one shoe curved beneath the hem of her gown, her chin resting on her hand.

'I surveyed the table with its jellies and sweetmeats and glasses and fruit, and began to be very hungry, so savoury was the smell of the turkey roasting downstairs. Martha knocked at the door when the clock had struck eight.

"'Dinner is ready, ma'am."

'My mother glanced fleetingly at the clock. "Just a little, only a very little while longer, tell Mrs. Ryder; your master will be home in a minute." She rose and placed the claret in the hearth at some distance from the fire.

"'Is it nicer warm, Mother?" I said. She looked at me with startled eyes and nodded. "Did you hear anything, Nicholas? Run to the door and listen; was that a sound of footsteps?"

'I opened the outer door and peered into the darkness; but it seemed the world ended here with the warmth and the light: beyond could extend only winter and silence, a region that, familiar though it was to me, seemed now to terrify me like an enormous sea.

"'It's stopped snowing," I said, "but there isn't anybody there; nobody at all, Mother."

'The hours passed heavily from quarter on to quarter. The turkey, I grieved to hear, was to be taken out of the oven, and put away to cool in the pantry. I was bidden help myself to what I pleased of the trembling jellies, and delicious pink blanc-mange. Already midnight would be the next hour to be chimed. I felt sick, yet was still hungry and very tired. The candles began to burn low. "Leave me a little light here, then," my mother said at last to Martha, "and go to bed. Perhaps your master has missed his way home in the snow." But Mrs. Ryder had followed Martha into the room.

"'You must pardon my interference, ma'am, but it isn't right, it isn't really right of you to sit up longer. Master will not come back, maybe, before morning. And I shouldn't be[Pg 26] doing my bounden duty, ma'am, except I spoke my mind. Just now too, of all times."

"'Thank you very much, Mrs. Ryder," my mother answered simply "but I would prefer not to go to bed yet. It's very lonely on the heath at night. But I shall not want anything else, thank you."

"'Well, ma'am, I've had my say, and done my conscience's bidding. And I have brought you up this tumbler of mulled wine; else you'll be sinking away or something with the fatigue."

'My mother took the wine, sipped of it with a wan smile at Mrs. Ryder over the brim; and Mrs. Ryder retired with Martha. I don't think they had noticed me sitting close in the shadow on my stool beside the table. But all through that long night, I fancy, these

good souls took it in turn to creep down stealthily and look in on us; and in the small hours of the morning, when the fire had fallen low they must have wrapped us both warm in shawls. They left me then, I think, to be my mother's company. Indeed, I remember we spoke in the darkness, and she took my hand.

'My mother and I shared the steaming wine together when they were gone; our shadows looming faintly huge upon the ceiling. We said very little, but I looked softly into her grey childish eyes, and we kissed one another kneeling there together before the fire. And afterwards, I jigged softly round the table, pilfering whatever sweet or savoury mouthful took my fancy. But by and by in the silent house—a silence broken only by the fluttering of the flames, and the odd far-away stir of the frost, drowsiness vanquished me; I sat down by the fireside, leaning my head on a chair. And sitting thus, vaguely eyeing firelight and wavering shadow, I began to nod, and very soon dream stalked in, mingling with reality.

'It was early morning when I awoke, dazed and cold and miserable in my uncomfortable resting-place. The rare odour of frost was on the air. The ashes of the fire lay iron-grey upon[Pg 27] the cold hearth. An intensely clear white ray of light leaned up through a cranny of the shutters to the cornice of the ceiling. I got up with difficulty. My mother was still asleep, breathing heavily, and as I stooped, regarding her curiously, I could almost watch her transient dreams fleeting over her face; and now she smiled faintly; and now she raised her eyebrows as if in some playful and happy talk with my father; then again utterly still darkness would descend on brow and lid and lip.

'I touched her sleeve, suddenly conscious of my loneliness in the large house. Her face clouded instantly, she sighed profoundly: "What?" she said, "nothing—nothing?" She stretched out her hand towards me; the lids drew back from eyes still blind from sleep. But gradually time regained its influence over her. She moistened her lips and turned to me, and suddenly, in a gush of agony, remembrance of the night returned to her. She hid her face in her hands, rocking her body gently to and fro; then rose and smoothed back her hair at the looking-glass. I was surprised to see no trace of tears on her cheeks. Her lips moved, as if unconsciously a heart worn out with grief addressed that pale reflection of her sorrow in the glass. I took hold of the hand that hung down listlessly on her silk skirt, and fondled it, kissing punctiliously each loose ring in turn.

'But I do not think she heeded my kisses. So I returned to the table on which was still set out the mockery of our Valentine feast, strangely disenchanted in the chill dusk of daybreak. I put a handful of wine biscuits and a broken piece of cake in my pocket; for a determination had taken me to go out on to the heath. My heart beat thick and fast in imagination of the solitary snow and of myself wandering in loneliness across its untrampled surface. A project also was forming in my mind of walking over to the Thorns; for somehow I knew my mother would not scold or punish me that day.

Perhaps, I thought, my father would be there. And I would tell Miss Grey all about my adventure of the night spent down in the[Pg 28] dining-room. So moving very stealthily, and betraying no eagerness, lest I should be forbidden to go, I stole at length unnoticed from the room, and leaving the great hall door ajar, ran out joyously into the wintry morning.

'Already dawn was clear and high in the sky, already the first breezes were moving in the mists; and breathed chill, as if it were the lingering darkness itself on my cheeks. The air was cold, yet with a fresh faint sweetness. The snow lay crisp across its perfect surface, mounded softly over the gorse-bushes, though here and there a spray of parched blossom yet protruded from its cowl. Flaky particles of ice floated invisible in the air. I called out with pleasure to see the little ponds where the snow had been blown away from the black ice. I saw on the bushes too the webs of spiders stretched from thorn to thorn, and festooned with crystals of hoar-frost. I turned and counted as far as I could my footsteps leading back to the house, which lay roofed in gloomy pallor, dim and obscured in the darkened west.

'A waning moon that had risen late in the night shone, it seemed, very near to the earth. But every moment light swept invincibly in, pouring its crystal like a river; and darkness sullenly withdrew into the north. And when at last the sun appeared, glittering along the rosy snow, I turned in an ecstasy and with my finger pointed him out, as if the house I had left behind me might view him with my own delight. Indeed, I saw its windows transmuted, and heard afar a thrush pealing in the bare branches of a pear-tree; and a robin startled me, so suddenly shrill and sweet he broke into song from a snowy tuft of gorse.

'I was now come to the beginning of a gradual incline, from the summit of which I should presently descry in the distance the avenue of lindens that led towards the village from the margin of the heath. As I went on my way, munching my biscuits, looking gaily about me, I brooded deliciously on the breakfast which Miss Grey would doubtless sit me down to;[Pg 29] and almost forgot the occasion of my errand, and the troubled house I had left behind me. At length I climbed to the top of the smooth ridge and looked down. At a little distance from me grew a crimson hawthorn-tree that often in past Aprils I had used for a green tent from the showers; but now it was closely hooded, darkening with its faint shadow the long expanse of unshadowed whiteness. Not very far from this bush I perceived a figure lying stretched along the snow and knew instinctively that this was my father lying here.

'The sight did not then surprise or dismay me. It seemed only the lucid sequel to that long heavy night-watch, to all the troubles and perplexities of the past. I felt no sorrow, but stood beside the body, regarding it only with deep wonder and a kind of earnest curiosity, yet perhaps with a remote pity too, that he could not see me in the beautiful morning. His grey hand lay arched in the snow, his darkened face, on which

showed a smear of dried blood, was turned away a little as if out of the oblique sunshine. I understood that he was dead, and had already begun speculating on what changes it would make; how I should spend my time; what would happen in the house now that he was gone, his influence, his authority, his discord. I remembered too that I was alone, was master of this immense secret, that I must go home sedately, as if it were a Sunday, and in a low voice tell my mother, concealing any exultation I might feel in the office. I imagined the questions that would be asked me, and was considering the proper answers to make to them, when my morbid dreams were suddenly broken in on by Martha Rodd. She stood in my footsteps, looking down on me from the ridge from which I had but just now descended. She hastened towards me, stooping a little as if she were carrying a heavy bundle, her mouth ajar, her forehead wrinkled beneath its wispy light brown hair.

'"Look, Martha, look," I cried, "I found him in the snow; he's dead." And suddenly a bond seemed to snap in my heart. The beauty and solitude of the morning, the perfect whiteness[Pg 30] of the snow—it was all an uncouth mockery against me—a subtle and quiet treachery. The tears gushed into my eyes and in my fear and affliction I clung to the poor girl, sobbing bitterly, protesting my grief, hiding my eyes in terror from that still, inscrutable shape. She smoothed my hair with her hand again and again, her eyes fixed; and then at last, venturing cautiously nearer, she stooped over my father. "O Master Nicholas," she said, "his poor dark hair! What will we do now? What will your poor mamma do now, and him gone?" She hid her face in her hands, and our tears gushed out anew.

'But my grief was speedily forgotten. The novelty of being left entirely alone, my own master; to go where I would; to do as I pleased; the experience of being pitied most when I least needed it, and then—when misery and solitariness came over me like a cloud—of being utterly ignored, turned my thoughts gradually away. My father's body was brought home and laid in my mother's little parlour that looked out on to the garden and the snowy orchard. The house was darkened. I took a secret pleasure in peeping in on the sunless rooms, and stealing from door to door through corridors screened from the daylight. My mother was ill; and for some inexplicable reason I connected her illness with the bevy of gentlemen dressed in black who came one morning to the house and walked away together over the heath. Finally Mrs. Marshall drove up one afternoon from Islington, and by the bundles she had brought with her and her grained box with the iron handles I knew that she was come, as once before in my experience, to stay.

'I was playing on the morrow in the hall with my leaden soldiers when there came into my mind vaguely the voices of Mrs. Ryder and of Mrs. Marshall gossiping together on their tedious way upstairs from the kitchen.

'"No, Mrs. Marshall, nothing," I heard Mrs. Ryder saying, "not one word, not one word. And now the poor dear lady left quite alone, and only the doctor to gainsay that fatherless mite from facing the idle inquisitive questions of all them[Pg 31] strangers. It's neither for me nor you, Mrs. Marshall, to speak out just what comes into our heads here and now. The ways of the Almighty are past understanding—but a kinder at*heart* never trod this earth."

'"Ah," said Mrs. Marshall.

'"I knew to my sorrow," continued Mrs. Ryder, "there was words in the house; but there, wheresoever you be there's that. Human beings ain't angels, married or single, and in every——"

'"Wasn't there talk of some——?" insinuated Mrs. Marshall discreetly.

'"Talk, Mrs. Marshall," said Mrs. Ryder, coming to a standstill, "I scorn the word! A pinch of truth in a hogshead of falsehood. I don't gainsay it even. I just shut my ears—there—with the dead." Mrs. Marshall had opened her mouth to reply when I was discovered, crouched as small as possible at the foot of the stairs.

'"Well, here's pitchers!" said Mrs. Marshall pleasantly. "And this is the poor fatherless manikin, I suppose. It's hard on the innocent, Mrs. Ryder, and him grown such a sturdy child too, as I said from the first. Well, now, and don't you remember me, little man, don't you remember Mrs. Marshall? He ought to, now!"

'"He's a very good boy in general," said Mrs. Ryder, "and I'm sure I hope and pray he'll grow up to be a comfort to his poor widowed mother, if so be——" They glanced earnestly at one another, and Mrs. Marshall stooped with a sigh of effort and drew a big leather purse from a big loose pocket under her skirt, and selected a bright ha'penny-piece from among its silver and copper.

'"I make no doubt he will, poor mite," she said cheerfully; I took the ha'penny in silence and the two women passed slowly upstairs.

'In the afternoon, in order to be beyond call of Martha, I went out on to the heath with a shovel, intent on building a[Pg 32] great tomb in the snow. Yet more snow had fallen during the night; it now lay so deep as to cover my socks above my shoes. I laboured very busily, shovelling, beating, moulding, stamping. So intent was I that I did not see Miss Grey until she was close beside me. I looked up from the snow and was surprised to find the sun already set and the low mists of evening approaching. Miss Grey was veiled and dressed in furs to the throat. She drew her ungloved hand from her muff.

'"Nicholas," she said in a low voice.

'I stood for some reason confused and ashamed without answering her. She sat down on my shapeless mound of snow, and took me by the hand. Then she drew up her veil, and I saw her face pale and darkened, and her clear dark eyes gravely gazing into mine.

'"My poor, poor Nicholas," she said, and continued to gaze at me with her warm hand clasping mine. "What can I say? What can I do? Isn't it very, very lonely out here in the snow?"

'"I didn't feel lonely much," I answered, "I was making a—I was playing at building."

'"And I am sitting on your beautiful snow-house, then?" she said, smiling sadly, her hand trembling upon mine.

'"It isn't a house," I answered, turning away.

'She pressed my hand on the furs at her throat.

'"Poor cold, blue hands," she said. "Do you like playing alone?"

'"I like you being here," I answered. "I wish you would come always, or at least sometimes."

'She drew me close to her, smiling, and bent and kissed my head.

'"There," she said, "I am here now."

'"Mother's ill," I said.

'She drew back and looked out over the heath towards the house.

'"They have put my father in the little parlour, in his coffin,[Pg 33] of course; you know he's dead, and Mrs. Marshall's come; she gave me a ha'penny this morning. Dr. Graham gave me a whole crown, though." I took it out of my breeches pocket and showed it her.

'"That's very, very nice," she said. "What lots of nice things you can buy with it! And, look, I am going to give you a little keepsake too, between just you and me."

'It was a small silver box that she drew out of her muff, and embossed in the silver of the lid was a crucifix. "I thought, perhaps, I should see you to-day, you know," she continued softly. "Now, who's given you this?" she said, putting the box into my hand.

'"You," I answered softly.

'"And who am I?"

'"Miss Grey," I said.

"'Your friend, Jane Grey," she repeated, as if she were fascinated by the sound of her own name. "Say it now—Always my friend, Jane Grey."

'I repeated it after her.

"'And now," she continued, "tell me which room is—is the little parlour. Is it that small window at the corner under the ivy?"

'I shook my head.

"'Which?" she said in a whisper, after a long pause.

'I twisted my shovel in the snow. "Would you like to see my father?" I asked her. "I am sure, you know, Martha would not mind; and mother's in bed." She started, her dark eyes dwelling strangely on mine. "But Nicholas, you poor lamb; where?" she said, without stirring.

"'It's at the back, a little window that comes out—if you were to come this evening, I would be playing in the hall; I always play in the hall, after tea, if I can; and now, always. Nobody would see you at all, you know."

'She sighed. "O what are you saying?" she said, and stood up, drawing down her veil.[Pg 34]

"'But would you like to?" I repeated. She stooped suddenly, pressing her veiled face to mine. "I'll come, I'll come," she said, her face utterly changed so close to my eyes. "We can both still—still be loyal to him, can't we, Nicholas?"

'She walked away quickly, towards the pool and the little darkened wood. I looked after her and knew that she would be waiting there alone till evening. I looked at my silver box with great satisfaction, and after opening it, put it into my pocket with my crown piece and my ha'penny, and continued my building for awhile.

'But now zest for it was gone; and I began to feel cold, the frost closing in keenly as darkness gathered. So I went home.

'My silence and suspicious avoidance of scrutiny and question passed unnoticed. Indeed, I ate my tea in solitude, except that now and again one or other of the women would come bustling in on some brief errand. A peculiar suppressed stir was in the house. I wondered what could be the cause of it; and began suddenly to be afraid of my project being discovered.

'None the less I was playing in the evening, as I had promised, close to the door, alert to catch the faintest sign of the coming of my visitor.

"'Run down to the kitchen, dearie," said Martha. Her cheeks were flushed. She was carrying a big can of steaming water. "You must keep very, *very* quiet this evening

and go to bed like a good boy, and perhaps to-morrow morning I'll tell you a great, great secret." She kissed me with hasty rapture. I was not especially inquisitive of her secret just then, and eagerly promised to be quite quiet if I might continue to play where I was.

"'Well, very, *very* quiet then, and you mustn't let Mrs. Marshall," she began, but hurried hastily away in answer to a peremptory summons from upstairs.

'Almost as soon as she was gone I heard a light rap on[Pg 35] the door. It seemed that Jane Grey had brought in with her the cold and freshness of the woods. I led the way on tiptoe down the narrow corridor and into the small, silent room. The candles burned pure and steadfastly in their brightness. The air was still and languid with the perfume of flowers. Overhead passed light, heedful footsteps; but they seemed not a disturbing sound, only a rumour beyond the bounds of silence.

"'I am very sorry," I said, "but they have nailed it down. Martha says the men came this afternoon."

'Miss Grey took a little bunch of snowdrops from her bosom, and hid them in among the clustered wreaths of flowers; and she knelt down on the floor, with a little silver cross which she sometimes wore pressed tight to her lips. I felt ill at ease to see her praying, and wished I could go back to my soldiers. But while I watched her, seeing in marvellous brilliancy everything in the little room, and remembering dimly the snow lying beneath the stars in the darkness of the garden, I listened also to the quiet footsteps passing to and fro in the room above. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a small, continuous, angry crying.

'Miss Grey looked up. Her eyes were very clear and wonderful in the candlelight.

"'What was that?" she said faintly, listening.

'I stared at her. The cry welled up anew, piteously; as if of a small remote and helpless indignation.

"'Why it sounds just like a—little baby," I said.

'She crossed herself hastily and arose. "Nicholas!" she said in a strange, quiet, bewildered voice—yet her face was most curiously bright. She looked at me lovingly and yet so strangely I wished I had not let her come in.

'She went out as she had entered. I did not so much as peep into the darkness after her, but busy with a hundred thoughts returned to my play.

'Long past my usual bedtime, as I sat sipping a mug of hot[Pg 36] milk before the glowing cinders of the kitchen fire, Martha told me her secret....

'So my impossible companion in the High Street yesterday was one, and only brother to your crazy old friend, Richard,' said the Count. 'His only brother,' he added, in a muse.

[Pg 37]

MISS DUVEEN

I seldom had the company of children in my grandmother's house beside the river Wandle. The house was old and ugly. But its river was lovely and youthful even although it had flowed on for ever, it seemed, between its green banks of osier and alder. So it was no great misfortune perhaps that I heard more talking of its waters than of any human tongue. For my grandmother found no particular pleasure in my company. How should she? My father and mother had married (and died) against her will, and there was nothing in me of those charms which, in fiction at any rate, swiftly soften a superannuated heart.

Nor did I pine for her company either. I kept out of it as much as possible.

It so happened that she was accustomed to sit with her back to the window of the room which she usually occupied, her grey old indifferent face looking inwards. Whenever necessary, I would steal close up under it, and if I could see there her large faded amethyst velvet cap I knew I was safe from interruption. Sometimes I would take a slice or two of currant bread or (if I could get it) a jam tart or a cheese cake, and eat it under a twisted old damson tree or beside the running water. And if I conversed with anybody, it would be with myself or with my small victims of the chase.

Not that I was an exceptionally cruel boy; though if I had[Pg 38] lived on for many years in this primitive and companionless fashion, I should surely have become an idiot. As a matter of fact, I was unaware even that I was ridiculously old-fashioned—manners, clothes, notions, everything. My grandmother never troubled to tell me so, nor did she care. And the servants were a race apart. So I was left pretty much to my own devices. What wonder, then, if I at first accepted with genuine avidity the acquaintanceship of our remarkable neighbour, Miss Duveen?

It had been, indeed, quite an advent in our uneventful routine when that somewhat dubious household moved into Willowlea, a brown brick edifice, even uglier than our

own, which had been long vacant, and whose sloping garden confronted ours across the Wandle. My grandmother, on her part, at once discovered that any kind of intimacy with its inmates was not much to be desired. While I, on mine, was compelled to resign myself to the loss of the Willowlea garden as a kind of no-man's-land or Tom Tiddler's ground.

I got to know Miss Duveen by sight long before we actually became friends. I used frequently to watch her wandering in her long garden. And even then I noticed how odd were her methods of gardening. She would dig up a root or carry off a potted plant from one to another overgrown bed with an almost animal-like resolution; and a few minutes afterwards I would see her restoring it to the place from which it had come. Now and again she would stand perfectly still, like a scarecrow, as if she had completely forgotten what she was at.

Miss Coppin, too, I descried sometimes. But I never more than glanced at her, for fear that even at that distance the too fixed attention of my eyes might bring hers to bear upon me. She was a smallish woman, inclined to be fat, and with a peculiar waddling gait. She invariably appeared to be angry with Miss Duveen, and would talk to her as one might talk to a post. I did not know, indeed, until one day Miss Duveen waved her handkerchief in my direction that I had been ob[Pg 39]served from Willowlea at all. Once or twice after that, I fancied, she called me; at least her lips moved; but I could not distinguish what she said. And I was naturally a little backward in making new friends. Still I grew accustomed to looking out for her and remember distinctly how first we met.

It was raining, the raindrops falling softly into the unrippled water, making their great circles, and tapping on the motionless leaves above my head where I sat in shelter on the bank. But the sun was shining whitely from behind a thin fleece of cloud, when Miss Duveen suddenly peeped in at me out of the greenery, the thin silver light upon her face, and eyed me sitting there, for all the world as if she were a blackbird and I a snail. I scrambled up hastily with the intention of retreating into my own domain, but the peculiar grimace she made at me fixed me where I was.

'Ah,' she said, with a little masculine laugh. 'So this is the young gentleman, the bold, gallant young gentleman. And what might be his name?'

I replied rather distantly that my name was Arthur.

'Arthur, to be sure!' she repeated, with extraordinary geniality, and again, 'Arthur,' as if in the strictest confidence.

'I know you, Arthur, very well indeed. I have looked, I have watched; and now, please God, we need never be estranged.' And she tapped her brow and breast, making the Sign of the Cross with her lean, bluish forefinger.

'What is a little brawling brook', she went on, 'to friends like you and me?' She gathered up her tiny countenance once more into an incredible grimace of friendliness; and I smiled as amicably as I could in return. There was a pause in this one-sided conversation. She seemed to be listening, and her lips moved, though I caught no sound. In my uneasiness I was just about to turn stealthily away, when she poked forward again.

'Yes, yes, I know you quite intimately, Arthur. We have met *here*.' She tapped her rounded forehead. 'You might not[Pg 40] suppose it, too; but I have eyes like a lynx. It is no exaggeration, I assure you—I assure everybody. And now what friends we will be! At times,' she stepped out of her hiding-place and stood in curious dignity beside the water, her hands folded in front of her on her black pleated silk apron—'at times, dear child, I long for company—earthly company.' She glanced furtively about her. 'But I must restrain my longings; and you will, of course, understand that I do not complain. *He* knows best. And my dear cousin, Miss Coppin—she too knows best. She does not consider too much companionship expedient for me.' She glanced in some perplexity into the smoothly swirling water.

'I, you know,' she said suddenly, raising her little piercing eyes to mine, 'I am Miss Duveen, that's not, they say, quite the thing here.' She tapped her small forehead again beneath its sleek curves of greying hair, and made a long narrow mouth at me. 'Though, of course,' she added, 'we do not tell *her* so. No!'

And I, too, nodded my head in instinctive and absorbed imitation. Miss Duveen laughed gaily. 'He understands, he understands!' she cried, as if to many listeners. 'Oh, what a joy it is in this world, Arthur, to be understood. Now tell me,' she continued with immense nicety, 'tell me, how's your dear mamma?'

I shook my head.

'Ah,' she cried, 'I see, I see; Arthur has no mamma. We will not refer to it. No father, either?'

I shook my head again and, standing perfectly still, stared at my new acquaintance with vacuous curiosity. She gazed at me with equal concentration, as if she were endeavouring to keep the very thought of my presence in her mind.

'It is sad to have no father,' she continued rapidly, half closing her eyes; 'no head, no guide, no stay, no stronghold; but we have, O yes, we have another father, dear child, another father—eh?... Where.... Where?'[Pg 41]

She very softly raised her finger. 'On high,' she whispered, with extraordinary intensity.

'But just now', she added cheerfully, hugging her mittened hands together, 'we are not talking of Him; we are talking of ourselves, just you and me, *so* cosy; so *secret*! And it's a grandmother? I thought so, I thought so, a grandmother! O yes, I can peep between the curtains, though they do lock the door. A grandmother—I thought so; that very droll old lady! *Such* fine clothes! Such a presence, oh yes! A grandmother.' She poked out her chin and laughed confidentially.

'And the long, bony creature, all rub and double'—she jogged briskly with her elbows, 'who's that?'

'Mrs. Pridgett,' I said.

'There, there,' she whispered breathlessly, gazing widely about her. 'Think of that! *He* knows; *He* understands. How firm, how manly, how undaunted!... *One* t?'

I shook my head dubiously.

'Why should he?' she cried scornfully. 'But between ourselves, Arthur, that is a thing we *must* learn, and never mind the headache. We cannot, of course, know everything. Even Miss Coppin does not know everything'—she leaned forward with intense earnestness—'though I don't tell her so. We must try to learn all we can; and at once. One thing, dear child, you may be astonished to hear, I learned only yesterday, and that is how exceedingly *sad* life is.'

She leaned her chin upon her narrow bosom pursing her lips. 'And yet you know they say very little about it.... They don't *mention* it. Every moment, every hour, every day, every year—one, two, three, four, five, seven, ten,' she paused, frowned, 'and so on. Sadder and sadder. Why? why? It's strange, but oh, so true. You really can have no notion, child, how very sad I am myself at times. In the evening, when they all gather together, in their white raiment, up and up and up, I sit on the garden seat, on Miss Coppin's garden seat, and precisely in the middle (you'll be kind enough to remember[Pg 42] that?) and my *thoughts* make me sad.' She narrowed her eyes and shoulders. 'Yes and frightened, my child! Why must I be so guarded? One angel—the greatest *fool* could see the wisdom of that. But billions!—with their fixed eyes shining, so very boldly on me. I never prayed for so many, dear friend. And we pray for a good many odd things, you and I, I'll be bound. But there, you see, poor Miss Duveen's on her theology again—scamper, scamper, scamper. In the congregations of the wicked we must be cautious!... Mrs. Partridge and grand-mamma, so nice, *so* nice; but even that, too, a *little* sad, eh?' She leaned her head questioningly, like a starving bird in the snow.

I smiled, not knowing what else she expected of me; and her face became instantly grave and set.

'He's right; perfectly right. We must speak evil of *no*-one. *No*-one. We must shut our mouths. We——' She stopped suddenly and, taking a step leaned over the water towards me, with eyebrows raised high above her tiny face. 'S—sh!' she whispered, laying a long forefinger on her lips. 'Eavesdroppers!' she smoothed her skirts, straightened her cap, and left me; only a moment after to poke out her head at me again from between the leafy bushes. 'An assignation, no!' she said firmly, then gathered her poor, cheerful, forlorn, crooked, lovable face into a most wonderful contraction at me, that assuredly meant—'But, *yes*!'

Indeed it was an assignation, the first of how many, and how few. Sometimes Miss Duveen would sit beside me, apparently so lost in thought that I was clean forgotten. And yet I half fancied it was often nothing but feigning. Once she stared me blankly out of countenance when I ventured to take the initiative and to call out good morning to her across the water. On this occasion she completed my consternation with a sudden, angry grimace—contempt, jealousy, outrage.

But often we met like old friends and talked. It was a novel but not always welcome diversion for me in the long shady[Pg 43] garden that was my privy universe. Where our alders met, mingling their branches across the flowing water, and the kingfisher might be seen—there was our usual tryst. But, occasionally, at her invitation, I would venture across the stepping-stones into her demesne; and occasionally, but very seldom indeed, she would venture into mine. How plainly I see her, tip-toeing from stone to stone, in an extraordinary concentration of mind—her mulberry petticoats, her white stockings, her loose spring-side boots. And when at last she stood beside me, her mittened hand on her breast, she would laugh on in a kind of paroxysm until the tears stood in her eyes, and she grew faint with breathlessness.

'In all danger,' she told me once, 'I hold my breath and shut my eyes. And if I could tell you of every danger, I think, perhaps, you would understand—dear Miss Coppin....' I did not, and yet, perhaps, very vaguely I did see the connection in this rambling statement.

Like most children, I liked best to hear Miss Duveen talk about her own childhood. I contrived somehow to discover that if we sat near flowers or under boughs in blossom, her talk would generally steal round to that. Then she would chatter on and on: of the white sunny rambling house, somewhere, nowhere—it saddened and confused her if I asked where—in which she had spent her first happy years; where her father used to ride on a black horse; and her mother to walk with her in the garden in a crinolined gown and a locket with the painted miniature of a 'divine' nobleman inside it. How very far away these pictures seemed!

It was as if she herself had shrunken back into this distant past, and was babbling on like a child again, already a little isolated by her tiny infirmity.

'That was before——' she would begin to explain precisely, and then a criss-cross many-wrinkled frown would net her rounded forehead, and cloud her eyes. Time might baffle her, but then, time often baffled me too. Any talk about her mother[Pg 44] usually reminded her of an elder sister, Caroline. 'My sister, Caroline,' she would repeat as if by rote, 'you may not be aware, Arthur, was afterwards Mrs. Bute. *So* charming,*so* exquisite, *so* accomplished. And Colonel Bute—an officer and a gentleman, I grant. And yet.... But no! My dear sister was *not* happy. And so it was no doubt a blessing in disguise that by an unfortunate accident she was found *drowned*. In a lake, you will understand, not a mere shallow noisy brook. This is one of my private sorrows, which, of course, your grand-mamma would be horrified to hear—horrified; and which, of course, Partridge has not the privilege of birth even to be informed of—*our* secret, dear child—with all her beautiful hair, and her elegant feet, and her eyes no more ajar than this; but blue, blue as the forget-me-not. When the time comes, Miss Coppin will close my own eyes, I hope and trust. Death, dear, dear child, I know they *say* is only sleeping. Yet I hope and trust *that*. To be sleeping wide awake; oh no!' she abruptly turned her small untidy head away.

'But didn't they shut *hers*?' I enquired.

Miss Duveen ignored the question. 'I am not uttering one word of blame,' she went on rapidly; 'I am perfectly aware that such things confuse me. Miss Coppin tells me not to think. She tells me that I can have no opinions worth the mention. She says, "Shut up your mouth". I must keep silence then. All that I am merely trying to express to you, Arthur, knowing you will regard it as sacred between us—all I am expressing is that my dear sister, Caroline, was a gifted and beautiful creature with not a shadow or vestige or tinge or taint of confusion in her mind. *Nothing*. And yet, when they dragged her out of the water and laid her there on the bank, looking——' She stooped herself double in a sudden dreadful fit of gasping, and I feared for an instant she was about to die.

'No, no, no,' she cried, rocking herself to and fro, 'you shall *not* paint such a picture in his young, innocent mind. You *shall* not.'[Pg 45]

I sat on my stone, watching her, feeling excessively uncomfortable. 'But what *did* she look like, Miss Duveen?' I pressed forward to ask at last.

'No, no, no,' she cried again. 'Cast him out, cast him out. *Retro Sathanas*! We must not even *ask* to understand. My father and my dear mother, I do not doubt, have spoken for Caroline. Even I, if I must be called on, will strive to collect my thoughts. And that is precisely where a friend, you, Arthur, would be so precious; to know that you too, in your innocence, will be helping me to collect my thoughts on that day, to save our dear Caroline from Everlasting Anger. That, that! Oh dear: oh dear!' She turned on me

a face I should scarcely have recognized, lifted herself trembling to her feet, and hurried away.

Sometimes it was not Miss Duveen that was a child again, but I that had grown up. 'Had now you been your handsome father—and I see him, O, so plainly, dear child—had you been your father, then I must, of course, have kept to the house.... I must have; it is a rule of conduct, and everything depends on them. Where would Society be *else*?' she cried, with an unanswerable blaze of intelligence. 'I find, too, dear Arthur, that they increase—the rules increase. I try to remember them. My dear cousin, Miss Coppin, knows them all. But I—I think sometimes one's *memory* is a little treacherous. And then it must vex people.'

She gazed penetratingly at me for an answer that did not come. Mute as a fish though I might be, I suppose it was something of a comfort to her to talk to me.

And to suppose that is *my* one small crumb of comfort when I reflect on the kind of friendship I managed to bestow.

I actually met Miss Coppin once; but we did not speak. I had, in fact, gone to tea with Miss Duveen. The project had been discussed as 'quite, quite impossible, dear child' for weeks. 'You must never mention it again.' As a matter of fact I had never mentioned it at all. But one day—possibly when[Pg 46] their charge had been less difficult and exacting, one day Miss Coppin and her gaunt maid-servant and companion really did go out together, leaving Miss Duveen alone in Willowlea. It was the crowning opportunity of our friendship. The moment I espied her issuing from the house, I guessed her errand. She came hastening down to the waterside, attired in clothes of a colour and fashion I had never seen her wearing before, her dark eyes shining in her head, her hands trembling with excitement.

It was a still, warm afternoon, with sweet-williams and linden and stocks scenting the air, when, with some little trepidation, I must confess, I followed her in formal dignity up the unfamiliar path towards the house. I know not which of our hearts beat the quicker, whose eyes cast the most furtive glances about us. My friend's cheeks were brightest mauve. She wore a large silver locket on a ribbon; and I followed her up the faded green stairs, beneath the dark pictures, to her small, stuffy bedroom under the roof. We humans, they say, are enveloped in a kind of aura; to which the vast majority of us are certainly entirely insensitive. Nevertheless, there was an air, an atmosphere as of the smell of pears in this small attic room—well, every bird, I suppose, haunts with its presence its customary cage.

'This,' she said, acknowledging the bed, the looking-glass, the deal washstand, 'this, dear child, you will pardon; in fact, you will not see. How could we sit, friends as we are, in the congregation of strangers?'

I hardly know why, but that favourite word of Miss Duveen's, 'congregation' brought up before me with extreme aversion all the hostile hardness and suspicion concentrated in Miss Coppin and Ann. I stared at the queer tea things in a vain effort not to be aware of the rest of Miss Duveen's private belongings.

Somehow or other she had managed to procure for me a bun—a saffron bun. There was a dish of a grey pudding and[Pg 47] a plate of raspberries that I could not help suspecting (and, I am ashamed to say, with aggrieved astonishment), she must have herself gathered that morning from my grandmother's canes. We did not talk very much. Her heart gave her pain. And her face showed how hot and absorbed and dismayed she was over her foolhardy entertainment. But I sipped my milk and water, sitting on a black bandbox, and she on an old cane chair. And we were almost formal and distant to one another, with little smiles and curtseys over our cups, and polished agreement about the weather.

'And you'll strive not to be sick, dear child,' she implored me suddenly, while I was nibbling my way slowly through the bun. But it was not until rumours of the tremendous fact of Miss Coppin's early and unforeseen return had been borne in on us that Miss Duveen lost all presence of mind. She burst into tears; seized and kissed repeatedly my sticky hands; implored me to be discreet; implored me to be gone; implored me to retain her in my affections, 'as you love your poor dear mother, Arthur,' and I left her on her knees, her locket pressed to her bosom.

Miss Coppin was, I think, unusually astonished to see a small strange boy walk softly past her bedroom door, within which she sat, with purple face, her hat strings dangling, taking off her boots. Ann, I am thankful to say, I did not encounter. But when I was safely out in the garden in the afternoon sunshine, the boldness and the romance of this sally completely deserted me. I ran like a hare down the alien path, leapt from stone to stone across the river; nor paused in my flight until I was safe in my own bedroom, and had—how odd is childhood!—washed my face and entirely changed my clothes.

My grandmother, when I appeared at her tea-table, glanced at me now and again rather profoundly and inquisitively, but the actual question hovering in her mind remained unuttered.

It was many days before we met again, my friend and I. She[Pg 48] had, I gathered from many mysterious nods and shrugs, been more or less confined to her bedroom ever since our escapade, and looked dulled and anxious; her small face was even a little more vacant in repose than usual. Even this meeting, too, was full of alarms; for in the midst of our talk, by mere chance or caprice, my grandmother took a walk in the garden that afternoon, and discovered us under our damson tree. She bowed in her

dignified, aged way. And Miss Duveen, with her cheeks and forehead the colour of her petticoat, elaborately curtseyed.

'Beautiful, very beautiful weather,' said my grandmother.

'It is indeed,' said my friend, fixedly.

'I trust you are keeping pretty well?'

'As far, ma'am, as God and a little weakness of the heart permit,' said Miss Duveen. 'He knows all,' she added, firmly.

My grandmother stood silent a moment.

'Indeed He does,' she replied politely.

'And that's the difficulty,' ventured Miss Duveen, in her odd, furtive, friendly fashion.

My grandmother opened her eyes, smiled pleasantly, paused, glanced remotely at me, and, with another exchange of courtesies, Miss Duveen and I were left alone once more. But it was a grave and saddened friend I now sat beside.

'You see, Arthur, all bad things, we know, are best for us. Motives included. That comforts me. But my heart is sadly fluttered. Not that I fear or would shun society; but perhaps your grandmother.... I never had the power to treat my fellow-creatures as if they were stocks and stones. And the effort not to notice it distresses me. A little hartshorn might relieve the *palpitation*, of course; but Miss Coppin keeps all keys. It is this shouting that makes civility such a task.'

'This shouting'—very faintly then I caught her meaning, but I was in no mood to sympathize. My grandmother's one round-eyed expressionless glance at me had been singularly disconcerting. And it was only apprehension of her questions that kept me from beating a retreat. So we sat on, Miss Duveen[Pg 49] and I, in the shade, the day drawing towards evening, and presently we walked down to the waterside, and under the colours of sunset I flung in my crumbs to the minnows, as she talked ceaselessly on.

'And yet,' she concluded, after how involved a monologue, 'and yet, Arthur, I feel it is for your forgiveness I should be pleading. So much to do; such an arch of beautiful things might have been my gift to you. It is here,' she said, touching her forehead. 'I do not think, perhaps, that all I might say would be for your good. I must be silent and discreet about much. I must not provoke'—she lifted her mittened finger, and raised her eyes—'Them,' she said gravely. 'I am tempted, terrified, persecuted. Whispering, wrangling, shouting: the flesh is a grievous burden, Arthur; I long for peace. Only to flee away and be at rest! But,' she nodded, and glanced over her shoulder, 'about much—great trials, sad entanglements, about much the Others say, I must keep

silence. It would only alarm your innocence. And that I will never, *never* do. Your father, a noble, gallant gentleman of the world, would have understood my difficulties. But he is dead.... Whatever that may mean. I have repeated it so often when Miss Coppin thought that I was not—dead, dead, dead, dead. But I don't think that even now I grasp the meaning of the word. Of you, dear child, I will never say it. You have been life itself to me.'

How generously, how tenderly she smiled on me from her perplexed, sorrowful eyes.

'You have all the world before you, all the world. How splendid it is to be a Man. For my part I have sometimes thought, though they do not of course intend to injure me, yet I fancy, sometimes, they have grudged me *my* part in it a little. Though God forbid but Heaven's best.'

She raised that peering, dark, remote gaze to my face, and her head was trembling again. 'They are saying now to one another—"*Where is she? where is she? It's nearly dark, m'm, where is she?*" O, Arthur, but there shall be no night *there*. We must[Pg 50] believe it, we must—in spite, dear friend, of a weak horror of glare. My cousin, Miss Coppin, does not approve of my wishes. Gas, gas, gas, all over the house, and when it is not singing, it roars. You would suppose I might be trusted with but just my own one bracket. But no—Ann, I think—indeed I fear, sometimes, has no——' She started violently and shook her tiny head. 'When I am gone,' she continued disjointedly, 'you will be prudent, cautious, dear child? Consult only your heart about me. Older you must be.... Yes, certainly, he must be older,' she repeated vaguely. 'Everything goes on and on—and round!' She seemed astonished, as if at a sudden radiance cast on an old and protracted perplexity.

'About your soul, dear child,' she said to me once, touching my hand, 'I have never spoken. Perhaps it was one of my first duties to keep on speaking to you about your soul. I mention it now in case they should rebuke me when I make my appearance there. It is a burden; and I have so many burdens, as well as pain. And at times I cannot think very far. I *see* the thought; but it won't alter. It comes back, just like a sheep—"*Ba-aa-ah*", like that!' She burst out laughing, twisting her head to look at me the while. 'Miss Coppin, of course, has no difficulty; gentlemen have no difficulty. And this shall be the occasion of another of our little confidences. We are discreet?' She bent her head and scanned my face. 'Here,' she tapped her bosom, 'I bear his image. My only dear one's. And if you would kindly turn your head, dear child, perhaps I could pull him out.'

It was the miniature of a young, languid, fastidious-looking officer which she showed me—threaded on dingy tape, in its tarnished locket.

'Miss Coppin, in great generosity, has left me this,' she said, polishing the glass on her knee, 'though I am forbidden to wear it. For you see, Arthur, it is a duty not to brood

on the past, and even perhaps, indelicate. Some day, it may be, you, too, will love a gentle girl. I beseech you, keep your heart pure and true. This one could not. Not a single word of blame[Pg 51] escapes me. I own to my Maker, *never* to anyone else, it has not eased my little difficulty. But it is not for us to judge. Whose office is that, eh?' And again, that lean small forefinger, beneath an indescribable grimace, pointed gently, deliberately, from her lap upward. 'Pray, pray,' she added, very violently, 'pray, till the blood streams down your face! Pray, but rebuke not. They all whisper about it. Among themselves,' she added, peering out beneath and between the interlacing branches. 'But I simulate inattention, I simulate....' The very phrase seemed to have hopelessly confused her. Again, as so often now, that glassy fear came into her eyes; her foot tapped on the gravel.

'Arthur,' she cried suddenly, taking my hand tightly in her lap, 'you have been my refuge in a time of trouble. You will never know it, child. My refuge, and my peace. We shall seldom meet now. All are opposed. They repeat it in their looks. The autumn will divide us; and then, winter; but, I think, no spring. It is so, Arthur, there is a stir; and then they will hunt me out.' Her eyes gleamed again, far and small and black in the dusky pallor of her face.

It was indeed already autumn; the air golden and still. The leaves were beginning to fall. The late fruits were well-nigh over. Robins and tits seemed our only birds now. Rain came in floods. The Wandle took sound and volume, sweeping deep above our stepping stones. Very seldom after this I even so much as saw our neighbour. But I chanced on her again one still afternoon, standing fixedly by the brawling stream, in a rusty-looking old-fashioned cloak, her scanty hair pushed high up on her forehead.

She stared at me for a moment or two, and then, with a scared look over her shoulder, threw me a little letter, shaped like a cock-hat, and weighted with a pebble stone, across the stream. She whispered earnestly and rapidly at me over the water. But I could not catch a single word she said, and failed to decipher her close spidery handwriting. No doubt I was too[Pg 52] shy, or too ashamed, or in a vague fashion too loyal, to show it to my grandmother. It is not now a flattering keepsake. I called out loudly I must go in; and still see her gazing after me, with a puzzled, mournful expression on the face peering out of the cloak.

Even after that we sometimes waved to one another across the water, but never if by hiding myself I could evade her in time. The distance seemed to confuse her, and quite silenced me. I began to see we were ridiculous friends, especially as she came now in ever dingier and absurder clothes. She even looked hungry, and not quite clean, as well as ill; and she talked more to her phantoms than to me when once we met.

The first ice was in the garden. The trees stood bare beneath a pale blue sunny sky, and I was standing at the window, looking out at the hoar-frost, when my grandmother told me that it was unlikely that I should ever see our neighbour again.

I stood where I was, without turning round, gazing out of the window at the motionless ghostly trees, and the few birds in forlorn unease.

'Is she dead, then?' I enquired.

'I am told,' was the reply, 'that her friends have been compelled to have her put away. No doubt, it was the proper course. It should have been done earlier. But it is not our affair, you are to understand. And, poor creature, perhaps death would have been a happier, a more merciful release. She was sadly afflicted.'

I said nothing, and continued to stare out of the window.

But I know now that the news, in spite of a vague sorrow, greatly relieved me. I should be at ease in the garden again, came the thought—no longer fear to look ridiculous and grow hot when our neighbour was mentioned, or be saddled with her company beside the stream.

[Pg 53]

AN IDEAL CRAFTSMAN

Away into secrecy frisked a pampered mouse. A scuffling of bedclothes, the squeak of a dry castor followed, and then suddenly the boy sat up and set to piecing together reality with scraps of terrifying but half-forgotten dreams.

It was his ears had summoned him, they were still ringing with an obscure message, a faint *Qui vive?* But as he sat blinking and listening in the empty dark he could not satisfy himself what sound it was that had actually wakened him. Was it only a dying howl from out of one of his usual nightmares, or had some actual noise or cry sounded up from the vacancy of the house beneath? It was this uncertainty—as if his brain were a piece of mechanism wound up by sleep—that set working a vivid panorama of memories in the little theatre of his mind—cloaked men huddled together in some dark corner of the night, scoundrels plotting in the wind, the pause between rifle-click and the loose fall, finally to culminate in the adventure of glorious memory—raiding Jacobs.

He groped under his pillow for the treasures he had concealed there before blowing out his candle—a box of matches, a crumbling slice of pie-crust, and a dingy volume of the Newgate Calendar. The last usually lay behind the draughty chimney of his fireplace, because Jacobs had the habits of a ferret and nothing was safe from his nosings. He struck a[Pg 54] match soundlessly on the edge of his mattress. Its flare lit up his lank-haired head, his sharp face and dazzled eyes. Then the flame drooped, went out. But he had had time to find the broad glossy belt he had cut out of a strip of mottled American cloth and the old sheathed poniard which he had months ago abstracted from his father's study. He buckled on the belt round his body in the dark over his night-shirt and dangled the rusty blood- (or water-) stained poniard coldly on his hip. He pulled on his stockings, tilted an old yachting cap over his eyes, and was fully equipped.

In this feverish haste he had had little time to ponder strategy. But now he sat down again on the edge of his bed, and though he was pretending to think, his brows wrinkled in a frown, he was actually listening. Even the stairs had ceased to creak. And the star that from a wraith of cloud glittered coldly in the night-sky beyond the rift between his curtains made no sound. He drew open his door, inch by inch, still intent, then stepped out on to the landing.

The first danger to be encountered on the staircase below was his father's bedroom. Its door gaped half-open, but was it empty? It was here on this very spot, he remembered with a qualm, that Jacobs had once leapt out on him. He saw in memory that agile shape stepping hastily and oddly in the dusk, furious at sight of the eavesdropper. And in an instant the tiny blue bead of gas on the landing had expanded into a white fan-shaped glare. Not so to-night. With a gasp and an oblique glance at the dusky bed and the spectral pendent clothes within, he slid by in safety on his stockinged feet, and so past yet another door—but this one tight shut, with its flower-painted panels—the door of his mother's gay little sitting-room, his real mother's, not the powdery eyebrowed stepmother who a few hours before had set out with his father, on pleasure bent.

A few paces beyond he trod even more cautiously, for here was a loose board. At the last loop of the staircase Jacobs'[Pg 55] customary humming should issue up out of the gloom beneath—the faint tune which he rasped on and on and on, faint and shrill between his teeth, superciliously, ironically, in greasy good-humour or sly facetiousness—he would hum it in his coffin perhaps. But no, not a sound. The raider hesitated. What next? Where now? He listened in vain.

And then, he suddenly remembered that this was 'silver' night. And doubtless—cook and housemaid long since snoring in their attic—a white glittering array of forks and spoons, soup ladles, and candlesticks were at this very moment spread out in bedaubed splendour before the aproned tyrant. For Jacobs was not only queer in his

habits and nocturnal by nature but a glutton for work. But if it was silver night, why this prodigious hush? No clang of fork ringing against its neighbour; not a single rattle of whitening brush on metal reached his ears.

Slim as a ferret himself, he hung over the loop in the staircase as he might have hung over the Valley of Death; but still all was strangely quiet. And so, with a pang of disappointment, and at the same moment with a crow of relief, the boy came to the conclusion that Jacobs was out. And not for the first time either. He must have had a visitor—the woman in the black bonnet, with the silver locket dangling on her front, perhaps. As likely as not, they had gone off gallivanting together, and would reappear about eleven o'clock, Jacobs either swearing and quarrelsome or amiably garrulous.

But the boy was no fool. In spite of this sinister hush in the house—as if its walls were draped with the very darkness of night—Jacobs *might* perhaps be busy over his silver. Shammy, however hard you rub with it, makes little sound. And if he were, then too much confidence would mean not only a sudden pursuit, a heart-daunting scuttle up the stairs, and Jacobs with his cane cutting at his legs from behind, but the failure of his raid altogether. Nothing then but a bit of stale pie-crust for his midnight feast. So he trod on velvet down the stairs,[Pg 56] his damp palm shunning the banister (*that* squeak would wake an army!), his lips dry and his tongue rolling in luxury of anticipation. And soon he was in the hall, with all the empty rooms of the house above his head, and minified in his own imagination to a mere atom of whiteness in the dusk, a mouse within smell of the cat. His rusty poniard clutched tight between his fingers, his stomach full of fear and his heart noisy as a cockcrow, he pushed on.

The staircase ran widely and shallowly into the hall; there was more light here, a thin faint glow of gas-light, turned low. He could distinguish the dark shapes of the heavy furniture, as he stalked on through this luminous twilight. But the back passage to the kitchen quarters was hidden from elegant visitors by a muffled door with a spring, which Jacobs, when it suited him, kept propped wide open. This passage, if followed to the end, turned abruptly at right angles; and at the inner angle near the fusty entry to the cellars he paused to breathe and then to listen again. Once round the corner, along the passage in front of him the kitchen door would come into view, ajar or wide open, on the right; and the larder itself a few paces further on, and exactly opposite the raider. But before reaching it, the boot cupboard, sour den of long-legged spiders and worse abominations, must be passed, and the window with the panes of coloured glass, looking out on a monstrous red, yellow, or blue garden of trees and stars.

The boy's lean dark face had in his progress become paler and leaner. His legs were now the skinny playthings of autumnal draughts, and at this moment a sound *had* actually reached his ears—the sound as of a lion panting over a meal. A sort of persistent half-choked snuffling. This was odd. This was surprising. Even when, with sleeves turned up and sharp elbows bared, Jacobs was engrossed in any

job, he never breathed like that. In general, indeed, he scarcely seemed to be breathing at all; when for example, he stooped down close handing a dish of cabbage or blanc-mange at the Sunday dinner table of a[Pg 57] taciturn father. *This* breathing was husky and unequal, almost like a snore through nostrils and mouth. Jacobs must be drunk, then; and that would mean either a sort of morose good-humour, or a sullen drowsy malice, as dangerous as it was sly. The adventure was losing its edge. Even the hunger for romance in the boy's Scots-French blood died down within him at recollection of the dull, dull-lidded eyes of Jacobs half drunk.

There came a sudden *crkkk* and the squeak as of a boot. The boy bit hard on his lip. Yet another slow sliding step forward; the kitchen door *was* ajar. A spear of yellow light warned the intruder. But light—spear or no spear—was as vitalizing as a sip of wine. Red-capped, pock-marked faces, all sorts and conditions of criminals, buccaneers and highwaymen, gore and glory, flocked back again into the boy's fancy. An icy delicious shiver ran down his spine, for now Jacobs, tied with a tape round the middle, in his green baize apron, must be sitting at not much more than arm's-length from the door. Or if not, who?

Inch by inch, courage restored, he slid on soundlessly, his stockinged foot first pushing forward into the light, then the white edge of his night-shirt. He pressed skin-close to the further side of the passage, and was actually half past the door ajar, when through a narrow chink he glanced into the kitchen, and so—suddenly found himself squinting full into the eyes of the fat woman in the black bonnet. Crouching a little, stiff and motionless, her eyes bolting out of her face, she stood there full in the light of the gas jet over her head, the faded brown hair that showed beneath her bonnet wreathing it as if with a nimbus. The boy stood frozen.

Not for an instant did he imagine he could be invisible to such a stare as that, to eyes which, though they were small and dark showed as round and shining as the silver locket that rose and fell jerkily upon her chest. His mouth opened—mute as a fish; every sinew in his body stiffened in readiness for flight.[Pg 58] But the woman never so much as stirred. Every fibre and muscle in *her* body was at stretch to aid her ears. It looked as if she might be able to hear even his thoughts moving. So would a she-wolf stand at gaze under a white moon, with those unstirring eyes; famished and gaunt. And yet, what in the world was there for*her* to be afraid of? If anybody else was there she would have spoken. She was alone, then? His fingers suddenly relaxed, the scabbard of his poniard rattled against the wall behind him, and there slipped off his tongue the most unlikely question that would ever else have come into his mind. 'I say; where's Jacobs?'

The lids over the little black eyes fluttered and the woman's lips opened in a squawk. Her two rough red hands were suddenly clapped on either side of her mouth. For a moment he thought she was going to scream again, and was thankful when only a

shuddering sob followed. 'Oh, sir, how you did startle me. Mr. Jacobs, sir, why just as you was coming—he's gone, sir; he's gone.'

The boy pushed open the door and stood on the threshold. He had supposed it impossible that so stout a woman could speak in so small a voice. Sheer curiosity had banished all alarm. Besides, if Jacobs was out, there was no immediate danger. He looked about him, conscious that he was being closely watched from between those square red fingers, and that the forehead above them was deeply wrinkled almost as if the woman were helpless with laughter.

'Why, lor,' she was muttering as if to herself, 'it's only the little boy. My! I thought he was his pa, I did; God bless him. He's come down for a drink of water. That's what he wants. And all in his pretty nightgown too.'

Tears were now gushing down her round cheeks and gurgling in her voice. She walked in angles to a chair and sat there rocking her body to and fro and smiling at him—an odd contorted smile of blandishment and stupidity sicklied over with fear. He blushed, and stared back at her as hot and angry as[Pg 59] when in days gone by bent-up wrinkled old ladies used to stop his nurse in the street to ask questions about him, and had even openly kissed him.

This end to his adventure, which seemed to be leading him into difficulties he had never dreamed of, was a bitter disappointment. A drink of water! He resented the presence of this fat woman in the kitchen. He resented even more his own embarrassment. He wriggled under his night-shirt, and was profoundly relieved when those flabby florid cheeks suddenly faded to a mottled mauve, the rocking ceased, and two heavy eyelids slowly descended upon the small black terrified eyes. Even if she *were* going to faint, she would at any rate have to stop staring.

But his troubles were only begun; ugly grunts were proceeding from that open mouth, and the woman's head was twitching oddly. Still, he had had experiences of this kind before. He knew what was to be done, and a scientific callousness gave his remedy zest. On the kitchen table beside some empty bottles of beer and a decanter stood a tumbler half full of water. This he liberally sprinkled on the woman's face and trickled a few drops, not without waste, between her teeth. Grunts expostulated, and the silver locket almost danced. She was coming to. Success stimulated him to fresh efforts; he snatched a scrap of brown paper from among the spoons and climbing up on to a chair lit it at the gas, and thrust it under her nose. It was enough. Such a smother would have stupefied an apiary.

But though the cure was now complete, and worthy of being proudly recorded, one pretty keepsake had been degraded forever—the memory of his mother, lying on a sofa, and two blue eyes like dawn shining up amid the dewdrops sprinkling her fair cheeks. This fat stranger's petticoat was of coarse red dingy flannel. She was clammy

and stupid and ridiculous. Nevertheless, the absurd fear of him or whatever it might be that had brought her to this pass seemed for the moment to be[Pg 60] clean forgotten. For when her dazed eyes rolled down from under their lids again and looked out at him, precisely the same expression had come into her face as he had seen on it when he had watched her smiling mawkishly at Jacobs himself.

'Are you better now?' he asked coldly, flourishing the smouldering paper.

The woman smiled again, and nodded.

'I'm afraid I may have burnt you. But there's no other way, you see, though the smell's pretty beastly.' The woman went on vacantly smiling. Not that this stupid wrinkling up of her mouth and cheeks seemed to mean anything. She might have been made of wax. Further parleying, he decided, would be wasted.

'You needn't mention it to Jacobs, you know,' he began. '*I* shan't say anything. You see, I just happened to notice you through the door. I think I'll be going back now. Jacobs is a bit of a....' Nothing very conciliatory could come after that 'bit'. At all events he decided to keep back the word that had so nearly slipped out. The silver locket began to jolt again, and clumsy fingers fumbled at it. The smile was beginning to crystallize into the familiar wrinkled stare.

'You *look* better, *much* better,' said the boy uneasily, edging towards the door. 'I remember once my mother...' but his tongue refused for shame to say what he remembered. Also he found it difficult to turn his back on the woman, though when at last he reached the door he whipped round quickly.

'Little boy,' called the woman in a fulsome voice, 'come back! I say!—little *boy*!'

He frowned. Her eyes were now searching his face intently and suspiciously. She had begun to think again. And at sight of their hostility his own underlip drooped into a sullen obstinacy. He didn't mind *her*. If she decided to sneak to Jacobs, that was her look out; meanwhile he could easily manage her alone.

'What?' he said.[Pg 61]

'I was took ill, wasn't I? The heat's something awful. *Phh!* But there isn't any need to stare, little boy. I shan't eat you.' Cunning peeped out of the unctuous face, and he merely waited for the trap. 'Not me; and what a pretty belt he's got on,' she continued, rolling her dingy handkerchief into a ball; 'and ain't he got a nice new dagger!'

But even such flatteries as these produced no response. The dagger wasn't new, and the belt was not meant to be pretty. 'I must be going now, thank you,' he repeated. 'Besides, I suppose he'll be back in a minute?'

Her hands stayed motionless, her head had suddenly jerked a little sideways like a thrush's intent on the stirrings of a worm.

'Going,' she repeated, 'why, of course, he must be going, poor lamb: he'll get his death of cold. And wasn't he *good* to me; *good* to me he was. And that clever! You'd have thought he was a doctor!'

Her glance meanwhile was roving in confusion into every corner of the room as though she were looking for something, and was afraid of what she might find. He could hardly keep his own from following them. 'That kind and gentle he was! Just like a doctor he was!' And again a menacing silence swallowed up her words. The boy's face reflected a distrust deepening into hostility. Was the whole thing a cheat then? Was Jacobs as usual playing the sneak? Would he suddenly leap out on him? In any case he knew he was only being cajoled, if not ridiculed.

'There, now!' she suddenly broke out, 'if he isn't *thinking* again. That's what he's doing. He's thinking about what I was saying to meself when that funny dream came over me. That's what he's doing. And why not, I should like to know. Eh?' She shot him a searching, ogling glance.

'I didn't notice,' he answered. 'Your *eyes* looked rather queer, with the whites gone up, and your skin twitched just as if the water burnt it. But *I* didn't mind.'[Pg 62]

'How long was you there, then? Tell me that?' Her nails were now gripped uncomfortably sharp on his arm. 'You stand there frowning and sulking, my young soldier. And by what rights, may I ask? Just you tell me how long you was there!' Her face had grown hard and dangerous, but he shut his mouth tight and returned sullenly stare for stare. 'So help me,' she half whispered, releasing him, 'now I've been and frightened him again. That's it. He thinks I'm angry with him. Lord love you, my precious, I didn't mean anything like that. Not me. P'raps you just came down for a bit of fun, eh?'

She fixed her eyes on the dagger, and shuddered. 'What was I saying? Ah, yes. How long—*how long* was—you—there?' She stamped her foot. 'That's right, saucer-eyes, stare, stare! Didn't I *say* I'm old and ugly! Ain't *he* said it too? Oh, oh, oh! What shall I do, what shall I do?' She hid her face in her hands and her tears gushed out anew.

The boy stood stiffly at her side. This unexpected capitulation unnerved him, and his heart began to heave menacingly.

'I'm sorry; but I must go now,' he repeated, trying with as little obvious aversion as possible to drag his hand from her hot wet cheek. 'And I don't see what good crying will do.' As if by magic the snuffling ceased.

'Good! Who said, what "good"? It's *me* who must be going, my young man, and don't you make any mistake about *that*!' She shook out her skirts, and searched in vain for the bonnet on her head. He nearly laughed out, so absurd was the attempt—for the bunched-up old thing was dangling by its strings, behind her back. But this retrieved, she drew it on, pushing under it stragglings of her iron-grey hair. Then she opened a fat leather purse, stuffed with keys and dirty crumpled papers.

'Now what have I got here?' she began wheedlingly, as she pushed about with her finger and took out a sixpence. 'What have I got here? Why, a silver sixpence. And who's that for? Why, for any nice little boy what won't spy and pry. That's what that's for.' She stooped nearly double, holding it out to[Pg 63] him with bolting eyes in her purpled face. 'What? He won't take it? Shakes his head? Too proud to take it. Oh, very well, very well.'

She opened her purse again and with shaking fingers pushed the sixpence back. She was not crying now, but her face had gone a deathly grey, and a blank, dreadful misery had crept into it. This woman was a very strange woman. He had never met anyone who behaved in such a queer way. He watched her as she went waddling off out of the kitchen and over the stone floor into the darkness beyond. Her footsteps ceased to sound. She was gone, then? And she must have left the garden door open behind her; the wind was bellying in his night-shirt and icy under his arms. Here was the cat come in, too, rolling in its sodden fur on the oilcloth at his feet. 'Puss, Puss,' he said. Where had *he* been to get in such a state. The boy stood dismayed and discomfited, while the cat rubbed its body and its purring jaws against his stockinged legs.

A stark unstirring silence had spread into the kitchen, though the gas was faintly singing—high and from very far away. And, as if to attract his attention, a wisp of hair was patting his forehead under his ridiculous cap-brim. The silence entangled his thoughts in a medley of absurd misgivings productive only of chicken-skin and perplexity. Something had gone wrong—the house was changed; and he didn't know how or why. He glanced up at the clock, which thereupon at once began to tick. His eyes dodged from side to side of the familiar kitchen and then it was as if a stealthy warning finger had been laid upon his thoughts, and chaos became unity.

His roving glance had fallen on the cupboard door. For there in the crack at the bottom of it, shut in and moving softly in the wind, showed a corner of green baize. Jacobs was there, then; bunched up there, then; smiling to himself and waiting, and listening in there, then? The boy stood appalled, his bright black eyes fixed on this flapping scrap of green baize apron. The whole thing *was* a trap. And yet, as he tried hard[Pg 64] to keep his wits, he had known instantly there was something wrong—something he couldn't understand. That was just like one of Jacobs's jokes!—jokes that usually had so violent and humourless an ending. And yet.... Suddenly the hinges

of the outer door had whinnied; he jerked round his head in alarm. It was the woman again. She had come back. Bead-bright raindrops glittered on the black of her jacket, on her bonnet, in her hair. That rigid awful stare of horror had come back into her face. He could move neither hand nor foot; could only stare at her.

'Eh, eh, now!' she was choking out at him. 'So you've *seen* now, my fine young gentleman, have you? That's what you've done. Then what do *I* say; *me*! Keep a civil tongue in your head, that's what *I* say. And tell me this——' The face thrust so close down to his had grown enormous and unspeakably dreadful. Her hot breath enveloped him. 'Where's the gate? Where's the gate, I say? I got lost there among them bushes. I can't get out. D'ye see? I've lost the gate. It's dark. It's come on raining. Where's the *gate*?'

Tiny beads of blood stood on her skin—she must have stumbled into the holly hedge at the foot of the garden by the cucumber frames. She smelt not only of her old clothes but of the night and the rain. And still he made no answer. He had been driven back by that awful and congealed look on her face—beyond fear. He was merely waiting—to find *his* way: this mystery, this horror.

'Eh, now'; she had turned away, her heavy head crooked down over one shoulder, and was speaking this time to herself: 'quiet and silly, that's what *he* is. Nothing much anybody could get out of *him*. But see you here!' She had twisted round. 'It's no good you playing the young innocent with me. You've seen and you know. That's what you've done. And you just tell me this. How *could* I have done it? how *should* I have done it? That's what I'm asking. Just you tell me that. Haven't I come of honest people? And didn't he promise me and pro[Pg 65]mise me? And nothing but lies. And then, "You ain't the first," he says. And me as I am! "You ain't the first," he says. Ay, and meant it. "What, what!" I says. And then he hit me—here, with his clenched-up fist, *here*. "I shan't leave you," I said, "and you can't make me." And all I wanted was just to keep body and soul together. "And you can't make me," that's what I said. "That's all," I said. And then he laughed. "You ain't the first," he says, laughing. And me as I am!... Oh, my God, he *won't* understand. Listen, little boy. I didn't know what I was doing; everything went black and I couldn't see. And I put out my hands—to push him off, and my fingers went stiff and a smudge of red came over my eyes, and next thing he fell down like a bundle and wouldn't speak, wouldn't speak. Mind you, I say *this*, if I hadn't drunk the beer, if I hadn't drunk the beer, if I hadn't—done—that....' She faltered, her face went blank as she swayed.

Her listener was struggling hard to understand. These broken words told him little that was clear and definite, and yet were brimming over with sinister incomprehensible meanings. He frowned at the contorted, dark-red moving face and loose lips. One fact and one fact alone was plain. He had nothing to fear from Jacobs. Jacobs was not going to pounce out on him. Simply because Jacobs was gone. Then why...? He

twisted about, and kneeling down on the floor by the cupboard beside the cooling kitchen range—with scarcely a glint of drowsy red now in its ashy coals—he struggled with the metal tongue that held back the door. Usually loose, it now turned stiffly and hurt his fingers. Then suddenly it gave way.

And the boy's first quick thought was: Why, he's quite a little man! And the next was one of supreme relief that all this wild meaningless talk was now over. He leaned forward and peered into the puckered-up clay-coloured face, with its blackened lips and leaden-lidded eyes. The chin was dinted in with the claw pin in the cravat. A gallipot stood near—a trap for crickets—touching one limp hand, still smeared with pink[Pg 66] plate powder. The door-tongue was stiff, the boy supposed, because the corner of the baize apron had got stuck to the varnish of the frame. You'd have hardly thought, though, there'd be room in the cupboard. But the important thing, the illuminating, inspiring, and yet startlingly familiar thing was the gallipot!

It had touched a spring, it had released a shutter in his mind and set his thoughts winging back to a sooty, draughty chimney where only a few minutes ago—minutes as vast and dark and empty as the sea—he had hidden a book with a wedge of pie-crust on top of it. In that book he had read of just such a gallipot as this—not as a trap for crickets—but a gallipot with a handful of spade guineas in it, which had belonged to an old man who had been brutally strangled in the small hours by his two nephews. They had never been caught either; nobody had even suspected them. They had planned a means of escape—so vile and fantastic that even to watch them at it had made his skin deliciously creep upon him and his hair stir on his head. But it had succeeded, it had *worked*. To the dead old man's four-poster bed they had strung up the body of their victim, and until one of them, on his death-bed, had made confession, the old man's bones had lain beneath the tramplings of the cross-roads. For everybody, even his own relatives, believed that he had hanged himself. This evilly romantic picture had flamed up with an ominous glow in the boy's imagination as he stood there contemplating his quiet enemy. The woman had become utterly unimportant. She was standing by the table, twisting, now up, now down, her dark-green bonnet-strings.

'How did you do it?' said the boy, looking up and leaning back, with a shuddering sigh, upon his heels. 'How on earth? Did he struggle? He couldn't have struggled *much*, I suppose. He's so small. He *looks* so small.'

The questions were unanswered and were unrepeated. He was merely drinking the scene in. That mole upon the bluish[Pg 67] close-shaven cheek was certainly grown blacker than it had been in life, more conspicuous.

'But you aren't of course going to leave him like this?' he broke out sharply. 'You can't, you know; you simply can't.' But the woman was paying him no attention. 'Don't you *see*? They'd find it out in no time,' he added petulantly.

Yet even in the midst of this callous analysis, the woman's childlike attitude attracted his sympathy. At sight of the mute huddled contents of the cupboard, she seemed to have forgotten the danger she was in. A vacant immeasurable mournfulness quietened her face. She was crying. 'I'm sorry, but it's no good crying,' he went on, still kneeling on the cold oilcloth. '*That* won't be of any help; and I'd be awfully pleased to help you all I *can*. As a matter of fact I didn't much care for old Jacobs myself. But then, he's dead now. He *is* dead?'

The woman smothered his momentary fear with an eye-shot of horror. 'Well, if he is, I can't see why you shouldn't say so.' She remained motionless. 'Oh, dear,' he muttered impatiently, 'don't you under*stand*? We *must* do *some*thing.' A heavy frown had settled under the streak of dark hair on his forehead. 'You wouldn't stand the ghost of a chance as it is. They'd catch you easy.'

The woman nodded. 'I don't care; I hope they will. I don't care *what* happens now—because I can't think.'

'That's all rot,' said the boy stoutly. 'You've got to.'

The woman was irritating and paradoxical in this mood, and more than ever like a senseless wax model, which, with diabolical tremors, moves its glazed eyes and turns a glossy head. He peered again into the cupboard. Only once before had he seen Jacobs asleep—stretched out on a sofa in the dining-room one sultry afternoon in the streaming sunshine—gaping, sonorous. Then he had gone out as he had come in, on tiptoe. Now he stooped a little closer towards the cupboard, examining what was in it, stretching out even an experimental finger towards the small pallid hand.[Pg 68]

He compared the woman's face and this other face, and found a fancy strangely contradictory of the facts. Jacobs was really and truly the man of blood; Jacobs was just the kind of person you'd expect to be a murderer. Not this woman, so fat and stupid. Nobody would be surprised to find *her* body in any cupboard. But Jacobs, small and ferrety, softly rasping his tune between his teeth, on and on. And now Jacobs was dead. So that's what *that* was like. He jerked his head aside, and his eyes became fixed once more on the gallipot. *That* was the real and eloquent thing. His mind had completed its circuit. He stood up convinced.

'It's no good going on like this,' he explained lucidly, almost cheerfully. 'This would be the very first place they would look into. I should look in here myself. But don't you see, you needn't be caught at all if you do what I tell you. It's something I read in a book of mine.'

The woman lifted a mechanical head and looked at him; and as if for the first time. She saw—a meagre boy with linnet legs and narrow shoulders, a lean clean-cut face of a rather bilious brown, and straight dark brown hair beneath a yachting cap; a boy in black stockings, a night-shirt and a shiny belt; his dark eyes, narrowed and intent, set steep in his head. This boy frightened her. She pushed on her bonnet and loosened her dress about her throat.

Manifestly she was preparing to go. He spoke more decisively. 'You don't *see*. That's all,' he said. 'Really, on my word of honour, it would be all right. I'm not just saying so. A baby could do it.'

The woman knelt down beside him in a posture not unlike the inmate's of the cupboard, and solemnly stared into his face. 'Tell me, tell me quick, you silly lamb. *What* did you say? A *baby* could do it?'

'Why, yes,' said the boy, outwardly cool, but inwardly ardent, 'it's as easy as A.B.C. You get a rope and make a noose, and you put it over his head and round his neck, you[Pg 69] know, just as if he was going to be hanged. And then you hang him up on a nail or something. He mustn't touch the ground, of course. You throttled him, didn't you? You see there's no blood. They'll say he hanged himself, don't you see? They'd find old Jacobs strung up in the kitchen here and they'll say he's hanged himself. Don't you *see*?' he repeated.

'Oh, I couldn't do it,' she whimpered, 'not for worlds. I couldn't. I'd sooner stay here beside him till they come.' She began to sob in a stupid vacant fashion and then suddenly hiccuped.

'You *could*, I tell you. A baby could do it. You're afraid. That's what it is! I'm going to, I tell you: whether you like it or not.' He stamped his stockinged foot. 'Mind you, I'm not doing it for myself. It's nothing to do with me. You aren't taking the least trouble to understand.' He looked at her as if he couldn't believe any human being could by any possibility be so dense. 'It's just stupid,' he added over his shoulder, as he sallied out to the boot cupboard to fetch a rope.

Once more the tide of consciousness flowed in the woman's stolid, flattened brain. Two or three words of this young hero had at last fallen on good ground. And with consciousness, fear had come back. She came waddling after the boy. The vagrant crawling inmates of the cupboard had been swept carelessly from the corner, and now he was trailing a rope behind him as he went on into the larder for brandy. His match died down meanwhile, scorching his fingers, and he stayed on in the dark, the woman close behind him, rummaging gingerly among the bottles and dishes. And soon his finger-tips touched the sharp-cut stopper. He returned triumphant, flipping from them the custard they had encountered in their search. The woman followed close behind him, stumbling ever and again upon his trailing rope, and thereby adding to her fears

and docility. She was coming alive again. Brandy set her tongue gabbling faster. It gave the boy the strength and zeal of a stage villain.[Pg 70]

He skipped hither and thither, now on to, now off the kitchen chair he had pushed nearer; then—having swept back the array of pink-smeared silver candlesticks and snuffers that were in his way, he scrambled up on to the table, and presently, after a few lasso-like flings of it, he had run the rope and made it fast over one of a few large hooks that curved down from the ceiling, hooks once used, as Jacobs had told him, to hang up hams on. His mouth was set, his face intent; his soldier grandfather's lower lip drawn in under the upper. The more active he was the more completely he became master of the ceremonies, the woman only an insignificant accomplice, as stupid as she was irresponsible. Even while she helped him drag out the body from the cupboard on to the flat arena of oilcloth, she continued to cry and snivel, as if *that* would be of any help. But a keen impassive will compelled her obedience. She followed the boy's every nod.

And presently she almost forgot the horror of the task, and found a partial oblivion in the intensity of it, though the boy was displeased by her maunderings. They were merely a doleful refrain to his troublesome grisly work. But he uttered no open reproof—not even when she buried her face in the baize apron and embraced the knees of the dead man. Only once she made any complaint against the limp heedless hung-up creature. 'If only,' she assured her young accomplice, 'if only he hadn't gone and *said* as how I wasn't the first. I ask you! As if I didn't know it.' But to this he paid no attention.

And now, at last, he drew back to view his handiwork. This he did with an inscrutable face, a face flattered at his own extraordinary ingenuity, a young face, almost angelic in its rapt gaslit look and yet one, maybe, of unsophisticated infamy. The dwarfish body seemed to be dangling naturally enough from its hook in the ceiling, its heels just free of the chair. And it did to some extent resemble the half-sinister, half-jocular cut that adorned his *Calendar*. Yet somehow he wasn't perfectly satisfied. Somehow the consummation was as[Pg 71] yet incomplete. Some one thing was wanting, some blemish spoiled the effect and robbed it of unity. What? He stood hunting for it without success.

He followed the woman into the passage. She walked unsteadily, swaying bulkily to and fro, now and again violently colliding with the wall. 'Oh, it was crule, crule,' she was muttering.

After her stalked the boy, deep in thought. When she stopped, he stopped; when once more she set forward, as patiently he too set forward with her. Which of them was led, and which leader, it would be difficult to say. This dogged search after the one thing wanting continued to perplex and evade him. He decided that it was no good trying. It must be looked to when the woman was gone; when he was alone.

'I think you had better go now,' he said. 'He'll be coming home soon—my father, I mean, and.... It's just ten to twelve by Jacobs's clock.' The words conjured up in his mind a vision of his handsome dressed-up stepmother, standing there in the kitchen doorway half-hysterical before her swaying manservant. It faintly, and even a little sadly, tickled his fancy.

He opened the front door. It was still raining, and the smell of the damp earth and ivy leaves came washing into the house. The woman squatted down on the doorstep. 'Where shall I go?' she said. 'Where shall I go? What's the use? There ain't *no*where.' The boy scowled at the dripping trees. The house was surrounded by night—empty and silent but for the smothering soft small whisper of the rain, and the flat *drip, drip*of the drops from the porch.

'What's the use? There ain't *no*where,' again wailed his poor bedraggled confederate. He scrutinized her scornfully from under his tilted yachting cap. 'Wait a minute,' he said. He raced at full speed up the three dark flights of stairs to his bedroom. The book, the mouse-nibbled pie-crust were tossed[Pg 72] on to the hearthrug and a florin was dug out of the gritty soot. Down he came again pell-mell.

Like a cat venturing into a busy street, the woman now stood peering out from the last of the three shallow crescent-shaped stone steps under the porch. 'I've brought you this,' he said superciliously.

'Thank you, sir,' said the woman.

She paused yet again, looking at him, in an attitude now familiar to the boy—the fingers of her knuckled left hand, with its thick brassy wedding-ring, pressed closely against mouth and cheek. He wondered for a moment what she was thinking about, and he was still wondering when she stepped finally off out into the rain.

A shrill shout followed her. 'I say! Mind that ditch there in the road!' But the only result of this was to bring the woman back again; she knelt and clasped him tightly to her bosom.

'I don't know why or anything. Oh, my lamb, my lamb, I didn't mean to do it and now I haven't got anywhere to go.' She bent low and hid her distorted miserable face on his shoulder. 'Oh, oh, I miss him so. The Lord God keep you safe! You've been very kind to me. But....'

She released him, and waddled out once more under the flat-spread branches of the cedar tree, while the boy rubbed the smarting tears from his neck. He shut the door indignantly. This tame reaction was mawkish and silly. Then he paused, uncertain what to do next. And suddenly memory rendered up the one thing wanting—the master-touch.

Why, of course, of course! Jacobs must have kicked a chair down. You couldn't hang yourself like that without a drop. It was impossible. The boy's valour, after all, was only a little shaken by the embrace. Into the kitchen he walked victorious. The gas was still singing, as it had sung all the evening, shedding its dismal flaring light on wall and clock and blind and ceiling and wide array of glossy crockery. The puckered clay-coloured face looked stupidly at him with bolting, dull, dull-[Pg 73]lidded eyes. What was now to be done must be done quickly. He ducked sharply and upset the chair—a little too sharply, for a light spring-side boot had tapped him on the cheek. He leapt back, hot and panting. The effect was masterly. It was a triumph. And yet.... He stared, with clenched fists, and whispered over his shoulder to a now absent accomplice. But no, he was alone! Only Jacobs was there—with that drowsy slit of eye—tremulously dangling. And as if, even for him, as if even for *his* clear bold young spirit, this last repulsive spectacle, that last minute assault of a helpless enemy, overwhelming some secret stronghold in his mind, had suddenly proved intolerable, his energy, enterprise, courage wilted within him. The whisper in the dark outside of the uncertain wind, the soft bubbling whistle of the gas, the thousand and one minute dumb things around him in the familiar kitchen—nothing had changed. Yet *now* every object had become suddenly real, stark, menacing, and hostile. Panic seized him. He ran out to the front door and bawled into the dark after the woman.

No answer came. The rain was falling softly on the sodden turf; and here, beneath the porch, in large ponderous drops. The widespread palms of the cedar tree under the clouded midnight lay prone and motionless. The whole world was gone out—black. Nothing, nothing; he was alone.

He ran back again into the house—as if he had been awakened out of a dream—leaving the door agape behind him, and whimpering 'Mother!' Then louder—louder. And all the blind things of the house took wooden voices. So up and down this white-shirted raider ran, his clumsy poniard clapping against sudden corners, his tongue calling in vain, and at last—as he went scuttling upstairs at sound of cab-horse and wheels upon the sodden gravel—falling dumb for very terror of its own noise.

SEATON'S AUNT

I had heard rumours of Seaton's aunt long before I actually encountered her. Seaton, in the hush of confidence, or at any little show of toleration on our part, would remark, 'My aunt', or 'My old aunt, you know', as if his relative might be a kind of cement to an *entente cordiale*.

He had an unusual quantity of pocket-money; or, at any rate, it was bestowed on him in unusually large amounts; and he spent it freely, though none of us would have described him as an 'awfully generous chap'. 'Hullo, Seaton,' we would say, 'the old Begum?' At the beginning of term, too, he used to bring back surprising and exotic dainties in a box with a trick padlock that accompanied him from his first appearance at Gummidge's in a billycock hat to the rather abrupt conclusion of his schooldays.

From a boy's point of view he looked distastefully foreign with his yellowish skin, slow chocolate-coloured eyes, and lean weak figure. Merely for his looks he was treated by most of us true-blue Englishmen with condescension, hostility, or contempt. We used to call him 'Pongo', but without any much better excuse for the nickname than his skin. He was, that is, in one sense of the term what he assuredly was not in the other sense, a sport.

Seaton and I, as I may say, were never in any sense intimate[Pg 75] at school; our orbits only intersected in class. I kept deliberately aloof from him. I felt vaguely he was a sneak, and remained quite unmollified by advances on his side, which, in a boy's barbarous fashion, unless it suited me to be magnanimous, I haughtily ignored.

We were both of us quick-footed, and at Prisoner's Base used occasionally to hide together. And so I best remember Seaton—his narrow watchful face in the dusk of a summer evening; his peculiar crouch, and his inarticulate whisperings and mumblings. Otherwise he played all games slackly and limply; used to stand and feed at his locker with a crony or two until his 'tuck' gave out; or waste his money on some outlandish fancy or other. He bought, for instance, a silver bangle, which he wore above his left elbow, until some of the fellows showed their masterly contempt of the practice by dropping it nearly red-hot down his neck.

It needed, therefore, a rather peculiar taste, and a rather rare kind of schoolboy courage and indifference to criticism, to be much associated with him. And I had neither the taste nor, probably, the courage. None the less, he did make advances, and on one memorable occasion went to the length of bestowing on me a whole pot of some outlandish mulberry-coloured jelly that had been duplicated in his term's supplies. In the exuberance of my gratitude I promised to spend the next half-term holiday with him at his aunt's house.

I had clean forgotten my promise when, two or three days before the holiday, he came up and triumphantly reminded me of it.

'Well, to tell you the honest truth, Seaton, old chap——' I began graciously: but he cut me short.

'My aunt expects you,' he said; 'she is very glad you are coming. She's sure to be quite decent to *you*, Withers.'

I looked at him in sheer astonishment; the emphasis was so uncalled for. It seemed to suggest an aunt not hitherto hinted[Pg 76] at, and a friendly feeling on Seaton's side that was far more disconcerting than welcome.

We reached his aunt's house partly by train, partly by a lift in an empty farm-cart, and partly by walking. It was a whole-day holiday, and we were to sleep the night; he lent me extraordinary night-gear, I remember. The village street was unusually wide, and was fed from a green by two converging roads, with an inn, and a high green sign at the corner. About a hundred yards down the street was a chemist's shop—a Mr. Tanner's. We descended the two steps into his dusky and odorous interior to buy, I remember, some rat poison. A little beyond the chemist's was the forge. You then walked along a very narrow path, under a fairly high wall, nodding here and there with weeds and tufts of grass, and so came to the iron garden-gates, and saw the high flat house behind its huge sycamore. A coach-house stood on the left of the house, and on the right a gate led into a kind of rambling orchard. The lawn lay away over to the left again, and at the bottom (for the whole garden sloped gently to a sluggish and rushy pond-like stream) was a meadow.

We arrived at noon, and entered the gates out of the hot dust beneath the glitter of the dark-curtained windows. Seaton led me at once through the little garden-gate to show me his tadpole pond, swarming with what (being myself not in the least interested in low life) seemed to me the most horrible creatures—of all shapes, consistencies, and sizes, but with which Seaton was obviously on the most intimate of terms. I can see his absorbed face now as, squatting on his heels he fished the slimy things out in his sallow palms. Wearying at last of these pets, we loitered about awhile in an aimless fashion. Seaton seemed to be listening, or at any rate waiting, for something to happen or for someone to come. But nothing did happen and no one came.

That was just like Seaton. Anyhow, the first view I got of[Pg 77] his aunt was when, at the summons of a distant gong, we turned from the garden, very hungry and thirsty, to go into luncheon. We were approaching the house, when Seaton suddenly came to a

standstill. Indeed, I have always had the impression that he plucked at my sleeve. Something, at least, seemed to catch me back, as it were, as he cried, 'Look out, there she is!'

She was standing at an upper window which opened wide on a hinge, and at first sight she looked an excessively tall and overwhelming figure. This, however, was mainly because the window reached all but to the floor of her bedroom. She was in reality rather an undersized woman, in spite of her long face and big head. She must have stood, I think, unusually still, with eyes fixed on us, though this impression may be due to Seaton's sudden warning and to my consciousness of the cautious and subdued air that had fallen on him at sight of her. I know that without the least reason in the world I felt a kind of guiltiness, as if I had been 'caught'. There was a silvery star pattern sprinkled on her black silk dress, and even from the ground I could see the immense coils of her hair and the rings on her left hand which was held fingering the small jet buttons of her bodice. She watched our united advance without stirring, until, imperceptibly, her eyes raised and lost themselves in the distance, so that it was out of an assumed reverie that she appeared suddenly to awaken to our presence beneath her when we drew close to the house.

'So this is your friend, Mr. Smithers, I suppose?' she said, bobbing to me.

'Withers, aunt,' said Seaton.

'It's much the same,' she said, with eyes fixed on me. 'Come in, Mr. Withers, and bring him along with you.'

She continued to gaze at me—at least, I think she did so. I know that the fixity of her scrutiny and her ironical 'Mr.' made me feel peculiarly uncomfortable. None the less she was extremely kind and attentive to me, though, no doubt, her[Pg 78] kindness and attention showed up more vividly against her complete neglect of Seaton. Only one remark that I have any recollection of she made to him: 'When I look on my nephew, Mr. Smithers, I realize that dust we are, and dust shall become. You are hot, dirty, and incorrigible, Arthur.'

She sat at the head of the table, Seaton at the foot, and I, before a wide waste of damask tablecloth, between them. It was an old and rather close dining-room, with windows thrown wide to the green garden and a wonderful cascade of fading roses. Miss Seaton's great chair faced this window, so that its rose-reflected light shone full on her yellowish face, and on just such chocolate eyes as my schoolfellow's, except that hers were more than half-covered by unusually long and heavy lids.

There she sat, steadily eating, with those sluggish eyes fixed for the most part on my face; above them stood the deep-lined fork between her eyebrows; and above that the wide expanse of a remarkable brow beneath its strange steep bank of hair. The lunch

was copious, and consisted, I remember, of all such dishes as are generally considered too rich and too good for the schoolboy digestion—lobster mayonnaise, cold game sausages, an immense veal and ham pie farced with eggs, truffles, and numberless delicious flavours; besides kickshaws, creams and sweetmeats. We even had a wine, a half-glass of old darkish sherry each.

Miss Seaton enjoyed and indulged an enormous appetite. Her example and a natural schoolboy voracity soon overcame my nervousness of her, even to the extent of allowing me to enjoy to the best of my bent so rare a spread. Seaton was singularly modest; the greater part of his meal consisted of almonds and raisins, which he nibbled surreptitiously and as if he found difficulty in swallowing them.

I don't mean that Miss Seaton 'conversed' with me. She merely scattered trenchant remarks and now and then twinkled a baited question over my head. But her face was like a dense[Pg 79] and involved accompaniment to her talk. She presently dropped the 'Mr.', to my intense relief, and called me now Withers, or Wither, now Smithers, and even once towards the close of the meal distinctly Johnson, though how on earth my name suggested it, or whose face mine had reanimated in memory, I cannot conceive.

'And is Arthur a good boy at school, Mr. Wither?' was one of her many questions. 'Does he please his masters? Is he first in his class? What does the reverend Dr. Gummidge think of him, eh?'

I knew she was jeering at him, but her face was adamant against the least flicker of sarcasm or facetiousness. I gazed fixedly at a blushing crescent of lobster.

'I think you're eighth, aren't you, Seaton?'

Seaton moved his small pupils towards his aunt. But she continued to gaze with a kind of concentrated detachment at me.

'Arthur will never make a brilliant scholar, I fear,' she said, lifting a dexterously burdened fork to her wide mouth....

After luncheon she preceded me up to my bedroom. It was a jolly little bedroom, with a brass fender and rugs and a polished floor, on which it was possible, I afterwards found, to play 'snow-shoes'. Over the washstand was a little black-framed water-colour drawing, depicting a large eye with an extremely fish-like intensity in the spark of light on the dark pupil; and in 'illuminated' lettering beneath was printed very minutely, 'Thou God Seest ME', followed by a long looped monogram, 'S.S.', in the corner. The other pictures were all of the sea: brigs on blue water; a schooner overtopping chalk cliffs; a rocky island of prodigious steepness, with two tiny sailors dragging a monstrous boat up a shelf of beach.

'This is the room, Withers, my poor dear brother William died in when a boy. Admire the view!'

I looked out of the window across the tree-tops. It was a day hot with sunshine over the green fields, and the cattle[Pg 80] were standing swishing their tails in the shallow water. But the view at the moment was no doubt made more vividly impressive by the apprehension that she would presently enquire after my luggage, and I had brought not even a toothbrush. I need have had no fear. Hers was not that highly civilized type of mind that is stuffed with sharp, material details. Nor could her ample presence be described as in the least motherly.

'I would never consent to question a schoolfellow behind my nephew's back,' she said, standing in the middle of the room, 'but tell me, Smithers, why is Arthur so unpopular? You, I understand, are his only close friend.' She stood in a dazzle of sun, and out of it her eyes regarded me with such leaden penetration beneath their thick lids that I doubt if my face concealed the least thought from her. 'But there, there,' she added very suavely, stooping her head a little, 'don't trouble to answer me. I never extort an answer. Boys are queer fish. Brains might perhaps have suggested his washing his hands before luncheon; but—not my choice, Smithers. God forbid! And now, perhaps, you would like to go into the garden again. I cannot actually see from here, but I should not be surprised if Arthur is now skulking behind that hedge.'

He was. I saw his head come out and take a rapid glance at the windows.

'Join him, Mr. Smithers; we shall meet again, I hope, at the tea-table. The afternoon I spend in retirement.'

Whether or not, Seaton and I had not been long engaged with the aid of two green switches in riding round and round a lumbering old grey horse we found in the meadow, before a rather bunched-up figure appeared, walking along the field-path on the other side of the water, with a magenta parasol studiously lowered in our direction throughout her slow progress, as if that were the magnetic needle and we the fixed Pole. Seaton at once lost all nerve and interest. At the next lurch of the old mare's heels he toppled over into the grass, and I slid off the sleek broad back to join him where he stood,[Pg 81] rubbing his shoulder and sourly watching the rather pompous figure till it was out of sight.

'Was that your aunt, Seaton?' I enquired; but not till then.

He nodded.

'Why didn't she take any notice of us, then?'

'She never does.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, she knows all right, without; that's the dam awful part of it.' Seaton was one of the very few fellows at Gummidge's who had the ostentation to use bad language. He had suffered for it too. But it wasn't, I think, bravado. I believe he really felt certain things more intensely than most of the other fellows, and they were generally things that fortunate and average people do not feel at all—the peculiar quality, for instance, of the British schoolboy's imagination.

'I tell you, Withers,' he went on moodily, slinking across the meadow with his hands covered up in his pockets, 'she sees everything. And what she doesn't see she knows without.'

'But how?' I said, not because I was much interested, but because the afternoon was so hot and tiresome and purposeless, and it seemed more of a bore to remain silent. Seaton turned gloomily and spoke in a very low voice.

'Don't appear to be talking of her, if you wouldn't mind. It's—because she's in league with the Devil.' He nodded his head and stooped to pick up a round flat pebble. 'I tell you,' he said, still stooping, 'you fellows don't realize what it is. I know I'm a bit close and all that. But so would you be if you had that old hag listening to every thought you think.'

I looked at him, then turned and surveyed one by one the windows of the house.

'Where's your *pater*?' I said awkwardly.

'Dead, ages and ages ago, and my mother too. She's not my aunt even by rights.'

'What is she, then?'

'I mean she's not my mother's sister, because my grand[Pg 82]mother married twice; and she's one of the first lot. I don't know what you call her, but anyhow she's not my real aunt.'

'She gives you plenty of pocket-money.'

Seaton looked steadfastly at me out of his flat eyes. 'She can't give me what's mine. When I come of age half of the whole lot will be mine; and what's more'—he turned his back on the house—'I'll make her hand over every blessed shilling of it.'

I put my hands in my pockets and stared at Seaton; 'Is it much?'

He nodded.

'Who told you?' He got suddenly very angry; a darkish red came into his cheeks, his eyes glistened, but he made no answer, and we loitered listlessly about the garden until it was time for tea....

Seaton's aunt was wearing an extraordinary kind of lace jacket when we sidled sheepishly into the drawing-room together. She greeted me with a heavy and protracted smile, and bade me bring a chair close to the little table.

'I hope Arthur has made you feel at home,' she said as she handed me my cup in her crooked hand. 'He don't talk much to me; but then I'm an old woman. You must come again, Wither, and draw him out of his shell. You old snail!' She wagged her head at Seaton, who sat munching cake and watching her intently.

'And we must correspond, perhaps.' She nearly shut her eyes at me. 'You must write and tell me everything behind the creature's back.' I confess I found her rather disquieting company. The evening drew on. Lamps were brought in by a man with a nondescript face and very quiet footsteps. Seaton was told to bring out the chess-men. And we played a game, she and I, with her big chin thrust over the board at every move as she gloated over the pieces and occasionally croaked 'Check!'—after which she would sit back inscrutably staring at me. But the game was never finished. She simply hemmed[Pg 83] me in with a gathering cloud of pieces that held me impotent, and yet one and all refused to administer to my poor flustered old king a merciful *coup de grâce*.

'There,' she said, as the clock struck ten—'a drawn game, Withers. We are very evenly matched. A very creditable defence, Withers. You know your room. There's supper on a tray in the dining-room. Don't let the creature over-eat himself. The gong will sound three-quarters of an hour *before* a punctual breakfast.' She held out her cheek to Seaton, and he kissed it with obvious perfunctoriness. With me she shook hands.

'An excellent game,' she said cordially, 'but my memory is poor, and'—she swept the pieces helter-skelter into the box—'the result will never be known.' She raised her great head far back. 'Eh?'

It was a kind of challenge, and I could only murmur: 'Oh I was absolutely in a hole, you know!' when she burst out laughing and waved us both out of the room.

Seaton and I stood and ate our supper, with one candlestick to light us, in a corner of the dining-room. 'Well, and how would you like it?' he said very softly, after cautiously poking his head round the doorway.

'Like what?'

'Being spied on—every blessed thing you do and think?'

'I shouldn't like it at all,' I said, 'if she does.'

'And yet you let her smash you up at chess!'

'I didn't let her!' I said indignantly.

'Well, you funked it, then.'

'And I didn't funk it either,' I said; 'she's so jolly clever with her knights.' Seaton stared at the candle. 'Knights,' he said slowly. 'You wait, that's all.' And we went upstairs to bed.

I had not been long in bed, I think, when I was cautiously awakened by a touch on my shoulder. And there was Seaton's face in the candlelight—and his eyes looking into mine.

'What's up?' I said, lurching on to my elbow.[Pg 84]

'*Ssh!* Don't scurry,' he whispered. 'She'll hear. I'm sorry for waking you, but I didn't think you'd be asleep so soon.'

'Why, what's the time, then?' Seaton wore, what was then rather unusual, a night-suit, and he hauled his big silver watch out of the pocket in his jacket.

'It's a quarter to twelve. I never get to sleep before twelve—not here.'

'What do you do, then?'

'Oh, I read: and listen.'

'Listen?'

Seaton stared into his candle-flame as if he were listening even then. 'You can't guess what it is. All you read in ghost stories, that's all rot. You can't see much, Withers, but you know all the same.'

'Know what?'

'Why, that they're there.'

'Who's there?' I asked fretfully, glancing at the door.

'Why, in the house. It swarms with 'em. Just you stand still and listen outside my bedroom door in the middle of the night. I have, dozens of times; they're all over the place.'

'Look here, Seaton,' I said, 'you asked me to come here, and I didn't mind chucking up a leave just to oblige you and because I'd promised; but don't get talking a lot of rot, that's all, or you'll know the difference when we get back.'

'Don't fret,' he said coldly, turning away. 'I shan't be at school long. And what's more, you're here now, and there isn't anybody else to talk to. I'll chance the other.'

'Look here, Seaton,' I said, 'you may think you're going to scare me with a lot of stuff about voices and all that. But I'll just thank you to clear out; and you may please yourself about pottering about all night.'

He made no answer; he was standing by the dressing-table looking across his candle into the looking-glass; he turned and stared slowly round the walls.

'Even this room's nothing more than a coffin. I suppose she[Pg 85] told you—"It's all exactly the same as when my brother William died"—trust her for that! And good luck to him, say I. Look at that.' He raised his candle close to the little water-colour I have mentioned. 'There's hundreds of eyes like that in this house; and even if God does see you, He takes precious good care you don't see Him. And it's just the same with them. I tell you what, Withers, I'm getting sick of all this. I shan't stand it much longer.'

The house was silent within and without, and even in the yellowish radiance of the candle a faint silver showed through the open window on my blind. I slipped off the bedclothes, wide awake, and sat irresolute on the bedside.

'I know you're only guying me,' I said angrily, 'but why is the house full of—what you say? Why do you hear—what you *do* hear? Tell me that, you silly fool!'

Seaton sat down on a chair and rested his candlestick on his knee. He blinked at me calmly. 'She brings them,' he said, with lifted eyebrows.

'Who? Your aunt?'

He nodded.

'How?'

'I told you,' he answered pettishly. 'She's in league. You don't know. She as good as killed my mother; I know that. But it's not only her by a long chalk. She just sucks you dry. I know. And that's what she'll do for me; because I'm like her—like my mother, I mean. She simply hates to see me alive. I wouldn't be like that old she-wolf for a million pounds. And so'—he broke off, with a comprehensive wave of his candlestick—'they're always here. Ah, my boy, wait till she's dead! She'll hear something then, I can tell you. It's all very well now, but wait till then! I wouldn't be in her shoes when she has to clear out—for something. Don't you go and believe I

care for ghosts, or whatever you like to call them. We're all in the same box. We're all under her thumb.'

He was looking almost nonchalantly at the ceiling at the[Pg 86] moment, when I saw his face change, saw his eyes suddenly drop like shot birds and fix themselves on the cranny of the door he had left just ajar. Even from where I sat I could see his cheek change colour; it went greenish. He crouched without stirring, like an animal. And I, scarcely daring to breathe, sat with creeping skin, sourly watching him. His hands relaxed, and he gave a kind of sigh.

'Was *that* one?' I whispered, with a timid show of jauntiness. He looked round, opened his mouth, and nodded. 'What?' I said. He jerked his thumb with meaningful eyes, and I knew that he meant that his aunt had been there listening at our door cranny.

'Look here, Seaton,' I said once more, wriggling to my feet. 'You may think I'm a jolly noodle; just as you please. But your aunt has been civil to me and all that, and I don't believe a word you say about her, that's all, and never did. Every fellow's a bit off his pluck at night, and you may think it a fine sport to try your rubbish on me. I heard your aunt come upstairs before I fell asleep. And I'll bet you a level tanner she's in bed now. What's more, you can keep your blessed ghosts to yourself. It's a guilty conscience, I should think.'

Seaton looked at me intently, without answering for a moment. 'I'm not a liar, Withers; but I'm not going to quarrel either. You're the only chap I care a button for; or, at any rate, you're the only chap that's ever come here; and it's something to tell a fellow what you feel. I don't care a fig for fifty thousand ghosts, although I swear on my solemn oath that I know they're here. But she'—he turned deliberately—'you laid a tanner she's in bed, Withers; well, I know different. She's never in bed much of the night, and I'll prove it, too, just to show you I'm not such a nolly as you think I am. Come on!'

'Come on where?'

'Why, to see.'

I hesitated. He opened a large cupboard and took out a[Pg 87] small dark dressing-gown and a kind of shawl-jacket. He threw the jacket on the bed and put on the gown. His dusky face was colourless, and I could see by the way he fumbled at the sleeves he was shivering. But it was no good showing the white feather now. So I threw the tasselled shawl over my shoulders and, leaving our candle brightly burning on the chair, we went out together and stood in the corridor.

'Now then, listen!' Seaton whispered.

We stood leaning over the staircase. It was like leaning over a well, so still and chill the air was all around us. But presently, as I suppose happens in most old houses, began to echo and answer in my ears a medley of infinite small stirrings and whisperings. Now out of the distance an old timber would relax its fibres, or a scurry die away behind the perishing wainscot. But amid and behind such sounds as these I seemed to begin to be conscious, as it were, of the lightest of footfalls, sounds as faint as the vanishing remembrance of voices in a dream. Seaton was all in obscurity except his face; out of that his eyes gleamed darkly, watching me.

'You'd hear, too, in time, my fine soldier,' he muttered. 'Come on!'

He descended the stairs, slipping his lean fingers lightly along the balusters. He turned to the right at the loop, and I followed him barefooted along a thickly carpeted corridor. At the end stood a door ajar. And from here we very stealthily and in complete blackness ascended five narrow stairs. Seaton, with immense caution, slowly pushed open a door, and we stood together, looking into a great pool of duskiness, out of which, lit by the feeble clearness of a night-light, rose a vast bed. A heap of clothes lay on the floor; beside them two slippers dozed, with noses each to each, a foot or two apart. Somewhere a little clock ticked huskily. There was a close smell; lavender and eau de Cologne, mingled with the fragrance of ancient sachets, soap, and drugs. Yet it was a scent even more peculiarly compounded than that.[Pg 88]

And the bed! I stared warily in; it was mounded gigantically, and it was empty.

Seaton turned a vague pale face, all shadows: 'What did I say?' he muttered. 'Who's—who's the fool now, I say? How are we going to get back without meeting her, I say? Answer me that! Oh, I wish to God you hadn't come here, Withers.'

He stood audibly shivering in his skimpy gown, and could hardly speak for his teeth chattering. And very distinctly, in the hush that followed his whisper, I heard approaching a faint unhurried voluminous rustle. Seaton clutched my arm, dragged me to the right across the room to a large cupboard, and drew the door close to on us. And, presently, as with bursting lungs I peeped out into the long, low, curtained bedroom, waddled in that wonderful great head and body. I can see her now, all patched and lined with shadow, her tied-up hair (she must have had enormous quantities of it for so old a woman), her heavy lids above those flat, slow, vigilant eyes. She just passed across my ken in the vague dusk; but the bed was out of sight.

We waited on and on, listening to the clock's muffled ticking. Not the ghost of a sound rose up from the great bed. Either she lay archly listening or slept a sleep serener than an infant's. And when, it seemed, we had been hours in hiding and were cramped, chilled, and half suffocated, we crept out on all fours, with terror knocking at our ribs, and so down the five narrow stairs and back to the little candle-lit blue-and-gold bedroom.

Once there, Seaton gave in. He sat livid on a chair with closed eyes.

'Here,' I said, shaking his arm, 'I'm going to bed; I've had enough of this foolery; I'm going to bed.' His lips quivered, but he made no answer. I poured out some water into my basin and, with that cold pictured azure eye fixed on us, be-spattered Seaton's sallow face and forehead and dabbled his hair. He presently sighed and opened fish-like eyes.[Pg 89]

'Come on!' I said. 'Don't get shamming, there's a good chap. Get on my back, if you like, and I'll carry you into your bedroom.'

He waved me away and stood up. So, with my candle in one hand, I took him under the arm and walked him along according to his direction down the corridor. His was a much dingier room than mine, and littered with boxes, paper, cages, and clothes. I huddled him into bed and turned to go. And suddenly, I can hardly explain it now, a kind of cold and deadly terror swept over me. I almost ran out of the room, with eyes fixed rigidly in front of me, blew out my candle, and buried my head under the bedclothes.

When I awoke, roused not by a gong, but by a long-continued tapping at my door, sunlight was raying in on cornice and bedpost, and birds were singing in the garden. I got up, ashamed of the night's folly, dressed quickly, and went downstairs. The breakfast room was sweet with flowers and fruit and honey. Seaton's aunt was standing in the garden beside the open french window, feeding a great flutter of birds. I watched her for a moment, unseen. Her face was set in a deep reverie beneath the shadow of a big loose sun-hat. It was deeply lined, crooked, and, in a way I can't describe, fixedly vacant and strange. I coughed politely, and she turned with a prodigious smiling grimace to ask how I had slept. And in that mysterious fashion by which we learn each other's secret thoughts without a syllable said, I knew that she had followed every word and movement of the night before, and was triumphing over my affected innocence and ridiculing my friendly and too easy advances.

We returned to school, Seaton and I, lavishly laden, and by rail all the way. I made no reference to the obscure talk we had had, and resolutely refused to meet his eyes or to take up the hints he let fall. I was relieved—and yet I was sorry—to be going back, and strode on as fast as I could from the station,[Pg 90] with Seaton almost trotting at my heels. But he insisted on buying more fruit and sweets—my share of which I accepted with a very bad grace. It was uncomfortably like a bribe; and, after all, I had no quarrel with his rum old aunt, and hadn't really believed half the stuff he had told me.

I saw as little of him as I could after that. He never referred to our visit or resumed his confidences, though in class I would sometimes catch his eye fixed on mine, full of a mute understanding, which I easily affected not to understand. He left Gummidge's, as I have said, rather abruptly, though I never heard of anything to his discredit. And I did not see him or have any news of him again till by chance we met one summer afternoon in the Strand.

He was dressed rather oddly in a coat too large for him and a bright silky tie. But we instantly recognized one another under the awning of a cheap jeweller's shop. He immediately attached himself to me and dragged me off, not too cheerfully, to lunch with him at an Italian restaurant near by. He chattered about our old school, which he remembered only with dislike and disgust; told me cold-bloodedly of the disastrous fate of one or two of the older fellows who had been among his chief tormentors; insisted on an expensive wine and the whole gamut of the foreign menu; and finally informed me, with a good deal of niggling, that he had come up to town to buy an engagement-ring.

And of course: 'How is your aunt?' I enquired at last.

He seemed to have been awaiting the question. It fell like a stone into a deep pool, so many expressions flitted across his long, sad, sallow, un-English face.

'She's aged a good deal,' he said softly, and broke off.

'She's been very decent,' he continued presently after, and paused again. 'In a way.' He eyed me fleetingly. 'I dare say you heard that—she—that is, that we—had lost a good deal of money.'

'No,' I said.[Pg 91]

'Oh, yes!' said Seaton, and paused again.

And somehow, poor fellow, I knew in the clink and clatter of glass and voices that he had lied to me; that he did not possess, and never had possessed, a penny beyond what his aunt had squandered on his too ample allowance of pocket-money.

'And the ghosts?' I enquired quizzically.

He grew instantly solemn, and, though it may have been my fancy, slightly yellowed. But 'You are making game of me, Withers,' was all he said.

He asked for my address, and I rather reluctantly gave him my card.

'Look here, Withers,' he said, as we stood together in the sunlight on the kerb, saying good-bye, 'here I am, and—and it's all very well. I'm not perhaps as fanciful as I was. But you are practically the only friend I have on earth—except Alice.... And there—to

make a clean breast of it, I'm not sure that my aunt cares much about my getting married. She doesn't say so, of course. You know her well enough for that.' He looked sidelong at the rattling gaudy traffic.

'What I was going to say is this: Would you mind coming down? You needn't stay the night unless you please, though, of course, you know you would be awfully welcome. But I should like you to meet my—to meet Alice; and then, perhaps, you might tell me your honest opinion of—of the other too.'

I vaguely demurred. He pressed me. And we parted with a half promise that I would come. He waved his ball-topped cane at me and ran off in his long jacket after a bus.

A letter arrived soon after, in his small weak handwriting, giving me full particulars regarding route and trains. And without the least curiosity, even perhaps with some little annoyance that chance should have thrown us together again, I accepted his invitation and arrived one hazy midday at his out-of-the-way station to find him sitting on a low seat under a clump of 'double' hollyhocks, awaiting me.[Pg 92]

He looked preoccupied and singularly listless; but seemed, none the less, to be pleased to see me.

We walked up the village street, past the little dingy apothecary's and the empty forge, and, as on my first visit, skirted the house together, and, instead of entering by the front door, made our way down the green path into the garden at the back. A pale haze of cloud muffled the sun; the garden lay in a grey shimmer—its old trees, its snap-dragoned faintly glittering walls. But now there was an air of slovenliness where before all had been neat and methodical. In a patch of shallowly dug soil stood a worn-down spade leaning against a tree. There was an old decayed wheelbarrow. The roses had run to leaf and briar; the fruit-trees were unpruned. The goddess of neglect had made it her secret resort.

'You ain't much of a gardener, Seaton,' I said at last, with a sigh of relief.

'I think, do you know, I like it best like this,' said Seaton. 'We haven't any man now, of course. Can't afford it.' He stood staring at his little dark oblong of freshly turned earth. 'And it always seems to me,' he went on ruminatingly, 'that, after all, we are all nothing better than interlopers on the earth, disfiguring and staining wherever we go. It may sound shocking blasphemy to say so; but then it's different here, you see. We are further away.'

'To tell you the truth, Seaton, I *don't* quite see,' I said; 'but it isn't a new philosophy, is it? Anyhow, it's a precious beastly one.'

'It's only what I think,' he replied, with all his odd old stubborn meekness. 'And one thinks as one *is*.'

We wandered on together, talking little, and still with that expression of uneasy vigilance on Seaton's face. He pulled out his watch as we stood gazing idly over the green meadows and the dark motionless bulrushes.

'I think, perhaps, it's nearly time for lunch,' he said. 'Would you like to come in?'[Pg 93]

We turned and walked slowly towards the house, across whose windows I confess my own eyes, too, went restlessly meandering in search of its rather disconcerting inmate. There was a pathetic look of bedraggledness, of want of means and care, rust and overgrowth and faded paint. Seaton's aunt, a little to my relief, did not share our meal. So he carved the cold meat, and dispatched a heaped-up plate by an elderly servant for his aunt's private consumption. We talked little and in half-suppressed tones, and sipped some Madeira which Seaton after listening for a moment or two fetched out of the great mahogany sideboard.

I played him a dull and effortless game of chess, yawning between the moves he himself made almost at haphazard, and with attention elsewhere engaged. Towards five o'clock came the sound of a distant ring, and Seaton jumped up, overturning the board, and so ended a game that else might have fatuously continued to this day. He effusively excused himself, and after some little while returned with a slim, dark, pale-faced girl of about nineteen, in a white gown and hat, to whom I was presented with some little nervousness as his 'dear old friend and schoolfellow'.

We talked on in the golden afternoon light, still, as it seemed to me, and even in spite of our efforts to be lively and gay, in a half-suppressed, lack-lustre fashion. We all seemed, if it were not my fancy, to be expectant, to be almost anxiously awaiting an arrival, the appearance of someone whose image filled our collective consciousness. Seaton talked least of all, and in a restless interjectory way, as he continually fidgeted from chair to chair. At last he proposed a stroll in the garden before the sun should have quite gone down.

Alice walked between us. Her hair and eyes were conspicuously dark against the whiteness of her gown. She carried herself not ungracefully, and yet with peculiarly little movement of her arms and body, and answered us both without turning her head. There was a curious provocative reserve in that impas[Pg 94]sive melancholy face. It seemed to be haunted by some tragic influence of which she herself was unaware.

And yet somehow I knew—I believe we all knew—that this walk, this discussion of their future plans was a futility. I had nothing to base such scepticism on, except only a vague sense of oppression, a foreboding consciousness of some inert invincible power in the background, to whom optimistic plans and love-making and youth are as chaff and thistledown. We came back, silent, in the last light. Seaton's aunt was there—under an old brass lamp. Her hair was as barbarously massed and curled as

ever. Her eyelids, I think, hung even a little heavier in age over their slow-moving inscrutable pupils. We filed in softly out of the evening, and I made my bow.

'In this short interval, Mr. Withers,' she remarked amiably, 'you have put off youth, put on the man. Dear me, how sad it is to see the young days vanishing! Sit down. My nephew tells me you met by chance—or act of Providence, shall we call it?—and in my beloved Strand! You, I understand, are to be best man—yes, best man! Or am I divulging secrets?' She surveyed Arthur and Alice with overwhelming graciousness. They sat apart on two low chairs and smiled in return.

'And Arthur—how do you think Arthur is looking?'

'I think he looks very much in need of a change,' I said.

'A change! Indeed?' She all but shut her eyes at me and with an exaggerated sentimentality shook her head. 'My dear Mr. Withers! Are we not *all* in need of a change in this fleeting, fleeting world?' She mused over the remark like a connoisseur. 'And you,' she continued, turning abruptly to Alice, 'I hope you pointed out to Mr. Withers all my pretty bits?'

'We only walked round the garden,' the girl replied; then, glancing at Seaton, added almost inaudibly, 'it's a very beautiful evening.'

'*Is* it?' said the old lady, starting up violently. 'Then on this very beautiful evening we will go in to supper. Mr. Withers, your arm; Arthur, bring your bride.'[Pg 95]

We were a queer quartet, I thought to myself, as I solemnly led the way into the faded, chilly dining-room, with this indefinable old creature leaning wooingly on my arm—the large flat bracelet on the yellow-laced wrist. She fumed a little, breathing heavily, but as if with an effort of the mind rather than of the body; for she had grown much stouter and yet little more proportionate. And to talk into that great white face, so close to mine, was a queer experience in the dim light of the corridor, and even in the twinkling crystal of the candles. She was naïve—appallingly naïve; she was crafty and challenging; she was even arch; and all these in the brief, rather puffy passage from one room to the other, with these two tongue-tied children bringing up the rear. The meal was tremendous. I have never seen such a monstrous salad. But the dishes were greasy and over-spiced, and were indifferently cooked. One thing only was quite unchanged—my hostess's appetite was as Gargantuan as ever. The heavy silver candelabra that lighted us stood before her high-backed chair. Seaton sat a little removed, his plate almost in darkness.

And throughout this prodigious meal his aunt talked, mainly to me, mainly *at* him, but with an occasional satirical sally at Alice and muttered explosions of reprimand to the servant. She had aged, and yet, if it be not nonsense to say so, seemed no older. I suppose to the Pyramids a decade is but as the rustling down of a handful of dust. And

she reminded me of some such unshakable prehistoricism. She certainly was an amazing talker—rapid, egregious, with a delivery that was perfectly overwhelming. As for Seaton—her flashes of silence were for him. On her enormous volubility would suddenly fall a hush: acid sarcasm would be left implied; and she would sit softly moving her great head, with eyes fixed full in a dreamy smile; but with her whole attention, one could see, slowly, joyously absorbing his mute discomfiture.

She confided in us her views on a theme vaguely occupying at the moment, I suppose, all our minds. 'We have barbarous[Pg 96] institutions, and so must put up, I suppose, with a never-ending procession of fools—of fools *ad infinitum*. Marriage, Mr. Withers, was instituted in the privacy of a garden; *sub rosa*, as it were. Civilization flaunts it in the glare of day. The dull marry the poor; the rich the effete; and so our New Jerusalem is peopled with naturals, plain and coloured, at either end. I detest folly; I detest still more (if I must be frank, dear Arthur) mere cleverness. Mankind has simply become a tailless host of uninstinctive animals. We should never have taken to Evolution, Mr. Withers. "Natural Selection!"—little gods and fishes!—the deaf for the dumb. We should have used our brains—intellectual pride, the ecclesiastics call it. And by brains I mean—what do I mean, Alice?—I mean, my dear child,' and she laid two gross fingers on Alice's narrow sleeve, 'I mean courage. Consider it, Arthur. I read that the scientific world is once more beginning to be afraid of spiritual agencies. Spiritual agencies that tap, and actually float, bless their hearts! I think just one more of those mulberries—thank you.

'They talk about "blind Love",' she ran on derisively as she helped herself, her eyes roving over the dish, 'but why blind? I think, Mr. Withers, from weeping over its rickets. After all, it is we plain women that triumph, is it not so—beyond the mockery of time. Alice, now! Fleeting, fleeting is youth, my child. What's that you were confiding to your plate, Arthur? Satirical boy. He laughs at his old aunt: nay, but thou didst laugh. He detests all sentiment. He whispers the most acid asides. Come, my love, we will leave these cynics; we will go and commiserate with each other on our sex. The choice of two evils, Mr. Smithers!' I opened the door, and she swept out as if borne on a torrent of unintelligible indignation; and Arthur and I were left in the clear four-flamed light alone.

For a while we sat in silence. He shook his head at my cigarette-case, and I lit a cigarette. Presently he fidgeted in his chair and poked his head forward into the light. He paused to rise, and shut again the shut door.[Pg 97]

'How long will you be?' he asked me.

I laughed.

'Oh, it's not that!' he said, in some confusion. 'Of course, I like to be with her. But it's not that. The truth is, Withers, I don't care about leaving her too long with my aunt.'

I hesitated. He looked at me questioningly.

'Look here, Seaton,' I said, 'you know well enough that I don't want to interfere in your affairs, or to offer advice where it is not wanted. But don't you think perhaps you may not treat your aunt quite in the right way? As one gets old, you know, a little give and take. I have an old godmother, or something of the kind. She's a bit queer, too.... A little allowance; it does no harm. But hang it all, I'm no preacher.'

He sat down with his hands in his pockets and still with his eyes fixed almost incredulously on mine. 'How?' he said.

'Well, my dear fellow, if I'm any judge—mind, I don't say that I am—but I can't help thinking she thinks you don't care for her; and perhaps takes your silence for—for bad temper. She has been very decent to you, hasn't she?'

'"Decent"? My God!' said Seaton.

I smoked on in silence; but he continued to look at me with that peculiar concentration I remembered of old.

'I don't think, perhaps, Withers,' he began presently, 'I don't think you quite understand. Perhaps you are not quite our kind. You always did, just like the other fellows, guy me at school. You laughed at me that night you came to stay here—about the voices and all that. But I don't mind being laughed at—because I know.'

'Know what?' It was the same old system of dull question and evasive answer.

'I mean I know that what we see and hear is only the smallest fraction of what is. I know she lives quite out of this. She *talks* to you; but it's all make-believe. It's all a "parlour game". She's not really with you; only pitting her outside wits against yours and enjoying the fooling. She's living on inside[Pg 98] on what you're rotten without. That's what it is—a cannibal feast. She's a spider. It doesn't much matter what you call it. It means the same kind of thing. I tell you, Withers, she hates me; and you can scarcely dream what that hatred means. I used to think I had an inkling of the reason. It's oceans deeper than that. It just lies behind: herself against myself. Why, after all, how much do we really understand of anything? We don't even know our own histories, and not a tenth, not a tenth of the reasons. What has life been to me?—nothing but a trap. And when one sets oneself free for a while, it only begins again. I thought you might understand; but you are on a different level: that's all.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' I said contemptuously, in spite of myself.

'I mean what I say,' he said gutturally. 'All this outside's only make-believe—but there! what's the good of talking? So far as this is concerned I'm as good as done. You wait.'

Seaton blew out three of the candles and, leaving the vacant room in semi-darkness, we groped our way along the corridor to the drawing-room. There a full moon stood shining in at the long garden windows. Alice sat stooping at the door, with her hands clasped in her lap, looking out, alone.

'Where is she?' Seaton asked in a low tone.

She looked up; and their eyes met in a glance of instantaneous understanding, and the door immediately afterwards opened behind us.

'*Such* a moon!' said a voice, that once heard, remained unforgettably on the ear. 'A night for lovers, Mr. Withers, if ever there was one. Get a shawl, my dear Arthur, and take Alice for a little promenade. I dare say we old cronies will manage to keep awake. Hasten, hasten, Romeo! My poor, poor Alice, how laggard a lover!'

Seaton returned with a shawl. They drifted out into the moonlight. My companion gazed after them till they were out of hearing, turned to me gravely, and suddenly twisted her[Pg 99] white face into such a convulsion of contemptuous amusement that I could only stare blankly in reply.

'Dear innocent children!' she said, with inimitable unctuousness. 'Well, well, Mr. Withers, we poor seasoned old creatures must move with the times. Do you sing?'

I scouted the idea.

'Then you must listen to my playing. Chess'—she clasped her forehead with both cramped hands—'chess is now completely beyond my poor wits.'

She sat down at the piano and ran her fingers in a flourish over the keys. 'What shall it be? How shall we capture them, those passionate hearts? That first fine careless rapture? Poetry itself.' She gazed softly into the garden a moment, and presently, with a shake of her body, began to play the opening bars of Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata. The piano was old and woolly. She played without music. The lamplight was rather dim. The moonbeams from the window lay across the keys. Her head was in shadow. And whether it was simply due to her personality or to some really occult skill in her playing I cannot say; I only know that she gravely and deliberately set herself to satirize the beautiful music. It brooded on the air, disillusioned, charged with mockery and bitterness. I stood at the window; far down the path I could see the white figure glimmering in that pool of colourless light. A few faint stars shone, and still that amazing woman behind me dragged out of the unwilling keys her wonderful grotesquerie of youth and love and beauty. It came to an end. I knew the player was watching me. 'Please, please, go on!' I murmured, without turning. '*Please* go on playing, Miss Seaton.'

No answer was returned to this honeyed sarcasm, but I realized in some vague fashion that I was being acutely scrutinized, when suddenly there followed a procession of quiet, plaintive chords which broke at last softly into the hymn, *A Few More Years Shall Roll*.

I confess it held me spell-bound. There is a wistful, strained[Pg 100] plangent pathos in the tune; but beneath those masterly old hands it cried softly and bitterly the solitude and desperate estrangement of the world. Arthur and his lady-love vanished from my thoughts. No one could put into so hackneyed an old hymn tune such an appeal who had never known the meaning of the words. Their meaning, anyhow, isn't commonplace.

I turned a fraction of an inch to glance at the musician. She was leaning forward a little over the keys, so that at the approach of my silent scrutiny she had but to turn her face into the thin flood of moonlight for every feature to become distinctly visible. And so, with the tune abruptly terminated, we steadfastly regarded one another; and she broke into a prolonged chuckle of laughter.

'Not quite so seasoned as I supposed, Mr. Withers. I see you are a real lover of music. To me it is too painful. It evokes too much thought....'

I could scarcely see her little glittering eyes under their penthouse lids.

'And now,' she broke off crisply, 'tell me, as a man of the world, what do you think of my new niece?'

I was not a man of the world, nor was I much flattered in my stiff and dullish way of looking at things by being called one; and I could answer her without the least hesitation.

'I don't think, Miss Seaton, I'm much of a judge of character. She's very charming.'

'A brunette?'

'I think I prefer dark women.'

'And why? Consider, Mr. Withers; dark hair, dark eyes, dark cloud, dark night, dark vision, dark death, dark grave, dark DARK!'

Perhaps the climax would have rather thrilled Seaton, but I was too thick-skinned. 'I don't know much about all that,' I answered rather pompously. 'Broad daylight's difficult enough for most of us.'[Pg 101]

'Ah,' she said, with a sly inward burst of satirical laughter.

'And I suppose,' I went on, perhaps a little nettled, 'it isn't the actual darkness one admires, it's the contrast of the skin, and the colour of the eyes, and—and their

shining. Just as,' I went blundering on, too late to turn back, 'just as you only see the stars in the dark. It would be a long day without any evening. As for death and the grave, I don't suppose we shall much notice that.' Arthur and his sweetheart were slowly returning along the dewy path. 'I believe in making the best of things.'

'How very interesting!' came the smooth answer. 'I see you are a philosopher, Mr. Withers. H'm! "As for death and the grave, I don't suppose we shall much notice that." Very interesting.... And I'm sure,' she added in a particularly suave voice, 'I profoundly hope so.' She rose slowly from her stool. 'You will take pity on me again, I hope. You and I would get on famously—kindred spirits—elective affinities. And, of course, now that my nephew's going to leave me, now that his affections are centred on another, I shall be a very lonely old woman.... Shall I not, Arthur?'

Seaton blinked stupidly. 'I didn't hear what you said, Aunt.'

'I was telling our old friend, Arthur, that when you are gone I shall be a very lonely old woman.'

'Oh, I don't think so;' he said in a strange voice.

'He means, Mr. Withers, he means, my dear child,' she said, sweeping her eyes over Alice, 'he means that I shall have memory for company—heavenly memory—the ghosts of other days. Sentimental boy! And did you enjoy our music, Alice? Did I really stir that youthful heart?... O, O, O,' continued the horrible old creature, 'you billers and cooers, I have been listening to such flatteries, such confessions! Beware, beware, Arthur, there's many a slip.' She rolled her little eyes at me, she shrugged her shoulders at Alice, and gazed an instant stonily into her nephew's face.[Pg 102]

I held out my hand. 'Good night, good night!' she cried. 'He that fights and runs away. Ah, good night, Mr. Withers; come again soon!' She thrust out her cheek at Alice, and we all three filed slowly out of the room.

Black shadow darkened the porch and half the spreading sycamore. We walked without speaking up the dusty village street. Here and there a crimson window glowed. At the fork of the high-road I said good-bye. But I had taken hardly more than a dozen paces when a sudden impulse seized me.

'Seaton!' I called.

He turned in the cool stealth of the moonlight.

'You have my address; if by any chance, you know, you should care to spend a week or two in town between this and the—the Day, we should be delighted to see you.'

'Thank you, Withers, thank you,' he said in a low voice.

'I dare say'—I waved my stick gallantly at Alice—'I dare say you will be doing some shopping; we could all meet,' I added, laughing.

'Thank you, thank you, Withers—immensely,' he repeated.

And so we parted.

But they were out of the jog-trot of my prosaic life. And being of a stolid and incurious nature, I left Seaton and his marriage, and even his aunt, to themselves in my memory, and scarcely gave a thought to them until one day I was walking up the Strand again, and passed the flashing gloaming of the second-rate jeweller's shop where I had accidentally encountered my old schoolfellow in the summer. It was one of those stagnant autumnal days after a night of rain. I cannot say why, but a vivid recollection returned to my mind of our meeting and of how suppressed Seaton had seemed, and of how vainly he had endeavoured to appear assured and eager. He must be married by now, and had doubtless returned from his honeymoon. And I had clean forgotten my manners, had sent not a word of congratulation, nor—as I might very well have done,[Pg 103] and as I knew he would have been pleased at my doing—even the ghost of a wedding present. It was just as of old.

On the other hand, I pleaded with myself, I had had no invitation. I paused at the corner of Trafalgar Square, and at the bidding of one of those caprices that seize occasionally on even an unimaginative mind, I found myself pelting after a green bus, and actually bound on a visit I had not in the least intended or foreseen.

The colours of autumn were over the village when I arrived. A beautiful late afternoon sunlight bathed thatch and meadow. But it was close and hot. A child, two dogs, a very old woman with a heavy basket I encountered. One or two incurious tradesmen looked idly up as I passed by. It was all so rural and remote, my whimsical impulse had so much flagged, that for a while I hesitated to venture under the shadow of the sycamore-tree to enquire after the happy pair. Indeed I first passed by the faint-blue gates and continued my walk under the high, green and tufted wall. Hollyhocks had attained their topmost bud and seeded in the little cottage gardens beyond; the Michaelmas daisies were in flower; a sweet warm aromatic smell of fading leaves was in the air. Beyond the cottages lay a field where cattle were grazing, and beyond that I came to a little churchyard. Then the road wound on, pathless and houseless, among gorse and bracken. I turned impatiently and walked quickly back to the house and rang the bell.

The rather colourless elderly woman who answered my enquiry informed me that Miss Seaton was at home, as if only taciturnity forbade her adding, 'But she doesn't want to see *you*.'

'Might I, do you think, have Mr. Arthur's address?' I said.

She looked at me with quiet astonishment, as if waiting for an explanation. Not the faintest of smiles came into her thin face.

'I will tell Miss Seaton,' she said after a pause. 'Please walk in.'[Pg 104]

She showed me into the dingy undusted drawing-room, filled with evening sunshine and with the green-dyed light that penetrated the leaves overhanging the long french windows. I sat down and waited on and on, occasionally aware of a creaking footfall overhead. At last the door opened a little, and the great face I had once known peered round at me. For it was enormously changed; mainly, I think, because the aged eyes had rather suddenly failed, and so a kind of stillness and darkness lay over its calm and wrinkled pallor.

'Who is it?' she asked.

I explained myself and told her the occasion of my visit.

She came in, shut the door carefully after her, and, though the fumbling was scarcely perceptible, groped her way to a chair. She had on an old dressing-gown, like a cassock, of a patterned cinnamon colour.

'What is it you want?' she said, seating herself and lifting her blank face to mine.

'Might I just have Arthur's address?' I said deferentially. 'I am so sorry to have disturbed you.'

'H'm. You have come to see my nephew?'

'Not necessarily to see him, only to hear how he is, and, of course, Mrs. Seaton, too. I am afraid my silence must have appeared....'

'He hasn't noticed your silence,' croaked the old voice out of the great mask; 'besides, there isn't any Mrs. Seaton.'

'Ah, then,' I answered, after a momentary pause, 'I have not seemed so black as I painted myself! And how is Miss Outram?'

'She's gone into Yorkshire,' answered Seaton's aunt.

'And Arthur too?'

She did not reply, but simply sat blinking at me with lifted chin, as if listening, but certainly not for what I might have to say. I began to feel rather at a loss.

'You were no close friend of my nephew's, Mr. Smithers?' she said presently.[Pg 105]

'No,' I answered, welcoming the cue, 'and yet, do you know, Miss Seaton, he is one of the very few of my old school-fellows I have come across in the last few years, and I suppose as one gets older one begins to value old associations....' My voice seemed to trail off into a vacuum. 'I thought Miss Outram', I hastily began again, 'a particularly charming girl. I hope they are both quite well.'

Still the old face solemnly blinked at me in silence.

'You must find it very lonely, Miss Seaton, with Arthur away?'

'I was never lonely in my life,' she said sourly. 'I don't look to flesh and blood for my company. When you've got to be my age, Mr. Smithers (which God forbid), you'll find life a very different affair from what you seem to think it is now. You won't seek company then, I'll be bound. It's thrust on you.' Her face edged round into the clear green light, and her eyes groped, as it were, over my vacant, disconcerted face. 'I dare say, now,' she said, composing her mouth, 'I dare say my nephew told you a good many tarradiddles in his time. Oh, yes, a good many, eh? He was always a liar. What, now, did he say of me? Tell me, now.' She leant forward as far as she could, trembling, with an ingratiating smile.

'I think he is rather superstitious,' I said coldly, 'but, honestly, I have a very poor memory, Miss Seaton.'

'Why?' she said. '*I* haven't.'

'The engagement hasn't been broken off, I hope.'

'Well, between you and me,' she said, shrinking up and with an immensely confidential grimace, 'it has.'

'I'm sure I'm very sorry to hear it. And where is Arthur?'

'Eh?'

'Where is Arthur?'

We faced each other mutely among the dead old bygone furniture. Past all my analysis was that large, flat, grey, cryptic countenance. And then, suddenly, our eyes for the first time really met. In some indescribable way out of that thick-lidded[Pg 106] obscurity a far small something stooped and looked out at me for a mere instant of time that seemed of almost intolerable protraction. Involuntarily I blinked and shook my head. She muttered something with great rapidity, but quite inarticulately;

rose and hobbled to the door. I thought I heard, mingled in broken mutterings, something about tea.

'Please, please, don't trouble,' I began, but could say no more, for the door was already shut between us. I stood and looked out on the long-neglected garden. I could just see the bright weedy greenness of Seaton's tadpole pond. I wandered about the room. Dusk began to gather, the last birds in that dense shadowiness of trees had ceased to sing. And not a sound was to be heard in the house. I waited on and on, vainly speculating. I even attempted to ring the bell; but the wire was broken, and only jangled loosely at my efforts.

I hesitated, unwilling to call or to venture out, and yet more unwilling to linger on, waiting for a tea that promised to be an exceedingly comfortless supper. And as darkness drew down, a feeling of the utmost unease and disquietude came over me. All my talks with Seaton returned on me with a suddenly enriched meaning. I recalled again his face as we had stood hanging over the staircase, listening in the small hours to the inexplicable stirrings of the night. There were no candles in the room; every minute the autumnal darkness deepened. I cautiously opened the door and listened, and with some little dismay withdrew, for I was uncertain of my way out. I even tried the garden, but was confronted under a veritable thicket of foliage by a padlocked gate. It would be a little too ignominious to be caught scaling a friend's garden fence!

Cautiously returning into the still and musty drawing-room, I took out my watch, and gave the incredible old woman ten minutes in which to reappear. And when that tedious ten minutes had ticked by I could scarcely distinguish its hands. I determined to wait no longer, drew open the door and, trusting to my sense of direction, groped my way through the[Pg 107] corridor that I vaguely remembered led to the front of the house.

I mounted three or four stairs and, lifting a heavy curtain, found myself facing the starry fanlight of the porch. From here I glanced into the gloom of the dining-room. My fingers were on the latch of the outer door when I heard a faint stirring in the darkness above the hall. I looked up and became conscious of, rather than saw, the huddled old figure looking down on me.

There was an immense hushed pause. Then, 'Arthur, Arthur,' whispered an inexpressibly peevish rasping voice, 'is that you? Is that you, Arthur?'

I can scarcely say why, but the question horribly startled me. No conceivable answer occurred to me. With head craned back, hand clenched on my umbrella, I continued to stare up into the gloom, in this fatuous confrontation.

'Oh, oh,' the voice croaked. 'It is *you,* is it? *That* disgusting man!... Go away out. Go away out.'

At this dismissal, I wrenched open the door and, rudely slamming it behind me, ran out into the garden, under the gigantic old sycamore, and so out at the open gate.

I found myself half up the village street before I stopped running. The local butcher was sitting in his shop reading a piece of newspaper by the light of a small oil-lamp. I crossed the road and enquired the way to the station. And after he had with minute and needless care directed me, I asked casually if Mr. Arthur Seaton still lived with his aunt at the big house just beyond the village. He poked his head in at the little parlour door.

'Here's a gentleman enquiring after young Mr. Seaton, Millie,' he said. 'He's dead, ain't he?'

'Why, yes, bless you,' replied a cheerful voice from within. 'Dead and buried these three months or more—young Mr. Seaton. And just before he was to be married, don't you remember, Bob?'[Pg 108]

I saw a fair young woman's face peer over the muslin of the little door at me.

'Thank you,' I replied, 'then I go straight on?'

'That's it, sir; past the pond, bear up the hill a bit to the left, and then there's the station lights before your eyes.'

We looked intelligently into each other's faces in the beam of the smoky lamp. But not one of the many questions in my mind could I put into words.

And again I paused irresolutely a few paces further on. It was not, I fancy, merely a foolish apprehension of what the raw-boned butcher might 'think' that prevented my going back to see if I could find Seaton's grave in the benighted churchyard. There was precious little use in pottering about in the muddy dark merely to discover where he was buried. And yet I felt a little uneasy. My rather horrible thought was that, so far as I was concerned—one of his extremely few friends—he had never been much better than 'buried' in my mind.

[Pg 109]

CREWE

When murky winter dusk begins to settle over the railway station at Crewe its first-class waiting-room grows steadily more stagnant. Particularly if one is alone in it. The long grimed windows do little more than sift the failing light that slopes in on them

from the glass roof outside and is too feeble to penetrate into the recesses beyond. And the grained massive black-leathered furniture becomes less and less inviting. It appears to have been made for a scene of extreme and diabolical violence that one may hope will never occur. One can hardly at any rate imagine it to have been designed by a really *good* man!

Little things like this of course are apt to become exaggerated in memory, and I may be doing the Company an injustice. But whether this is so or not—and the afternoon I have in mind is now many years distant—I certainly became more acutely conscious of the defects of my surroundings when the few fellow-travellers who had been sharing this dreadful apartment with me had hurried out at the clang of a bell for the down train, leaving me to wait for the up. And nothing and nobody, as I supposed, but a great drowsy fire of cinders in the iron grate for company.

The almost animated talk that had sprung up before we parted, never in this world to meet again, had been occasioned[Pg 110] by an account in the morning's newspapers of the last voyage of a ship called the *Hesper*. She had come in the evening before, and some days overdue, with a cargo of sugar from the West Indies, and was now berthed safely in the Southampton Docks. This seemed to have been something of a relief to those concerned. For even her master had not refused to admit that certain mysterious and tragic events had recently occurred on board, though he preferred not to discuss them with a reporter. He agreed, even with the reporter, however, that there had been a full moon at the time, that, apart from a heavy swell, the sea was 'as calm as a mill-pond', and that his ship was at present in want of a second mate. But the voyage of the *Hesper* is now, of course, an old tale many times told. And I myself, having taken very little part in the discussion, had by that time wearied of her mysteries and had decided to seek the lights and joys and coloured bottles of the refreshment room when a voice from out of the murk behind me suddenly broke the hush. It was an unusual voice, rapid, incoherent and internal, like that of a man in a dream or under the influence of a drug.

I shifted my high-backed ungainly chair and turned to look. Evidently this, the only other occupant of the room, had until that moment been as unaware of my presence in it as I of his. Indeed he seemed to have been completely taken aback at finding he was not alone. He had started up from out of his obscure corner beyond the high window and was staring across at me out of his flat greyish face in unconcealed stupefaction. He seemed for a moment or two to be in doubt even of what I was. Then he sighed, a sigh that ended in a long shuddering yawn. 'I am sorry,' I said, 'I supposed——'

But he interrupted me—and not as if my company, now that he had recognized me as a fellow creature, was any the less welcome for being unexpected.

'Merely what I was saying, sir,' he was mildly explaining, 'is that those gentlemen there who have just left us had no[Pg 111] more notion of what they were talking about than an infant in the cradle.'

This elegant paraphrase, I realized, bore only the feeblest resemblance to the violent soliloquy I had just overheard. I looked at him. 'How so?' I said. 'I am only a landsman myself, but....'

It had seemed unnecessary to finish the sentence—I have never seen anyone less marine in effect than *he* was. He had shifted a little nearer and was now, his legs concealed, sitting on the extreme edge of his vast wooden sofa—a smallish man, but muffled up in a very respectable greatcoat at least two sizes too large for him, his hands thrust deep into its pockets.

He continued to stare at me. 'You don't have to go to sea for things like that,' he went on. 'And there's no need to argue about it if you do. Still it wasn't my place to interfere. They'll find out all right—all in good time. They go their ways. And talking of that, now, have you ever heard say that there is less risk sitting in a railway carriage at sixty miles an hour than in laying alone, safe, as you might suppose, in your own bed? That's true, too.' He glanced round him. 'You know where you are in a place like this, too. It's solid, though——' I couldn't catch the words that followed, but they seemed to be uncomplimentary to things in general.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'it certainly looks solid.'

'Ah, "looks",' he went on cantankerously. 'But what *is* your "solid", come to that? I thought so myself once,' He seemed to be pondering over the *once*. 'But now', he added, 'I know different.'

With that he rose and, dwarfed a little perhaps by the length of his coat, sallied out of his obscure corner beyond the high window and came to the fire. After warming his veined shrunken hands at the heap of smouldering cinders in the grate under the black marble mantelpiece—he seated himself opposite to me.

At risk of seeming fastidious, I must confess that now he was[Pg 112] near I did not much care for the appearance of this stranger. He might be about to solicit a small loan. In spite of his admirable greatcoat he looked in need of a barber, as well as of medicine and sleep—a need that might presently exhibit itself in a hankering for alcohol. But I was mistaken. He asked for nothing, not even sympathy, not even advice. He merely, it seemed, wanted to talk about himself. And perhaps a complete stranger makes a better receptacle for a certain kind of confidences than one's intimates. He tells no tales.

Nevertheless I shall attempt to tell Mr. Blake's, and as far as possible in his own peculiar idiom. It impressed me at the time. And I have occasionally speculated since

whether his statistics in relation to the risks of railway travel proved trustworthy. *Safety first* is a sound principle so far as it goes, but we are all of us out-manœuvred in the end. And I still wonder what end was his.

He began by asking me if I had ever lived in the country—'In the depps of the country'. And then, quickly realizing that I was more inclined to listen than talk, he suddenly plunged into his past. It seemed to refresh him to do so.

'I was a gentleman's servant when I began,' he set off; 'first boot-boy under a valet, then footman and helping at table, then pantry work and so on. Never married or anything of that; petticoats are nothing but encumbrances in the house. But I must say if you keep yourself *to* yourself, it sees you through—in time. What you have to beware of is those of your own calling. Domestic. That's the same everywhere; nobody's reached much past the cat-and-dog stage in that. Not if you look close enough; high or low. I lost one or two nice easy places all on that account. Jealousy. And if you don't stay where you are put there's precious little chance of pickings when the funeral's at the door. But that's mostly changed, so I'm told; high wages and no work being the order of the day; and gratitude to follow suit. They are all rolling stones nowadays, and never mind the moss.'[Pg 113]

As a philosopher this white-faced muffled-up old creature seemed to affect realism, though his reservations on the 'solid' had fallen a little short of it. Not that *my* reality appeared to matter much—beyond, I mean the mere proof of it. For though in the rather intimate memories he proceeded to share with me he frequently paused to ask a question, he seldom waited for an answer, and then ignored it. I see now this was not to be wondered at. We happened to be sharing at the moment this—for my part—chance resort and he wanted company—human company.

'The last situation I was in' (he was going on to tell me), 'was with the Reverend W. Somers, M.A.: William. In the depps of the country, as I say. Just myself, a young fellow of the name of George, and a woman who came in from the village to char and cook and so on, though I did the best part of that myself. The finishing touches, I mean. How long the Reverend hadn't cared for females in the house I never knew; but parsons have their share of them, I'm thinking. Not that he wasn't attached enough to his sister. They had grown up together, nursery to drawing-room, and that covers a multitude of sins.

'Like *him*, *she* was, but more of the parrot in appearance; a high face with a beaky nose. Quite a nice lady, too, except that she was mighty slow in being explained to. No interference, generally speaking; in spite of her nose. But don't mistake me; we had to look alive when she was in the house. Oh, yes. But that, thank God, was seldom. And in the end it made no difference.

'She never took to the Vicarage. Who would? I can hear her now—Blake this, and Blake that. Too dark, too vaulty, too shut in. And in winter freezing cold, laying low maybe. Trees in front, everlastings; though open behind with a stream and cornfields and hills in the distance; especially in summer, of course. They went up and down, and dim and dark, according to the weather. You could see for miles from those[Pg 114] upper corridor windows—small panes that take a lot of cleaning. But George did the windows. George had come from the village, too, if you could call it a village. But he was a permanency. Nothing much but a few cottages, and an outlying farmhouse here and there. Why the old brick church lay about a mile away from it, I can't say. To give the Roaring Lion a trot, perhaps. The Reverend had private means—naturally. I knew that before it came out in the will. But it was a nice fat living notwithstanding—worked out at about fifty pounds to the pig-sty, I shouldn't wonder, with the vicarage thrown in. You get what you've got in this world, and some of us enjoy a larger slice than we deserve. But the Reverend, I must say, never took advantage of it. He was a gentleman. Give him his books, and to-morrow like yesterday, and he gave no trouble—none whatever.

'Mind you, he liked things as they should be, and he had some of the finest silver I ever lay finger on; and old furniture to match. I don't mean furniture picked up at sales and such like, but real old family stuff. That's where the parrot in the family nose came from. Everything punctual to the minute and the good things *good*. Soup or fish, a cutlet, a savoury, and a glass of sherry or madeira. No sweets—though he was a lean, spare gentleman, silvery beard and all. And I have never seen choicer fruit than came from his houses and orchard, though it was here the trouble began. Cherries, gages, peaches, nectarines—old red sun-baked walls nine or ten feet high and a sight like wonder in the spring. I used to go out specially to have a look at them. He had his fancies, too, had the Reverend. If any smoking was to be done it must be in the shrubbery with the blackbirds, not under the roof. And sitting there in his study, sir, he could detect the whiff of a cigarette even in the furthest of the attics!

'But tobacco's not *my* trouble, never was. Keep off what you don't need, and you won't want it when you can't get it. That's my feeling. It was, as I say, an easy place, if you forgot[Pg 115] how quiet it was—not a sound, no company, and not a soul to be seen. Fair prospects, too, if you could wait. He had no fancy for change, had the Reverend; made no concealment of it. He told me himself that he had remembered me in his will—"if still in his service". You know how these lawyers put it. As a matter of fact he had given me to understand that if in the meantime for any reason any of us went elsewhere, the one left was to have the lot. But not death. *There*, as it turned out, I was in error.

'But I'm not complaining of that now. He was a gentleman; and I have enough to see me through however long I'm left. And that might be for a good many years yet.'

The intonation of this last remark suggested a question. But my confidant made no pause for an answer and added argumentatively, 'Who *wants* to go, I should like to ask? Early *or* late. And nothing known of what's on the other side?' He lifted his grey eyebrows a little as if to glance up at me as he sat stooped up by the fire, and yet refrained from doing so. And again I couldn't enlighten him.

'Well, there, as I say, I might have stayed to this day if the old gentleman's gardener had cared to stay too. *He* began it. Him gone, we all went. Like ninepins. You might hardly credit it, sir, but I am the only one left of that complete establishment. Gutted. And that's where these fine gentlemen here were talking round their hats. What I say is, keep on this side of the tomb as long as you can. Don't meddle with that hole. Why? Because while some fine day you will have to go down into it, you can never be quite sure while you are here what mayn't come back out of it.

'*There'll be no partings there*—I have heard them trolling that out in them chapels like missel-thrushes in the spring. They seem to forget there may be some mighty unpleasant *meetings*. And what about the further shore? It's my belief there's some kind of a ferry plying on that river. And coming back depends on what you want to come back *for*.[Pg 116]

'Anyhow the Vicarage reeked of it. A low old house, with lots of little windows and far too many doors; and, as I say, the trees too close up on one side, almost brushing the glass. No wonder they said it was what they call haunted. You could feel that with your eyes shut, and like breeds like. The Vicar—two or three, I mean, before my own gentleman—had even gone to the trouble of having the place exercised. Candles and holy water, that kind of thing. Sheer flummummery, *I* call it. But if what I've heard there—and long before that gowk of a George came to work in the house—was anything more than mere age and owls and birds in the ivy, it must badly have needed it. And when you get accustomed to noises, you can tell which from which. By usual, I mean. Though more and more I'm getting to ask myself if any thing is anything much more than what you think it is—for the time being.

'Same with noises of course. What's this voice of conscience that they talk about but something you needn't hear if you don't want to? I am not complaining of that. If at the beginning there was anything in that house that was better out than in, it never troubled me; at least, not at first. And the Reverend, even though you could often count his congregation on your ten fingers, except at Harvest Festival, was so wove up in his books that I doubt if he'd have been roused up out of 'em even by the Last Trump. It's my belief that in those last few weeks—when I stepped in to see to the fire—as often as not he was sitting asleep over them.

'No, I'm not complaining. Live at peace with who you can, I say. But when it comes to as crusty a customer, and a Scotchman at that, as was my friend the gardener, then

there's a limit. Mengus he called himself, though I can't see *how*, if you spell it with a z. When I first came into the place it was all gold that glitters. I'm not the man for contentiousness, if let alone. But afterwards, when the rift came, I don't suppose we ever hardly exchanged the time of day but what there came words of it. A long-legged man *he* was, this Mr. Menzies; too long I should[Pg 117] have thought for strict comfort in grubbing and hoeing and weeding. He had ginger hair, scanty, and the same on his face, whiskers—and a stoop. He lived down at the lodge; and his widowed daughter kept house for him, with one little boy as fair as she was dark. Harmless enough as children go, the kind they call an angel, but noisy, and not for the house.

'Now why, I ask you, shouldn't I pick a little of this gentleman's precious fruit, or a cucumber for a salad, if need be, and him not there? What if I wanted a few grapes for dessert or a nice apricot tart for the Reverend's luncheon, and our Mr. Menzies gone home or busy with the frames? I don't hold with all these hard and fast restrictions, at least outside the house. Not he, though! We wrangled about it week in, week out. And him with a temper which once roused was past all reasoning.

'Not that I ever took much notice of him until it came to a point past any man's enduring. I let him rave. But duty is duty, there's no getting away from that. And when, apart from all this fuss about his fruit, a man takes advantage of what is meant in pure friendliness, well, one's bound to make a move. Job himself.

'What I mean to say is, I used occasionally—window wide open and all that, the pantry being on the other side of the house and away from the old gentleman's study—I say I used occasionally, and all in the way of friendliness, to offer our friend a drink. Like as with many of Old Adam's trade, drink was a little weakness of his, though I don't mean I hold with it because of that. But peace and quietness is the first thing, and to keep an easy face to all appearances, even if you do find it a little hard at times to forgive and forget.

'When he was civil, as I say, and as things should be, he could have a drink, and welcome. When not, not. But it came to become a kind of habit; and to be expected; which is always a bad condition of things. Oh, it was a thousand pities! There was the Reverend, growing feeble as you could see, and him[Pg 118] believing all the while that everything around him was calm and sweet as the new Jerusalem, while there was nothing but strife and agrimony, as they call it, underneath. There's many a house looks as snug and cosy as a nut. But crack it and look inside! Mildew. Still, our Mr. Mengus had "prospects," up to then.

'Well, there came along at last a mighty hot summer—five years ago, you may remember. Five years ago, next August, an extraordinary hot summer. And an early harvest—necessarily. Day after day I could see the stones in the stubble fields

shivering in the sun. And gardening is thirsty work; I will say that for it. Which being so, better surely virgin water from the tap or a drop of cider, same as the harvesters have, than ardent spirits, whether it is what you are bred up to or not! It stands to reason.

'Besides, we had had words again, and though I can stretch a point with a friend and no harm done, I'm not a man to come coneying and currying favour. Let him get his own drinks, was my feeling in the matter. And you can hardly call me to blame if he did. *There* was the pantry window hanging wide open in the shade of the trees—and day after day of scorching sun and not a breath to breathe. And there was the ruin of him within arm's reach from outside, and a water tap handy, too. Very inviting, I'll allow.

'I'm not attesting, mind you, that he was confirmed at it, no more than that I'm a man to be measuring what's given me to take charge of by tenths of inches. It's the principle of the thing. You might have thought, too, that a simple honest pride would have kept him back. Nothing of the sort; and no matter, wine or spirits. I'd watch him there, though he couldn't see me, being behind the door. And practices like that, sir, as you will agree with me, can't go on. They couldn't go on, vicarage or no vicarage. Besides, from being secret it began to be open. It had gone too far. Brazen it out: that was the lay. I came down one fine morning to find one of my best decanters smashed to smithereens on the stone floor, Irish glass and[Pg 119] all. Cats and sherry, who ever heard of it? And out of revenge he filled the pantry with wasps by bringing in over-ripe plums. Petty waste of time like that. And some of the green-houses thick with blight!

'And so things went, from bad to worse, and at such a pace as I couldn't have credited. A widower, too, with a married daughter dependent on him; which is worse even than a wife, who expects to take the bad with the good. No, sir, I had to call a halt to it. A friendly word in his ear, or keeping everything out of his reach, you may be thinking, might have sufficed. Believe me, not for him. And how can you foster such a weakness by taking steps out of the usual to prevent it? It wouldn't be proper to your self-respect. Then I thought of George; not com*prom*ising myself in anyway, of course, in so doing. George had a face as long as your arm, pale and solemn, enough to make a cat laugh. Dress him up in a surplice and hassock, he might have been the Reverend's curate. Strange that, for a youth born in the country. But curate or no curate, he had eyes in his head and must have seen what there was to be seen.

'I said to him one day, and I remember him standing there in the pantry in his black coat against the white of the cupboard paint, I said to him, "George, a word in time saves nine, but it would come better from you than from me. You take me? Hold your peace till our friend's sober again and can listen to reason. Then hand it over to him—a word of warning, I mean. Say we are muffling things up as well as we *can* from the

old gentleman, but that if he should hear of it there'd be fat in the fire; and no mistake. He would take it easier from you, George, the responsibility being mine."

'Lord, how I remember George! He had a way of looking at you as if he couldn't say *Boh* to a goose—swollen hands and bolting blue eyes, as simple as an infant's. But he wasn't stupid, oh no. Nobody could say that. And now I reflect, I think he knew our little plan wouldn't carry very far. But[Pg 120] there, whatever he might be thinking, he was so awkward with his tongue that he could never find anything to say until it was too late, so I left it at that. Besides, I had come to know he was, with all his faults, a young man you could trust for doing what he was told to do. So, as I say, I left it at that.

'What he actually did say I never knew. But as for its being of any use, it was more like pouring paraffin on a bonfire. The very next afternoon our friend came along to the pantry window and stood there looking in—swaying he was, on his feet; and I can see the midges behind him zigzagging in a patch of sunshine as though they were here before my very eyes. He was so bad that he had to lay hold of the sill to keep himself from falling. Not thirst this time, but just fury. And then, seeing that mere flaunting of fine feathers wasn't going to inveigle *me* into a cockfight, he began to talk. Not all bad language, mind you—*that's* easy to shut your ears to—but cold reasonable abuse, which isn't. At first I took no notice, went on about my business at my leisure, and no hurry. What's the use of arguing with a man, and him one of these Scotchmen to boot, that's beside himself with rage? What was wanted was *peace* in the house, if only for the old gentleman's sake, who I thought was definitely under the weather and had been coming on very poorly of late.

'"Where's that George of yours?" he said to me at last—with additions. "Where's that George? Fetch him out, and I'll teach him to come playing the holy Moses to my own daughter. Fetch him out, I say, and we'll finish it here and now." And all pitched high, and half his words no more English than the mewing of a cat.

'But I kept my temper and answered him quite moderate and as pleasantly as I knew how. "I don't want to meddle in *any*body's quarrels," I said. "So long as George so does his work in this house as will satisfy*my* eye, I am not responsible for his actions in his off-time and out of bounds."

'How was I to know, may I ask, if it was *not* our Mr.[Pg 121] Mengus who had smashed one of my best decanters? What proof was there? What *reason* had I for thinking else?

'"George is a quiet, unbeseeming young fellow," I said, "and if he thinks it's his duty to report any misgoings-on either to me or to the Reverend, it doesn't concern anybody else."

'That seemed to sober my fine gentleman. Mind you, I'm not saying that there was anything unremidibly wrong with him. He was a first-class gardener. I grant you that. But then he had an uncommonly good place to match—first-class wages; and no milk, wood, coals or house-rent to worry about. But breaking out like that, and the Reverend poorly and all; that's not what he thought of when he put us all down in his will. I'll be bound of that. Well, there he stood, looking in at the window and me behind the table in my apron as calm as if his wrangling meant no more to me than the wind in the chimmeny. It was the word "report", I fancy, that took the wind out of his sails. It had brought him up like a station buffer. And he was still looking at me, and brooding it over, as though he had the taste of poison on his tongue.

'Then he says very quiet, "So that's his little game, is it? You are just a pair, then?"

'"If by pair you're meaning me," I said, "well, I'm ready to take my share of the burden when it's ready to fit my back. But not before. George may have gone a bit beyond himself, but he meant well, and you know it."

'"What I am asking is this," says our friend, "have you ever seen me the worse for liquor? Answer me that!"

'"If I liked your tone better," I said, "I wouldn't say how I don't see why it would be necessarily the *worse*."

'"Ehh? You mean, Yes, then?" he said.

'"I mean no more than what I say," I answered him, looking at him over the cruet as straight as I'm looking at you now. "I don't ask to meddle with your private affairs, and I'll thank *you* not to come meddling with mine." He seemed taken[Pg 122] aback at that, and I noticed he was looking a bit pinched, and hollow under the eyes. Sleepless nights, perhaps.

'But how was *I* to know this precious grandson of his was out of sorts with a bad throat and that—seeing that he hadn't mentioned it till a minute before? I ask you! "The best thing you and George there can do," I went on, "is to bury the hatchet; and out of hearing of the house, too."

'With that I turned away and went off into it myself, leaving him there to think things over at his leisure. I am putting it to you, sir, as a free witness, what else could I have done?'

There was little light of day left in our cavernous waiting-room by this time. Only the dulling glow of the fire and the phosphorescence caused by a tiny bead of gas in the

'mantles' of the great iron bracket over our heads. My realist seemed to be positively in want of an answer to this last question. But as I sat looking back into his intent small face nothing that could be described as of a helpful nature offered itself.

'If he was anxious about his grandson,' I ventured at last, 'it might explain his being a little short in temper. Besides.... But I should like to hear what came after.'

'What came after, now?' the little man repeated, drawing his right hand gingerly out of the depths of his pocket and smoothing down his face with it as if he had suddenly discovered he was tired. 'Well, a good deal came after, but not quite what you might have expected. And you'd hardly go so far as to say perhaps that anxiety over his grandson would excuse him for what was little short of manslaughter, and him a good six inches to the good at that? Keeping facts as facts, if you'll excuse me, our friend waylaid George by the stables that very evening, and a wonderful peaceful evening it was, shepherd's delight and all that. But to judge from the looks of the young fellow's face when he came into the house there hadn't been much of that in the quarter of an hour they had had together.[Pg 123]

'I said, "Sponge it down, George, sponge it down. And by good providence maybe the old gentleman won't notice anything wrong." It wasn't to reason I could let him off his duties and enter into a lot of silly peravications which in the long run might only make things worse. It's that you have to think of when you are a man in my position. But as for the Reverend's not noticing it, there, as luck would have it, I was wrong myself.

'For when the two of us were leaving the dining-room that evening after the table had been cleared and the dessert put on, he looked up from round the candles and told George to stay behind. Some quarter of an hour after that George came along to me snuffling as if he'd been crying. But I asked no questions, not me; and, as I say, he was always pretty slow with his tongue. All that I could get out of him was that he had decocted some cock-and-bull story to account for his looks the like of which nobody in his senses could credit, let alone such a power of questioning as the old gentleman could bring to bear when roused, and apart from what comes, I suppose, from reading so many books. So the fat *was* in the fire and no mistake. And the next thing I heard, after coming back late the following evening, was that our Mr. Mengus had been called into the house and given the sack there and then, with a quarter's wages in lieu of notice. Which, after all, mind you, was as good as three-quarters a gift. What I'm saying is that handsome is as handsome does, and that was the Reverend all over; though I agree, mind you, even money isn't necessarily everything when there's what they call character to be taken into account. But if ever there was one of the quality fair and upright in all his dealings, as the saying goes, then that was the Reverend Somers. And I abide by that. He wouldn't have any truck with drink topped with insolence. That's all.

'Well, our friend came rapping at the back door that evening, shaken to the marrow if ever man was, and just livid. I told him, and I meant it too, that I was sorry for what had[Pg 124] occurred: "It's a bad ending", I said, "to a tale that ought never to have been told." I told him too, speaking as quiet and pleasant as I am to you now, that the only hope left was to let bygones be bygones; that he had already had his fingers on George, and better go no further. Not he. He said, and he was sober enough then in all conscience, that, come what come may, here or hereafter, he'd be even with him. Ay, and he made mention of me also, but not so rabid. A respectable man, too; never a word against him till then; and not far short of sixty. And by rabid I don't mean violent. He spoke as low and quiet as if there was a judge on the bench there to hear him, sentence said and everything over. And then....'

The old creature paused until yet another main-line train had gone roaring on its way. 'And then,' he continued, 'though he wasn't found till morning, he must have gone straight out—and good-bye said to nobody. He must, I say, have gone straight out to the old barn and hanged himself. The midmost rafter, sir, and a drop that would have sufficed for a Giant Goliath. All night. And it's my belief, good-bye or no good-bye, that it wasn't so much the *disgrace* of the affair but his daughter—Mrs. Shaw by name—and his grandson that were preying on his mind. And yet—why, he never so much as asked me to say a good word for him! Not one.

'Well, that was the end of that. So far. And it's a curious thing to me—though they say these Romans aren't above making use of it—how, going back over the past clears everything up like; at least for the time being. But it's what you were saying just now about what's *solid* that sets me thinking and keeps repeating itself in my mind. Solid was the word you used. And they look it, I agree.' He deliberately twisted his head and fastened a prolonged stare on the bench on which he had been seated. 'But it doesn't follow there's much comfort in them even if they are. Solid or not, they go at last when all's said to what's little else but gas and ashes once they're[Pg 125] fallen to pieces and been put on the fire. Which holds good, and even more so, for them that sit on them. Peculiar habit that, too—sitting! Yes, I've been told, sir, that after what they call this cremation, and all the moisture in us gone up in steam, what's left would scarcely turn the scales by a single *hounce*!'

If sitting *is* a peculiar habit, it was even more peculiar how etherealizing the effect of my new acquaintance's misplaced aspirate had been—his one and only lapse in this respect throughout his interminable monologue.

'Yes, they say that so far as this *solid* goes, we amount to no more than what you could put into a walnut. And my point, sir,' he was emphasizing with a forefinger that

only just showed itself beyond the long sleeve of his greatcoat, 'my point is *this*—that if *that's* all there is to you and me, we shouldn't need much of the substantial for what you might call the mere sole look of things, if you follow me, if *we* chose or chanced to come back. When gone, I mean. Just enough, I suppose, to be obnoxious, as the Reverend used to say, to the naked eye.

'But all that being as it may be, the whole thing had tided over, and George was pretty nearly himself again, and another gardener advertised for—and I must say the Reverend, though after this horrible affair he was never the same man again, treated the young woman I mentioned as if he himself had been a father—I say, the whole thing had tided over, and the house was as silent as a tomb again, ay, as the sepulchre itself, when I began to notice something peculiar.

'At first maybe, little more *than* mere silence. What, in the contrast, as a matter of fact, I took for *peace*. But afterwards not so. There was a strain, so to speak, as you went about your daily doings. A strain. And especially after dark. It may have been only in one's head. I can't say. But it was there: and I could see without watching that even George had noticed it, and *he'd* hardly notice a black-beetle on a pancake.[Pg 126]

'And at last there came something you could put word to, catch in the act, so to speak. I had gone out towards the cool of the evening after a broiling hot day, to get a little air. There was a copse of beeches, which as perhaps you may know, is a very pleasant tree for shade, sir, at a spot a bit under the mile from the back of the Vicarage. And I sat there quiet for a minute or two, with the birds and all—they were beginning to sing again, I remember—and—you know how memory strays back, though sometimes it's more like a goat tethered to a peg on a common—I was thinking over what a curious thing it is how one man's poison is another man's meat. For the funeral over, and all that, the old gentleman had thanked me for all I had done. You see what had gone before had been a hard break in his trust of a man, and he looked up from his bed at me almost with tears in his eyes. He said he wouldn't forget it. He used the word substantial, sir; and I ought by rights to have mentioned that he was taken ill the night of the inquest; a sort of stroke, the doctor called it, though he came round, I must say, remarkably well considering his age.

'Well, I had been thinking over all this on the fringe of the woods there, and was on my way back again to the house by the field-path, when I looked up as if at call and saw what I take my oath I never remembered to have seen there before—a scarecrow. A scarecrow—and that right in the middle of the cornfield that lay beyond the stream with the bulrushes at the back of the house. Nothing funny in that, you may say. Quite so. But mark me, this was early September, and the stubble all bleaching in the sun, and it didn't look an *old* scarecrow, either. It stood up with its arms out and an old hat down over its eyes, bang in the middle of the field, its back to me, and its front to the house. I knew that field as well as I know my own face in the looking-glass. Then

how could I have missed it? What wonder then I stood stock still and had a good long stare at it, first because, as I say, I had never seen it before, and next because—but I'll be coming to that later.[Pg 127]

'That done, and *not* to my satisfaction, I turned back a little and came along on the other side of the hedge, and so, presently at last, indoors. Then I stepped up to the upper storey to have a look at it from the windows. For you never know with these country people what they are up to, though they may seem stupid enough. Looked at from there, it wasn't so much in the middle of the field as I had fancied, seeing it from the other side. But how, thought I to myself, could you have escaped me, my friend, if you had been there all through the summer? I don't see how it could; that's flat. But if not, then it must have been put up more recently.

'I had all but forgotten about it next morning, but as afternoon came on I went upstairs and had another look. There was less heat-haze or something, and I could see it clearer and nearer, so to speak, but not quite clear enough. So I whipped along to the Reverend's study, him being still, poor gentleman, confined to his bed, in fact he never got up from it; I whipped along, I say, to the study to fetch his glasses, his boniculars, and I fastened them on that scarecrow like a microscope on a fly. You will hardly credit me, sir, when I say that what seemed to me then most different about it—different from what you might expect—was that it didn't look in any ordinary manner of speaking, quite *real*.

'I could watch it with the glasses as plain as if it had been in touch of my hand, even to the buttons and the hat-band. It wasn't the first time I had set eyes on the *clothes*, either, though I couldn't have laid name to them. And there was something in the appearance of the thing, something in the way it bore itself up, so to speak, with its arms thrown up at the sky and its empty face, which wasn't what you'd expect of mere sticks and rags. Not, I mean, if they were nothing but just real—real like that there chair, I mean, you are sitting on now.

'I called George. I said, "George, lay your eye to these glasses"—and his face was still a bit discoloured, though his little affair in the stableyard was now a good three weeks old.[Pg 128] "Take a squint through these, George," I said, "and tell me what you make of *that* thing over there."

'George was a slow dawdling mug if ever there was one—clumsy-fingered. But he fixed the glasses at last, and he took a good long look. Then he gave them back into my hand.

'"Well?" I said, watching his face.

'"Why, Mr. Blake," he said, meaning me, "it's a scarecrow."

'"How would you like it a bit nearer?" I said. Just off-hand, like that.

'He looked at me. "It's near enough in *them*," he said.

'"Does the air round it strike you as funny at all?" I asked him. "Out-of-the-way funny—*quivering*, in a manner of speaking?"

'"That's the heat," he said, but his lip trembled.

'"Well, George," I said, "heat or no heat, you or me must go and have a look at that thing closer some time. But not this afternoon. It's too late."

'But we didn't, sir, neither me *nor* him, though I fancy he went on thinking about it on his own account in between. And lo and behold, when I got up next morning and had slid out of my bedroom early, and went along into the corridor to have another glance at it, and—believe me, sir, as you looked out into the morning the country lay as calm and open as a map—it wasn't there. The scarecrow, sir. It wasn't there. It was vanished. Nor could I get a glimpse of it from downstairs through the bushes *this* side of the stream. And all so still and early that even there from the back door you could hear the water moving. Now who, thinks I to myself, is answerable for *this* jiggery-pokery?

'But it's no good in this world, sir, putting reasons more far-fetched to a thing than are necessary to account for it. That you *will* agree. Some farmer's lout, I thought to myself, must have come and moved the old mommet overnight. But, that being so, what was it ever put up for? Harvest done,[Pg 129] mind you, and the crows, one would think, as welcome to what they could pick up in the stubble—if they hadn't picked it all up already—as robins to house crumbs. Besides, what about the peculiar looks of it?

'I didn't go out next day, not at all; and there being only George and me in the Vicarage, and the Reverend shut off in his room, I never remember such a holy quiet. The heavens like a vault. Eighty-four in the shade by the thingamy in the verandah and this the fourth of September. All day long, and I'll vouch for it, the whole twenty acres of that field, but for the peewits and the rooks running over it, lay empty. And when, the sun going down, the harvest moon came up that evening—and that summer she showed up punctual as a clock the whole month round—you could see right across the flat country to the hills. And the night-jars croaking too. You could have cut the heat with a knife.

'What time the old gentleman's gruel was gone up and George out of the way, I took yet another squint through the glasses from the upper windows. And I am ready to own that something inside of me gave a sort of a *hump*, sir, when, large as life, I saw that the scarecrow was come back again, though this is where you'll have, if you please, to go careful with me. What I saw the instant before I began to look, and to that I'd lay my affidavit, was something moving, and pretty rapid, too; and it was only

at the very moment I clapped the glasses on to it that it suddenly fixed itself into what I already *supposed* I should find it to be. I've noticed that—though in little things not mattering much—before. It's your own mind that learns you before what you look at turns out to be what you expect. Else why should we be alarmed by this here*solid* sometimes? It *looks* all so; but *is* it?

'You might be suggesting that both shape and scarecrow too were all my eye and Betty Martin. But we'll see later on about that. And what about George? You don't mean to infer that he could borrow to order a mere fancy clean out of my[Pg 130] head and turn it into a scarecrow in the middle of a field and in broad daylight too? That would be the long bow, and no mistake. Ay, and take it in some shape for what we *did*! No. Yet, as I say, even when I first cast eyes on it, it looked too real to be real. So there's the two on the one side, and the two on the other, and they don't make four.

'Well, sir, I must say that from that moment on I didn't like the look of things, and never have I shared a meal so mum as when George and me sat to supper that evening. From being a hearty eater his appetite was fallen almost to a cipher. He munched and couldn't swallow. I doubt if his vittles had a taste of them left. And we both of us knew as though it had been printed on the tablecloth what the other was thinking about.

'It was while we sat there, George and me alone, him on the right and the window opposite, and me on the cupboard side in what was called the servants' hall, that we heard some words said. Not what you could understand, but still, words. I couldn't tell from where, except that it wasn't from the Reverend, and I couldn't tell what. But they dropped upon us and between us as if there was a parrot in the room, clapping its horny bill, so to say, motionless in the air. At this George stopped munching for good, his face little short of green. But except for a cockling up inside of me, I didn't make any sign I'd heard. After all, it was nothing that made any difference to *me*, though what was going on was, to say the least of it, not all as it should be. And if you knew the old Vicarage you'd agree.

'Lock-up time came at last. And George took his candle and went up to bed. Not quite as willing as usual, I fancied; though he had always been a glutton for his full meed of sleep. You could notice by the sound of his feet on the stairs that he was as you might say pushing of himself on. As for me, it had always been my way to sit up after him reading a bit with the Reverend's *Times*. But that night, I went off early. I gave a[Pg 131] last look in on the old gentleman, and I might as well mention—though dilatory isn't the word for these doctors, even when they *are* called in in reasonable time—I say a nurse had been sent for, and his sister was now expected any day from Scotland. All well there, and him lying as peaceful on his bed as if the end had come already. Well, sir, that done, coming back along the corridor I blew out my candle and stood waiting. The candle out, the moon came streaming in, and the outside from the

window lay spread out beneath me almost bright as day. I looked this ways and I looked that ways, back and front; but nothing to be seen, nor heard neither. Yet it seemed not more than one deep breath after I had closed my eyes in sleep that night that I was stark wideawake again, trying to make sense of some sound I'd heard.

'Old houses—I'm used to them; the timbers crinkle like a beehive. But this wasn't timbers, oh no! It might maybe have been wind, you'll say. But what chance of wind with not a hand's breadth of cloud moving in the sky, and such a blare of moonlight as would keep even a field mouse from peeping out of its hole? What's more, not to know whether what you are listening to is in or outside of your head isn't much help to a good night's rest. Still I fell off at last, unnoticing.

'Next morning, as George came back from taking up the breakfast tray, I had a good look at him in the sunlight, but you couldn't tell whether the marks round his eyes were natural—from what had gone before with the other, I mean—or from *insommia*. Best not to meddle, I thought; just wait. So I gave him good morning and poured out the coffee and we sat to it as usual, the wasps coming in over the marmalade as if nothing had happened.

'All quiet that day, only rather more so, as it always is in a sick-room house. Doctor come and gone, but no nurse yet; and the old gentleman I thought looking very ailing. But he spoke to me quite cheerful. Just like his old self, too, to be sympathizing with me for the double-duty I'd been doing in[Pg 132] the house. He asked after the garden, too, though there was as fine a bunch of black grapes on his green plate as any out of Canaan. It was the drought was in his mind. And just as I was leaving the room, my hand on the door, he mentioned one or two compliments about my having stayed on with him so long. "You can't pay for that out of any Bank," he said to me, smiling at me almost merry-like, his beard over the sheet.

'"I hope and trust, sir," I said, "while I am with you, there will be no further fuss." But I had a surety even as I said the words that he hadn't far to go, so that fusses, if come they did, didn't really much matter to him. I don't see how you would be likely to notice them when things are drawing to a last conclusion; though I am thankful to say that what did occur, was kept from him to the end.

'That night there came something sounding about the house that wasn't natural, and no mistake. I had scarcely slept a wink, and as soon as I heard it, I was on with my tail-coat over my night-shirt in a jiffy, though there was no need for light. I had fetched along my winter overcoat, too, one the Reverend himself had passed on to me—this very coat on my back now—and with that over my arm, I pushed open the door and looked in on George. Maybe he had heard my coming, maybe he had heard the other, I couldn't tell which, but there he was, sitting up in bed—the moonlight flooding in on

his long white face and tousled hair—and his trousers and braces thrown down anyhow on the chair beside it.

'I said to him, "What's wrong, George? Did you hear anything? A voice or anything?"

'He sat looking at me with his mouth open as if he couldn't shut it, and I could see he was shaken to the very roots. Now, mind you, here I was in the same quandary, as they call it, as before. What I'd heard might be real, some animal, fox, badger, or the like, prowling round outside, or it might not. If not, and the house being exercised, as I said, though a long way back, and the Reverend gentleman still in this world him[Pg 133]self, I had a kind of trust that what was there, if it *was* anything, couldn't get in. But naturally I was in something of a fever to make sure.

'"George," I said, "you mustn't risk a chill or anything of that sort"—and it had grown a bit cold in the small hours—"but it's up to us—our duty, George—with the Reverend at death's door and all, to know what's what. So if you'll take a look round on the outside I'll have a search through on the in. What we must be cautious about is that the old gentleman isn't disturbed."

'George went on looking at me, though he had by this time shuffled out of bed and into the overcoat I had handed him. He stood there, with his boots in his hand, shivering, but more maybe because he felt cold after the warmth of his sheets than because he had quite taken in what I had said.

'"Do you think, Mr. Blake," he asked me, sitting down again on his bed, "—you don't think he is come back again?"

'*Come back*, he said, just like that. And you'd have supposed from the quivering of his mouth I might have stopped it!

'"Who's, George, come back?" I asked him.

'"Why, what we looked through the glasses at in the field," he said. "It had his look."

'"Well, George," I said, speaking as moderate and gentle as you might to a child, "we know as how dead men tell no tales. Let alone scarecrows, then. All we've got to do is just to make sure. You do as you're bid, then, my lad. You go your ways, and I'll go mine. There's never any harm can befall a man if his conscience is easy."

'But that didn't seem to satisfy him. He gave a gulp and stood up again, still looking at me. Stupid or not, he was always one for doing his duty, was George. And I must say that what I call courage is facing what you're afraid of in your very innards, and not mere crashing into danger, eyes shut.

'"I'd lief as not go down, Mr. Blake," he said. "Leastways,[Pg 134] not alone. He never took much of a liking to me. He said he'd be evens. Not *alone*, Mr. Blake."

'"What have you to fear, George, my lad?" I said. "Man or spectre, the fault was none of yours."

'He buttoned the coat up, same as I am wearing it now, and he gave me just one look more. It's hard to say all that's in a fellow-creature's eyes, sir, when they are full of what no tongue in him could tell. But George had shut his mouth at last, and the moon on his face gave him a queer look, far away-like, as if all that there was of him, this world or the next, had come to keep him company. I will say that.

'And when the hush that had come down on the house was broken again, and this time it *was* the wind, though away high up over the roof, he didn't look at me any more. It was the last between us. He turned his back on me and went off out into the passage and down the stairs, and I listened until I could hear him in the distance scrabbling with the bar at the back. It was one of those old-fashioned doors, sir, you must understand, just loaded with locks and bolts, like in all old places.

'As for myself, I didn't move for a bit. There wasn't any hurry that I could see. Oh, no. I just sat down on the bed on the place where George had sat, and waited. And you may depend upon it, I stayed pretty quiet there—with all that responsibility, and not knowing what might happen next. And then presently what I heard was as though a voice had said something—very sharp and bitter; then said no more. There came a sort of moan, and then no more again. But by that time I was on my way on my rounds inside the house, as I'd promised; and so, out of hearing; and when I got back to my bedroom again everything was still and quiet. And I took it of course that George had got back safe to his....'

Since the fire had faded and the light of day was gone, the fish-like phosphorescence of the gas-mantles had grown[Pg 135] brighter, and this elderly man, whose name was Blake, I understood, was looking at me out of his white, almost leper-like face in this faint gloom as steadily almost as George must have been looking at him a few minutes before he had descended the back stairs of the Vicarage, never, I gathered, to set foot on them again.

'Did you manage to get any more sleep that night?' I said.

Mr. Blake seemed to be pleasingly surprised at so easy a question.

'That was the mistake of it,' he said. 'He wasn't found till morning. Cold for hours, and precious little to show why.'

'So you did manage to get a little sleep?'

But this time he made no answer.

'Your share, I suppose, was quite a substantial one?'

'Share?' he said.

'In the will...?'

'Now, didn't I tell you myself,' he protested with some warmth, 'that that, as it turned out, wasn't so; though why, it would take half a dozen or more of these lawyers to explain. And even at that, I don't know as what I did get has brought me anything much to boast about. I'm a free man, that's true. But for how long? Nobody can stay in this world here for ever, can he?'

With a peculiar rocking movement of his small head he peered round and out of the door. 'And though in this world,' he went on, 'you may have not one *iota* of harm to blame yourself for *to* yourself, there may still be misunderstandings, and them that have been deceived by them may be waiting for you in the next. So when it comes to what the captain of the *Hesper*——'

But at this moment our prolonged *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by a thickset vigorous young porter carrying a bucket of coals in one hand, and a stumpy torch of smouldering brown paper in the other. He mounted one of our chairs and with a tug of[Pg 136] finger and thumb instantly flooded our dingy quarters with an almost intolerable gassy glare. That done, he raked out the ash-grey fire with a lump of iron that may once have been a poker, and flung all but the complete contents of his bucket of coal on to it. Then he looked round and saw who was sitting there. Me he passed over. I was merely a bird of passage. But he greeted my fellow derelict as if he were an old acquaintance.

'Good evening, sir,' he said, and in that slightly indulgent and bantering voice which suggests past favours rather easily earned. 'Let in a little light on the scene. I didn't notice you when I came in and was beginning to wonder where you had got to.'

His patron smirked back at him as if any such trifling human attention was a peculiar solace. This time the porter deliberately caught my eye. And his own was full of meaning. It was as if there were some little privy and ironical understanding between us in which this third party was unlikely to share. I ignored it, rose to my feet and clutched my bag. A passenger train had come hooting into the station, its gliding lighted windows patterning the platform planks. Alas, yet again it wasn't mine. Still—such is humanity, I preferred my own company, just then.

When I reached the door, and a cold and dingy prospect showed beyond it, I glanced back at Mr. Blake, sitting there in his greatcoat beside the apparently extinguished fire. With a singularly mournful look, as of a lost dog, on his features, he was gazing after me. He seemed to be deploring the withdrawal even of my tepid companionship. But in that dreadful gaseous luminosity there was nothing, so far as I could see, that any mortal man could by any possibility be afraid of, alive or dead. So I left him to the porter. And—as yet—we have not met again.

[Pg 137]

MISSING

It was the last day of a torrid week in London—the flaming crest of what the newspapers call a *heat wave*. The exhausted inmates of the dazzling, airless streets—plate-glass, white stone, burnished asphalt, incessant roar, din, fume and odour—have the appearance at such times of insects trapped in an oven of a myriad labyrinthine windings and chambers; a glowing brazen maze to torture Christians in. To have a*mind* even remotely resembling it must be Satan's sole privilege!

I had been shopping; or rather, I had been loafing about from one department on to another in one of the huge 'stores' in search of bathing-drawers, a preventative of insect bites, and a good holiday 'shocker', and had retired at last incapable of buying anything—even in a world where pretty well everything except peace of mind can be bought, and sold. The experience had been oppressive and trying to the temper.

Too hot, too irritable even to lunch, I had drifted into a side street, and then into a second-hand bookshop that happened still to be open this idle Saturday afternoon; and having for ninepence acquired a copy of a book on psycho-analysis which I didn't want and should never read, I took refuge in a tea shop.

In spite of the hot-water fountain on the counter it was a[Pg 138] degree or two cooler in here, though even the marble-top tables were tepid to the touch. Quiet and drowsy, too. A block of ice surmounted the dinner-wagon by the counter. The white clock face said a quarter to three. Few chairs were now occupied; the midday mellay was over. A heavy slumbrousness muffled the place—the flies were as idle as the waitresses, and the waitresses were as idle as the flies.

I gave my order, and sat back exhausted in a listless vacancy of mind and body. And my dazed eyes, having like the flies little of particular interest to settle on, settled on the only fellow reveller that happened to be sitting within easy reach. At first glimpse

there could hardly be a human being you would suppose less likely to attract attention. He was so scrupulously respectable, so entirely innocent of 'atmosphere'. Even a Chelsea psychic would have been compelled to acknowledge that this particular human being had either disposed of his aura or had left it at home. And yet my first glimpses of him had drawn me out of the vacuum into which I had sunk as easily as a cork is drawn out of an empty bottle.

He was sitting at a table to the left, and a little in front of me. The glare from the open door and the gentler light from the cream-blinded shop window picked out his every hair and button. It flooded in on him from the sparkling glittering street, focused him, 'placed' him, arranged him—as if for a portrait in the finest of oils for next year's Academy. Limelight on the actor-manager traversing the blasted heath is mere child's play by comparison.

Obviously he was not 'the complete Londoner'—though that can hardly be said to be a misfortune. On the other hand, there was nothing rural, and only a touch or so of the provincial in his appearance. He wore a neat—an excessively neat—pepper-and-salt tweed suit, the waistcoat cut high and exhibiting the points of a butterfly collar and a triangle of black silk cravat slipped through a gold mourning ring. His[Pg 139] ears maybe were a little out of the mode. They had been attached rather high and flat on either side of his conical head with its dark, glossy, silver-speckled hair.

The nose was straight, the nostrils full. They suggested courage of a kind; possibly, even, on occasion, bravado. He looked the kind of man, I mean, it is well to keep out of a corner. But the eyes that were now peering vacantly down that longish nose over a trim but unendearing moustache at the crumbs on his empty plate were too close together. So, at least, it seemed to me. But then I am an admirer of the wide expressive brow—such as our politicians and financiers display. Those eyes at any rate gave this spruce and respectable person just a hint, a glint of the fox. I have never heard, though, that the fox is a dangerous animal even in a corner; only that he has his wits about him and preys on geese—whereas my stranger in the tea shop had been refreshing himself with Osborne biscuits.

It was hot. The air was parched and staled. And heat—unless in Oriental regions—is not conducive to exquisite manners. Far otherwise. I continued to watch this person, indolently speculating whether his little particularities of appearance did not match, or matched too precisely. Those ears and that cravat, for example; or those spruce-moustached nostrils and the glitter of the close-neighbouring eyes. And why had he brought to mind a tightly-packed box with no address on it? He began to be a burden, yet I could not keep my eyes away from him—nor from his hands. They were powerful and hairy, with large knuckles; and now that they were not in use he had placed them on his knees under the dark polished slab of his marble table. Beneath

those knees rested his feet (the toes turned in a little) in highly polished boots, with thickish soles and white socks.

There is, I agree, something peculiarly vulgar in thus picking a fellow-creature to pieces. But even Keats so dissected Miss Brawne; and even when he was in love with her: and it was[Pg 140] certainly not love at first sight between myself and this stranger.

Whether he knew it or not, he was attaching himself to me; he was making his influence felt. It was odd, then, that he could remain so long unconscious of so condensed a scrutiny. Maybe that particular nerve in him had become atrophied. He looked as if a few other rather important nerves might be atrophied. When he did glance up at me—the waitress having appeared with my tea at the same moment—there was a far-away startled look in his bleak blue-black eyes—as if he had been called back.

Nothing more; and even at that it was much such a look as had been for some little time fixed on the dry biscuit crumbs in his empty plate. He seemed indeed to be a man accustomed to being startled or surprised into vigilance without reason. But having seen me looking at him, he did not hesitate. He carefully took up his hat, his horn-handled and gold-mounted umbrella, and a large rusty scaling leather bag that lay on a chair beside him; rose; and stepping gently over with an almost catlike precision, seated himself in the chair opposite to mine. I continued to pour out my tea.

'You will excuse me troubling you,' he began in a voice that suggested he could sing tenor though he spoke bass, 'but would you kindly tell me the number of the omnibus that goes from here to King's Cross? I am a stranger to this part of London.'

I called after the waitress: 'What is the number of the bus,' I said, 'that goes from here to King's Cross?'

'The number of the bus, you si, that goes from here to King's Cross?'

'Yes,' I said, 'to King's Cross.'

'I'm sure *I* don't know,' she said. 'I'll ask the counter.' And she tripped off in her silk stockings and patent leather shoes.

'The counter will know,' I assured him. He looked at me,[Pg 141] moving his lips over his teeth as if either or both for some reason had cause to be uneasy.

'I am something of a stranger to London altogether,' he said, 'and I don't usually come these ways: it's a novelty to me. The omnibuses are very convenient.'

'Don't you? Is it?' I replied. 'Why not?' They were rather point-blank questions (and a gentleman, said Dr. Johnson, does not ask questions) but somehow they had slipped out as if at his pressing invitation.

He looked at me, his eyes seeming to draw together into an intenser focus. He was not exactly squinting, but I have noticed a similar effect in the eyes of a dog when its master is about to cry 'Fetch it!'

'You see,' he said, 'I live in the country, and only come to London when I seem to need company—badly, I mean. There's a great contrast between the country and this. All these houses. So many strange faces. It takes one out of oneself.'

I glanced round at the sparsely occupied tables. A cloud apparently had overlaid the sun, for a dull coppery glow was now reflected from the drowsy street. I could even hear the white-faced clock ticking. To congratulate him on his last remark would hardly have been courteous after so harmless an advance. I merely looked at him. What kind of self, I was vaguely speculating, would return into his hospitality when he regained his usual haunts.

'I have a nice little place down there,' he went on, 'but there's not much company. Lonely: especially now. Even a few hours makes all the difference. You would be surprised how friendly a place London can be; the people, I mean. Helpful.'

What can only be described as a faint whinny had sounded in his voice as he uttered that 'helpful'. Was he merely to prove yet another of those unfortunate travellers who have lost the return halves of their railway tickets? Had he marked me down for his prey![Pg 142]

'It is not so much what they say,' he continued, laying his hand on the marble table; 'but just their being about, you know.' I glanced at the heavy ring on its third finger and then at his watch-chain—woven apparently of silk or hair—with little gold rings at intervals along it to secure the plait. His own gaze continued to rest on me with so penetrating, so corkscrew-like an intensity, that I found myself glancing over my shoulder in search of the waitress. She however was now engaged in animated argument with the young lady at the pay-desk.

'Do you live *far* from London?' I ventured.

'About seventy miles,' he replied with an obvious gulp of relief at this impetus to further conversation. 'A nice old house too considering the rent, roomy enough but not too large. Its only drawback in some respects is there's nothing near it—not within call, I mean; and we—I—suffer from the want of a plentiful supply of water. Especially now.'

Why so tactless a remark on this broiling afternoon should have evoked so vivid a picture of a gaunt yellow-brick building perched amid sloping fields parched lint-white with a tropical drought, its garden little more than a display of vegetable anatomies, I cannot say. It was a house of a hideous aspect; but I confess it stirred my interest. Whereupon my stranger, apparently, thought he could safely glance aside; and I could examine him more at leisure. It was not, I have to confess, a taking face. There was a curious hollowness in its appearance. He looked like the shell of a man, or rather, like a hermit crab—that neat pepper-and-salt tweed suit and so on being a kind of second-hand accumulation on his back.

'And of course,' he began again, 'now that I am alone I become'—he turned sharply back on me—'I become more conscious of it.'

'Of the loneliness?' I suggested.

Vacancy appeared on his face, as if he had for the instant stopped thinking. 'Yes,' he replied, once more transfixing me[Pg 143] with those bleak close eyes of his, 'the loneliness. It seems to worsen more and more as the other slips away into the past. But I suppose we most of us have much the same experience; just of that, I mean. And even in London....'

I busied myself with my tea things, having no particular wish at the moment to continue the conversation. But he hadn't any intention of losing his victim as easily as all that.

'There's a case now here in the newspaper this morning,' he went on, his glance wandering off to a copy of the *Daily Mail* that lay on the chair next the one he had just vacated. 'A man not much older than I am—"found dead". Dead. The only occupant of quite a good-sized house, I should judge, at Stoke Newington—though I don't know the place personally. Lived there for years on end without even a charwoman to do for him—to—to work for him. Still even there there was some kind of company, I suppose. He could look out of the window; he could hear people moving about next door. Where I am, there isn't another house in sight, not even a barn, and so far as I can see, what they call Nature doesn't become any the more friendly however long you stay in a place—the birds and that kind of thing. It may get better in time; but it's only a few months ago since I was left quite like this. When my sister died.'

Obviously I was hooked beyond hope of winning free again until this corkscrew persistent creature had had his way with me. The only course seemed to be to get the experience over as quickly as possible. It is not easy, however, to feign an active sympathy; and mention of his dead sister had produced in my mind only a faint reflex image of a dowdy lady no longer young in dingy black. Still, it was an image that proved to be not very far from the actuality.

'Any close companionship like that', I murmured, 'when it is broken is a tragic thing.'

He appeared to have seen no significance in my remark.[Pg 144] 'And you see, once there were three of us. Once. It never got into the papers—at least not into the London papers, except just by mention, I mean.' He moistened his lips. 'Did you ever happen to come across a report about a lady, a Miss Dutton, who was "missing"?'

It was a pretty stupid question, for after all, few human beings are so gifted as to be able to recall the names even of the protagonists in genuine *causes célèbres*. To bear in mind every sort of Miss Dutton whose disappearance would be referred to only in news-snippets borrowed by the Metropolitan press from the provincial, would be rather too much of a tax even for those interested in such matters. I sipped my tea and surveyed him as sagaciously as possible; 'Not that I can actually recall,' I said. 'Miss—Dutton? It isn't a very uncommon name. You knew her?'

'Knew her!' he repeated, placing his hands on his knees and sitting stiffly back in his chair, his eyes unflinchingly fixed on mine. 'She lived with us a matter of two years or more. It was us she left. It was my house she was missing from. It caused quite a stir in the neighbourhood. It was the talk of the countryside. There was an Inquiry; and all that.'

'How long ago?'

'Pretty near a year ago. Yes; a year yesterday.'

'Do you mean the inquiry, or when Miss Dutton disappeared?'

'The inquiry,' he replied in a muffled fashion, as if a little annoyed at my want of perspicacity. 'The other was—oh, a month or more before that.'

The catechism was becoming a rather laborious way of extracting a story, but somehow its rudiments had begun to interest me. I had nothing to do. To judge from the look of the street, the quicksilver in the thermometer was still edging exquisitely upwards. I detested the thought of emerging into that oven. So apparently did my companion, unless the mere sound of his voice seemed to him better entertainment than,[Pg 145]say, the nearest 'picture palace'—where at least one would be out of sight and it would be dark.

'I should have thought,' I began again in a voice as unconcerned as I could manage, 'that living as you do, a stir in the neighbourhood would not much matter, though I agree that the mystery itself must have mattered a good deal more. That of course must have been a great shock to you both.'

'Ay,' he said, with a gleam in his eye, 'but that's just what you Londoners don't seem to understand. You have your newspapers and all that. But in most ways you don't get

talked about much. It's not so in the country. I guarantee you might be living right in the middle of the Yorkshire Moors and yet, if it came to there being anything to keep their tongues wagging, you'd know that your neighbours were talking of you, and what about, for miles around. It gets across—like those black men's drums one hears about in West Africa. As if the mere shock of the thing wasn't enough! What I feel about it is that nowadays people don't seem to show any sympathy, any ordinary feeling with—with those in such circumstances; at least, not country people. Wouldn't you say yourself,' he added, with feline rapidity, 'that if *you* were reported as missing it would be rough luck if nobody cared?'

'I don't quite see what you mean,' I replied. 'I thought you said that the disappearance of your friend made a stir in the neighbourhood.'

'Yes; but they were not thinking so much of *her* as of the cause of it.'

We exchanged a long glance, but without much addition to my own small fund of information. 'But surely,' I ventured, 'that must depend upon where she was supposed to have disappeared *to*?'

'That,' he replied, 'they never knew. We couldn't find out not one iota about it. You've no idea'—he drew his hands down over his face as if to clear away a shadow from his eyes—'you've no idea. Since she has gone I feel almost sometimes[Pg 146] as if she can never have been real. *There*, but not real; if you understand me. I see her; and then the real thing goes again. It never occurred to me, that.'

'The psychologists would tell us something about that.'

'The what?' he asked sharply.

'Oh, those who profess to explain the workings of the mind. After all, we can't definitely say whether that teapot there is real—what it is in itself, I mean. And merely to judge from its looks,' I added, 'one might hope it was a pure illusion.'

He looked hard at the teapot. 'Miss Dutton was a very well-preserved woman for her age,' he said. 'And when I say "not real", it's only in a manner of speaking, I mean. I've got her portrait in the newspaper in my pocket-book. That ought to prove her real enough. I never knew any one who was more "all there", as they say. She was a good friend to me—I have every reason to remember her. She came along of her own free will—just a chance meeting. In Scarborough, as a matter of fact. And she liked the comforts of a home after all those hotels and boarding houses.'

In the course of these ruminating and mournful remarks—and there was unmistakable 'feeling' in his tones—he was rather privily turning over the contents of an old leather pocket-book with an inelastic black band. He drew out a frayed newspaper cutting and put it down on the table beside the teapot.

'Looking at that, you wouldn't be in much doubt what Miss Dutton was in herself, now, would you? You'd recognize her,' he raised his eyes, 'if she were—if you met her, I mean, in these awful streets? I would myself.'

It was impossible to decide whether this last remark was ironical, triumphant, embittered, or matter-of-fact; so I looked at Miss Dutton. She was evidently a blonde and a well-preserved woman, as my friend had intimated; stoutish, with a plump face, a plump nose, infantile blue eyes, frizzy hair,[Pg 147] and she wore (what a few years ago were old-fashioned and are now new-fashioned) long ear-rings.

It was curious what a stabilizing effect the ear-rings produced. They resembled the pole Blondin used to carry as he tripped across his rope over the Niagara Falls. Miss Dutton was looking out of her blurred image with a sort of insouciance, gaiety, 'charm', the charm that photographers aim at but rather seldom convey. Destiny, apparently, casts no retrospective shadow. I defy anybody to have found the faintest hint in that aware, vain, commonplace, good-natured face which would suggest Miss Dutton was ever going to be 'missed'—missed, I mean, in the sense of becoming indiscoverable. In the other sense her friends would no doubt miss her a good deal. But then boarding houses and hotels are the resorts rather of acquaintances than of friends.

The owner of the newspaper snippet was scrutinizing the gay, blurred photograph with as much interest as I was; though to him it was upside-down. There was a queer foolish look on his face, a little feline, perhaps, in its sentimentality.

I pushed back the cutting across the marble table and he carefully reinterred it in his pocket-book. 'I was wondering,' he rambled on as he did so, 'what you might have thought of it—without prejudice, so to speak, if you had come across it—casually-like; in the newspaper, I mean?'

The question was not quite so simple as it sounded. It appeared as if my new acquaintance were in wait for a comment which he himself was eager to supply. And I had nothing much to say.

'It's difficult, you know, to judge from prints in newspapers,' I commented at last. 'They are usually execrable even as caricatures. But she looks, if I may say so, an uncommonly genial woman: feminine—and a practical one, too. Not one, I mean, who would be likely to be missing, except on purpose—of her own choice, that is.' Our eyes met an instant. 'The whole business must have been very disturbing, a great[Pg 148]anxiety to you. And, of course, to Miss...to your sister, I mean.'

'My name,' he retorted abruptly, shutting his eyes while a bewildering series of expressions netted themselves on his face, 'my name is Bleet.'

'Miss Bleet,' I added, glancing at the pocket into which the book had by now disappeared, and speculating, too, why so preposterous an *alias* should have occurred to apparently so ready a tongue.

'You were saying "genial",' he added rapidly. 'And that is what they all agreed. Even her only male relative—an uncle, as he called himself, though I can swear she never mentioned him in that or in any other capacity. She hadn't always been what you might call a happy woman, mind you. But they were bound to agree that those two years under my care—in our house—were the happiest in Miss Dutton's life. We made it a real home to her. She had her own rooms and her few bits of furniture—photographs, what-nots and so on, quite private. It's a pretty large house considering the rent—countrified, you know; and there was a sort of a new wing added to it fifty years or more ago. Old-fashioned, of course—open fireplace, no bath, enormous kitchen range—swallows coal by the bushel—and so on—very inconvenient but cheap. And though my sister was not in a position to supervise the housekeeping, there couldn't be a more harmless and affectionate creature. To those, that is, who were kind to her. She'd run away from those who weren't—just run away and hide. I must explain that my poor sister was not quite—was a little weak in her intellects—from her childhood. It was always a great responsibility. But as time went on,' he drew his hand wearily over his face, 'Miss Dutton herself very kindly relieved me of a good deal of that. You said she looked a practical woman; so she was.'

His narrative was becoming steadily more personal, and disconcerting. And yet—such is humanity—it was as steadily[Pg 149] intensifying in interest. A menacing rumble of thunder at that moment sounded over the street, and a horse clattered down with its van beyond the open door. My country friend did not appear to have noticed it.

'You never know quite where you are with the ladies,' he suddenly ejaculated, and glanced piercingly up—for at that moment our waitress had drawn near.

'It's a 'Ighteen,' she said, pencil on lip, and looking vacantly from one to the other of us.

'"Ighteen",' echoed her customer sharply; 'what's that? Oh the omnibus. You didn't say what you meant. Thank you.' She hovered on, check-book in hand. 'And please bring me another cup of coffee.' He looked at me as if with the intention of duplicating his order. I shook my head. 'One cup, then, miss; no hurry.'

The waitress withdrew.

'It looks as if rain was coming,' he went on, and as if he were thirsting for it as much as I was. 'As I was saying, you can never be quite sure where you are with women; and, mind you, Miss Dutton was a woman of the world. She had seen a good deal of life—been abroad—Gay Paree, Monte Carlo, and all that. Germany before the war,

too. She could read French as free and easy as you could that mennoo there. Paper-bound books with pictures on them, and that kind of thing.' He was looking at me, I realized, as if there were no other way of intimating the particular kind of literature he had in mind.

'I used to wonder sometimes what she could find in us, such a lonely place; no company. Though, of course, she was free to ask any friends if she wanted to, and talked of them too when in the mood. Good class, to judge from what she said. What I mean is, she was quite her own mistress. And I must say there could not be more good humour and so on than what she showed my poor sister. At least, until later. She'd talk to her as if conversing; and my sister would sit[Pg 150] there by the window, looking back at her and smiling and nodding just as if she were taking it all in. And who knows, perhaps she was. What I mean is, it's possible to have things in your head which you can't quite put into so many words. It's one of the things I look for when I come up to London: the faces that could tell a story though what's behind them can't.'

I nodded.

'I can assure you that before a few weeks were over she had got to be as much at home with us as if we had known her all our lives. Chatty and domesticated, and all that. And using the whole house just as if it belonged to her. All the other arrangements were easy, too. I can say now, and I said it then, that we never once up to then demeaned ourselves to a single word of disagreement about money matters or anything else. A woman like that, who has been all over the continent, isn't likely to go far wrong in that. I agree the terms were on the generous side; but then, you take me, so were the arrangements.

'She asked herself to raise them when she had been with us upwards of twelve months. But I said "No". I said, "A bargain's a bargain, Edna"—we were "Edna" and "William" to one another, by then, and my sister too. She was very kind to my poor sister; got a specialist up all the way from Bath—though for all his prying questions he did nothing, as I knew he wouldn't. You can't take those things so late. Mind you, as I say, the business arrangements were not all on one side. Miss Dutton liked things select and comfortable. She liked things to go smoothly; as we all do, I reckon. She had been accustomed to smart boarding-houses and hotels—that kind of thing. And I did my level best to keep things nice.'

My stranger's face dropped into a rather gloomy expression, as if poor humanity had sometimes to resign itself to things a little less agreeable than the merely smooth and nice. He laid down his spoon, which he had been using with some vigour, and sipped his coffee.[Pg 151]

'What I was going to explain,' he went on, rubbing at his moustache, 'is that everything was going perfectly easy—just like clockwork, when the servant question

came up. My house, you see, is on what you may call the large side. It's old in parts, too. Up to then we had had a very satisfactory woman—roughish but willing. She was the wife, or what you might just as well call the widow, of a sailor. I mean he was one of the kind that has a ditto in every port, you know. She was glad of the place, glad to be where her husband couldn't find her, even though the stipulation was that her wages should be permanent. That system of raising by driblets always leads to discontent. And I must say she was a fair tyrant for work.

'Besides her, there was a help from the village—precious little good *she* was. Slummocky—and *stupid*! Still, we had got on pretty well up to then, up to Miss Dutton's time, and for some months after. But cooking for three mouths is a different thing to two. Besides, Miss Dutton liked her meals dainty-like: a bit of fish, or soup occasionally, toast-rack, tantalus, serviettes on the table—that kind of thing. But all that came on gradual-like—the thin edge of the wedge; until at last, well, "exacting" wasn't in it.

'And I must say,' he turned his wandering eye once more on mine, 'I must say, she had a way of addressing menials which sometimes set even my teeth on edge. She was a lady, mind you—though what *that* is when the breath is out of your body it's not so easy to say. And she had the lady's way with them—those continental hotels, I suppose. All very well in a large establishment where one works up against another and you can call them names behind their backs. But our house wasn't an establishment. It wouldn't do there: not in the long run, even if you had an angel for a general, and a cook to match.

'Mind you, as I say, Miss Dutton was always niceness itself to my poor sister: never a hard word or a contemptuous look—not to her face nor behind her back, not up to then. I wouldn't have tolerated it either. And you know what talking[Pg 152] to a party that can only just sit, hands in lap, and gape back at you means, or maybe a word now and then that doesn't seem to have anything to do with what you've been saying. It's a great affliction. But servants were another matter. Miss Dutton couldn't demean herself to them. She lived in another world. It was, "Do this"; and "Why isn't it done?"—all in a breath. I smoothed things over, though they got steadily worse and worse, for weeks, and weeks, ay, months. It wore me to a shadow.

'And one day the woman—Bridget was her name—Irish, you know—she flared up in earnest and gave her, as they say, as good as she got. I wasn't there at the time. But I heard afterwards all that passed, and three times over—on the one side at least. I had been into the town in the runabout. And when I came home, Mrs. Tantrums had packed up her box, got a gig from the farm, and was gone for good. It did me a world of harm, that did.

'Pretty well upset, I was too, as you can imagine. I said to Miss Dutton, "Edna," I said, "all I am saying is, was it necessary to go to such extremes? Not," I said, "mind you, Edna, that she was all sugar and honey even to me. I knew the wrong side of her mouth years before *you* appeared on the scene. What you've got to do with such people is—to manage—be firm, keep 'em low, but manage. It isn't commonsense to cut off your tongue to spite your teeth. She's a woman, and Irish at that," I said, "and you know what to expect of them."

'I was vexed, that's a fact, and perhaps I spoke rather more sharply than need have been. But we were good friends by that time: and if honest give-and-take isn't possible between friends, where are you? I ask you. There was by that time too, nothing left over-private between us, either. I advised her about her investments and so on, though I took precious good care not to be personally involved. Not a finger stirring unless she volunteered it first. That all came out too. But it was nothing to do with me, now, was it, as man to man, if the[Pg 153] good lady took a fancy into her head to see that my poor sister was not left to what's called the tender mercies of this world after my death?

'And yet, believe me, they fixed on that, like leeches. My hell, they did! At the Inquiry, I mean. And I don't see how much further their decency could have gone if they had called it an Inquest; and....'

Yet another low (almost gruff) volley of thunder interrupted his discourse. He left the sentence in the air; his mouth ajar. I have never met any one that made such active use of his chin in conversation, by the way, as Mr. Bleet did. It must have been exceedingly fatiguing. I fancy he mistook just then the expression on my face for one of inquiry. He leant forward, pushing down towards me that long hairy finger on the marble table-top.

'When I say "tender mercies",' he explained, 'I don't mean that my sister would have been left penniless, even if Miss Dutton or nobody like her had come into the house. There was money of my own too, though, owing to what I need not explain'—he half swallowed the words—'not much.' He broke off. 'It seems as if we are in for a bit of a thunderstorm. But I'd sooner it was here than down my way. When you're alone in the house you seem to notice the noise more.'

'I fancy it won't be much,' I assured him. 'It will clear the air.'

His eyes opened as if in astonishment that any mere act of nature could bring such consolation.

'You were saying,' I exclaimed, 'that you lost your maid?' He glanced up sharply. 'Though of course,' I added hastily, 'you mustn't let me intrude on your private affairs.'

'Not at all; oh, not at all,' he interrupted with relief. 'I thought you said, "lost my head". Not at all. It makes all the difference to me—I can assure you, to be able to go over it like this. Friendly like. To get a listener who has not been fed up on all that gossip and slander. It takes some living down,[Pg 154] too. Nothing satisfies them: nothing. From one week's end to another you can't tell where they'll unearth themselves next.'

It was becoming difficult to prevent a steadily growing distaste for my companion from showing itself in my face. But then self-pity is seldom ingratiating. Fortunately the light where we sat was by now little better than dusk. Indeed, to judge from the growing gloom in our tea-shop, the heavens at this moment were far from gracious. I determined to wait till the rain was over. Besides, though my stranger himself was scarcely winning company, and his matter was not much above the sensational newspaper order, the mere zigzagging of his narrative was interesting. Its technique, I mean, reminded me of the definition of a crab: 'The crab is a little red animal that walks backwards.'

'The fact is,' he went on, 'on that occasion—I mean about the servant—Miss Dutton and I had words. I own it. Not that she resented my taking the thing up in a perfectly open and friendly way. She knew she had put me in a fair quandary. But my own private opinion is that when you are talking to a woman it's best not to bring in remarks about the sex in general. A woman is herself or nothing, if you follow me. What she thinks is no more than another skin. Keep her sex out of it, and she'll be reasonable. But no further. As a matter of fact, I never argue with ladies. But I soon smoothed that over. It was only a passing cloud. And I must say, considering what a lady she *was*, she took the discomforts of having nothing but a good-for-nothing slattern in the house very generously, all things considered.

'Mind you, I worked *myself*, fit for any couple of female servants: washed up dishes, laid the table, kept the little knick-knacks going. Ay, and I'd go into the town to fetch her out little delicacies, tinned soups and peaches, and such like; anything she might have a taste to. And I taught her to use the runabout for herself, though to hear her changing gear was[Pg 155] like staring ruin in the face. A gallon of petrol to a hank of crimson silk—that kind of thing. Believe me, she'd go all those miles for a shampoo-powder, or to have tea at a tea-shop—though you can't beat raw new-laid eggs and them on the premises. They got to know her there. She was a rare one for the fashions: scarves and motor-veils, and that kind of thing. But I never demurred. It wasn't for me to make objections, particularly as she'd do a little shopping on the housekeeping side as well, now and then. Though, mind you, she knew sixpence from a shilling, and particularly towards the last.

'What was the worst hindrance was that my poor sister seemed to have somehow come to know there were difficulties in the house. I mean that there had begun to be.

You don't know how they do it; but they do. And it doesn't add to your patience, I grant, when what you have done at one moment is done wrong over again the next. But she meant well, poor creature: and scolding at her only made things worse. Still, we got along happily enough for a time, until'—he paused once more with mouth ajar—'until Miss Dutton took it into her head to let matters come to a crisis. Now judging from that newspaper cutting I showed you, what would you take the lady's age to be? Allowing, as you might say, for all that golden hair?'

It was an indelicate question. Though why the mere fact that Miss Dutton was now missing should intensify its indelicacy, it is not easy to say.

'Happiness makes one look younger than one really is,' I suggested.

He gaped at me, as if in wonderment that in a world of woe he himself was not possessed of a white beard as long as your arm.

'"Happiness?"' he echoed.

'Yes, happiness.'

'Well, what I mean is, you wouldn't say she was in the filly[Pg 156] class; now, would you? High-spirited, easy-going, and all that; silly, too, at times: but no longer young. Not in her heyday, I mean.'

I pushed my empty cup aside and looked at him. But he looked back at me without flinching, as if indeed it was a pleasant experience to be sharing with a stranger sentiments so naïve regarding 'the fair sex'.

'Mind you, I don't profess to be a young man either. But I can assure you on my word of honour, that what she said to me that evening—I was doing chores in the kitchen at the time, and she was there too, arranging flowers in a vause for supper; she had a dainty taste in flowers—well, she asked me why I was so unkind to her, so unresponsive, and—it came on me like a thunderbolt.'

As if positively for exemplification, a violent clap of thunder at that moment resounded overhead. The glasses and crockery around us softly tinkled in sympathy. We listened in silence to its reverberations dying away across the chimney-tops; though my companion seemed to be taking them in through his mouth rather than through his ears. His cheek paled a little.

'That's what she asked me, I say. And I can tell you it took me on the raw. It was my turn to flare up. We had words again: nothing much, only a storm in a tea-cup.' Instead of smiling at this metaphor in the circumstances, he seemed astonished, almost shocked, at its aptitude. But he pushed on boldly.

'And then after I had smoothed things over again, she put her cards on the table. Leap Year, and all that tomfoolery, not a bit of it! She was in dead earnest. She told me what I had guessed already, that she had scarcely a friend in the world. Never a word, mind you, of the Colonel—interloping old Pepper-face! She assured me, as I say, she hadn't not only a single relative, but hardly a friend; that she was, as you might say, alone in life, and—well, that her sentiments had become[Pg 157] engaged. In honour bound I wouldn't have breathed this to a living soul who knew the parties; but to a stranger, if I may say so, it isn't quite the same thing. What she said was—in the kitchen there, and me in an apron, mind you, tied round me—doing chores—she said—well, in short, that she wanted to make a match of it. She had taken a fancy to me, and was I agreeable.' There was no vanity in his face; only a stark unphilosophical astonishment. He seemed to think that to explain all is to forgive all; and was awaiting my concurrence.

'You mean she proposed marriage,' I interrupted him with needless pedantry, and at once, but too late, wished the word back. For vestiges of our conversation had evidently reached the counter. Our waitress, still nibbling her pencil, was gazing steadily in our direction. And for some obscure reason this heat that we were sharing with the world at large, combined with this preposterous farrago, was now irritating me almost beyond endurance. The fellow's complacency was incredible.

I beckoned to the young woman. 'You said this gentleman's bus to King's Cross was an Eighteen, didn't you?'

'Yes, 'Ighteen,' she repeated.

'Then would you please bring him an ice.'

Mr. Bleet gazed at me in stupefaction; a thick colour had mounted into his face. 'You don't mean to say,' he spluttered, 'that *I* made any such mention of such a thing. I'm sure I never noticed it.'

My impulse had been nothing more than a protest against my own boredom and fatigue; but the way he had taken it filled me with shame. What could the creature's state of mind be like if his memory was as untrustworthy as that? The waitress retired.

'It's so devilishly hot in here,' I explained. 'And even talking is fatiguing in this weather.'

'Ay,' he said in a low voice. 'It is. But you aren't having one yourself?'

'No, thank you,' I said, 'I daren't. I can't take ices. Indiges[Pg 158]tion—it's a miserable handicap.... You were saying that at the time of Miss Dutton's proposal, you were in the kitchen.'

There was a pause. He sat looking foolishly at the little glass dishful of ice-cream: as surprising a phenomenon apparently as to an explorer from the torrid zone earth's northern snows must first appear. There was a look upon his face as if he had been 'hurt', as if, like a child, at another harsh word he might burst out crying.

'I hardly know that it's worth repeating,' he said at last lamely. His fine resonant voice had lost its tone. 'I suppose she intended it kindly enough. And I wouldn't say I hadn't suspected which way the wind was blowing: Willie this, and Willie that. I've always been William to them that know me, except Bill at school. But it was always Willie with her; and a languishing look to match. Still, I never expected what came after that. It took me aback.

'There she was, hanging on my every word, looking volumes, and me not knowing what to say. In a way too, I was attached to her. There were two sides to her, I allow that.' He turned away but not, it seemed, in order to see the less conspicuous side more clearly. 'I asked her to let me think things over, and I said it as any gentleman would. "Let me think it over, Edna," I said. "You do me honour," I said. Her hand was on my arm. She was looking at me. God being my witness, I tried to spare her feelings. I eased it over, meaning it all for the best. You see that little prospect had no more than occurred to me. Married life wasn't what I was after. I shouldn't be as old as I am now—and unmarried, I mean—if that had been so. It was uncomfortable to see her carrying on like that: too early. But things having come to such a pass, well, as you might say, we glided into an understanding at last. And with what result? Why...she made it an occasion for putting her foot down all the way round. And hadn't I known it of old?'

He looked at me searchingly, with those dog-bright eyes,[Pg 159] those high-set ears, as if to discover where precisely I now was in relation to his confidences.

'She took the reins, as they say. All in good temper for the most part; but there was no mistaking it. Mistress first and Mrs. after, in a manner of speaking. But when it came to speaking sharply to my poor sister on a matter which you wouldn't expect even a full-witted person to be necessarily very quick about at the uptake—I began to suspect I had made a mistake. I knew it then: but forewarned isn't always forearmed. And mistakes are easier to make than to put right. It had gone too far....'

'If you really don't want that ice, I can easily ask the waitress to take it away,' I assured him, if only to bring back that wandering empty eye from the reverie into which he seemed to have fallen. Or was it that he was merely absorbed in the picture of the rain-drenched street that was reflected in the looking-glass behind my chair?

'Thank you,' he said, taking up the spoon.

'And Miss Dutton left you at last. Did she tell you she had any intention of going?'

'Never,' he asseverated. 'Not a word. No, not a single word. And if you *can't* explain it, well then, why go on trying? I say. Not at this late day. But you might as well argue with a stone wall. The heat had come by then. Last summer, you know: the drought. Not the great drought, I mean—but round our parts in particular. The whole place was dried up to a tinder; cracks in the clay; weeds dying; birds gone. Even the trees flagging: and the oaks half eaten up by caterpillars already. Meantime, I don't know how it was—unless, perhaps, the heat—but there had been another quarrel. They never got *that* out of me at the Inquiry, though; I can tell you. And that was patched up, too. I apologized because she insisted. But she had hurt me; she had hurt my feelings. And I couldn't see that marriage was going to be a very practical experiment on those lines. But she came round; and considering what an easy[Pg 160] woman of the world she looks like in that photograph, you wouldn't have guessed, would you, that crying, weeping, I mean, was much in her way? I found that out, too. Fatiguing.

'And it didn't suit her, either. But she was what they call a woman made for affection. And I mean by *that*,' he broke in emphatically, 'she liked to monopolize. She wasn't a sharer. We were badly in want of a servant ourselves by that time, as you may imagine. Going from bad to worse, and me with a poisoned thumb, opening tins. But *she* was in want of a servant still more. She wanted me. Husbands often are nothing much better. What's more, I don't wish to say anything against the—against her now; but for the life of me I can't see any reason why she should have gone so far as to insult me. And not a week since we were like birds on one roost. To insult me, mind you, with my poor sister there, listening by!

'But I had learned a bit by then. I held my tongue, though there was a plenty of things to say in reply if I could have demeaned myself to utter them. Plenty. I just went on looking out of the window, easing myself with my foot—we were in the drawing-room at the time—and the very sight of the dried-up grass and the dead vegetables, and the sun pouring down out of the sky like lava from a volcano would have been enough in themselves to finish off most people's self-restraint. But as I say, I just stood there thinking of what I might have said, but saying nothing—just let her rant on.

'Why, for instance, do you suppose she had made out weeks before that her investments were bringing in twice as much as they really did? Why all that stuff about Monte Carlo and the lady from America when it was only Boulogne and what they call a *pension*, which in plain English is nothing more than lodgings? Mind you,' he said, as if to intercept the remark I had no intention of making, 'mind you, I agree there *was* a competence, and I agree that, apart from a silly legacy to the Home for Cats and Dogs and that Belgian knacker trade, she had left all there was to leave to my sister—and long before[Pg 161] what I told you about just now. I saw that in black and white. It was my duty. That was all settled. On the other hand, how was I to know that she wouldn't change her mind; that she hadn't been paving the way, as you may call

it? And why had she deliberately deceived me? I thought it then, and I think it now, more than ever—considering what I have been through. It wasn't treating me fairly, and particularly before she was in a position when things couldn't be altered, so to speak, as between husband and wife. Stretch it too far, and...'

Owing to the noise of the rain—and possibly in part to his grammar—it was only with difficulty that I could now follow what the creature was mumbling. I found my attention wandering. A miniature Niagara at least eighteen inches wide was at this moment foaming along the granite gutter while the rain in the middle of the street as it rebounded above the smoking asphalt was lifting into the air an exquisite mist of spray. I watched it enthralled; it was sweet as the sight of palm-trees to my tired hot eyes, and its roar and motion lulled me for a moment or two into a kind of hypnotic trance. When I came back to myself and my trivial surroundings, I found my companion eyeing me as if he had eagerly taken advantage of these moments of oblivion.

'That's the real thing,' he said, as if to humour me, beckoning with his thumb over his shoulder. 'That rain. But it's waste on only stones.' He eyed it pensively, turning his head completely round on his narrow shoulders to do so. But only for a moment. He returned to the business in hand as promptly as if we gossipers had been called to order by the Chairman of a Committee.

'Now it says in that report there, which you have just been reading, that Miss Dutton had not been seen after she left Crowstairs that afternoon of the 3rd of July. That's what it says—in so much print. And I say that's a lie. As it came out later on. And it doesn't make it any truer being in print. It's inaccurate—proved so. But perhaps I ought to tell you first[Pg 162] exactly how the whole thing came about. Things get so confused in memory.' Once more he wearily drew his hand over his face as if to obliterate even the memory itself. 'But—quite apart from the others—it's a relief to get things clearer even in one's own mind. The fact is, the whole thing was over between us a day or two before. As I say, after the last little upset which I told you about, things were smoothed out again as usual. At least on her side, though there was precious little in which I was really myself at fault. But my own belief is that she was an hysterical woman. What I mean is, she didn't need anything to make a fuss about; to fire up over. No foundation except just her own mood and feelings. I never was what they call a demonstrative person; it isn't in our family. My father himself was a schoolmasterish kind of man. "It hurts me more than it hurts you"; that kind of man. And up to the age of ten I can honestly say that I never once heard my mother answer him back. She felt it, mind you. He thrashed me little short of savage at times. She'd look on, crying; but she kept herself in. She knew it only made matters worse; and she died when I was twelve.

'Well, what I think is this—that Miss Dutton made a mistake about me. She liked comfort. Breakfast in bed; slippers at night; hot water to wash in; that kind of thing. I'll go further: she was meant for luxury. You could see it in her habits. If she had been twice as well off, she'd have wanted three times as many luxuries: lady's maid, evening dress, tea-gowns, music in the drawing-room—that sort of thing. And maybe it only irritated her when she found that I could keep myself in and just look calm, whatever she did or said. Hesitate to say whatever came into her mind?—not she!—true or untrue. Nor actual physical violence, either. Why months before, she threw a vase full of flowers at me: snowdrops.'

The expression on his face suddenly became fixed, as if at an unexpected recollection.

'I am not suggesting,' he testified earnestly, 'considering[Pg 163]—considering what came after, that I bear her any grudge or malice on account of all that. All I mean is that I was pressed and pushed on to a point that some would say was beyond human endurance. Maybe it was. But what I say is, let', his voice trembled, 'bygones be bygones. I will say no more of that. My point is that Miss Dutton, after all, was to be, as they say, a bird of passage. There had been a final flare up and all was over between us. Insult on insult she heaped on me. And my poor sister there, in her shabby old black dress, peering out at us, from between her fingers, trembling in the corner like a dumb animal. She had called her in.

'And me at my wits' end, what with the servant trouble and the most cantankerous and unreasonable lot of tradespeople you could lay hands on, north or south. I can tell you, I was pretty hard pressed. They dragged all that up at the Inquiry. Oh, yes, bless you. Trust 'em for that. Once it's men against man, then look to it. Not a *public* Inquiry, mind you. No call for that. And I *will* say the police, though pressing, and leaving no stone unturned in a manner of speaking, were gentlemen by comparison. But such things leak out. You can't keep a penny-a-liner from gabbing, and even if there had been nothing worse to it they'd have made my life a hell upon earth.

'Nothing worse to it? How do you mean?'

His glance for the instant was entirely vacant of thought. 'I mean,' he said stubbornly, after a moment's hesitation, 'the hurt to my private feelings. That's what I mean. I can hear her now. And the first thing I felt after it was all over, was nothing but relief. We couldn't have hit it off together, not for long: not after the first few weeks, anyhow. Better, I say, wash your hands of the whole thing. I grant you her decision had left me in a nasty pickle. As a matter of fact, she was to go in a week, and me to clear up the mess. Bills all over the place—fresh butter, mind you, olives, wine, tinned mock turtle—that kind of thing; and all down to my account. What I feel is, she oughtn't to have kept on at me like that right up to the last.[Pg 164] Wouldn't you have thought,

considering all things, any woman with an ounce of common sense—not to speak of common caution—would have let sleeping dogs lie?'

He was waiting for an answer.

'What did her uncle, the Colonel, say to that?'

'Oh, him,' he intimated with an incredible sneer. 'In the Volunteers! I was speaking as man to man.'

'And she didn't even wait the two or three days, then?'

'It was the 3rd of July,' he repeated. 'After tidying things up for the day—and by that time, mind you, every drop of water had to be brought in buckets across the burnt-up fields from a drying-up pond half a mile away. But it was done. I did it. After finishing, I say, all the rest of the morning chores, I was sitting there thinking of getting a snack of lunch and then what to do next, when I heard a cough—her door had opened; and then her footstep on the stairs—slippers.' He held up that forefinger as if at an auction, and he was speaking with extreme deliberation as if, with eyes and senses fixed on the scene, he were intent to give me the exactest of records in the clearest of terms. 'And I said to myself, "She's coming! and it's all to begin again!" I said it; I knew it. "And face it out?...then—me?"' He shook his head a little like a cat tasting water, but the eyes he showed me were like the glazed windows of an empty shop. 'No, I made myself scarce. I said to myself: "Better keep your distance. Make yourself scarce; keep out of it." And heaven help me I had been doing my best to forget what had passed the night before and to face what was to come. And so—I went out.

'It was early afternoon: sultry, like now. And I wandered about the fields. I must have gone miles and never met a soul. But if you ask me to say where, then all I can say is: Isn't one field the living image of another? And what do you see when your mind isn't there? All round Winstock way—lanes, hedges, cornfields, turnips—tramp and tramp and tramp. And it was not until about seven o'clock that evening that I got[Pg 165] back again. Time for supper. I got out the crockery and—and raked out the fire. No sign of nobody, nor of my sister either—though there was nothing in that: she had a habit of sitting up at her bedroom window, and looking out, just with her hands in her lap. And the house as still as a—as still as a church.

'I loafed about a bit in the kitchen. Call *her*? Well, hardly! There was plenty to do. As usual. The supper, and all that. The village woman had left about eleven that morning—tooth-ache. She owned to it. Not that that put me about. I can cook a boiled egg and a potato well enough for most Christians. But hot meals—meals for—well, anyhow, there was nothing hot that evening. It was about seven-thirty by then, I suppose; and I was beginning to wonder. Then I thought I'd go out in the yard and

have a look at the runabout—an old Ford, you know—I hadn't had time then for weeks to keep it decent. When I got to the shed, there was a strange cat eating up some fish-bones; and when I looked in, it was gone.'

'You mean the Ford?'

'Yes, the Ford. There wasn't a sign of it. That froze me up, I can tell you, for there had been gipsies about a day or two before. I rushed into the house and called out up the stairs, "Edna! Edna! Are you there? The Ford's gone." No answer. I can tell you I was just like a frenzied man. I looked in the drawing-room—teapot and cup on a tray but empty: just sunshine streaming in as if nothing had happened. Then I looked into her little parlour: boudoir, she called it. Nothing doing. Then I went upstairs and tapped on her bedroom door. "Miss Dutton," I said, "have you seen anything of the Ford? It's gone." And then I looked in. That was the queer thing about it. They all said that. That it never occurred to me, I mean, that she was not in the car herself. But what I say is—how can you think of everything before you say it, and wasn't it I myself that *said* I had said it?

'Anyhow, I looked in: I suppose a man can do *that* in his[Pg 166] own house and his car gone from under his very nose! And believe me, the sight inside was shocking. I'm a great stickler myself for law and order, for neatness, I mean. I had noticed it before: it irritated me. In spite of all her finery, she was never what you would call a tidy woman. But that room beat everything. Drawers flung open, dresses hugger-mugger, slippers, bags, bead-work, boxes, gimcracks all over the place. But not a sign of her. I looked—everywhere. She wasn't there, right enough. Not—not a sign of her. She was gone. And—and I have never seen her since.'

The rain was over, and the long sigh he uttered seemed to fill the whole tea-shop as if it were a faint echo of the storm which had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The sun was wanly shining again, gilding the street.

'You at once guessed, I suppose, the house had been broken into, while you were out?'

He kept his eyes firmly on mine. 'Yes,' he said. 'That's what I thought—at first.'

'But then, I think you said a minute or two ago that Miss Dutton *was* actually seen again?'

He nodded. 'That's just it,' he said, as if with incredulous lucidity. 'So you see, the other couldn't have been. The facts were against it. She was seen that very evening,' he said, 'and driving my Ford. By more than one, too. Our butcher happened to be outside his shop door; no friend of mine either. It was a Saturday, cutting up pieces for the 4d. and 6d. trays, and he saw her going by: saw the number too. It was all but broad daylight, though it's a narrow street. It was about seven then, he said, because he had only just wound his clock. There she was; and a good pace too. And who could

be surprised if she looked a bit unusual in appearance? It's exactly what you'd expect. You don't bolt out of a house you have lived in comfortable for two or three years as neat as a new pin.'

'What was wrong with her?'

'Oh, the man was nothing better than a fool, though[Pg 167] promptitude itself when it came to asking a good customer to settle up. He said he'd have hardly recognized her. There, in my car, mind you, and all but broad daylight.'

'But surely,' I said as naturally as possible, 'even if it is difficult sometimes to trace a human being, it is not so easy to dispose of a car. Wasn't that ever found?'

He smiled at me, and in a more friendly way than I should have deemed possible in a face so naturally inexpressive.

'You've hit the very nail on the head,' he assented. 'They did find the car—on the Monday morning. In fact it was found on the Sunday by a young fellow out with his sweetheart, but they thought it was just waiting—picking flowers, or something. It had been left inside a fir-copse about a couple of hundred yards from a railway station, a mile or so out of the town.'

'Just a countryfied little railway station, I suppose? Had the porter or anybody noticed a lady?'

'Countryfied—ay, maybe: but the platform crowded with people going to and fro for their week's marketing, besides a garden party from the Rectory.'

'The platform going into the town?'

'Yes, that's it,' said my friend. 'Covering her tracks.'

At that moment I noticed one of our waitress's bright-red 'Eighteens' whirling past the tea-shop door. It vanished.

'She had had a letter that morning—postmark Chicago,' the now far-too-familiar voice edged on industriously. 'The postman noticed it, being foreign. It's my belief *that* caused it. But mind you, apart from that, though I'm not, and never was, complaining, she'd treated me, well——' But he left the sentence unfinished while he clumsily pushed about with his spoon in the attempt to rescue a fly that had strayed in too far in pursuit of his sweet cold coffee. He was breathing gently on the hapless insect.

'And I suppose, by that time, you had given the alarm?'

'Given the alarm?' he repeated. 'Why?'[Pg 168]

The sudden frigidity of his tone confused me a little. 'Why,' I said, 'not finding Miss Dutton in the house, didn't you let anybody know?'

'Now my dear sir,' he said, 'I ask you. How was *I* to know what Miss Dutton was after? I wasn't Miss Dutton's keeper; she was perfectly at liberty to do what she pleased, to come and go. How was I to know what she had taken into her head? Why, I thought for a bit it was a friendly action considering all things, that she should have borrowed the car. Mind you, I don't say I wasn't disturbed as well, her not leaving a word of explanation, as she had done once before—pinned a bit of paper to the kitchen table—"Yours with love, Edna"—that sort of thing. Though that was when everything was going smooth and pleasant. What I did first was to go off to a cottage down the lane and inquire there. All out, except the daughter in the wash-house. Not a sight or sound of car or Miss Dutton, though she did recollect the honk of a horn sounding. "Was it my horn?" I asked. But they're not very observant, that kind of young woman. Silly-like. Besides, she wasn't much more than a child.'

'And your sister: where actually was she, after all?'

He looked at me as if once more in compliment of my sagacity.

'That, I take it—to find and question *her*, I mean, was a matter of course. I went up to her room, opened the door, and I can hear myself actually saying it now: "Have you seen anything of Edna, Maria?"

'It was very quiet in her room—stuffy, too, and for the moment I thought she wasn't there; and then I saw her—I detected her there—crouching in the farthest corner out of the light. I saw her white face turn round, it must have been covered up. "Where's Edna, Maria?" I repeated. She shook her head at me, sitting there beyond the window. I could scarcely see her. And you don't seem to have realized that any kind of direct or sudden question always confused her. It[Pg 169] didn't seem she understood what I was saying. In my belief it was nothing short of brutal the way they put her through it. I mean that Colonel, as he calls himself. Over and over and over again.

'Well, we weren't in any mood for food, as you may guess, when eight, nine, went by—and no sign of her. At last it was no use waiting any longer; but just to make sure, I went over to the farm two miles or so away—a little off the road, too, she must have taken to the town. We were still pretty friendly there. It was about half-past nine, I suppose, and they had all gone to bed. The dog yelled at me as if it was full moon and he had never seen me before. I threw a handful of gravel up at the old man's window, and I must say, considering all things, he kept his temper pretty well. Specially as he had seen nothing. Nothing whatever, he said.

'"Well," I said, speaking up at him, and they were my very words, "I should like to know what's become of her." He didn't seem to be as anxious as I was—thought she'd

turn up next morning. "That kind of woman knows best what she's about," he said. So I went home and went to bed, feeling very uneasy. I didn't like the feel of it, you understand. And I suppose it must have been about three or four in the morning when I heard a noise in the house.'

'You thought she had come back?'

'What?' he said.

'I say, you thought she had come back?'

'Yes, of course. Oh yes. And I looked out of my bedroom door over the banisters. By that time there was a bit of moonlight showing, striking down on the plaster and oilcloth. It was my sister, with an old skirt thrown over her nightgown. She was as white as a sheet, and shivering.

'"Where have you been, Maria?" I asked her in as gentle a voice as I could make it. The curious thing is, she understood me perfectly well. I mean she answered at once, because often I think really and truly she did understand, only that she[Pg 170]couldn't as quickly as most people collect her wits as they say.

'She said, mumbling her words, she had been looking for her.

'"Looking for who?" I said, just to see if she had taken me right.

'"For her," she said.

'"For Edna?" I asked. "And why should you be looking for Edna this time of night?" I spoke a little more sternly.

'She looked at me, and the tears began to roll down her face.

'"For God's sake, Maria, why are you crying?" I said.

'"Oh," she said, "she's gone. And she won't come back now."

'I put my arm round her and drew her down on to the stairs. "Compose yourself," I said to her, "don't shiver and shake like that." I forgot she had been standing barefoot on the cold oilcloth. "What do you mean, Gone? Don't take on so. Who's to know she won't come back safe and sound?" I am giving you the words just as they came out of our mouths.

'"Oh," she said, "William, you know better than me—I won't say anything more. Gone. And never knowing that I hadn't forgotten how kind she was to me!"

'"Kind, my girl!" I said. "Kind! In good part, maybe," I said, "but not surely after what she said to you that day?"

'But I could get nothing more out of her. She shrank up moaning and sobbing. She had lost herself again, her hair all draggled over her eyes, and she kept her face averted from me, and her shoulders were all humped, shaking under my hands—you know what women are. So I led her off to her room and made her as comfortable as I could. But all through the night I could hear her afterwards when I went to listen, and talking too.

'You can tell I was by now in a pretty state myself. That was a long night for me. And what do you think: when I repeated that conversation to the Colonel, and the Inspector[Pg 171] himself standing by, he as good as told me he didn't believe me. "Friendly questions"! I could have wrung his nose. But then by that time my poor sister couldn't put two words together, he bawled at her so; until even the Inspector said it was not fair on her, and that she wouldn't be any use, anyhow, whatever happened.'

Once again there fell a pause in my stranger's disjointed story. He took two or three spoonfuls in rapid succession of his half-melted ice-cream. Even though the rain and the storm had come and gone, the air was not appreciably cooler, or rather it was no less heavy and stagnant. Our waitress had apparently given us up as lost souls, and I glanced a little deprecatingly at the notice, 'No gratuities', on the wall.

'How long did the drought last after that?' I inquired at last.

'The drought?' said my friend. 'The questions you ask! Why, it broke that very night. Over an inch of rain we had in less than eight hours.'

'Well, that, at any rate, I suppose, was something of a comfort.'

'I don't see quite why,' he retorted.

'And then you informed the police?'

'On the Sunday.' He took out a coloured silk handkerchief from the pocket of his neat pepper-and-salt jacket, and blew his nose. It is strange how one can actually anticipate merely from the general look of a man such minute particulars as the trumpeting of a nose. Strange, I mean, that all the parts and properties of human beings seem to hang so closely together, as if in positive collusion. Anyhow, the noise resounded through the glass-walled marbled room as sharp as a cockcrow.

'Well,' he said, 'that's where I stand. Looking at me, you wouldn't suppose perhaps that everything that a man wants most in this world has been destroyed and poisoned away. I had no call perhaps to be confiding in a mere stranger. But you couldn't credit the relief. I have nothing left now. I came up here to lose myself in the noise—so shocking quiet it is,[Pg 172] there, now. But I have to go back—can't sleep much, though: wake up shouting. But what's worst is the emptiness: it's all perished. I don't

want anything now. I'd as lief die and have done with it, if I could do it undriven. I've never seen a desert, but I reckon I know what the inside of one's like now. I stop thinking sometimes, and get dressed without knowing it. You wouldn't guess that from my appearance, I dare say. But once begin living as you feel underneath living *is*, where would most of us be? They have hounded me on and they've hounded me down, and presently they'll be sealing me up, and me never knowing from one day to another what news may come of—of our friend. And my sister gone and all.'

'She isn't "missing" too, I hope?' As I reflect on it, it was a vile question to have put to the man. I don't see how anything could have justified it. His face was like a burnt-out boat. The effect on him was atrocious to witness. His swarthy cheek went grey as ashes. The hand on the marble table began to tremble violently.

'Missing?' he cried. 'She's *dead*. Isn't *that* good enough for you?'

At this, no doubt because I was hopelessly in the wrong, I all but lost control of myself.

'What do you mean?' I exclaimed in a low voice. 'What do you mean by speaking to me like that? Haven't I wasted the better part of a Saturday afternoon listening to a story which, if I cared, I could read in your own county newspaper? What's it all to me, may I ask? I want to have nothing more to do with it—or you either.'

'You didn't say that at the beginning,' he replied furiously, struggling to his feet. 'You led me on.'

'Let you on, by God! What do you mean by such a piece of impudence? I say I want nothing more to do with you. And if that's how you accept a kindness, take my advice and keep your troubles to yourself in future. Let your bygones *be* bygones. And may the Lord have mercy on your soul.'[Pg 173]

It was a foul outburst, due in part, I hope, to the heat; in part to the suffocating dehumanizing fœtor which spreads over London when the sun has been pouring down on its bricks and mortar as fiercely as on the bones and sands of some Eastern mud village.

My stranger had sat down again abruptly, had pushed his ice away from him and covered his face with his hands. His shoulders were jumping as if with hiccups. It was fortunate perhaps that at the moment there was no other eater in the café. But the waitresses were clustered together at the counter. They must have been watching us for some little time. And the manageress was there, too, looking at us like a scandalized hen over her collar through her pince-nez. We were evidently causing a disturbance—on the brink of a 'scene'. A visionary placard flaunted across my inward eye: *Fracas in a Restaurant*.

I too sat down, and beckoned peremptorily to the young lady who had been so attentive about the bus.

'My bill, please,' I said—'this gentleman's and mine.' And then, foolishly, I added, 'It's hot, isn't it?'

She made no reply until, after damping her lead pencil, she had added up her figures and had handed me between her finger-tips the mean scrap of paper. Then she informed me crisply, in fastidious Cockney, that some people seemed to find it hotter than most, and that it was past closing time, and would I please pay at the desk.

My accomplice had regained a little of his self-restraint by now. He put out a wavering hand and took up his hard felt hat. It was almost incredible that so marked a change should have come over so insensitive a face in that brief space of time. Its touch of bravado, its cold clear stare as of a watchful dog, even the neatness of it, had disappeared. He looked ten years older—lost and abandoned. He put out his other hand for the check. It was a curious action for a man with an intense closeness—if not meanness—clearly visible on his features. 'I should prefer, if you don't mind, to pay my bill myself,' he said.[Pg 174]

'Not at all,' I replied brusquely. 'It was my ice-cream. I must apologize for having been so abrupt.'

He tried to smile; and it was like the gleam of a sickly evening sunshine after heavy winter rain.

'It's broken me: that's all I can say,' he said. 'What I say is, you read such things in the newspapers, but you don't know what they mean to them as are most concerned. I don't see how you can. But anyhow, I*can* pay my way.'

I hesitated. A furious contest—dim spread-eagled figures silhouetted, as it were, against a background of utter black—seemed to be proceeding in some dream in my mind, a little beyond actual consciousness. 'Well,' I blurted, 'I hope time will make things better. I can guess what I should feel like myself in similar circumstances. If I were you, I should....' But at sight of him, the words, I am thankful to say, faded out before I could utter them. 'If I were you'—how easy! But how is that metamorphosis conceivable?

He looked at his hat; he looked at his ice-cream, now an insipid mush; he looked anxiously and searchingly at the table—marked over with the hieroglyphics of dark ugly marble. And at last he raised his eyes—those inexpressive balls of glass—and looked at me. He changed his hat from his right to his left hand, and still looking at me, hesitated, holding the empty hand out a little above the table. Then turning away, he drew it back.

I pretended not to have noticed the action. 'There should be another Eighteen in a few minutes,' I volunteered. 'And I think I noticed a stopping-place a few yards down.'

Nevertheless I couldn't for the moment leave him there—to the tender mercies of those censorious young waitresses in their exquisitely starched caps. 'I am going that way,' I said. 'Shall I see you into it?'

'It's the heat,' he said. 'No, thank you. You have been a....'

With a gasp I repelled as well as I could the distaste for him[Pg 175] that was once more curdling as if with a few drops of vinegar my very blood. What monsters of hatred and uncharitableness we humans can be! And what will *my* little record look like, I wonder, when the secrets of all hearts are opened.

It seemed for the time being as though the whole of my right arm had become partially paralysed. But with an effort I put out my hand at last; and then he, too, his—a large green solitaire cuff-link showing itself against his wristband as he did so. We shook hands—though I doubt if a mere fleshly contact can express much while the self behind it is dumb with instinctive distaste.

Besides, the effect on him even of a friendly action as frigid as this was horribly disconcerting. It reminded me of ice pitted and crumbling in a sudden thaw. He seemed to have been reduced to a state of physical and spiritual helplessness as if by an extremity of emotion, or by a drug. It was nauseating. It confused me and made me ashamed and miserable. I turned away abruptly; paid our bill at the desk, and went out. And London enveloped me.

[Pg 176]

MISS MILLER

Because she had very little breath left, and because it must be far from easy to sob and run at the same time, the little girl with the square-bobbed flaxen hair dropped into a walk as she came in under the shade of the wide-spreading chestnut tree. And there, at sight of the figure that sat bolt upright in the middle of the seat, she at once stopped dead. So complete was her surprise that she had even forgotten to sob any more. She simply opened her tear-washed eyes and stared. And Miss Miller, in her tight soldierlike jacket and peculiar hat, seemed to be taking no more notice of her than a lighted lamp-post takes of a moth.

But Miss Miller had seen her right enough. Miss Miller had kept a weather-eye open, had watched her come tumbling across the gentle green grass slopes and under the trees and into the sunshine and into the shade again. It was only her funny little way to pretend not to have seen, though she could no more have explained *why* than she could explain why these long balmy summer mornings she always sat bolt upright on a seat that had clearly been constructed with such beautiful scroll-like curves at the back of it on purpose to make those who had time thus to idle the day away uncomfortable.

Not that this little creature had ever seen Miss Miller before, had even so much as suspected she was there. That was cer[Pg 177]tain. Though, since they frequently shared the amenities of the park, she very well might have done so. The park-keepers knew Miss Miller all right, and there wasn't one that wouldn't nod her a jocular if slightly ironical good morning. So would the elephantine policeman at the gates—and then perhaps solemnly wink at the man who was piling up the dead leaves in his three-wheeled handcart. Hardly a day went by but Miss Miller was to be seen wandering about in these particular parts, observing the observable with a quick bird-like turn of the head, or sitting just as she was now, with her sharp black eyes and her long sharp nose, one cotton-gloved hand resting on the long-beaked stork's head of her umbrella, her gaze fixed on the sun-sheened waters of the ornamental pond, almost as though she were eternally on the point of being lost in some fantastically quizzical daydream.

Only 'almost', though; for Miss Miller had very little ultimate respect for daydreams. She preferred, or rather she restricted herself to, the actual—but with no excessive respect for that either. And however motionless her pose might be, however absent-looking the expression on her long, odd, sallow face, and in her coal-black cavernous eyes, she noticed positively everything that was going on around her—striding gluttonous starlings, clumsy, strutting, burnished wood-pigeons, fashionable nursemaids, smartly-stepping soldier-boys with their paper-squill puttees and funny little metal-headed swagger canes, ladies and gentlemen politely conversing on the gravel paths, or less politely colloguing under the trees, the swans for ever amorous of their own snowy images on the lustrous pale-blue water, and the wing-sailed toy-boats braving the breezes, their small round-behinded owners stooping like Chinese dummies at the edge of the pond as they launched them out upon the deep. She even heard and heeded the changeable talk of the sparrows in the branches overhead, while their cousins of every degree dumpily hopped about her long feet with no more fear of casualties than if she were a[Pg 178] dust-bin. And all the while some other Miss Miller sat tristfully hearkening to the distant murmur of a fall of water feeding the shallow pond.

In the soft sweet air of that hot St. Martin's Summer morning her small tear-stained visitor must by now have stood staring at her under the tent of the chestnut tree for at least two whole minutes. And then softly and suddenly Miss Miller turned her sharp,

black, coal-box eyes, and the long drooping nose that hung between them, straight at the child.

'Well, Rosie,' she said, 'and what's for you?'

But the question was neither sharp, tart, tradesman-like nor grown-up-ish. It merely asked for valuable information.

'Nothing at all, thank you,' said her visitor, 'I was only looking.'

'And so was I,' said Miss Miller. 'What's the harm in that?'

The bobbed head under the blue bonnet stooped a little forward. 'My name', she all but whispered, as though she didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, 'is not Rosie; it's Nella.'

'And that's an odd thing too,' cried Miss Miller from in under her high hat, 'for mine is Miller—*Miss* Miller. At least that's what they call me:

> *Though only one had an umberella,*
> *There sat Miss Miller and there stood Nella.*'

'Can you make up *much*?' asked the little girl.

'It depends on who *for*, on the vocabulary, and the *rhymes*,' said Miss Miller. 'Some come, some won't. But the next and the next and the next thing to inquire is *why*, Rosie, you have run away? And who from? Or should we say, whom-m-m?

> *In life, so I'm told, there is no need to stammer,*
> *So long as we keep a sharp eye on our grammar.*

And be sure not to answer if you've *no* wish to say.'

The little girl looked stealthily over her shoulder, gazed[Pg 179] carefully once more at Miss Miller, turned, and breathed out her secret.

'It's my new nurse,' she said. 'She's *not* my real Nannie; *my* Nannie's ill. She's a beast, and I hate her.'

'Ah, now,' cried Miss Miller, clutching more firmly than ever her beaked umbrella; '"a beast"! With four legs no doubt, but not, oh no, a tell-tale at the end of it! What did I *say*! Isn't that *just*, Rosie, what we have to expect? And I'll be bound she can't help it. That's *my* opinion. It's what's called ingrained. So you ran away. And what more likely? Though *not*, we must admit, allowed?

> *And there, maybe to mock the eye,*
> *Goes fluttering by a butterfly.*

But mark, dear Pilgrim, mark with me,
How rational is the honey bee!

Hey now, what about *that*? Nurses! It's years and years and years... but then you see after all it's only Time, Rosie, that divides us. By us meaning just you and me. And what is *Time*? Nothing I promise you but merely "wear and tear". Merely.'

Yet another prolonged shuddering sob shook the little girl from head to foot, but it was meaning little more now than that solemn foamless swell upon the Pacific which succeeds a storm.

'She won't let me do a single thing I want, and some day I'll run right away. Then even my daddy won't be able to find me.'

'I expect *not*,' said Miss Miller, 'and especially even if he shouldn't happen to look. You see, my poppet, even if we have the legs and the brrroth to run with, it's very very seldom really "right away". It can't be done. And *there's* the rub. I have frequently noticed it.'

She was still steadily surveying her visitor, her perched-up hat trembling a little in the process. The fair face looked far[Pg 180] too young to have had so many troubles begin to show their markings in it. At which sad notion Miss Miller openly smiled at the little girl, though her smile rather more closely resembled a grimace.

'Now when *I* was about your size and for a good long time after' she said, 'I didn't myself usually run away. I was run away *from*.'

'Didn't you have a nurse?'

'Three,' said Miss Miller. 'Black, yellow and brown. Turn and turn about. So it wasn't much good.'

'I don't think I quite understand that,' said her visitor.

'No? In such cases I am told it is better to explain. You will understand then, Pollie, that when I was young—which is exactly a hundred and forty-eight years ago now, not counting Sundays—I lived in a big, a*great* big house—a whacking great e*nor*mous house.'

'Why?'

'Because', said Miss Miller, 'it was there it had pleased God to call me. A house, Pollie, not parked as they say in a huge prairie like this one,' and she swept her umbrella across the ample view, '*not* with a bit of a pond in it like that one,' and she jabbed its point at the lake, 'but a river, my love, a wide r-r-rolling r-r-river, with cr-r-reeks in its cr-r-rumplings, and simply carpeted with water-lilies. Carpeted. A hop and

a skip and a jump and there you were on the other side. And fish—*plop-plip-plopp*, and ducks—quack-quack—*quarkk*! And besides the woolly sheep, my love, *deer*! Herds of them, dappled and waggle-tailed and some of them horned, and ears like windmills. But believe me, Pollie, *one* flick of a finger and every single one of them clean out of sight! On the other hand, it was not the deer we were referring to, but the house. It had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of windows. Specially up above, of course, where the corridors were—one after another and all the way round.' And Miss Miller spread out the black-gloved fingers of one lank left hand as if that[Pg 181] would show exactly how. 'And to every window—or *two—or* three, as the case might be, a room or chamber: chiefly, as I say, bed. Not that I'd attempt to tell you exactly how many. Mistakes cannot always be put right. But imagine me there, if you please, looking *out* of the windows; and the OTHERS, you know, feasting in the HALL.'

'I have *my* dinner,' said her visitor, 'in the nursery; except on Sundays. Then it's with my daddy.'

'Halls and dining-rooms—much the same,' said Miss Miller. 'All depends on the *entourage*. Well', she planted her foot a little more firmly on the little patch of gravel that surrounded the seat, 'it was at one of those windows that I first saw it running away.'

'Saw what running away?'

'That, my love, is what I could never positively descry,' said Miss Miller, stooping her long nose and the brim of her hat in the direction of the little girl as if she were a cockatoo on a perch. 'There's some that run, and there's some who are run from, and it's distance lends enchantment to the view. What I can *say* is that it seemed to be something or somebody I didn't exactly want, you know, to go. *And* such a swimming moon! Every bit as the poem says,' and Miss Miller once more broke into rhyme:

> '*There were leaves on the branches like silver,*
> *And dew thick as frost on the grass,*
> *And nought but the moon in the shimmery-shammery,*
> *And me staring out through the glass.*

I say *staring*, Pollie, though we agree it's not polite. But *politesse* apart, as the barber said, it wasn't to be seen from *that* window. And why? Simply, my dear, because it had gone out of sight. So that's where we are.'

'Where?' said the little girl.

'Why, there,' said Miss Miller.

'What did you do?' asked the little girl.

'That's just it,' said Miss Miller. 'What would you have[Pg 182] done? And the answer to that is, I did just the same as that. I ran as fast as my trotters would carry me to the next—and then to the next, and then to *all* the nexteses. *Little* windows, every one of them, with round tops and small—er—panes. But no. *No*—and I repeat it on purpose—not a glimpse. I won't *say*, mind you,' she continued with due solemnity and with a longer face than ever, 'that all the little bedrooms had beds in them, or wash-hand-stands or even chests of drawerseses. You'll pardon me, but I didn't really *look*. But I *will* say I went in and out, and out and in, and so of course out again of every single one there was, until after twice round the house and back, counting the corridors once and once only, I found myself in the very place I had started from. And by and large, my dear Miss Sheepshanks, that's what we all do. In time.'

Miss Miller thereupon burst out laughing, and even Miss Sheepshanks opened her mouth—not to laugh, but only because she was so intent on her new acquaintance that she couldn't help imitating her.

'What did you do then?' she said.

'Well, then,' said Miss Miller, drawing her cotton-gloved forefinger slowly down her nose as if in deep reflection, and the faded greying tip of it made a right-angle with the rest, 'then—I gave it up; and *it* gave *me*up. It was what's called mutual, my poppet. Then too about that time we were compelled to move—the Family, you know. Ups and downs, then downs again. So we dismissed the, the—well—the *entourage*. That *is* the best thing, don't you think?'

Nella nodded.

'Too-whit, *or* too-whoo,
Come now, or come soon,
You won't miss the sun
If you look at the moon.

That', said Miss Miller, 'is how it goes in the *pome*. But oh,[Pg 183] Pollie, if *only* you could have seen the shadows on the cobblestones and the silvering of the snails!'

'I don't *think*', said Nella, 'I quite like snails.'

Miss Miller merely beamed on her as though, if she had not entirely disagreed with her visitor, she could not have so easily comprehended a very natural aversion. 'There *are* such people; I admit it,' she cried cordially:

'"And whether one travels due East or due West,
I'm inclined," said the Sailor, "to thinks truth is best."

But as *I* was saying,' she went rapidly on, 'there might have been dew and there *were* snails, but there was positively nothing else. It had come, my dear; and it had gone, my dove. And if you should ask me what I mean by *it*, I should say it is called being *young*—like you and me, Miss Cosy. And as for that, and with all due respect for nursemaids and such, the first part of it is apt to be much nicer than the last.'

The little girl stared at this fantastic Miss Miller sitting so stiff and vertical on her scroll-shaped seat with its iron legs bent under her on the patch of gravel. It was deliciously cool under the fan-like fronds of the great spiky-fruited chestnut tree overhead. The leaves shed a dry fragrance, and the sun-burned grass, too; and there came floating on the air from afar the hypnotic whiff of an early autumn bonfire.

Miss Miller appeared for the moment to have forgotten she was not alone, while the round blue eyes of her visitor went on busily examining her from top to toe.

'Do you live in a great big enormous house now?' Nella presently inquired.

'By no means. Not at all,' Miss Miller replied, her black eyes fixed on the far-away. 'Still, for shelter from what are called the Ellimans, my child, only four walls are required, excluding floor and ceiling. What is*space*?'

'But you see,' said Nella, 'I didn't quite understand what[Pg 184] you meant it was when what you couldn't see ran away, out of all those little windows, I mean.'

Miss Miller penetrated the slight ambiguity of this sentence as if with a needle.

'And what more likely?' she agreed. 'No more did I. But you see, *me* never having noticed much that it was there, it wasn't scarcely right or proper to go laveering and lamenting up and down when it was gone. Which is what is called reasoning, Rosie. Besides, as I say, we moved. What is 17 from, say, 55?'

'I think', said Nella, after a long pause, 'it must be thirty something.'

'Well, then, it is about thirty something whatever-you-like-to-call-them ago since I climbed up the Tower for the last time.' Miss Miller suddenly stooped and pressed the fingers of her right hand on the toe of her left shoe. Her face had gone a little stiff and surprised-looking.

'Does that bump on your toe hurt you?' inquired her visitor courteously.

'Now and then,' replied Miss Miller in her richest tones. 'It does its best. It's what is called a bunion. Not John, of course, though it *may* come, they say, from walking about. And that, my dear, I am pretty well used to. Now the Tower, you must understand, please, was in our park. In what is called the centre, Rosie. Where we went to next, I mean. Two parks in all. But *not*, as I have said before, a public prairie

like this!' And yet again Miss Miller swept the panorama with the point of her umbrella. 'This Tower I mention faced to the *east*, you will please imagine, and was of the fairest choicest marble. It might almost be ivory; something like a roly-poly jam-pudding, but pinker and more, as they say, diffused. And its top was like a pepper-pot, marble too, with heads and wings and faces, and cut out with holes like flowers for peeping places, and all, all of stone. Quite quite solid too. *And*'—Miss Miller paused and looked at her toe—'perhaps I ought to mention[Pg 185] that it was also in the middle of a box-wood. And, as dear Alfred Lord Tennyson says:

"*With here and there a cypress pricking*
Black against the blue,
And here and there a dark but older
Tree they call a yew."

In the middle of a box-wood, Rosie; and you could see for *miles*—if, that is, and you'll forgive the reminder, you troubled to look. Well, I climbed that tower one morning, birds chim-champing, grasshoppers whirring, larks in the sky, sun burning, and as I peered up the spiral staircase—you know what a corkscrew is, my child—a twist, a wheeze and a pop?'

Nella, with a small dumpy forefinger pointing upward, pushed that finger round and round and up and up under the tree.

'Exactly. And just at the topmost bend of it, bless your heart, what if I didn't go and see it yet again! Or something: at any rate so much like it, you could scarcely tell them apart; not at first.'

'What was it doing then?'

'*Just* the same as usual,' said Miss Miller airily. 'Running away. And all as the old song goes.' She actually sang it too, but not loud enough to get beyond the circuit of her chestnut since she had her respectability to consider, and at times her voice, even to her own ear, seemed almost too powerful:

'*It's joys and cares and stri-i-ife*
I'm singing to you of,
And some they call it li-i-ife,
And some they call it lov.

So up I went, of course. Round and round and up and up until at last I reached the top, and never a sign of it *no*where.'

Miss Miller inhaled a deep breath of the thin autumnal air,[Pg 186] as if to restore her after that long climb in memory. But Nella still stood her ground.

'Not but what I might not say', said her new acquaintance a little craftily, 'there was no vestige of a sign of where it might have *been*. On the other hand it wasn't there then. And everything so calm and still and*trarn*quil you could have dined off thistledown. Why, it might have been carried off in its sleep the very moment I got to the top step and came out into the gallery. So, you see, once more, or, in other words, yet again'—and the lengthy angular face turned slowly about towards the little girl rather like the ominous top of an oast house—'I had been cheated of everything.

'*No, no, papa, I* can*not*, since
He whom I wed must be a Prince.

Though how you can call it cheating when every single card from the Queen of Hearts to the Ace of Spades was on the table, I'll be dashed, Rosie, if I can see. And you will, I hope, excuse the vigour of the remark.

'Now when you say "It", my dear Miss Sheepshanks,' Miss Miller continued reflectively, 'I suppose we neither of us know exactly what we are talking about. What, I mean, we *mean*; even though it's something we might, given a good supper and a feather bed, dream of, say, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for years and years. *And* on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, including the Sabbath, be trusted to forget. But there is no need for high horses. None whatever.

'*Come what come may; go what go will,*
There is such a thing as must.
Then why be philo-so-sophical
So long as one tries to be just?

You follow me?'

The round clear eyes under the compact little brow beneath[Pg 187] the fair straight fringe of hair and the rim of bonnet gazed steadily back. Then Nella nodded.

'Precisely,' said Miss Miller with a smile like that of the Conqueror at Hastings, as with a sharp little gesture she planted the point of her umbrella emphatically between the pebbles. 'Precisely. And so between you and me and the gatepost it has been ever since. This prairie, you understand, these here people, and all these trees; you sit, you scarcely need to look, but you know it just comes and goes. And the complete*entourage* dispersed! In fact, who would believe, Rosie, that looking out of one's *own* indefatigably poky little top-floor window, square this time, of course, or rather obbolongy, with a jar of geranium or mignonette on the sill—and I must say some of those young men who look after the gardens are very civil—*and* millions of chimney pots over the roofs of every shape and smell and size, and the wires simply humming in the breezes, not to speak of the noise and—er—odours from down below

and only twopence-halfpenny to pay for it, *and* a land*lady* who *never* has *change*—who, I say, who would believe, my dear, there could be anything left at all?'

'In the chimney pots?'

'In the chimney pots.'

'Are there many smuts?'

'In winter, hosts,' said Miss Miller, 'and in summer, fewer.'

'Do you mean you can't see anything, of what you were saying, there, either? Not even now?' And Miss Miller's square-headed little visitor looked quite anxious about it.

'For certain; never: but of signs of it exactly a thousand and one. Now look at this,' Miss Miller with some little fumbling managed at last to unfasten an old leather vanity bag that hung on her arm, 'look at this.'

Nella with a deep sigh drew a step or two nearer, but not too close, while her odd friend held up between cotton-gloved finger and thumb an acorn with a long stalk. 'That,' said Miss Miller almost ingratiatingly as she rapidly twirled it, 'that is an[Pg 188] acorn. No doubt of it. And did you ever in your life see anything that fitted better—John Bunyan apart, you know? As if the cup and the seed, or the "a" and the "corn" had been waiting for one another for ages on ages until at last there was no keeping them back. Now that, Rosie, dropped on to my hat as I was walking under its parent tree—this very hat, and not an hour ago. And what did I say to myself when I looked at it, come clean out of the blue sky, so to speak? I said: Observe, Miss Miller; it fits!

> '*It might be a lump of amber, ma'am,*
> *It might be a stick of coral;*
> *But what we have to remember, ma'am,*
> *Is to keep our eye on the moral.*

Ah, my dear Rosie, I have sat on that tower at noonday when the clocks were striking the hour, and in the height—though I prefer to say heighth—of the summer, and I have listened to the nightingales in the midst of the box-wood, though of course in the best families they come at night, and we mustn't get poetical. And bless my soul—now that your own smudged tears are dry upon your cheeks—I could weep about a bucketful at thought of it—and partly at what didn't fit, you know—if only it were not improper to do so in so public a resort as this.'

Nella watched Miss Miller closely, as if in hope of seeing at least one large tear course slowly down her cheek. It would probably keep very close to that long long nose. But far from weeping, Miss Miller was smiling with greater intensity than ever

as she sat with that nose turned sidelong towards her little visitor in the shade of the chestnut tree.

'And now,' she said, 'instead, my dear Susie, of giving it to you, which might be troublesome, I will return my acorn to my bag. I shall plant it, as a matter of fact, in a pot, and after two or three leaves have appeared it will die. That, my child, is how things go. *And* come.' Up went her thin eyebrows,[Pg 189] '*And* go again. So why, why, make too much fuss about it?'

At the word 'come', Miss Miller's singularly attentive eye, which had ever and anon roved the green expanse beyond her canopying chestnut tree, had alighted on an enemy, and one rapidly approaching them.

'A fuss? Certainly not,' she added emphatically. 'We are simply *not* going to *lower* ourselves. And never, never, I say, because our horrid nurse, as I see, in her long grey odious coat and neat little bonnet is stamping after us at this moment like a buffalo over the savannas of the West. We are *not* going to make a fuss; oh, no! And it isn't even mere pride that stops us. What? Eh?'

Nella had turned her small head with extreme rapidity over her shoulder.

'I must say good-bye now,' she said, a little drily and sedately, turning once more to her friend. 'My nurse wants me. I suppose, you know, it must be nearly time for lunch. *Good* morning.'

'Lunch,' cried Miss Miller merrily. 'Why, certainly. *I* seldom think of it, you know, until I find that most of it isn't exactly *there*. And what's more, it's a long lane, Miss Sheepshanks, that has no turning, which is*not* to mention in any particular respect merely *red* lanes.'

When Nella had reached the big stone floriated vase that stood beside the bridge over the water—and she hadn't been listening very closely to the heated remarks which her nurse had been ejaculating from time to time during their walk—she turned her head and looked behind her; but the scroll-shaped seat under the chestnut tree was now vacant, and there was no sign at all of its late occupant.

But then, at this moment, any one of the 'prairie' trees might easily have hidden that long, spare, sharp-boned figure, including even its nose. And so intent was her small mind still upon her talk with this peculiar stranger, that when her nurse,[Pg 190] snatching at her arm as if she were a tottering clockwork dummy which she intended to fling clean across the ornamental pond, said, 'Now, mind your *step*, you

little imp! Just you wait till I get you home, my fine lady. Ooh, but *you*'ll be hearing of this! *You—mark*—ME!'—not the faintest change of expression showed on the child's face. It was almost as if one could learn to be a 'philo—so—sophoser' after one lesson, and that in the open, and without any fee.

[Pg 191]

THE ORGY: AN IDYLL

It was a Wednesday morning, and May-day, and London—its West End too, crisp, brisk, scintillating. Even the horses had come out in their Sunday best. With their nosegays and ribbons and rosettes they might have been on their way to a wedding—the nuptials of Labour and Capital, perhaps. As for people, the wide pavements of the great street were packed with them. Not so many busy idlers of the one sex as of the other, of course, at this early hour—a top-hat here, a pearl-grey Homburg there; but of the feminine a host as eager and variegated as the butterflies in an Alpine valley in midsummer; some stepping daintily down from their landaulettes like 'Painted Ladies' out of the chrysalis, and thousands of others, blues and browns and speckleds and sables and tawnies and high-fliers and maiden's blushes, from all parts of the world and from most of the suburbs, edging and eddying along, this way, that way, their eyes goggling, their tongues clacking, but most of them, their backs to the highway, gazing, as though mesmerized, in and through the beautiful plate-glass windows at the motley merchandise on the other side. And much of that on the limbs and trunks of beatific images almost as life-like but a good deal less active than themselves.

The very heavens, so far as they could manage to peep under the blinds, seemed to be smiling at this plenty. Nor had[Pg 192] they any need for care concerning the future, for nursemaids pushing their baby-carriages before them also paraded the pavements, their infant charges laid in dimpled sleep beneath silken awning and coverlet, while here and there a tiny tot chattered up into the air like a starling.

A clock, probably a church clock, and only just audible, struck ten. The sun from its heights far up above the rooftops blazed down upon the polished asphalt and walls with such an explosion of splendour that it looked as if everything had been repainted overnight with a thin coat of crystalline varnish and then sprinkled with frozen sea-water. And every human creature within sight seemed to be as heart-free and gay as this beautiful weather promised to be brief. Every human creature—with one exception only—poor Philip Pim.

And why not? He was young—so young in looks, indeed, that if Adonis had been stepping along at his side they might have been taken for cousins. He was charmingly attired, too, from his little, round, hard felt hat—not unlike Mercury's usual wear, but without the wings—to his neat brogue shoes; and he was so blond, with his pink cheeks and flaxen hair, that at first you could scarcely distinguish his silken eyebrows and eyelashes, though they made up for it on a second glance. Care seemed never to have sat on those young temples. Philip looked as harmless as he was unharmed.

Alas! this without of his had no resemblance whatever to his within. He eyed vacantly a buzzing hive-like abandonment he could not share; first, because though he had the whole long day to himself he had no notion of what to do with it; and next, because only the previous afternoon the manager of the bank in which until then he had graced a stool specially reserved for him every morning, had shaken him by the hand and had wished him well—for ever. He had said how deeply he regretted Philip's services could not be indulged in by the bank any longer. He would miss him. Oh yes, very much indeed—but missed Philip must be.[Pg 193]

The fact was that Philip had never been able to add up pounds, shillings, and pence so that he could be certain the total was correct. His 9's, too, often looked like 7's, his 5's like 3's. And as 'simple addition' was all but his sole duty in the bank, he would not have adorned its premises for a week if his uncle, Colonel Crompton Pim, had not been acquainted with one of its most stylish directors, and was not in the habit of keeping a large part of his ample fortune in its charge. He had asked Mr. Bumbleton to give Philip a chance. But chances—some as rapidly as Manx cats—come to an end. And Philip's had.

Now, if Colonel Pim had sent his nephew when he was a small boy to a nice public school, he might have been able by this time to do simple sums very well indeed. Philip might have become an accurate adder-up. It is well to look on the bright side of things. Unfortunately when Philip was an infant, his health had not been very satisfactory—at least to his widowed mother—and he had been sent instead to a private academy. There a Mr. Browne was the mathematical master—a Mr. Browne so much attached to algebra and to reading the *Times* in school hours that he hadn't much patience with the rudiments of arithmetic. 'Just add it up,' he would say, 'and look up the answer. And if it isn't right, do it again.'

It was imprudent of him, but in these early years poor Philip had never so much as dreamed that some day he was going to spend all day on a stool. If he had, he might not perhaps have been so eager to look up the answers. But then, his uncle was both fabulously rich and apparently unmarriageable, and Philip was his only nephew. Why, then, should he ever have paid any attention to banks, apart from the variety on which the wild thyme grows?

Term succeeded term, and still, though 'a promising boy', he remained backward—particularly in the last of the three R's. And his holidays, so called, would be peppered with such problems as (*a*) if a herring and a half cost three halfpence,[Pg 194] how many would you eat for a shilling? (*b*) If a brick weighs just a pound and half a brick, what does it weigh? (*c*) If Moses was the son of Pharaoh's daughter, etc.; and (*d*) Uncles and brothers have I none, and so on. And since, after successive mornings with a sheet of foolscap and a stub of pencil, Philip's answers would almost invariably reappear as (*a*) 18; (*b*) 1½ lb.; (*c*) his sister, and (*d*) himself, Colonel Pim became more and more choleric and impolite, and Nature had long ago given him a good start.

He had a way, too, when carpeting at Philip, of flicking his shepherd-plaid trouser-leg with his handkerchief which was highly alarming to everyone concerned. At last, instead of transferring his nephew from Mr. Browne to Christ Church, Oxford, or to Trinity College, Cambridge, or to some less delectable resort at an outlying university, he first (before setting out in pursuit of big game all around the world), consigned him to a tutor, who thanked his lucky stars the expedition would take the Colonel a long time; and, on his return, he gave them both a prolonged vacation.

And *then* had fallen the bolt from the blue. On the morning of his twenty-first birthday, which had promised to be so cool, so calm, so bright, Philip received a letter from his uncle. He opened it with joy; he read it with consternation. It was in terms as curt as they looked illegible, and it was merely to tell him that what the Colonel called a post (but which was, in fact, a high stool) had been secured for his nephew, and that unless Philip managed to keep his seat on it for twelve consecutive months he would be cut off with a shilling.

Of these drear months about two and a half had somehow managed to melt away, and now not only was the stool rapidly following them into the limbo of the past, but at this very moment the Colonel was doubtless engaged, and with his usual zest, in keeping his promise. What wonder, then, Philip was not exactly a happy young man as he wandered this sunny populous May morning aimlessly on his way. There was noth[Pg 195]ing—apart from Everything around him—to make him so, except only one minute stroke of luck that had befallen him before breakfast.

When he had risen from his tumbled bed in his London lodgings, the sight of his striped bank trousers and his black bank coat and waistcoat had filled him with disgust. Opening the grained cupboard which did duty for a wardrobe—and in the indulgence of his tailor it was pretty full—he took down from a peg the festive suit he was now wearing, but which otherwise he had left unheeded since Easter. He found himself faintly whistling as he buttoned it on; but his delight can be imagined when, putting his finger and thumb into an upper waistcoat pocket, he discovered—a sovereign. And an excellent specimen of one, with St. George in his mantle and the dragon on the one side of it, and King Edward VII's head—cut off at the neck as if he

had sat to its designer in his bath—on the other. This, with four others very much like it, had been bestowed on Philip many months ago by his Uncle Charles—a maternal uncle, who had since perished in Paris. As the rest of Philip's pockets contained only 7½d. in all, this coin—how forgotten, he simply could not conjecture—was treasure trove indeed.

Now, poor Philip had never really cared for money. Perhaps he had always associated it with herrings and half-bricks. Perhaps he had never needed it quite enough. Since, moreover, immediately opposite his perch at the Bank there hung a framed antique picture of this commodity in process of being shovelled out of receptacles closely resembling coal-scuttles into great vulgar heaps upon a polished counter, and there weighed in brass scales like so much lard or glucose, he had come to like it less and less. On the other hand, he dearly enjoyed spending it. As with Adam and the happy birds in the Garden of Eden—linnet and kestrel and wren—he enjoyed seeing it fly. In this he was the precise antithesis of his uncle.[Pg 196]

Colonel Crompton Pim loved money. He exulted in it (not vocally, of course) *en masse*, as the Pharaohs exulted in pyramids. And he abhorred spending it. For this (and for many another) reason he had little affection for mere objects—apart, that is, from *such* objects as golf clubs, shooting boots, or hippopotamus-hoof inkstands, and he had not the smallest pleasure in buying anything for mere buying's sake.

His immense dormitory near Cheltenham, it is true, was full of furniture, but it was furniture, acquired in the 'sixties or thereabouts, for use and not for joy. Prodigious chairs with pigskin seats; tables of a solidity that defied time and of a wood that laughed at the worm; bedsteads of the Gog order; wardrobes resembling Assyrian sarcophagi; and ottomans which would seat with comfort and dignity a complete royal family. As for its 'ornaments', they came chiefly from Benares.

And simply because poor Philip delighted in spending money and hated such horrible impedimenta with the contempt a humming-bird must feel for a black-pudding, he had never been able to take to his uncle—not even for the sake of what he owned. And it was impossible—as he fondly supposed—for any human being to take to him for any other reason. No, there was nothing in common between them, except a few branches of the family tree. And these the Colonel might already have converted into firewood.

Now, as poor Philip meandered listlessly along the street, fingering his Uncle Charles's golden sovereign in his pocket, he came on one of those gigantic edifices wherein you can purchase anything in the world—from a white elephant to a performing flea, from a cargo of coconuts to a tin-tack. This was the 'store' at which his uncle 'dealt'. And by sheer force of habit, Philip mounted the welcoming flight of steps, crossed a large flat rubber mat, and went inside.

Having thus got safely in, he at once began to ponder how he was to get safely out—with any fraction, that is, of his golden sovereign still in his pocket. And he had realized in[Pg 197] the recent small hours that with so little on earth now left to spend, except an indefinite amount of leisure, he must strive to spend that little with extreme deliberation.

So first, having breakfasted on a mere glance at the charred remnant of a kipper which his landlady had served up with his chicory, he entered a large gilded lift, or elevator, as the directors preferred to call it, *en route* to the restaurant. There he seated himself at a vacant table and asked the waitress to be so kind as to bring him a glass of milk and a bun. He nibbled, he sipped, and he watched the people—if people they really were, and not, as seemed more probable, automata intended to advertise the Ecclesiastical, the Sports, the Provincial, the Curio, the Export, and the Cast-Iron Departments.

With his first sip of milk he all but made up his mind to buy a little parting present for his uncle. It would be at least a gentle gesture. With his second he decided that the Colonel would be even less pleased to receive a letter *and*, say, a velvet smoking-cap, or a pair of mother-of-pearl cuff-links, than just a letter. By the time he had finished his bun he had decided to buy a little something for himself. But try as he might he could think of nothing (for less than a guinea) that would be worthy of the shade of his beloved Uncle Charles. So having pushed seven-fifteenths of all he else possessed under his plate for his freckled waitress, with the remaining fourpence he settled his bill and went steadily downstairs. Nineteen minutes past ten—he would have a good look about him before he came to a decision.

Hunger, it has been said, sharpens the senses, but it is apt also to have an edgy effect upon the nerves. If, then, Philip's breakfast had been less exacting, or his lunch had made up for it, he might have spent the next few hours of this pleasant May morning as a young man should—in the open air. Or he might have visited the British Museum, the National Gallery and Westminster Abbey. He might never, at any rate, in one brief morning of his mortal existence have all but died again[Pg 198] and again of terror, abandon, shame, rapture and incredulity. He might never—but all in good time.

He was at a loose end, and it is then that habits are apt to prevail. And of all his habits, Philip's favourite was that of ordering 'goods' on behalf of his uncle. The Colonel in his fantastic handwriting would post him two weekly lists—one consisting of the 'wanted', the other of complaints about the previous week's 'supplied'. Armed with these, Philip would set out for the building he was now actually in. The first list, though not a thing of beauty, was a joy as long as it lasted. The second, for he had always flatly refused to repeat his uncle's sulphurous comments to any underling, he reserved for his old enemy, the secretary of the establishment, Sir Leopold Bull. And

though in these weekly interviews Sir Leopold might boil with rage and chagrin, he never boiled over. For the name of Pim was a name of power in the secretary's office. The name of Pim was that of a heavy shareholder; and what the Colonel wanted he invariably in the long run got. A chest, say, of Ceylon tea, 'rich, fruity, bright infusion'; a shooting-stick (extra heavy Brugglesdon tube pattern); a double quart-size tantalus, with two double spring sterling silver Brahmin locks; a hundredweight of sago; a thousand black cheroots; a stymie, perhaps, or a click—something of that sort.

These 'order days' had been the balm of Philip's late existence. His eyes fixed on his ledger and his fancy on, say, 'Saddlery', or 'Sports', he looked forward to his Wednesdays—thirsted for them. Indeed, his chief regret at the bank, apart from little difficulties with his 9's and 3's, had been that his uncle's stores were closed on Saturday afternoons. And on Sundays. His hobby had, therefore, frequently given him indigestion, since he could indulge it only between 1 and 2 p.m. It was a pity, of course, that Colonel Pim was a man of wants so few, and these of so narrow a range. Possibly the suns of India had burned the rest out of him. But for Philip, any kind of vicarious purchase had been better than none.[Pg 199] And now these delights, too, were for ever over. His fountain had run dry. Sir Leopold had triumphed.

At this moment he found himself straying into an aisled medley of empties in hide. There is nothing like leather; here there was nothing *but* leather, and all of it made up into articles ranging in size from trunks that would contain the remains of a Daniel Lambert to card-cases that would hold practically nothing at all. And all of a sudden Philip fancied he would like to buy a cigarette-case. He would have preferred one of enamel or gold or ivory or tortoise-shell or lizard or shagreen; or even of silver or suede. But preferences are expensive. And as he sauntered on, his dreamy eye ranging the counters in search merely of a cigarette-case he could *buy*, his glance alighted on a 'gent's dressing-case'.

It was of pigskin, and, unlike the central figure in Rembrandt's 'Lesson in Anatomy', it so lay that the whole of its interior was in full view, thus revealing a modest row of silver-topped bottles, similar receptacles for soap, tooth-brushes, pomade, and hair-restorer; a shoe-horn, a boot-hook, an ivory paper-knife, and hair-brushes, 'all complete'. Philip mused on the object for a moment or two, perplexed by a peculiar effervescence that was going on in his vitals. He then approached the counter and asked its price.

'The price, sir?' echoed the assistant, squinnying at the tiny oblong of pasteboard attached by a thread to the ring of the handle; 'the price of that article is seventeen, seventeen, six.'

He was a tubby little man with boot-button eyes, and his snort, Philip thought, was a trifle unctuous.

'Ah,' he said, putting a bold face on the matter, 'it looks a sound vulgar workaday bag. A trifle blatant perhaps. Have you anything—less ordinary?'

'Something more expensive, sir? Why, yes, indeed. This is only a stock line—the "Archdeacon" or "Country Solicitor" model. We have prices to suit all purses. Now if you were thinking of something which you might call resshersy, sir'[Pg 200]—and Philip now was—'there's a dressing-case under the window over there was specially made to the order of Haitch Haitch the Maharaja of Jolhopollolulu. Unfortunately, sir, the gentleman deceased suddenly a week or two ago; climate, I understand. His funeral obliquies were in the newspaper, you may remember. The consequence being, his ladies not, as you might say, concurring, the dressing-case in a manner of speaking is on our hands—and at a considerable reduction. Only six hundred and seventy-five guineas, sir; or rupees to match.'

'May I look at it?' said Philip. 'Colonel Crompton Pim.'

'By all means, sir,' cried the little man as if until that moment he had failed to notice that Philip was a long-lost son; 'Colonel Crompton Pim; of course. Here is the article, sir, a very handsome case, and quite unique, one of the finest, in fact, I have ever had the privilege of handling since I was transferred to this Department—from the Sports, sir.'

He pressed a tiny knob, the hinges yawned, and Philip's mouth began to water. It was in sober sooth a handsome dressing-case, and the shaft of sunlight that slanted in on it from the dusky window seemed pleased to be exploring it. It was a dressing-case of tooled red Levant morocco, with gold locks and clasps and a lining of vermilion watered silk, gilded with a chaste design of lotus flowers, peacocks, and houris, the 'fittings' being of gold and tortoise-shell, and studded with so many minute brilliants and emeralds that its contents even in that rather dingy sunbeam, appeared to be delicately on fire.

Philip's light blue eyes under their silken lashes continued to dwell on its charms in so spell-bound a silence that for a moment the assistant thought the young man was about to swoon.

'Thank you very much,' said Philip at last, turning away with infinite reluctance and with a movement as graceful as that of a faun, or of a *première danseuse* about to rest; 'I will[Pg 201] keep it in mind. You are sure the management can afford the reduction?'

Having made this rather airy comment, it seemed to Philip impolite, if not impossible, to ask the price of a 'job line' of mock goatskin cigarette-cases that were piled up in dreary disorder on a tray near at hand. So he passed out into the next Department, which happened to be that devoted to goods described as 'fancy', though, so far as he could see, not very aptly.

Still he glanced around him as he hurried on, his heart bleeding for the unfortunates, old and helpless, or young and defenceless, doomed some day to welcome these exacerbating barbarous jocosities as gifts. But at sight of an obscure, puffy, maroon object demonstratively labelled 'Pochette: Art Nouveau', his very skin contracted, and he was all but about to inquire of a large veiled old lady with an ebony walking-stick who was manfully pushing her way through this *mélange*, possibly in search of a *prie-dieu*, how such dreadful phenomena were 'begot, how nourished', and was himself preparing to join in the chorus, when a little beyond it his glance alighted on a minute writing-case, so frailly finished, so useless, so delicious to look at, handle, and smell, that even Titania herself might have paused to admire it. Philip eyed it with unconcealed gusto. His features had melted into the smile that so often used to visit them when as a little boy he had confided in his Uncle Charles that he preferred éclairs to doughnuts. Its price, he thought, was ridiculously moderate: only £67 10s.

'It's the décor, sir—Parisian, of course—that makes it a trifle costly,' the assistant was explaining. 'But it's practical as well as sheek and would add distinction to *any* young lady's boudoir, bedchamber, or lap. The ink, as you see, sir, cannot possibly leak from the bottle, if the case, that is, is held the right way up—so. The pencil, the "*Sans Merci*", as you observe, is of solid gold; and the pen, though we cannot guarantee the nib, is set with life-size turquoises. The flaps will hold[Pg 202] at least six sheets of small-size notepaper, and envelopes to—or not to—match. And *here* is a little something, a sort of calendar, sir, in fine enamel, sir, telling the day of the week of any day of the month in any year in any century from one A.D. to nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. It could then be renewed.'

'M'm, very ingenious,' Philip murmured, 'and even Leap Year, I see. Is it unique, and so on?'

'No doubt of it, sir. As a matter of fact, a lady from Philadelphia—the United States of America, sir—ordered fifty facsillimies, platinum mounts, of this very article—only yesterday afternoon; they get married a good deal over there, sir; wedding presents.'

'Quite, thank you, no,' said Philip, firmly but pleasantly. 'They say there is safety in numbers, but there seems to be precious little else. Have you anything less reproducible?'

'Reproducible, sir? Why, naturally, sir. You see this is only a counter article. While catering for the many, sir, we are bound to keep an eye upon the few. For that very reason, the management prefer to have the costlier specimens under cover.'

'Again, thank you,' said Philip hurriedly. 'What evils are done in thy name, O Philadelphia! I may return later.'

He emerged from the Fancy Goods Department, feeling at the same moment crestfallen and curiously elated. His mind, in fact, at this moment resembled a volcano the instant before its gloom is fated to burst into a blazing eruption. Though very hazily, he even recognized the danger he was in. So in hope to compose himself he sat down for a minute or two on a Madeira wicker chair intended perhaps by the management for this very purpose, and found himself gazing at a large black Chinese cat in the glossiest of glazed earthenware, and as life-like as Oriental artifice could make it. It was seated in a corner under a high potted palm, and it wore a grin upon its features that may have come from Cheshire, but which[Pg 203] showed no symptom whatever of vanishing away. At sight of it—for Philip was not only partial to cats but knew the virtues of the black variety—a secret fibre seemed to have snapped in his head. 'Good luck!' the creature smirked at him. And Philip smirked back. A flame of anguished defiance and desire had leapt up in his body. He would show his uncle what was what. He would learn him to cut nephews off with shillings. He would dare and do and die!

He rose, refreshed and renewed. It was as if he had tossed off a bumper of 'Veuve Clicquot' of 1066. He must himself have come over with the Conqueror. A shopwalker lurking near was interrupted in the middle of an enormous gape by the spectacle of this Apollonian young figure now entering his department—Pianofortes and American Organs. There was something in the leopard-like look of him, something so princely and predatory in his tread, that this Mr. Jackson would have been almost ready to confess that he was moved. Frenchily dark and Frenchily sleek, he bowed himself almost double.

'Yes, sir?' he remarked out loud.

'I want, I think, a pianoforte,' said Philip. 'A Grand.'

'Thank you, sir; this way, please. Grand pianofortes, Mr. Smithers.'

'I want a Grand piano,' repeated Philip to Mr. Smithers, an assistant with a slight cast in his left eye and an ample gingerish moustache. But in spite of these little handicaps Philip liked him much better than Mr. Jackson. A far-away glimpse of Mrs. Smithers and of all the little Smitherses seated round their Sunday leg of mutton at Hackney or at Brondesbury had flashed into his mind.

'Grands, sir,' cried Mr. Smithers, moving his moustache up and down with a curious rotatory constriction of the lips; 'this way, please.'

The young man was conducted along serried ranks of Grands. They stood on their three legs, their jaws tight shut,[Pg 204] as mute as troops on parade. Philip paced on and on, feeling very much like the late Duke of Cambridge reviewing a regiment of

his Guards. He paused at length in front of a 'Style 8; 7 ft. 9 in., square-legged, black-wood, mahogany-trimmed Bismarck.'

'It *looks* spacious,' he smiled amiably. 'But the finish! And why overhung?'

'Overstrung, sir?' said Mr. Smithers. 'That's merely a manner of speaking, sir, relating solely to its inside. But this, of course, is not what we specificate as a *grand* Grand. For tone and timber and resonance and pedal work and solidity and *wear*—there isn't a better on the market. I mean on the rest of the market. And if you were having in mind an everlasting instrument for the nursery or for a practice room—and we supply the new padded partitioning—this would be precisely the instrument, sir, you were having in mind. The young are sometimes a little hard on pianofortes, sir. They mean well, but they are but children after all; and——'

'Now let—me—think,' Philip interposed. 'To be quite candid, I wasn't having anything of that sort in mind. My sentiments are England for the English; and Bismarck, you know, though in girth and so on a remarkable man, was in other respects, a little—well, miscellaneous. It is said that he mixed his champagne with stout—or was it cocoa? On the other hand, I have no wish to be insular, and I *may* order one of these constructions later—for a lady: the niece, as a matter of fact, of a governess of my uncle Colonel Crompton Pim's when he was young—as young at least, as it was possible for him to be—who is, I believe, thinking of taking—of taking in—pupils. But we will see to that later. Have you anything that I could really look at?'

Mr. Smithers's moustaches twirled like a weathercock. 'Why, yes, sir. Just now we are up to our eyes in pianos—flooded; and if I may venture to say so, sir, Bismarck was never no friend of *mine*. All this,' and he swept his thumb in[Pg 205] the direction of the avenue of instruments that stretched behind them, 'they may be Grands, but they're most of them modern, and if you want a little something as nice to listen to as it is natty to look at, and *not* a mere menadjery fit only for an 'awl, there is a little what they call a harpsichord over yonder, sir. It's a bijou model, de Pompadour case, hand-painted throughout—cupids and scallops and what not, all English gut, wire, metal, and jacks, and I defy any dealer in London to approximate it, sir, in what you might call pure form. No noise and all music, sir, and that *mellow* you scarcely know where to look. A lady's instrument—a titled lady's. And only seven hundred and seventy-seven guineas, sir, all told.'

'Is it unique?' Philip inquired.

'Unique, sir? There's not another like it in Europe.'

Philip smiled at Mr. Smithers very kindly out of his blue eyes. 'But what about America?' he said.

The assistant curved what seemed an almost unnecessarily large hand round his lips. 'Between you and me, sir, if by America', he murmured, 'you're meaning the United States, why, Messrs. Montferas & de Beauguyou refuse to ship in that direction. It ruins their tone. In fact, sir, they are what's called *difficult*. They make for nobody and nowhere but as a favour; and that instrument over there was built for——!'

He whispered the sesame so low that water rustling on a pebbled beach would have conveyed to Philip tidings more intelligible. But by the look in Mr. Smithers's eye Philip guessed that the lady in question moved in a lofty, though possibly a narrow, circle.

'Ah!' he said; 'then that settles it. A home away from home. Charity begins there. I shall want it to-morrow. I shall want them both to-morrow. I mean the pianos. And perhaps a more democratic instrument for the servants' hall. But I will leave that to you.'

Mr. Smithers pretended not to goggle. 'Why, yes, sir, that can be easily arranged. In London, I *ho*—conjecture?'[Pg 206]

'In London,' said Philip, 'Grosvenor Square.' For at that very instant, as if at the summons of a jinnee, there had wafted itself into his memory the image of a vacant and 'highly desirable residence' which his casual eye had glanced upon only the afternoon before, and which had proclaimed itself 'to be let'.

'Grosvenor Square, sir; oh yes, sir?' Mr. Smithers was ejaculating, order-book in hand. 'I will arrange for their removal at once. The three of them—quite a nice little set, sir.'

'Pim, Crompton, Colonel,' chanted Philip. 'R-*O*-M; deferred account; *thank* you. 4-4-4, yes, four hundred and forty-four, Grosvenor Square. I am—that is, *we* are furnishing there.'

But this gentle emphasis on the 'we' was so courtly in effect that it sounded more like an afterthought than a piece of information. Nevertheless it misled Mr. Smithers. Intense fellow-feeling beamed from under his slightly overhung forehead. 'And I am sure, sir, if I may make so bold, I wish you both every happiness, I am myself of a matrimonial turn. And regret it, sir? *never!* I always say if every——'

'That's very kind indeed of you,' said Philip, averting his young cheek, which having flushed had now turned a little pale. 'And, if *I* may be so bold, I am perfectly certain Mrs. Smithers is of the same way of thinking. Which is the best way to the Best Man's Department, if I take in Portmanteaux and the Fancies on my way?'

Mr. Smithers eyed him with the sublimest admiration. 'Straight through, sir, on the left beyond them Chappels. On the same floor, but right out on the farther side of the building. As far as you can go.'

'That is exactly what I was beginning to wonder—precisely how far I can go. This little venture of mine is a rather novel experience, and at the moment I am uncertain of its issue. But tell me, why is it our enterprising American friends have not yet invented a *lateral* lift?'[Pg 207]

'Now that's passing strange, too, sir; for I've often fancied it myself,' said Mr. Smithers. 'But you see in a department like this there's not much time for quiet thought, sir, with so much what you might call hidden din about. As a matter of fact, when I was younger, sir—and that happens to us all—I did invent a harmonium key-stifler—rubber, and pith, and wool—*so*—and a small steel spring, quite neat and entirely unnoticeable. But the manufacturers wouldn't look at it; not they!'

'I don't believe', said Philip, folding up his bill, 'they ever look at anything. Not closely, you know. But if ever I do buy a harmonium,' he put his head a little on one side and again smiled at Mr. Smithers, 'I shall insist on the stifler. I suppose', he added reflectively, 'you haven't by any chance a nice pedigree Amati, or Stradivarius in stock? I have a little weakness for fiddles.'

Mr. Smithers, leaning heavily on the counter on both his thumbs, smiled, but at the same time almost imperceptibly shook his head.

'I fancied it was unlikely,' said Philip. 'What's that over there; in the glass case, I mean?'

'That, sir?' said Mr. Smithers, twinkling up, 'in that glass case there? That's a harp, sir. And a lovely little piece *that* is. Child's size, sir. What they call minnychoore, and well over a century old, but still as sweet as a canary. It was made, so they say, for Mozart, the composer, sir, as you might be aware, in 1760, and up in the top corner is scratched the letters A.W. No doubt of it, sir—A.W. I've seen a picture of the mite myself playing like an angel in his nightcap, and not a day over seven; you'd hardly believe it, and his parents coming in at the door. Surprising. Then Schumann, *he* had it, sir—I mean the harp; and Schumann, though I don't know how he could dissuade himself to part with it, *he* passed it on to Brahms, another composer—and very much thought of even though a bit nearer *our* day. But you'll find it all neatly set out[Pg 208] on the brass label at the foot. It's all there, sir. There's many a custo——'

'Indeed!' said Philip, 'Brahms, Schumann, Mozart, what raptures we are recalling! And here it rests at last. The knacker's yard. How very, very sad. Why, of course, Mr. Smithers, we must have that sent on too—and packed very, very carefully. Is the glass case extra?'

Mr. Smithers gulped. 'I am exceedingly sorry, sir,' he said, 'exceedingly sorry, but it's not for sale; I mean—*except* the case.'

'Not for sale,' retorted Philip impulsively. 'But what is the use, Mr. Smithers, of a mercenary institution like this unless everything in it is for sale? You cannot mean for raw advertisement?'

Mr. Smithers was covered with confusion. 'I am sure, sir,' he said, 'that the directors would do their utmost to consider your wishes. They would be very happy to do so. But if you will excuse my mentioning it, I should myself very much miss that harp. I have been in this department thirteen years now....My little boy.... It is the only thing....'

It was Philip's turn to be all in confusion. 'Good gracious me, I quite understand,' he said; 'not another word, Mr. Smithers. I wouldn't *think*, of pressing the point. None the less I can assure you that even if it *had*been for sale I should always have welcomed you whenever you cared to come to Grosvenor Square and take another look at it. And, of course, your little boy too—*all* your little boys.'

Mr. Smithers appeared to be lost in gratitude. 'If only', he began, a light that never was on sea or land in his eye—but words failed him.

At the other end of the 'Chappels' Philip again encountered the walker, Mr. Jackson, still looking as much like a self-possessed bridegroom as it is possible for a high collar and a barber to achieve.

'I see', said Philip, 'you exhibit specimens of the tuberphone[Pg 209] (and, by the way, I would suggest *a* instead of "er")—the tubaphone, the clog-box, and the Bombaboo, iniquities at the same time negroid and old-fashioned, but though in a recent visit to Budapest I found even the charming little linden-shaded shops—along the Uffelgang, you know, not, of course, a fashionable part of the city—crammed with models of the "Haba-Stein", a microtonic instrument with five keyboards and Hindu effects, intended, of course for the polytonal decompositions of the "Nothing-but-Music" school—*most* interesting; I see *no* trace of it here. I am not a neotero-maniac, but still, we must keep abreast, we must keep abreast!'

He waved a not unfriendly glove over his head, smiled and went on.

Mr. Smithers had also watched the slim grey young figure until it had turned the corner and was out of sight. He then had a word with his 'floor chief'.

'Pim, eh, Crompton,' said Mr. Jackson, squinting morosely, at his underling's open order-book. '"Setting up house"? Then I suppose the old gent must have sent in his checks. Not that I'm surprised this nephew of his hasn't bought his black yet. Close-fisted, purple-nosed, peppery old——! There won't be many to cry their eyes out over *his* arums and gardenias.'

Mr. Smithers, being a family man, felt obliged to seem to enjoy as much as possible his immediate chief's society.

'All I can say *is*,' he ventured, 'that young feller, and he's a gentleman if ever there was one, is making it fly.'

He *was*. At this moment Philip was assuring Assistant No. 6 in the Portmanteau Department that unless the Maharaja of Jolhopolloluli's dressing-case could be despatched next day to reach No. 444 Grosvenor Square by tea-time he need not trouble. 'A few other little things', he explained, 'are being sent at the same time.' No. 6 at once hastened to the house telephone and asked for the secretary's office. The line was engaged.

But he need not have hesitated, for when a young man with[Pg 210] a Pim for an uncle and of so much suavity and resource makes his wishes known, this world is amiability itself. Philip was warming up. However bland in outward appearance, he was by this time at a very enlivening temperature. He had tasted blood, as the saying goes; and he was beginning to see the need of setting a good example. Customers, like the coneys, are usually a feeble folk. His little sortie was turning into a crusade.

By this time he had all but finished disporting himself in the Furniture Department. 'Three large drawing-rooms, one of them "extensive",' had run his rather naked catalogue, 'a ball-room, a dining-room, a breakfast-room, and a little pretty dumpy all-kinds-of-angles morning-room with a Cherubini ceiling and a Venetian chimneypiece, eighteenth century, in lapis lazuli and glass. Bedrooms, let me see, say, twenty-two—just to go on with (but not in), eleven of them for personal use, and the rest, staff. That, I think, will do for the present. We face east or west as the case may be; and nothing, please, of the "decorative", the quaint, or the latest thing out. Nothing shoddy, shapeless, or sham. I dislike the stuffy and the fussy and mere trimmings; and let the beds be *beds*. Moreover, I confess to being sadly disappointed in the old, the "antique", furniture you have shown me. The choice is restricted, naïve and incongruous, and I have looked in vain for anything that could not be easily rivalled in the richer museums. However, let there be as many so-called antique pieces as possible, and those as antique as you can manage. Period, origin, design, harmony—please bear these in mind.'

The assistants, clustering round him, bowed.

'If I have time I will look through the Department again on my way down. Eight hundred guineas for the cheaper of the Chippendale four-posters seems a little exorbitant; and three hundred and fifty for the William and Mary wall-glass—I fear it's been resilvered and patched. Still, I agree you can but do your best—I say you can all of you but do your best[Pg 211]—and I must put up with that. What I *must* insist on, however, is that everything I have mentioned—everything—must be in its place

to-morrow afternoon—carpets and so on will, of course, precede them—by four o'clock. And let there be no trace of that indescribable odour of straw and wrappings—from Delhi, I should think—which accompanies removals. 444 Grosvenor Square. Pim—Crompton—Colonel: R-*O*-M. Thank you. To the left? *Thank* you.'

This 'floor-chief' hastened on in front of his visitor as if he were a Gehazi in attendance on a Naaman, and the young man presently found himself in a scene overwhelmingly rich with the colours, if not the perfumes, of the Orient. Here a complete quarter of an hour slid blissfully by. Mere wooden furniture, even when adorned with gilt, lacquer, ivory, or alabaster, can be disposed of with moderate ease; and especially if the stock of the tolerable is quickly exhausted. But Persian, Chinese, if not Turkey, carpets are another matter.

Philip sat erect on a gimcrack gilded chair, his cane and hat in his left hand, his gloves in his right, while no less than three sturdy attendants in baize aprons at one and the same moment strewed their matchless offerings at his feet, and an infuriated and rapidly multiplying group of would-be customers in search of floorcloth, lino and coconut matting stood fuming beyond. But first come first served is a good old maxim, and even apart from it Philip was unaware of their company. He lifted not so much as an eyebrow in their direction.

In the meantime, however, the cash balance in his uncle's bank, and much else besides, had long since as rapidly vanished as the vapour from a locomotive on a hot summer's day. From the Carpet Department, vexed that time allowed him only one of London's chief treasuries to ransack—such are the glories of Bokhara and Ispahan—he hastened down to the wine counters. Here, childishly confident in the cellarage of No. 444, Philip indulged a pretty palate *not* inherited from his uncle: claret, Burgundy, hock, sherry, cherry brandy, green[Pg 212] Chartreuse, and similar delicate aids to good talk and reflection. He was ingenuous but enthusiastic. Port he ignored.

From 'Wines' he made his way through the galleries exhibiting curtains and 'hangings' (he shuddered), and china and glass—'most discouraging'. His spirits revived a little when yet another defunct and barbaric prince, this time from Abyssinia, supplied him in the Car Department with a vehicle whose only adequate use, to judge from the modesty of its dashboard, the simplicity of its engine and its price, would be a journey from this world into the next. Nevertheless His Highness had left it behind him.

Fleeting visits to counters bristling with ironmongery, turnery, kitchen utensils, and 'provisions'—and from motives of principle he omitted all mention of mulligatawny paste, chutney, West India pickles, and similar fierce and barbarous comestibles, vanished out of memory like the patterns of a kaleidoscope. The rather noisy annexe reserved for live stock Philip left unvisited. After deserts of dead stock it sounded

inviting, but Philip's was a dainty nose and he was sorry for orang-outangs. Not so napery and damasks: he revelled.

So too with the books. He had clear convictions of what a gentleman's library should be without, but decided that it would take more leisure than he could spare this morning to expound them. Even the sight of a Work of Reference, however, is an excellent sedative; he ordered the choicest of obsolete dictionaries, old atlases, encyclopædias, bird, flower, and antique cookery books, ignored the Who's-whoo's—and retired.

As for pictures and statuary, one anguished glance into the dreadful chambers devoted to the fine arts had sent him scurrying on like a March hare. Nor, as he rather sadly realized, had he any need to linger at the portals of the Monumental Masonry Department, and he now suddenly found himself in the midst of a coruscating blaze of the precious metals and the still more precious stones. He had[Pg 213] strayed into 'Jewellery'—a feast for Aladdin. Gold in particular—goblets and bowls and tankards, plates, platters, and dishes of it; clocks, chronometers, watches—from massive turnips, memorials of the Georges, to midgets like a threepenny-piece in crystal and enamel, many of them buzzing like bees, and all of them intent on the kind of time which is *not* wild or always nectarous, but of which Philip had always supposed there was an inexhaustible supply. But not, alas, for all purposes. Indeed, these officious reminders of the actual hour had for the first time a little scared him.

In the peculiar atmosphere that hangs over any abundant array of sago, cooked meats, candles, biscuits, coffee, tea, ginger, and similar wares, he had been merely a young bachelor on the brink of an establishment. But at sight of this otiose display of gewgaws in the lamplit mansion in which he now found himself, his fancy had suddenly provided him with a bride. She was of a fairness incomparably fair. The first faint hint of this eventuality had almost unnerved him. He lost his head and—his heart being unconcerned—his taste also. In tones as languid as the breezes of Arabia he had at once ordered her rings, bracelets, necklaces, pendants, brooches, ear-rings, not to speak of bediamonded plumes and tiaras, that would daunt the dreams even of the complete bevy of musical comedy young ladies on the British stage—not to mention that of Buenos Aires. And then, oddly enough, he had come to himself, and paused.

At the very moment of opening his mouth in repetition of a solo with which he was now entirely familiar—'R-*O*-M', and so on—he sat instead, gaping at the tall, calm, bald, venerable old gentleman on the other side of the counter. He had flushed.

'Have you', he inquired almost timidly at last, his eyes fixed on a chastely printed list of cutlery and silver ware that lay on the glass case at his elbow, 'have you just one really simple, lovely, rare, precious, and, well, unique little trinket suitable for a lady? Young, you know? An *un*-birthday present?'[Pg 214]

The old gentleman looked up, looked at, looked *in*, smiled fondly, reminiscently, and, selecting a minute key on a ring which he had drawn out of his pocket, opened a safe not half a dozen yards away. 'We have this,' he said.

'This', at first, was a little fat morocco leather case. He pressed the spring. Its lid flew open. And for an instant Philip's eyesight failed him. But it was not so much the suppressed lustre of the jewels within that had dazed his imagination as the delicate marvel of their setting. They lay like lambent dewdrops on the petals of a flower. The old gentleman gazed too.

'The meaning of the word "simple",' he suggested ruminatively, 'is one of many degrees. This, sir, is a Benvenuto Cellini piece.' He had almost whispered the last few syllables as if what in workmanship were past all rivalry was also beyond any mortal pocket; as if, in fact, he were telling secrets of the unattainable. The tone piqued Philip a little.

'It is charming,' he said. 'But have you nothing then of Jacques de la Tocqueville's, or of Rudolph von Himmeldömmer's, nothing of—dear me, the name escapes me. The earlier Florentine, you will remember, no doubt referred to in *Sordello*, who designed the chryselephantine bowl for the Botticelli wedding-feast. But never mind. Nothing Greek? Nothing Etruscan—*poudre d'or*? Are you suggesting that the Winter Palace was thrice looted in vain?'

The old gentleman was accustomed to the airs and graces of fastidious clients and merely smiled. He had not been listening very intently. 'You will appreciate the difficulty, sir, of keeping anything but our more trifling pieces actually within reach of the nearest burglar with a stick of gun-cotton or an acetylene lamp. This'—he stirred the little leather case with his finger as lithely as a cat the relics of a mouse, and its contents seemed softly to sizzle in subdued flames of rose and amber and blue—'this', he said, 'happens not to be our property. It is merely in our keeping. And though to an article[Pg 215] of such a nature it is absurd to put a price, we have been asked to dispose of it; and by—well, a client for whom we have the profoundest respect.'

'I see'; Philip pondered coldly on the bauble, though his heart was a whirlpool of desire and admiration. He swallowed. The remote tiny piping of a bird that was neither nightingale nor woodlark, and yet might be either or both, had called to him as if from the shores of some paradisal isle hidden in the mists of the future. He glanced up at the old gentleman, but his bald, long, grey countenance was as impassive as ever.

'I'll take it,' Philip said, and for a while could say no more. When speech was restored to him, he asked that it should be delivered not 'with the other things', and not to any butler or major-domo or other crustacean that might appear in answer to a knock at No. 444, but by special messenger into his own personal private hands.

'Precisely, at half-past four, if you please.' The old gentleman bowed. As there was not enough room in the money column of his order-book for the noughts, he had written in the price in longhand, and was engaged in printing the figures 444 in the place reserved for the customer's address, when a small but clearly actual little voice at Philip's elbow suddenly shrilled up into his ear——' Mr. Philip Pim, sir?' At echo of this summons Philip stood stock-still and stiff, his heart in his ears. 'The sekkertary, sir,' the piping voice piped on, 'asks me to say he'd be much obliged if you would be so kind as to step along into his office on your way *hout*, sir.'

The tone of this invitation, though a little Cockney in effect, was innocence and courtesy itself; yet at sound of it every drop of blood in Philip's body—though he was by no means a bloated creature—had instantly congealed. This was the end, then. His orgy was over. His morning of mornings was done. The afflatus that had wafted him on from floor to floor had wisped out of his mind like the smoke of a snuffed-out candle. Yet still the bright thought shook him: he had had a Run[Pg 216] for his money. No—better than that: he had had a Run *gratis*.

He must collect his wits: they had gone wool-gathering. At last he managed to turn his head and look down at the small, apple-cheeked, maroon-tunicked page-boy at his side—apple-cheeked, alas, only because he had but that week entered the sekkertary's service and his parents were of country stock.

'Tell Sir Leopold Bull'—Philip smiled at the infant—'that I will endeavour to be with him in the course of the afternoon. Thank you. That, apart from the rest,' he added for the ear of his friend on the other side of the counter, 'that will be all.'

But Philip was reluctant to leave him. The last four words, as he had heard himself uttering them, sounded on in his ear with the finality of a knell. He was extremely dubious of what would happen if he let go of the counter. His knees shook under him. A dizzy vacancy enveloped him in. With a faint wan smile at the old gentleman, who was too busily engaged in returning his treasures to the safe to notice it, he managed to edge away at last.

Every mortal thing around him, gilded ceiling to grandfather clock, was at this moment swaying and rotating, as will the ocean in the eyes of a sea-sick traveller gloating down upon it from an upper deck. He felt ill with foreboding.

But breeding tells. And courage is a mistress that has never been known to jilt a faithful heart. Philip was reminded of this as he suddenly caught sight of a sort of enormous purple beefeater, resembling in stature a Prussian dragoon, and in appearance a Javanese Jimjam. This figure stood on duty in the doorway, and appeared to be examining him as closely as if he were the heir to the English throne (or the most nefarious crook from Chicago). As Philip drew near he looked this

monster full in his fish-like eye, since he was unable to do anything else. But try as he might he couldn't pass him in silence.

'Ask Sir Leopold Bull, please,' he said, 'to send an official[Pg 217] to show me the way to his office. He will find me somewhere in the building.'

'I can take you there meself,' replied the giant hoarsely. He could indeed—bodily.

'Thank you,' replied Philip. 'I have no doubt of it. But I should be much obliged if you would at once deliver my message.'

He then groped his way to yet another wicker chair not many yards along a corridor festooned with knick-knacks from Japan and the Near East, and clearly intended for speedy disposal. He eyed them with immense distaste and sat down.

'Nothing whatever, thank you,' he murmured to a waitress who had approached him with a card containing a list of soft drinks. Never in his life had he so signally realized the joys of self-restraint. And though at the same moment he thrust finger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket in search of his Uncle Charles's last sovereign, it was with a view not to material but to moral support. Years before he had often tried the same device when as a small boy deadly afraid of the dark he had managed at last to thrust his fevered head up and out from under his bedclothes, and to emit a dreadful simulacrum of a croupy cough. He had never known it to fail of effect, and it was always nice to know his mother was *there*.

So, too, with his Uncle Charles's sovereign. It was nice to know it was there, though it was not the dark Philip was now afraid of but the light. Resting the ivory handle of his walking-stick on his lower lip, he began to think. What would his sentence be? A first offender, but not exactly a novice. Not, at any rate, he hoped, in taste and judgment. Months or years? Hard labour or penal servitude? So swift is the imagination that in a few seconds Philip found himself not only—his sentence served, the smiling governor bidden farewell—*out* and a free man again, but fuming with rage that he had not managed to retain a single specimen of his spoils. The Jobbli dressing-bag,[Pg 218] for instance, or that tiny, that utterly and inimitably 'unique' little Sheraton Sheridan writing-desk.

He came back a little stronger from this expedition into the future. For reassurance, like hope, springs eternal in the human breast. His one regret was not so much that he had been found out (that might come later), but that he had been found out so soon. How much bolder, less humiliating, nobler, to have actually bearded that old curmudgeon of an uncle of his, swapp or bogey in hand, in his den!

That in any event he would have been 'found out' on the morrow, as soon, that is, as the first van arrived at No. 444, he had realized long ago. He certainly would not have

been found 'in'! But even one brief night in May seems, in prospect, a long interval between being a Crœsus and a felon in Pentonville.

He was recalled from these reflections by a young man whose sleek black hair was parted as neatly in front and in the middle as his morning coat was parted behind. A few paces distant, like a mass of gilded pudding-stone, stood the giant from the Jewellery Department. Were they in collusion? Philip could not decide.

'If you would step this way, sir, to the secretary's office,' said the young man, 'Sir Leopold Bull would be very much obliged.'

Philip mounted to his feet and, though he flatly refused to step *that* way, followed him—to his doom. That, however, was not to be instantaneous, for on his arrival Sir Leopold Bull, rising from his roll-top desk with a brief but thrilling smile, first proffered a plump white hand to his visitor and then a chair. It seemed to be a needlessly polite preamble to the interview that was to follow. Philip ignored the hand but took the chair.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I do hope you will some day take my advice, Sir Leopold, to *sim*plify the arrangement of this building. It is a perfect labyrinth, and I always miss my[Pg 219] way.' With a sigh he sank down into the cushions. He was tired.

'My uncle, Colonel Crompton Pim,' he continued, 'is unable to spare a moment to see you this morning. I regret to say he strongly disapproved of the Bombay ducks, or was it the Clam Chowder, you sent him on Friday. They were beneath contempt.'

Sir Leopold smiled once more, but even more placatingly. 'I had the privilege of seeing Colonel Crompton Pim only yesterday afternoon,' he replied. 'He then expressed his satisfaction, for the time being, at the golf balls—the new *Excelsior* brand—with one of which we had the pleasure of supplying him *gratis* a week or two ago. The Bombay ducks shall be withdrawn immediately. I must apologize for not seeking you out in person, Mr. Pim, but what I have to say is somewhat of a private nature and——'

'Yes,' said Philip, realizing how thin was the end of the wedge which Sir Leopold was at this moment insinuating into the matter in hand. 'Yes, quite.' And he opened his innocent blue eyes as wide as he could, to prevent them from blinking. He kept them fixed, too, on the close-shaven face, its octopus like mouth and prominent eyes, with ill-suppressed repulsion. To be a fly that had fallen a victim to such a spider as this!

'It would please me better', he went on, 'if you would arrive as rapidly as possible at the matter you wish to discuss with me. I am free for five minutes, but I must beg you not to waste our time. And please tell your porter over there to go away. Such scenes are distasteful to me.'

The face of the porter who seemed to have been created solely for his bulk, turned as crimson as a specimen of *sang-du-boeuf*. He appeared to be hurt. But wages are of more importance than feelings, and he withdrew.

'You have had a busy morning, Mr. Pim,' said the secretary. 'No less than seven of my assistants who have had the privilege of waiting upon you have been monopolizing me for[Pg 220] some time with telephone messages. I hope I am not being too intrusive if I venture to congratulate you, sir, on what I suppose to be Colonel Crompton Pim's approaching——'

'Candidly, Sir Leopold,' said Philip firmly, 'that *would* be venturing too far. Much too far. Let us say no more about it. What precise charge are you intending to bring against me?'

There was a pause while the world continued to rotate.

'For which article?' breathed Sir Leopold.

Philip gazed steadily at the full, bland, secretive countenance. It was as if once again he had heard that seraphic bird-like voice sounding in the remote blue sky above the storm-clouds that now hung so heavily over his beating heart.

'Oh, I mean for delivery,' he said. 'Mine was—was a large order.'

'But my dear sir, we shouldn't dream of making *any* such charge. *Any* service to Colonel Pim.... Even the Harp....' The faint sob in the voice would have done credit to a Caruso.

Philip stooped to hide the cataract of relief that had swept over his face, then raised his head again. How could he be sure that this was anything more than play-acting—the torture of suspense? 'Ah, well,' he said, 'that is no matter now. I gather there was some other point you had in mind—in *view*, I should say.'

'Oh, only', said Sir Leopold, 'to ask if Colonel Pim would be so kind as to subscribe as usual to our Fund for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Offspring of Superannuated Shop Assistants. Mainly orphans, Mr. Pim. We must all die, Mr. Pim, and some of us have to die earlier in life than others. Still, our average here is little worse than that of any other large London establishment. In Petrograd—or was it Los Angeles?—I am given to understand, a shop assistant at two-and-thirty is a shop assistant with at least one foot in the grave. It is the little orphans, the fatherless ones, who from no apparent fault of their own, have to be left to the tender[Pg 221] mercies of a busy world! It would grieve you, sir, which Heaven forbid, if I told you how many of these wee small things there are now on our hands. Chubby, joysome, rosebud little creatures, as happy as the day is long. Nevertheless it is a little thoughtless to marry, Mr. Pim, when it is only orphans one can leave behind one. On

the other hand, there is a silver lining to *every* cloud. Without these infants we should be deprived of a good cause. An excellent cause. And it's causes that keep us going. Last year I think Colonel Pim very kindly contributed half a guinea.'

'In cash?' Philip inquired sharply.

'We debited his account,' said Sir Leopold.

'Well, then,' said Philip, 'please understand that my uncle *regrets* that little laxity. He has hardened. He now entirely disapproves of orphans and of orphanages. The shop assistant, he was saying to me only the other day, is a person who should be grateful to Providence that he has *no* justification for dabbling in matrimony. The more celibate they are, in his opinion, the better. But recollect, Sir Leopold, that until we arrive at the higher and fewer salaried officials in your establishment, I feel myself in no way bound to *share* my uncle's views. Your staff is as courteous and considerate as it appears to be unappreciated. A man's a man for a' that. And *a'* that. Let us talk of brighter things.'

Sir Leopold did his utmost to conceal the wound to his vanity. 'I am sorry to seem to be persistent,' he assured his client, 'but Colonel Pim only yesterday was so kind as to say he would *consider* my appeal. I take it, then, that he has changed his mind?

'My uncle', retorted Philip tartly, 'has a mind that is the better for being changed.' For an instant he saw the face before him as it would appear in due course in the witness-box; and his very soul revolted. That pitiless Machine called Society might have its merits, but not *this* cog in its wheel! 'I myself implored my uncle', he added bitterly, 'to give the[Pg 222] orphans the cold shoulder. What in the chronic sirocco of his next world would be the use to him of a mere half-guinea's worth of cooling breezes? Scarcely a sop in the pan. Indeed, only a passion for the conventional prevented him from asking for his previous donations to be returned.'

Sir Leopold appeared to be engaged in rapidly bolting something—possibly his pride. It was at any rate no part of his secretarial duties to detect insanity in the family of any solvent shareholder.

'There is only one other little point,' he went on rather hollowly. 'Colonel Pim asked me to send him a detailed account of his purchases during the last month. We met by happy chance as he was yesterday alighting from a taxicab at the entrance to his bank. After to-day's purchases that will perhaps take an hour or two. But it shall reach him to-morrow morning—without fail.'

Philip had risen. It is better to stand when one is at bay. While with a gentle absent smile he stood drawing on his gloves he was faced with the wildest effort of his life—to make sure of what lay in hiding behind these last remarks. Anything *might*.

'Oh, he did—did he,' he remarked very softly. 'I fancy'—and at last he lifted his gentle eyes to meet his adversary's—'I *believe* there's an empty whisky jar that has not yet been credited to him. Perhaps that was on his mind.'

'Well, Mr. Pim,' said Sir Leopold, 'turning' at last, 'if *that's* his only jar it's soon adjusted.'

Philip took a deep breath. He playfully wagged a finger.

'Now *that*, Sir Leopold,' he said, 'was blank verse. I hope you don't intend to put my little purchases of this morning into *rhyme*! The effort, I assure you, would be wasted on my uncle.'

He wheeled lightly, and turned towards the door. Sir Leopold, his face now at liberty to resume its office of expressing his feelings, accompanied him. Indeed he continued to accompany him to the very entrance of his gigantic abode. And[Pg 223] there Philip almost fainted. A deluge, compared with which that of Noah and his family was nothing but an April shower, was descending on the street.

'A taxi,' roared Sir Leopold at a group of his satellites in the porch, caparisoned in shiny waterproofs, and armed with gigantic *parapluies*.

But though at least nineteen of these vehicles were instantly battling their way towards this goal, Philip with incredible agility had eluded their attention. Before Sir Leopold had had time even to arrange his face to smile a farewell, our young friend had gone leaping up the staircase behind him, and had without a moment's pause vanished into the Tropical Department. One fugitive glance at its pith and pukka contents, and at the dusky assistants in attendance, had only accelerated his retreat. In less than half a minute he found himself confronting a young woman seated in the midst of a stockade of umbrellas.

The coincidence was too extreme to be ignored. He would at least carry off *some* little souvenir of his morning's outing. What better value could he get for hard cash than an implement that would be at the same time a refuge from the elements—for other he would soon presently have none—and a really formidable weapon at hand for his next interview with Sir Leopold?

He had but just enough breath left to express himself. He pointed.

'I *want* one, please,' he cried at the young woman. 'Cash.'

'One, two, three, four, *five* guineas?' she murmured, looking as if she were less in need of her stock than of her lunch. 'Partridge, malacca, horn, ivory, rhinoceros, natural, *gold*? Union, gloria, glacé, taffeta, cotton, mixture, *twill*?

'Not a toy; an umbrella,' Philip expostulated. 'To keep off rain. A nephew returning to school—ten years' wear. Gingham, alpaca, calico, cast-iron—*anything*; so long as it is hefty, solid, endurable, awful, and*cheap*.'[Pg 224]

'We have here what is *called* an umbrella,' replied the assistant a trifle coldly. 'The "Miss and Master Brand". Lignumvitæ stick, whalebone ribs, blunted ferrule, non-poisonous handle, guaranteed not to break, fray, fade, or scale. Nine and elevenpence complete.'

'Bill; in haste; cash; just as it is; thanks,' cried Philip and seized the dreadful object. With a groan he laid his Uncle Charles's sovereign in the narrow brass trough of the pay-desk. The obese young person in the wooden box seemed about to lift it to her lips, glanced at him again, put it aside, smiled, and gave him his change.

'The way to the back exit, I think, is over there?' Philip murmured, waving his gloves due west.

The young person smiled again, and he withdrew. He withdrew down the back steps and into the deluge: there to face a watery world, the possessor of ten shillings and a penny (in his pocket), a wardrobe of old suits, about a hundred and fifty books, three of them unmerited prizes for good conduct, a juvenile collection of postage stamps, a hypothetical legacy of a shilling, and an uncle who, if he faced his liabilities as an English gentleman must, had to all intents and purposes overdrawn his bank account that afternoon, by, say roughly, a couple of hundred thousand pounds.

[Pg 225]

THE NAP

The autumnal afternoon was creeping steadily on towards night; the sun after the morning's rain was now—from behind thinning clouds—glinting down on the chimney pots and slate roofs of Mr. Thripp's suburb. And the day being a Saturday, across Europe, across England, an immense multitudinous stirring of humanity was in progress. It had begun in remote Australia and would presently sweep across the Atlantic into vast America, resembling the rustling of an ant-heap in a pine wood in sunny June. The Christian world, that is, was preparing for its weekly half-holiday; and Mr. Thripp was taking his share.

As if time were of unusual importance to him, two clocks stood on his kitchen mantelpiece: one, gay as a peepshow in the middle, in a stained wood case with red

and blue flowers on the glass front; the other an 'alarm'—which though it was made of tin had a voice and an appearance little short of the brazen. Above them, as if entirely oblivious to their ranting, a glazed King Edward VII stared stolidly out of a Christmas lithograph, with his Orders on his royal breast.

Mr. Thripp's kitchen table was at this moment disordered with the remains of a meal straggling over a tablecloth that had now gallantly completed its full week's service. Like all Saturday dinners in his household, this had been a hugger-[Pg 226]mugger dinner—one of vehement relays. Mr. Thripp himself had returned home from his office at a quarter to two—five minutes after his daughter Millie and Mrs. Thripp had already begun. Charlie Thripp had made his appearance a little before the hour; and James—who somehow had never become Jim or Jimmie—arrived soon afterwards. To each his due, kept warm.

But the hasty feeding was now over. Mr. Thripp in his shirt-sleeves, and with his silver watch-chain disposed upon his front, had returned once more from the scullery with his empty tray. He was breathing heavily, for he inclined nowadays, as he would sometimes confess, to the *ongbongpong*. He had remarkably muscular arms for a man of his sedentary profession, that of ledger clerk in Messrs. Bailey, Bailey and Company's counting house. His small eyes, usually half-hidden by their plump lids, were of a bright, clear blue. His round head was covered with close-cut hair; he had fullish lips, and his ample jowl always appeared as if it had been freshly shaved—even on Saturday afternoons.

Mr. Thripp delighted in Saturday afternoons. He delighted in housework. Though he never confessed it to a living soul (and even though it annoyed Tilda to hear him) he delighted too in imitating the waitresses in the tea-shops, and rattled the plates and dishes together as if they were made of a material unshatterable and everlasting. When alone at the sink he would hiss like a groom currying a full-grown mare. He packed the tray full of dirty dishes once more, and returned into the steam of the scullery.

'You get along now, Tilda,' he said to his wife who was drying up. 'We shall have that Mrs. Brown knocking every minute, and that only flusters you.'

Mrs. Thripp looked more ill-tempered than she really was—with her angular face and chin, pitch-dark eyes, and black straight hair. With long damp fingers she drew back a limp strand of it that had straggled over her forehead.[Pg 227] 'What beats me is, you never take a bit of enjoyment yourself,' she replied. 'It isn't fair to *us*. I slave away, morning, noon and night; but that's just as things are. But other husbands get out and about; why not you? *Let* her knock! She's got too much money to waste; that's what's the matter with *her*. I don't know what you wouldn't take her for in that new get-up she's got.'

Then what the devil do you go about with her for? were the words that entered Mr. Thripp's mind; and as for slaving, haven't I just *asked* you to give over? Have reason, woman! But he didn't utter them. 'That'll be all right,' he said instead, in his absurd genial way. 'You get on along off, Tilda; I'll see to all this. I enjoy myself my own way, don't you fear. Did you never hear of the selfish sex? Well, that's me!'

'Oh yes, I know all about that,' said his wife sententiously: 'a pinch of salt on a bird's tail! But there's no need for sarcasms. Now do be careful with that dish, there. It don't belong to us, but to next door. She gave me one of her pancakes on it—and nothing better than a shapeless bit of leather, eether. Just to show she was once in service as a cook-general, I suppose; though she never owns to it.'

A spiteful old mischief-maker, if you asked me, was Mr. Thripp's inward comment. But 'Oh well, Tilda, she means all right,' he said soothingly. 'Don't you worry. Now get along off with you; it's a hard day, Saturday, but you won't know yourself when you come down again.' As if forced into a line of conduct she deprecated and despised, Tilda flung her wet tea-cloth over a chair, and, with heart beating gaily beneath her shrunken breast, hastened away.

Mr. Thripp began to whistle under his breath as he turned on the hot water tap again. It was the one thing he insisted on—a lavish supply of hot water. He was no musician and only himself knew the tune he was in search of; but it kept him going as vigorously as a company of grenadiers on the march, and he invariably did his household jobs against time. It in[Pg 228]dulged a sort of gambling instinct in him; and the more he hated his job the louder he whistled. So as a small boy he had met the challenge of the terrors of the dark. 'Keep going,' he would say. 'Don't let things mess over. That's waste!'

At that moment, his elder son, James, appeared in the scullery doorway. James took after his mother's side of the family. In his navy-blue serge suit, light-brown shoes, mauve socks and spotted tie, he showed what careful dressing can do for a man. A cigarette sagged from his lower lip. His head was oblong, and flat-sided, and his eyes had a damp and vacant look. He thrust his face an inch or two into the succulent steam beyond the doorway.

'Well, dad, I'm off,' he said.

Oh, my God! thought his father; if only you'd drop those infernal fags. Smoke, smoke, smoke, morning to night; and you that pasty-looking I can't imagine what the girl sees in you, with your nice superior ways. 'Right you are, my son,' he said aloud, 'I won't ask you to take a hand! Enjoy yourself while you're young, I say. But slow and steady does it. Where might *you* be bound for this afternoon?'

'Oh, tea with Ivy's people,' said James magnanimously. 'Pretty dull going, I can tell you.'

'But it won't be tea all the evening, I suppose?' said his father, pushing a steaming plate into the plate-rack.

'Oh, I dare say we shall loaf off to a Revoo or something,' said James. He tossed his cigarette end into the sink, but missed the refuse strainer. Mr. Thripp picked it up with a fork and put it into the receptacle it was intended for, while James 'lit up' again.

'Well, so long,' said his father, 'don't spoil that Sunday-go-to-Meeting suit of yours with all this steam. And by the way, James, I owe you five shillings for that little carpentering job you did for me. It's on the sitting-room shelf.'

'Right ho. Thanks, dad,' said James. 'I thought it was six. But never mind.'[Pg 229] His father flashed a glance at his son—a glance like the smouldering of a coal. 'That so? Well, make it six, then,' he said. 'And I'm much obliged.'

'Oh, that's nothing,' replied James graciously. 'Cheerio; don't overdo it, dad.'

Mr. Thripp returned to his washing-up. He was thinking rapidly with an extraordinary medley of feeling—as if he were not one Mr. Thripp, but many. None the less, his whistling broke out anew as though, like a canary, in rivalry with the gushing of the tap. After loading up his tray with crockery for the last time, he put its contents away in the cupboard, and on the kitchen dresser; cleansed the drain, swabbed up the sink, swabbed up the cracked cement floor, hung up his dish-cloth, rinsed his hands, and returned into the kitchen.

Millie in a neat, tailor-made costume which had that week marvellously survived dyeing, was now posed before the little cracked square of kitchen looking-glass. She was a pale, slim thing. Her smooth hair, of a lightish brown streaked with gold and parted in the middle, resembled a gilded frame surrounding her mild angelic face—a face such as the medieval sculptors in France delighted to carve on their altar-pieces. Whatever she wore became her—even her skimpy old pale-blue flannel dressing-gown.

She turned her narrow pretty face sidelong under her hat and looked at her father. She looked at every human being like that—even at her own reflection in a shop window, even at a flower in a glass. She spent her whole life subtly, instinctively, wordlessly courting. She had as many young men as the White Queen has pawns: though not all of them remained long in her service.

It's all very well to be preening yourself in that mirror, my girl, her father was thinking, but you'd be far better off in the long run if you did a bit more to help your mother, even though you do earn a fraction of your living. More thinking and less

face, *I* say. And all that—— But 'Why, I never see[Pg 230] such a girl as you, Millie,' he greeted her incredulously, 'for looking your best! And such a best, too, my dear. Which young spark is it to be *this* afternoon? Eh?'

'Sparks! dad; how you do talk. Why, I don't hardly know, dad. Sparks!' Millie's voice almost invariably ran down the scale like the notes of a dulcimer muted with velvet. 'I wasn't thinking of anybody in particular,' she went on, continuing to watch her moving mouth in the glass, 'but I promised Nellie Gibbs I.... One thing, I am not going to stay out long on a day like this!'

'What's the matter with the day?' Mr. Thripp inquired.

'The matter! Why, look at it! It's a fair filthy mug of a day.' The words slipped off her pretty curved lips like pearls over satin. A delicious anguish seemed to have arched the corners of her eyelids.

'Well, ain't there such a thing as a mackingtosh in the house, then?' inquired her father briskly.

'Mackingtosh! Over this? Oh, isn't that just like a man! I should look a perfect guy.' She stood gazing at him, like a gazelle startled by the flurry of a breeze across the placid surface of its drinking-pool.

Now see you here, my girl, that see-saw voice inside her father was expostulating once more, what's the good of them fine silly airs? I take you for an honest man's daughter with not a ha'penny to spare on fal-lals and monkey-traps. *That* won't get you a husband. But Mr. Thripp once more ignored its interruption. He smiled almost roguishly out of his bright blue eyes at his daughter. 'Ask *me* what I take you for, my dear? Why, I take you for a nice, well-meaning, though remarkably plain young woman. Eh? But there, there, don't worry. What I say is, make sure of the best (and the best that's *inside*) and let the other young fellows go.'

He swept the last clean fork on the table into the drawer and folded up the tablecloth.

'Oh, dad, how you do go on!' breathed Millie. 'It's always[Pg 231] fellows you're thinking of. As if fellows made any difference.' Her glance roamed a little startledly round the room. 'What *I* can't understand,' she added quickly, 'is why we never have a clean tablecloth. How can anybody ask a friend home to their own place if that's the kind of thing they are going to eat off of?' The faint nuance of discontent in her voice only made it the more enchanting and seductive. She might be Sleeping Beauty babbling out of her dreams.

A cataract of invective coursed through the channels of Mr. Thripp's mind. He paused an instant to give the soiled tablecloth another twist and the table another prolonged sweep of that formidable right arm which for twenty-three years had never once been

lifted in chastisement of a single one of his three offspring. Then he turned and glanced at the fire.

'I wouldn't,' he said, seizing the shovel, 'I wouldn't let Mother hear that, my dear. We all have a good many things to put up with. And what I say is, all in good time. *You* bring that Mr. Right along! and I can promise him not only a clean tablecloth but something appetizing to eat off of it. A bit of a fire in the sitting-room too, for that matter.'

'You're a good sort, dad,' said Millie, putting up her face to be kissed—in complete confidence that the tiny powder-puff in her vanity bag would soon adjust any possible mishap to the tip of her small nose. 'But I don't believe you ever think *I* think of anything.'

'Good-bye, my dear,' said Mr. Thripp; 'don't kiss me. I am all of a smother with the washing-up.'

'Toodle-loo, ma,' Millie shrilled, as her father followed her out into the passage. He drew open the front door, secreting his shirt-sleeves well behind it in case of curious passers-by.

'Take care of yourself, my dear,' he called after her, 'and don't be too late.'

'Late!' tossed Millie, 'any one would think I had been coddled up in a hot-house.'

Out of a seething expense of spirit in Mr. Thripp's mind[Pg 232] only a few words made themselves distinct. 'Well, never mind, my precious dear. I'm *with* you for ever, whether you know it or not.'

He returned into the house, and at once confronted his younger son, Charlie, who was at that moment descending the stairs. As a matter of fact he was descending the stairs like fifteen Charlies, and nothing so much exasperated his father as to feel the whole house rock on its foundations at each fresh impact.

'Off to your Match, my boy?' he cried. 'Some day I expect you will be taking a hand in the game yourself. Better share than watch!'

Every single Saturday afternoon during the football season Mr. Thripp ventured to express some such optimistic sentiment as this. But Charlie had no objection; not at all.

'Not me, dad,' he assured him good-humouredly. 'I'd sooner pay a bob to see other fellows crocked up. You couldn't lend me one, I suppose?'

'Lend you what?'

'Two tanners; four frippenies; a twelfth of a gross of coppers.'

Good God! yelled Mr. Thripp's inward monitor, am I *never* to have a minute's rest or relief? But it yelled in vain.

'Right you are, my son,' he said instead, and thrusting his fleshy hand into his tight-fitting trouser-pocket he brought out a fistful of silver and pence. 'And there,' he added, 'there's an extra sixpence, free, *gratis*, and for nothing, for the *table d'hôte*. All I say is, Charlie, better say "give" when there isn't much chance of keeping to the "lend". I don't want to preach; but that's always been *my* rule; and kept it too, as well as I could.'

Charles counted the coins in his hand, and looked at his father. He grinned companionably. He invariably found his father a little funny to look at. He seemed somehow to be so remote from anything you could mean by things as they are,[Pg 233] and things as they are now. He wasn't so much old-fashioned, as just a Gone-by. He was his father, of course, just as a jug is a jug, and now and then Charlie was uncommonly fond of him, longed for his company, and remembered being a little boy walking with him in the Recreation Ground. But he wished he wouldn't be always giving advice, and especially the kind of advice which he had himself assiduously practised.

'Ta, dad,' he said; 'that's doing me proud. I'll buy you a box of Havanas with what's over from the *table d'hôte*. And now we're square. Good-bye, dad.' He paused as he turned to go. 'Honour bright,' he added, 'I hope I shall be earning a bit more soon, and then I shan't have to ask you for anything.'

A curious shine came into Mr. Thripp's small lively eyes; it seemed almost to spill over on to his plump cheeks. It looked as if those cheeks had even paled a little.

'Why, that's all right, Charlie, me boy,' he mumbled, 'I'd give you the skin off me body if it would be of any use. That's all right. Don't stand about too long but just keep going. What I can't abide is these young fellows that swallow down their enjoyments like so much black draught. But we are not that kind of a family, I'm thankful to say.'

'Not me!' said Charles, with a grimace like a good-humoured marmoset, and off he went to his soccer match.

Hardly had the sound of his footsteps ceased—and Mr. Thripp stayed there in the passage, as if to listen till they were for ever out of hearing—when there came a muffled secretive tap on the panel of the door. At sound of it the genial podgy face blurred and blackened.

Oh, it's you, you cringing Jezebel is it?—the thought scurried through his mind like a mangy animal. Mr. Thripp indeed was no lover of the ultra-feminine. He either feared it, or hated it, or both feared *and* hated it. It disturbed his even tenor. It was a thorn in the side of the Mr. Thripp who not only believed second thoughts were best, but

systematically refused to give utterance to first. Any sensible person, he[Pg 234] would say, ought to know when he's a bit overtaxed, and act according.

The gloved fingers, Delilah-like, had tapped again. Mr. Thripp tiptoed back into the kitchen, put on his coat, and opened the door.

'Oh, it's you, Mrs. Brown,' he said. 'Tilda won't be a moment. She's upstairs titivating. Come in and take a seat.'

His eyes meanwhile were informing that inward censor of his precisely how many inches thick the mauvish face-powder lay on Mrs. Brown's cheek, the liver-coloured lipstick on her mouth, and the dye on her loaded eyelashes. Those naturally delicate lashes swept down in a gentle fringe upon her cheek as she smiled in reply. She was a graceful thing, too, but practised; and far more feline, far far more body-conscious than Millie. No longer in the blush of youth either; though still mistress of the gift that never leaves its predestined owner—the impulse and power to fascinate mere man. Still, there were limitations even to Mrs. Brown's orbit of attraction, and Mr. Thripp might have been the planet Neptune, he kept himself so far out in the cold.

He paused a moment at the entrance to the sitting-room, until his visitor had seated herself. He was eyeing her Frenchified silk scarf, her demure new hat, her smart high-heeled patent-leather shoes, but his eyes dropped like stones when he discovered her own dark languishing ones surveying him from under that hat's beguiling brim.

'Nice afternoon after the rain,' he remarked instantly. 'Going to the pictures, I suppose? As for meself, these days make me want to be out and in at the same time. It's the musty, fusty, smoky dark of them places*I* can't stand.'

Mrs. Brown rarely raised her voice much above a whisper. Indeed it appeared to be a physical effort to her to speak at all. She turned her face a little sidelong, her glance on the carpet. 'Why, it's the dark I enjoy, Mr. Thripp,' she said. 'It'—and she raised her own—'it rests the eyes so.'[Pg 235] For an instant Mr. Thripp's memory returned to Millie, but he made no comment.

'Here's Mrs. Brown, Tilda,' he called up the staircase. Good heavens, the woman might as well be the real thing, the voice within was declaring. But the words that immediately followed up this piece of news were merely, 'You'll be mighty surprised to hear, Tilda, Mrs. Brown's got a new hat.' A faint catcall of merriment descended the stairs.

'Oh, now, Mr. Thripp, listen to that!' whispered the peculiar voice from out of the little airless sitting-room, 'you always did make fun of me, Mr. Thripp. Do I deserve it, now?'

A gentle wave of heat coursed over Mr. Thripp as he covertly listened to these accents, but he was out of sight.

'Fun, Mrs. Brown? Never,' he retorted gallantly; 'it's only my little way:' and then to his immense relief, on lifting his eyes, discovered Tilda already descending the stairs.

He saw the pair of them off. Being restored to his coat, he could watch them clean down the drying street from his gatepost. Astonishing, he thought, the difference there can be between two women's backs! Tilda's, straight, angular, and respectable, as you might say; and that other—sinuous, seductive, as if it were as crafty a means of expression as the very smile and long-lashed languishments upon its owner's face. 'What can the old woman see in her!' he muttered to himself; 'damned if *I* know!' On this problem Mr. Thripp firmly shut his front door. Having shut it he stooped to pick up a tiny white feather on the linoleum; and stooping, sighed.

At last his longed-for hour had come—the hour for which his very soul pined throughout each workaday week. Not that it was always his happy fate to be left completely alone like this. At times, indeed, he had for company far too much housework to leave him any leisure. But to-day the dinner things were cleared away, the washing-up was over, the tables fair as a baker's board, the kitchen spick and span, the house[Pg 236]empty. He would just have a look round his own and Tilda's bedroom (and, maybe, the boys' and Millie's). And then the chair by the fire; the simmering kettle on the hearth; and the soft tardy autumnal dusk fading quietly into night beyond the window.

It was a curious thing that a man who loved his family so much, who was as desperately loyal to every member of it as a she-wolf is to her cubs, should yet find this few minutes' weekly solitude a luxury such as only Paradise, one would suppose, would ever be able to provide.

Mr. Thripp went upstairs and not only tidied up his own and Tilda's bedroom, and went on to Millie's and the boys', but even gave a sloosh to the bath, slid the soap out of the basin where Charlie had abandoned it, and hung up the draggled towels again in the tiny bathroom. What a place looks like when you come back to it from your little enjoyments—it's *that* makes all the difference to your feelings about a home. These small chores done, Mr. Thripp put on an old tweed coat with frayed sleeves, and returned to the kitchen. In a quarter of an hour that too more than ever resembled a new pin.

Then he glanced up at the clocks; between them the time was a quarter to four. He was amazed. He laid the tea, took out of his little old leather bag a pot of jam which he had bought for a surprise on his way home, and arranged a bunch of violets in a small jar beside Tilda's plate. But apart from these family preparations, Mr. Thripp was now depositing a demure little glossy-brown teapot all by itself on the kitchen

range. This was his Eureka. This was practically the only sensual *secret* luxury Mr. Thripp had ever allowed himself since he became a family man. Tilda's cooking was good enough for him provided that the others had their little dainties now and then. He enjoyed his beer, and could do a bit of supper occasionally with a friend. But the ritual of these solitary Saturday afternoons reached its climax in this small pot of tea. First the nap, sweet as nirvana in his easy-chair,[Pg 237] then the tea, and then the still, profound quarter of an hour's musing before the door-knocker began again.

Having pulled down the blind a little in order to prevent any chance of draught, Mr. Thripp eased his bootlaces, sat himself in his chair, his cheek turned a little away from the window, his feet on the box that usually lay under the table, and with fingers clasped over his stomach composed himself to sleep. The eyelids closed; the lips set; the thumbs twitched now and again. He breathed deep, and the kettle began a whispered anthem—as if a myriad voices were singing on and on without need of pause or rest, a thousand thousand leagues away.

But now there was none to listen; and beyond, quiet hung thick in the little house. Only the scarce-perceptible hum of the traffic at the end of the narrow side street was audible on the air. Within, the two clocks on the chimneypiece quarrelled furiously over the fleeting moments, attaining unanimity only in one of many ticks. Ever and again a tiny scutter of dying ashes rejoined those that had gone before in the pan beneath the fire. Soon even these faint stirrings became inaudible and in a few moments Mr. Thripp's spirit would have wafted itself completely free awhile from its earthly tenement, if, suddenly, the image of Millie—more vivid than even the actual sight of her a few minutes before—had not floated up into the narrow darkness of her father's tight-shut eyes.

But this was not the image of Millie as her father usually saw her. A pathetic earthly melancholy lay over the fair angelic features. The young cheek was sunken in; the eye was faded, dejected, downcast; and that cheek was stubbornly turned away from her father, as if she resented or was afraid of his scrutiny.

At this vision a headlong anxiety darted across Mr. Thripp's half-slumbering mind. His heart began heavily beating: and then a pulse in his forehead. Where was she now? What forecast, what warning was this? Millie was no fool. Millie knew[Pg 238] her way about. And her mother if anything was perhaps a little too censorious of the ways of this wicked world. If you keep on talking at a girl, hinting of things that might otherwise not enter her head—that in itself is dangerous. Love itself even must edge in warily. The tight-shut lids blinked anxiously. But where was Millie now? Somewhere indoors, but where? Who with?

Mr. Thripp saw her first in a tea-shop, sitting opposite a horrid young man with his hair greased back over his low round head, and a sham pin in his tie. His elbows were

on the marble-top table, and he was looking at Millie very much as a young but experienced pig looks at his wash-trough. Perhaps she was at the Pictures? Dulcet accents echoed into the half-dreaming mind—'But I enjoy the dark, Mr. Thripp.... It rests the eyes.' Why did the woman talk as if she had never more than half a breath to spare? Rest her eyes! She never at any rate wanted to rest the eyes of any fool in trousers who happened to be within glimpse of her own. It was almost unnaturally dark in the cinema of Mr. Thripp's fancy at this moment; yet he could now see his Millie with her pale, harmless, youthful face, as plainly as if she were the 'close-up' of some star from Los Angeles on the screen. And now the young man in her company was almost as fair as herself, with a long-chinned sheepish face and bolting eyes; and the two of them were amorously hand in hand.

For a moment Mr. Thripp sat immovable, as if a bugle had sounded in his ear. Then he deliberately opened his eyes and glanced about him. The November daylight was already beginning to fade. Yes, he would have a word with Millie—but not when she came home that evening. It is always wiser to let the actual coming-home be pleasant and welcoming. To-morrow morning, perhaps; that is, if her mother was not goading at her for being late down and lackadaisical when there was so much to be done. Nevertheless, all in good time he would have a little quiet word with her. He would say only[Pg 239] what he would not afterwards regret having said. He had meant to do that ages ago; but you mustn't flood a house with water when it's not on fire. She was but a mere slip of a thing—like a flower; not a wild flower, but one of those sweet waxen flowers you see blooming in a florist's window—which you must be careful with and not just expose anywhere.

And yet how his own little place here could be compared with anything in the nature of a hot-house he could not for the life of him understand. Delicate-looking! Everybody said that. God bless me, perhaps her very lackadaisicalness was a symptom of some as yet hidden malady. Good God, supposing!... He would take her round to see the doctor as soon as he could. But the worst of it was you had to do these things on your own responsibility. And though Mr. Thripp was now a man close on fifty, sometimes he felt as if he could no longer bear the burden of all these responsibilities. Sometimes he felt as if he couldn't endure to brood over them as he was sometimes wont to do. If he did, he would snap. People *looked* old; but nobody was really old inside; not old at least in the sense that troubles were any the lighter, or forebodings any the more easily puffed away; or tongues easier to keep still; or tempers to control.

And talking of tempers reminded him of Charlie. What on earth was going to be done with Charlie? There was no difficulty in conjuring up, in seeing Charlie—that is if he really did go every Saturday to a football match. But Charlie was now of an age when he might think it a fine manly thing to be loafing about the counter of a pub talking to some flaxen barmaid with a tuppeny cigar between his teeth. Still, Mr. Thripp refused

to entertain more than a glimpse of this possibility. He saw him at this moment as clearly as if in a peepshow, packed in with hundreds of other male creatures close as sardines in a tin, with their check caps and their 'fags', and their staring eyes revolving in consort as if they were all attached to one wire, while that idiotic ball in the middle of the[Pg 240] arena coursed on its helpless way from muddy boot to muddy boot.

Heaven knows, Mr. Thripp himself was nothing much better than a football! You had precious small chance in this life of choosing which boot should give you the next kick. And what about that smug new creeping accountant at the office with his upstart airs and new-fangled book-keeping methods!

Mr. Thripp's mouth opened in a yawn, but managed only to achieve a fraction of it. He rubbed his face; his eyes now shut again. It was not as if any of your children were of much practical help. Why should they be when they could never understand that what you pined for, what you really needed was not only practical help but some inward grace and clearness of mind wherewith they could slip in under your own thoughts and so share your point of view without all that endless terrifying argumentation. He didn't *always* give advice to suit his own ends; and yet whenever he uttered a word to James, tactfully suggesting that in a world like this—however competent a man may be and however sure of himself—you *had* to push your way, you had to make your weight felt, James always looked at him as if he were a superannuated orang-outang in a cage—an orang-outang with queer and not particularly engaging habits.

He wouldn't mind even that so much if only James would take his cigarette out of his mouth when he talked. To see that bit of stained paper attached to his son's lower lip wagging up and down, up and down, beneath that complacent smile and those dark helpless-looking eyes, all but sent Mr. Thripp stark staring mad at times. Once, indeed, he had actually given vent to the appalling mass of emotion hoarded up like water in a reservoir in his mind. The remembrance of the scene that followed made him even at this moment tremble in his chair. Thank God, thank God, he hadn't often lost control like that.

Well, James would be married by this time next year, he supposed. And what a nice dainty pickle he was concocting[Pg 241] for himself! Mr. Thripp knew that type of young woman, with the compressed lips, and the thin dry hair, and the narrow hips. She'd be 'a good manager', right enough, but there's a point in married life where good managing is little short of being in a lunatic asylum between two iron-faced nurses and yourself in a strait waistcoat. The truth of it was, with all his fine airs and neat finish, James hadn't much common sense. He had a fair share of brains; but brains are no good if you are merely self-opinionated and contemptuous on principle. James was not like anybody in Mr. Thripp's own family. He was a Simpkins.

And then suddenly it was as if some forgotten creature in Mr. Thripp's mind or heart had burst out crying; and the loving look he thereupon cast on his elder son's face in his mind was almost maudlin in its sentimentality. He would do anything for James within reason: anything. But then it would have to be within James's reason—not his own. He knew that. Why he would himself marry the young woman and exult in being a bigamist if only he could keep his son out of her way. And yet, and yet; maybe there were worse women in the world than your stubborn, petulant, niggardly, half-sexed nagger. Mr. Thripp knew a nagger of old. His brother's wife, Fanny, had been a nagger. She was dead now, and George was a free man—but drinking far too much.

Well, as soon as he could get a chance, Mr. Thripp, sitting there in his chair decided, he would have another good think; but that probably wouldn't be until next Saturday, if then. You can't think to much purpose—except in a worried disjointed fashion—when you are in the noise of an office or keeping yourself from saying things you have no wish to say. The worst of it was it was not much good discussing these matters with Tilda. Like most women, she always went off at a tangent. And when you came down to it, and wanted to be reasonable, there was so little left to discuss. Besides, Tilda had worries enough of her own.[Pg 242] At this moment Mr. Thripp once more opened his eyes wide. The small kitchen loomed beatifically rosy and still in the glow of the fire. Evening had so far edged on its way now that he could hardly see the hands of his two clocks. He could but just detect the brass pendulum—imperturbably chopping up eternity into fragments of time. He craned forward; in five minutes he ought to be brewing his little private pot of tea. Even if he nodded off now, he would be able to wake in time, but five minutes doesn't leave *much* margin for dropping off. He shifted a little on his chair, and once more shut his eyes. And in a moment or two his mind went completely blank.

He seemed to have been suddenly hauled up helpless with horror into an enormous vacancy—to be dangling unconfined and motionless in space. A scene of wild sandy hills and spiky trees—an illimitable desert, came riding towards him out of nothingness. He hung motionless, and was yet sweeping rapidly forward, but for what purpose and to what goal there was not the smallest inkling. The wilderness before him grew ever more desolate and menacing. He began to be deadly afraid; groaned; stirred—and found himself with fingers clenched on its arms sitting bolt upright in his chair. And the hands of the clock looked to be by a hair's breadth precisely in the same position as when he had started on that ghastly nightmare journey. His face blanched. He sat appalled, listening to an outrageous wauling of voices. It was as though a thousand demons lay in wait for him beneath his window and were summoning him to his doom.

And all this nightmare horror of mind was due solely to a conversazione of cats! Yet, as with flesh still creeping he listened on to this clamour, it was so human in effect

that it might be multitudinous shades of the unborn that were thronging about the glass of his window. Mr. Thripp rose from his chair, his face transfigured with rage and desire for revenge. He went out into the scullery, opened the back door, and at sound of him the caterwauling instantly ceased.[Pg 243] And almost as instantly his fury died out in him. The cold evening air fanned his forehead. He smiled quixotically, and looked about him. There came a furtive rustle in the bushes. 'Ah, there you are!' he sang out gently into the dark. 'Have your play while you can, my fine gentlemen! Take it like your betters, for it's a sight too soon over.'

Above the one cramped leafless elder-tree in his yard a star was pricking the sky. A ground mist, too, was rising, already smelling a little stale. Great London and its suburbs appeared to be in for one of its autumnal fogs. A few of the upper windows opposite loomed dim with light. Mr. Thripp's neighbours, it seemed, were also preparing to be off to the pictures or the music-halls. It was very still, and the air was damp and clammy.

As he stood silent there in the obscurity a deepening melancholy crept over his mind, though he was unaware into what gloomy folds and sags his face had fallen. He suddenly remembered that his rates would have to be paid next week. He remembered that Christmas would soon be coming, and that he was getting too old to enter into the fun of the thing as he used to do. His eyes rolled a little in their sockets. What the...! his old friend within began to suggest. But Mr. Thripp himself did not even enunciate the missing 'hell'. Instead, he vigorously rubbed his face with his stout capable hand. 'Well, fog anyhow don't bring rain,' he muttered to himself.

And as if at a signal his own cat and his next-door neighbour's cat and Mrs. Brown's cat and the cat of the painter and decorator whose back garden abutted his own, together with the ginger-and-white cat from a newsvendor's beyond, with one consent broke out once more into their Sabbath eve quintette. The many-stranded strains of it mounted up into the heavens like the yells of demented worshippers of Baal.

'And, as I say, I don't blame ye neether,' Mr. Thripp retorted, with a grim smile. 'If you knew, my friends, how narrowly you some of you escaped a bucket of cold water[Pg 244] when you couldn't even see out of your young eyes you'd sing twice as loud.'

He shut the door and returned to his fireside. No more hope of sleep that afternoon. He laughed to himself for sheer amusement at his disappointment. What kids men were! He stirred the fire; it leapt brightly as if intent to please him. He pushed the kettle on; lit the lamp; warmed his little privy glossy-brown teapot, and fetched out a small private supply of the richest Ceylon from behind some pots in the saucepan cupboard.

Puffs of steam were now vapouring out of the spout of the kettle with majestic pomposity. Mr. Thripp lifted it off the coals and balanced it over his teapot. And at

that very instant the electric bell—which a year or two ago in a moment of the strangest caprice Charles had fixed up in the corner—began jangling like a fire-alarm. Mr. Thripp hesitated. If this was one of the family, he was caught. Caught, that is, unless he was mighty quick in concealing these secret preparations. If it was Tilda—well, valour was the better part of discretion. He poured the water into the pot, replaced the lid, and put it on to the oven-top to stew. With a glance of satisfaction at the spinster-like tidiness of the room, he went out, and opened the door.

'Why, it's Millie!' he said, looking out at the slim-shouldered creature standing alone there under the porch; 'you don't mean to say it's you, my dear?'

Millie made no reply. Her father couldn't see her face, partly because the lamp-post stationed in front of the house three doors away gave at best a feeble light, and partly because her features were more or less concealed by her hat. She pushed furtively past him without a word, her head still stooping out of the light.

Oh, my God, what's wrong now? yelled her father's inward monstrous monitor, frenziedly clanging the fetters on wrist and ankle. 'Come right in, my pretty dear,' said Mr. Thripp[Pg 245] seductively, 'this *is* a pleasant surprise. And what's more, between you and me and the gatepost, I have just been making myself a cup of tea. Not a word to mother; it's *our* little secret. We'll have it together before the others come in.'

He followed his daughter into the kitchen.

'Lor, what a glare you are in, pa!' she said in a small muffled voice. She turned the wick of the lamp down so low that in an instant or two the flame flickered and expired, and she seated herself in her father's chair by the fire. But the flame-light showed her face now. It was paler even than usual. A strand of her gilded pale-brown hair had streaked itself over her blue-veined temple. She looked as if she had been crying. Her father, his hands hanging down beside him as uselessly as the front paws of a performing bear, watched her in an appalling trepidation of spirit. This then was the secret of his nightmare; for this the Cats of Fate had chorused!

'What's wrong, Millie love? Are you overtired, my girl? There! Don't say nothing for a minute or two. See, here's my little pot just meant for you and me!'

Millie began to cry again, pushing her ridiculous little handkerchief close to her eyes. Mr. Thripp's hand hovered awkwardly above her dainty hat and then gently fumbled as if to stroke her hair beneath. He knelt down beside her chair.

For heaven's sake! for heaven's sake! for heaven's sake! a secret voice was gabbling frenziedly in his ear. 'Tell your old dad, lovey,' he murmured out loud, softly as the crooning of a wood-pigeon.

Millie tilted back her pretty hat and dropped her fair head on his shoulder. 'It's nothing, Dad,' she said. 'It's only that they are all the same.'

'What are all the same?'

'Oh, fellows, Dad.'

'Which one, precious?' Mr. Thripp lulled wooingly. God strike him dead! muttered his monster.[Pg 246] 'Oh, only young Arthur. Like a fool I waited half an hour for him and then saw him with—with that Westcliff girl.'

A sigh as voluminous as the suspiration of Niagara swept over Mr. Thripp; but it made no sound. Half a dozen miraculous words of reassurance were storming his mind in a frenzy of relief. He paused an instant, and accepted the seventh.

'What's all that, my precious?' he was murmuring. 'Why, when I was courting your mother, I saw just the same thing happen. She was a mighty pretty young thing, too, as a girl, though not quite so trim and neat in the figure as you. I felt I could throttle him where he stood. But no, I just took no notice, trusting in my own charms!'

'That's all very well,' sobbed Millie, 'but you were a man, and *we* have to fight without seeming to. Not that I care a fig for him: he can go. But——'

'Lord, Millie!' Mr. Thripp interrupted, smoothing her cheek with his squat forefinger, 'you'd beat twenty of them Westcliffs, with a cast in both eyes and your hands behind your back. Don't you grieve no more, my dear; he'll come back safe and sound, or he's less of a—of a nice young feller than I take him for.'

For a moment Mr. Thripp caught a glimpse of the detestable creature with the goggling eyes and the suede shoes, but he dismissed him sternly from view.

'There now,' he said, 'give your poor old dad a kiss. What's disappointments, Millie; they soon pass away. And now, just take a sip or two of this extra-strong Bohay! I was hoping I shouldn't have to put up with a lonely cup and not a soul to keep me company. But mind, my precious, not a word to your ma.'

So there they sate, father and daughter, comforter and comforted, while Mr. Thripp worked miracles for two out of a teapot for one. And while Millie, with heart comforted, was musing of that other young fellow she had noticed boldly watching her while she was waiting for her Arthur, Mr.[Pg 247] Thripp was wondering when it would be safe and discreet to disturb her solacing daydream so that he might be busying himself over the supper.

It's one dam neck-and-neck worry and trouble after another, his voice was assuring him. But meanwhile, his plain square face was serene and gentle as a nestful of halcyons, as he sat sipping his hot water and patting his pensive Millie's hand.

[Pg 248]

PHYSIC

Emilia and William had been keeping one another company in the kitchen. Mary, her trusty substantial cook-general was 'out', and would not be knocking at the door until half-past ten. After that there might be another hour to wait. But then Emilia would be alone. Meanwhile, just like man and wife, William and she would soon be having supper together at two corners of the kitchen table, and William would have an egg—with nine bread-and-butter fingers.

This, once fortnightly, now weekly, Wednesday-night feast had become a kind of ritual, a little secret institution. They called it their covey night. Not even Daddie ever shared it with them; and it was astonishing what mature grown-up company William became on these occasions. It was as if, entirely unknown to himself, he had swallowed one of Jack's bean-seeds and had turned inside into a sort of sagacious second-husband. All that Emilia had to do, then, was merely to become again the child she used to be. And that of course needs only a happy heart.

He was a little dark-skinned boy, William—small for his age. A fringe of gilt-edged fair hair thatched a narrow forehead over his small, restless eyes. His sister Sallie—poor gaunt Aunt Sarah, whom she had been called after, having departed this life when less than a month had passed since the gay[Pg 249] christening party—little Sallie, after a restless and peevish afternoon and a wailful bath, was asleep now, upstairs, in her crib. You could tell that almost without having to creep out every now and again to listen at the foot of the stairs.

William had been even more lively and hoppity than usual. He and Emilia had been playing Beggar-my-Neighbour, and he had become steadily more excited when with something very like sheer magic, every sly knave in the pack had rapidly abandoned poor Emilia and managed to slide into his hand. And when—after an excited argument as to where the Queen of Hearts had best be hidden—they changed the game, he laughed and laughed till the tears came into his eyes to see her utter confusion at finding herself for the third time an abject Old Maid! And when supper-time came—plates, spoons, forks—he had all but danced from dresser to table, from table to dresser again. They had borrowed Mary's best blue-check kitchen tablecloth; he had said it looked cooler. 'Don't you *think* so, Mummie?' And every now and again he had ejaculated crisp shrill remarks and directions at Emilia, who was looking after the cooking in the outer room, a room she had steadfastly refused to call the 'scullery'. Merely because she disliked the word! Though one day in a sudden moment of

inspiration she had defended his priggishness by exclaiming, 'Well, spell it with a *k* and then see what you think of it!'

It was a little way Emilia had. As tenaciously as she could she always put off until to-morrow even what it was merely difficult to put up with to-day. Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you, was her motto when driven into a corner. She hated problems, crises, the least shadow of any horror, though they would sometimes peer up at her out of her mind—and from elsewhere—when she wasn't looking, like animals at evening in the darkening hills. But when they actually neared, and had to be faced; well, that was quite another matter.

For some minutes now, busied over her sizzling pan at the[Pg 250] gas stove, she hadn't noticed that William's galvanic sprightly conversation piped up from the kitchen had been steadily dwindling, had almost ceased. He had decided to have his supper egg fried, though 'lightly boiled' was the institution. And Emilia had laughed when, after long debate, he had declared that he had chosen it fried because then it was more indigestible. She was dishing it up from the smoke and splutter—a setting sun on a field of snow, and with a most delicate edging of scorch.

When she came back into the kitchen William was standing by the table, gazing across it at the window. He couldn't be looking *out* of the window, for although there was a crevice a few inches wide between the flowered chintz curtains that had been drawn over it and where the blue linen blind had not been pulled down to the very bottom, it was already pitch dark outside. Yet even at this distance she saw that he couldn't also be staring solely at his own reflection.

He stood motionless, his eyes fixed on this dark glassy patch of window, his head well above the table now. He had not even turned at sound of her footsteps. So far as Emilia's bird-like heart was concerned it was as if a jay had screeched in a spinney. But best not to notice too much. Don't put things into people's heads. 'There!' she exclaimed, 'Well now, you *have* cut the bread and butter thick, Mr. Stoic! *I'm* going to have that scrap of cold fish. Eat this while it's hot, my precious!'

But William had continued to wait.

'I don't think, Mummie,' he said slowly as if he were reciting something he had been learning by heart, 'I don't *think* I'll have my egg after all. I don't think I feel very hungry just now.'

All his eagerness and excitement seemed to have died down into this solemn and stagnant reverie; and for a child to have the air and appearance of a sorrowful old dwarf is unutterably far away from its deliciously pretending to be a sedate grown-up.[Pg 251]

'Not to have it!' cried Emilia. 'Why, look, blessing, it's cooked! Look! Lovely. You wouldn't know it wasn't a tiny half of a peach in cream. Let's pretend.'

'I couldn't like even that, mummie,' he said, glancing at it, a slight shudder ending in a decisive shake of the head as he hastily looked away again. 'I don't think, you know, I want *any* supper.'

Emilia's eyes widened. She stood perfectly still a moment, the hot plate in her hand, staring at him. Then she hurriedly put it down on the table, knelt with incredible quickness beside him, and seized his hand.

'That's what it is,' she said. 'You don't feel very well, William. You don't feel very well? Your hands are hot. Not sick? Not sore throat? Tell mummie.'

'I'm *not* ill,' wailed William obstinately. 'Just because I don't want the egg! You *can't* like that horrid cold fish, and if I did feel sick, wouldn't I say so? That's only what *you* say.' He paused as if the utmost caution and precision were imperative, then added, nodding his head mournfully and sympathetically in time to the whispered words, 'I *have* got a teeny tiny headache, but I didn't notice it until just now.' His mouth opened in a prodigious yawn, leaving tears in his eyes. 'Isn't it funny, mummie—you can't really see anything out of the window when it's black like that, yet you needn't look at your*self* in the glass. It's just as if....'

His eyes came round from examining the window, and fixed themselves on her face.

'That's what it is,' said Emilia, raising herself abruptly from the floor. 'That's what it is.' She kept squeezing the thin, unresponsive fingers of his hand between her own. 'You're feverish. And I knew it. *All* the time. Yes—*how* stupid of me.' And instantly her voice had changed, all vain self-recriminations gone. 'I'll tell you what we'll *do*, William. First, I'll fill a hot-water bottle. Then I'll run up and get the thermometer. And*you* shall be the doctor. That's much the best thing,' And she did not even pause for his consent.[Pg 252]

'I expect you know, Dr. Wilson,' she had begun at once, 'it's something that's disagreed with my little boy. I expect so. Oh, yes, I expect so.'

William, pale and attentive, was faltering. 'Well, yes, Mrs. Hadleigh, p'raps,' he said at last, as if his mouth were cramfull of plums. 'You *may* be right. And that depends, you know, on what he has been *eating*.'

'Yes, yes, I quite understand, doctor. Then would you perhaps wait here just for one moment, while I see if my little boy is ready for you. I think, you know, he might like to wash his hands first and brush his hair. And *pray* keep on your overcoat in case you should feel cold.' She took a large dry Turkey towel that was airing on a horse near

by, and draped it over William's shoulders. 'I won't be a moment,' she assured him. 'Not a moment.'

Yet she paused to glance again at his shawled-in pale face and fever-bright eyes, as if by mere looking she could bore clean through his body; and stooping once more, she pressed her cheek against his, and then his hand to her lips.

'You said,' half tearfully chanted the little boy, 'that I was the doctor; and now you are kissing me, mummie!'

'Well, I could often and often kiss lots of doctors,' said his mother, and in a flash she was gone, leaving him alone. She raced up the dark staircase as if she were pursued by twenty demons, not even waiting to switch on the light. And when she came to her bedroom it was as if everything in it were doing its utmost to reassure her. The shining of the street lamp was quietly dappling its walls with shadow. The whole room lay oceans deep in silence; the duskily mounded bed, the glass over the chimneypiece, the glass on the dressing-table. They may until that very moment have been conferring together, but now had, as usual, instantly fallen mute, their profound confabulations for the time being over. But she did not pause even so much as to sip of this refreshing stillness. Her finger touched the electric switch, and in an instant the[Pg 253]harmless velvety shadows—frail quivering leaf-shadows—the peace, the serenity, had clean evaporated. It was as if the silence had been stricken with leprosy, so instantaneous was the unnatural glare—even in spite of the rose-pink lamp-shades. For now Emilia was staring indeed.

How, she was asking herself, how by any possibility could that striped school tie of her husband's have escaped from its upper drawer on to the bedspread? How by an utter miracle had she failed to see it when she had carried Sallie into the room only an hour or two ago? Ties don't wriggle out of top-drawers across carpets and climb up valances like serpents in the tropics. Husbands miles away cannot charm such things into antics like *these*!

Mary had been out all the afternoon. She herself had been out for most of it with the children, and she could have vowed, taken her oath, *knew*, that *that* couldn't have been there when she had come up to put on her hat. In the instant that followed, before even she could insist on raising her eyes from this queer scrap of 'evidence', her mind suddenly discovered that it was dazed and in the utmost confusion. It was as if, like visitors to a gaudy Soho restaurant, a jostling crowd of thoughts and images, recollections, doubts, memories, clues, forebodings, apprehensions and reiterated stubborn reassurances had thronged noisy and jostling into consciousness—and then were gone again. And at that, at once, as if by instinct and as unforeseeably as a night moth alights on one out of a multitude of flowers, her stricken glance had encountered her husband's note.

At sight of it her heart had leapt in her body, and then cowered down like a thing smitten with palsy. Novels told you of things like these, but surely not just ordinary life! The note had been scribbled on a half-sheet of her own notepaper, and hastily folded into a cocked hat—perhaps the only old-fashioned device she had ever known that husband to be capable of. It seemed that she had learned by heart the message[Pg 254]it contained before even she had unfolded the paper and read it. Indeed, it did not matter what it had to say. It hardly even mattered *how* it had said it. So considerately, yet so clumsily, so blastingly. 'She'—that alone was enough. When shells explode why be concerned with fuse or packing? Edward was gone. That was all that mattered. She had been abandoned—she and the children.

So far, so inevitably. You can in vile moments of suspicion, incredulity and terror foresee things like that. Just that he was gone—and for good. But to have come stealing back in the afternoon into a vacant house, merely for a few clothes or a little money, and she out, and Mary out, and the children out—and everything else out; well, that seemed a funny, an unnecessary thing to do!

'I wouldn't have so much minded...' she began to mutter to herself, and then realized that her body was minding far too much. A thin acid water had welled into her mouth. Unlike William, she felt sick and dizzy. She had gone stiff and cold and goose-flesh all over. It was as if some fiendish hand were clutching her back hair and dragging the scalp from her forehead taut as the parchment of a drum over her eyes. It was as if she had swallowed unwittingly a dose of some filthy physic. Her knees trembled. Her hands hung down from her arms as though they were useless. And the only thing she could see at this instant was the other woman's face. But it wasn't looking at her; on purpose. It was turned all but three-quarters away—a becoming angle for the long, fair cheekbone, the drooping eyelashes, the lips, the rounded chin Clara. And then, suddenly, she saw them both together, stooping a little; at a railway station, it seemed; talking close. Or was it that they had just got out of a cab?

Emilia might as well have been dreaming all this, since although these picturings, this misery, this revulsion of jealousy, and the horror of what was to come persisted in a hideous activity somewhere in her mind, she herself had refused for[Pg 255] the time being to have anything to do with it. There was something infinitely more important that must be done at once, without a moment's delay. Husbands may go, love *turn*, the future slip into ruin as silently and irretrievably as a house of cards. But children must not be kept waiting; not sick children. She was already clumsily tugging at the tiny middle drawer of the old mirror, one of their first bargains, on the dressing-table, and she caught at the same instant a glimpse of the face reflected in its glass; but so instantaneously that the eyes of the image appeared to be darkened and shut, and therefore blind.

What a boon a little methodicalness may be. What a mercy that in this world *things* stay where they are put; do not hide, deceive, play false, forsake and abandon us. Where she always kept it, *there* lay the slim, metal, sharp-edged case of the thermometer. It was as if it had been faithfully awaiting this very reunion—ever since she had seen it last. In the old days, before she was married and had children, even if she had possessed such a thing, she might have looked for it for hours before discovering it. She had despised thermometers. Now, such a search would have resembled insanity.

She hesitated for scarcely the breadth of a sigh at the door, and then with decision switched off the light. Stuffing her husband's scribbled note into her apron pocket, she flew into the next room, put a match to the fire laid in the grate, pushed the hot-water bottle between the sheets of the bed, and hastened downstairs. Her legs, her body, her hand flitting over the banisters, were as light and sure again as if she had never experienced so much as an hour even of mere disappointment in her life. Besides, for some little time now, that body had been habitually told what it had to do. And so long as her orders came promptly and concisely, it could be trusted to continue to act in the same fashion, to be instantly obedient. That was what being a mother taught you to become, and even taught you to try within limits to[Pg 256] teach a young child to become—an animated automaton.

'Dr. Wilson' stood where she had left him beside the table and in precisely the same attitude. He had not even troubled to sit down. He had, apparently, not even so much as moved his eyes.

'Now, doctor,' said Emilia.

At this, those eyes first settled on her fingers, then quietly shifted to her face.

'You were a long time gone, Mrs. Hadleigh,' he remonstrated in a drawling voice, as if his tongue were sticking to the roof of his mouth. 'A very long time.' He took the thermometer and pushed it gingerly between his lips, shutting them firmly over the thin glass stem. Then his blue and solemn eyes became fixed again, and, without the faintest stir, he continued to watch his mother, while she in turn watched him. When half a minute had gone by, he lifted his eyebrows. She shook her head. In another half-minute he himself took the thermometer out of his mouth, and, holding it between finger and thumb, gravely scrutinized it under the light. 'A hundred and forty-seven,' he announced solemnly. 'H'm.' Then he smiled, a half-secret, half-deprecatory smile. '*That's* nothing to worry about, Mrs. Hadleigh. Nothing at all. It looks to me as if all you did was to worry. Put him to bed; I will send him round a bottle of very nice medicine—*very* nice medicine. And...' his voice fell a little fainter, 'I'll look in again in the morning.'

His eyes had become fixed once more, focused, it seemed, on the far-away. 'Mummie, I do wish when Mary pulls down the blinds she would do it to the very bottom. I *hate* seeing—seeing myself in the glass.'

But Emilia had not really attended to this fretful and unreasonable complaint. She herself was now examining the thermometer. She was frowning, adjusting it, frowning again. Then she had said something—half-muttered, half-whispered—which Dr. Wilson had failed to catch.[Pg 257]

'I'd give him,' he again began wearily, 'some rice pudding and lemonade, and——' But before the rest of his counsel could be uttered she had wrapped him tighter in his bath towel, had stooped down to him back to front so that he could clasp his hands round her neck, pick-a-back; and next moment he was being whisked up the dark staircase to the blue and white nursery. There she slid him gently down beside the fender, took off his shoes, smoothed his fringe, and tenderly kissed him.

'You have very bright eyes, Dr. Wilson. You mustn't let them get too bright—just for my sake.'

'Not at all, Mrs. Hadleigh,' he parroted, and then suddenly his whole body began to shiver.

'There,' she said, 'now just begin to take off your clothes, my own precious, while I see to the fire—though *that*, Dr. Wilson, should have been done *first*. Look, the silly paper has just flared up and gone out. But it won't be a minute. The sticks are as dry as Guy Fawkes' Day. Soon cosy in bed now.'

William with unusually stupid fingers was endeavouring to undo his buttons. He was already tired of being the doctor. 'Why', he said, 'do your teeth chatter, mummy, when you are very hot? That seems funny. And why do faces come in the window, horrid faces? Is *that* blind right down to the very bottom? Because I would like it to be. Oh dear, my head does ache, mummie.'

It was extraordinary with what cleverness and dexterity Emilia's hands, unlike her son's, were now doing as they were bidden. The fire, coaxed by a little puffing in lieu of bellows, in a wondrous sheet of yellow, like crocuses, was now sweeping up the chimney as if to devour the universe. A loose under-blanket had been thrust into the bed, the hot bottle wrapped up in a fleecy old shawl, the coal scuttle had been filled, a second pair of small pyjamas had been hung over the fender to air, a saucepan of milk had been stood on the stove with its gas turned low—like a circlet of little blue wavering beads;[Pg 258] and William himself, half-naked for less than the fraction of a second, had been tucked up in his bed, one of her own tiny embroidered handkerchiefs sprinkled with lavender water for company. There, he had instantly fallen asleep,

though spasmodic jerks of foot and hand, and flickering eyelids showed that his small troubles had not wholly been left behind him.

So swiftly and mechanically had her activities followed one upon the other that Emilia had only just realized that she was still unable to make up her mind whether to telephone at once to the doctor or to venture—to dare—to look in on Sallie.

Blind fool! *Blind* fool!—foreseeing plainly every open or half-hidden hint and threat of to-night's event, smelling it, tasting it, hearing it again and again knocking at the door of her mind, she had yet continually deferred the appalling moment when she must meet it face to face, challenge and be done with it, and accept its consequences. The mere image in her mind of her husband's school tie left abandoned on the bed had made the foreboding of looking at Sallie a last and all but insupportable straw. The futility, the cowardice! What needs most daring must be done instantly. There had not been the least need to debate such a question. You can't do twenty-*one* things at once!

Having stolen another prolonged scrutiny of William's pale dream-distorted face and dilating nostrils, she hastened into her own bedroom again, groped for the tiny switch-pull that dangled by the bed-rail, stooped over the cot beside it, and, screening its inmate's face as much as possible from the glare, looked down and in. The small blonde creature, lovelier and even more delicate to the eye than any flower, had kicked off all its bedclothes, the bright lips were ajar, the cheeks flushed—an exquisite coral red. And the body was breathing almost as fast and shallowly as a cat's. That children under three years old should talk in their sleep, yes; but with so minute a vocabulary! Still, all vocabularies are minute for what they are sometimes needed to express—or to keep silent about.[Pg 259]

No sickness, no sore throat; but headache, lassitude, pains all over the body, shivering attacks and fever—you just added up the Yes's and subtracted the Noes; and influenza, or worse, was the obvious answer. Should she or should she not wheel the cot into William's room? Sallie might wake, and wake William. Whereas if she remained here and she herself lay down in the night even for so much as an hour—and began to think, she wouldn't be alone, not hopelessly alone. It was the fear of waking either patient that decided the question. She very gently drew blanket and counterpane over Sallie's nakedness, draped a silk handkerchief over the rose-coloured shade, switched on the electric stove in the fireplace, and ran downstairs. There for a few moments, eyes restlessly glancing, she faced the stark dumbness and blindness of the mouthpiece of the telephone.

Dr. Wilson *was* in. Thank Heaven for that. Incredible, that was his voice! There might have been a maternity case—hours and hours. He might have had a horde of dispensary patients. But no, he would be round in a few minutes. Thank Heaven for

that. She put back the receiver with a shuddering sigh of gratitude. All that was now needed—superhuman ordeal—was just to wait.

But this Emilia was to be spared. For midway up the staircase, whose treads now seemed at least twice their usual height, she had suddenly paused. Fingers clutching the banister rail, she stood arrested, stock still, icy, constricted. The garden gate had faintly clicked. There could be only one explanation of that—at least on a Wednesday. Edward's few friends and cronies, every one of them, must have discovered long ago that Wednesdays were now *his* 'evenings out'. And she—she hadn't much fancied friends or company recently. It was he himself, then. He had come back. What to do now? A ghastly revulsion took possession of her, a gnawing ache in the pit of her stomach, another kind of nausea, another *kind*, even, of palpitation.[Pg 260]

If only she could snatch a few minutes to regain her balance, to prepare herself, to be alone. Consciousness was like the scene of a fair—a dream-fair, all distortion, glare, noise, diablerie and confusion. And before she was even aware of her decision—to make use of a deceit, a blind, a mere best-thing-for-the-time-being—she had found herself in her bedroom again, had somehow with cold and fumbling fingers folded the note into its pretty cocked-hat shape again, and replaced it where she had first set eyes on it, beside the charming little travelling clock, the gift of Aunt Sarah, in the middle of the mantelpiece.

What light remained in the room behind the blinded and curtained windows could not possibly have been detectable outside. That was certain. In an instant she was in William's room once more—listening, her heart beating against her ribs like the menacing thumping of a drum. She had not long to wait. The latch of the front door had faintly squeaked, the lower edge of the door itself had scraped very gently across the coarse mat within, had as softly and furtively shut.

'Is that you, Edward?' she heard herself very gently and insidiously calling over the banisters from the landing. 'How lovely! You *are* home early. I didn't expect you for—for hours and hours!'

And now she had met and kissed him, full in the light of the hall-lamp. 'Why, what's the matter, darling...? You are ill!' She was peering as if out of an enormous fog at the narrow, beloved, pallid countenance, the pale lips, the hunted, haunted, misery-stricken light-brown eyes in those pits of dark entreaty and despair.

'Is it *that's* brought you home?'

He continued to stare at her as if, spectacles lost, he were endeavouring to read a little book in very small print and in an unfamiliar language. His mouth opened, as if to yawn; he began to tremble a little, and said, 'Oh, no; nothing much. A headache; I'm tired. Where *were* you?'[Pg 261]

'Me?' But her lips remained faintly, mournfully, sympathetically smiling; her dark eyes were as clear and guileless and empty of reflections as pools of water under the windless blue of the sky. 'I was in William's room. It's hateful to say it now, Edward—now that you are so tired yourself—but—but I'm rather afraid, poor mite, he's in for another cold—a little chill—and I shouldn't be surprised if Sallie.... But don't worry about that—because, because there's nothing of course at all yet to worry about. It's you I'm thinking of. You look so dreadfully fagged and—what a welcome!... There's nothing...?'

Her vocabulary had at last begun to get a little obstinate and inadequate, 'You don't mean, Edward, there's anything *seriously* wrong? I fancy, you know'—she deliberately laid her hand for an instant on his, 'I fancy *you* may be the least little bit feverish yourself—you too. Well....' She turned away, flung up a hand as if to flag off a railway train, 'I'll get you something hot at once.

'And Edward'—she turned her head over her shoulder, to find him as motionless as she had left him, in almost as stolid and meaningless an attitude as 'Dr. Wilson's' had been in the kitchen, as he stood brooding on the nightmare faces in the darkness of the glass. 'There is just one thing, if you could manage it. Just in *case*, would you in a moment or two first wheel Sallie's cot into William's room. I've lit the fire—and I *had*to ask Dr. Wilson to come. I'm so dreadfully stupid and anxious, when—even when there's no reason to be.

The two faces had starkly confronted one another again, but neither could decipher with any absolute certainty the hitherto unrevealed characters now inscribed on them. Each of them was investigating the map of a familiar country, but the cartographer must now have sketched it from an unprecedentedly eccentric angle. The next moment she had turned away, had whisked upstairs and down again, leaving him free,[Pg 262] at liberty, to dispose of himself—and of anything else he might be inclined to. In every family life there are surely potential keepsakes that would be far better destroyed; and perhaps a moment *some* time might come. But now....

When she returned with her tray and its contents—a steaming tumbler of milk, a few biscuits and a decanter containing a little whisky—she found him standing beside William's bedroom fire. He watched her, as with the utmost care she put down her burden on the little wicker table.

'Millie,' he said, 'I'm not sure.... But, well—it was, I suppose, because of William's being ill that you haven't yet been into—into the other room, our bedroom. And so'—he had gulped, as if there was some little danger of producing his very heart for her inspection—'you have not seen *this*?' He was holding towards her the unfolded note, and with trembling fingers she found herself actually pretending to read its scribbled lines again.

Her face had whitened; she had begun to despair of herself, conscious beyond everything else—the tumult in her mind, the ravaging of her heart—that she could hardly endure the mingled miseries, remorse, humiliation in his eyes, in the very tones of his voice, yet listening at the same time to a message of ineffable reassurance. He has not then deceived me again! At last she had contrived to nod, her chin shaking so stupidly for a while that she could scarcely utter a word. 'Yes. I *have* read it. I put it back...couldn't face it when I heard you. The children—I had to have time. I'm *sorry*, Edward.'

'"*Sorry!*"' he echoed.

'I mean—it *was* an awful, well, revelation; but I was stupid; I ought to have seen...I did see. But we won't—I *can't* go into that now. You are tired, ill; but you are back...for the present.'

Her eyes had managed at last to glance at him, and then to break away, and to keep from weeping. And, as if even in his sleep his usual tact and wisdom had not deserted him, William[Pg 263] had suddenly flung back his scorching sheet and in a gasping voice was muttering to an unseen listener in some broken, unintelligible lingo that yet ended with a sound resembling the word faces. 'There, darling,' she answered him, smoothing back his fair fringe from his forehead, '*I* know. They are gone; all gone now; and the blind *is* down—to its very last inch.'

She stayed watching him, couldn't look back just yet.

'You see, Millie...She'—her husband was trying to explain—'that is, *we* had arranged to meet. It's hopeless to attempt to say anything more just now.... I waited. She sent.... She didn't come.'

'I see. And so?'

'Millie, Millie. It wasn't, it wasn't *you*. Oh, I can't bear it any longer. If I had dreamed—the children!' He had flung himself into a pretty round basket chair and sat shuddering, his face hidden in his lean, bloodless hands.

The few minute sounds in the room, the peevish creakings of the chair, William's rapid, snoring breathing, the fluttering of the fire, were interrupted by the noise of brakes and wheels rasping to a standstill in the street below. A brisk yet cautious knocking had followed, awakening an echo, it seemed, in the very hollow of her breast bone.

'Look,' she said, 'that's where *that* goes. There's no *time* now.' The scrap of paper, more swiftly than a vanishing card in a conjuring trick, had been instantly devoured by the voracious flames, had thinned to an exquisitely delicate fluttering ash, and then,

as if with a sudden impulse, wafted itself out of sight like a tiny toy balloon into the sooty vacancy of the chimney.

'Listen. Must *you* see the doctor, to-night? Unless it's not—you know—well *bad* 'flu? Wouldn't it be better not? I'll tell him; I could find out; I could say you had gone to bed. Quick, I must go.' Every nerve in her body was clamouring for motion, action, something to face, something to do.

He nodded. 'And you'll come back?'[Pg 264]

'Yes.... I'll try. Oh, Edward, I'm sorry, sorry. If only there were words to say it. It must have been awful—awful!' She hesitated, gazing at his bent head, the familiar hands....

And now the doctor, having deftly packed up Sallie again, burning hot but seemingly resigned to whatever fate might bring, and having carefully wiped his thermometer on the clean huckaback towel Emilia had handed him, was stuffing his stethoscope back into his little brown case. An almost passionate admiration filled her breast at his assured, unhurried movements, and with it a sort of mute, all-reconciling amusement to see how closely, deep within, behind these gestures, and the careful choice of words, he resembled his small and solemn understudy, William.

She was returning earnestly glance for glance, intently observant of every least change of expression in his dark decisive face, of timbre in his voice. Practically every one of the hungered-for, familiar, foreseen, all-satisfying assurances—like a tiny flock of innocent sheep pattering through a gateway—had been uttered and sagaciously nodded to: 'It may be just a feverish attack; it might, it *might* be 'flu.' 'Don't forget, Mrs. Hadleigh, they are down one moment and up the next!' 'I'll send round a bottle of medicine to-night, almost at once, and some powders.' 'I'll look in again first thing in the morning.' Then he had paused, little leather case in hand, his eyes fixed on the fire.

Some day, she told herself, she *must* retaliate in kind: 'You must understand, Dr. Wilson, that at this hour of the night it would be utterly stupid of you to breathe the word *pneumonia*, which takes weeks and weeks and weeks; may easily be fatal; and one has just to wait for the crisis!' Or, 'Don't be mistaken, Dr. Wilson, even if you were at death's door yourself I shouldn't hesitate to ring you up if their temperatures go over 103'—that kind of thing.

'You know, Mrs. Hadleigh,' he was beginning again, 'it just beats me why you mothers—quite rational, sensible, al[Pg 265]most cynically practical creatures some of you, simply wear yourselves out with worry and anxiety when there's scarcely a shred of justification for it. Quite uselessly. Getting thin and haggard, wasting away, losing all that precious youth and beauty. I say I often *think* these things—wish I could express them. You simply refuse to heed *the* lesson in life: that really great Englishman's, Mr. Asquith's—"Wait and See". *Condensing*, don't you see, and not

squandering all energy, impulse and reserves. "Never trouble trouble until trouble troubles you." Isn't *that* good sense? It's what's called an old wives' saying, of course—not a mother's. But I could have saved dozens of precious lives and bodies and all but souls, if only...well, literally saved them, I mean, a deuce of a lot of wear and tear.'

She was drinking in his words, this delicious lecture, these scoldings; devouring them, as if they were manna dipped in honey, the waters of life. They were a rest and peace beyond expression. A ready help in time of trouble. He shall lead his flock like a shepherd. Yea, though I walk.... Why all this Bible? Dr. Wilson was not a parson; he was just a doctor. And then another Dr. Wilson had piped up in memory again, '"You *said* that I was the doctor; and now you are kissing me, Mummie!"... "I could often kiss lots of doctors!"'

'I know, I know,' she heard herself meekly assuring him. 'I'm utterly stupid about these things. And of course if we were all sensible savages or gipsies there wouldn't be.... Even—oh, but you can't think what a comfort it is to—to be reassured.'

He was eyeing her now more closely, totting up and subtracting yes's and noes, it seemed, on his own account, and on hers. It was with difficulty she met the straight clear scrutiny. 'Well, there we are,' he decided. 'Just look what lovely babies you have. Everything a woman could wish for! Gipsies be dashed. There are, I assure you, my dear Mrs. Hadleigh, spinsters galore in this parish who.... How's your husband?'[Pg 266]

Her dark shining eyes had now at last quivered in their sockets, if only for the fraction of a second.

'It sounds very silly,' the words were squeezing out like cooing turtle doves through too narrow an exit, 'but *he's* not very well either! It's, it's almost funny, ridiculous—all three at once. Isn't it? He came home rather late from—from the office, and he's gone to bed.' It seemed a pity that one's cheeks should flatly refuse not to flame up, when one's eyes were hard as brass. 'The fact is, Dr. Wilson, he refused to see you. You know what men are. But could it be, do you think', a little nod towards William's bed had helped her out, 'that too?'

'I think,' Dr. Wilson had replied drily, a scarcely perceptible forking frown between his eyebrows, 'it might very well be that too. But listen, Mrs. Hadleigh. Husbands, of course, are not really of much importance in life—not really. Necessities perhaps; but here to-day and gone to-morrow. *Children* are what the kernel is to the nut; the innermost part of it. And so must be taken great care of. *Therefore*—and this is not advice; this is *orders*: I forbid you to worry; forbid it. I shall throw up the case! If you *must* stay up—you have a maid, a good solid, stolid one too. Wake up her and chance it; she'll love you all the better. And you can share the night between you.

Otherwise—unless of course you need me again, and you won't, though I should be *easily* handy—you are not only not to worry (more than you can help) but you are on no account to get up more than twice until the morning to look at your patients—at *our* patients, mind you. It's bad for them, worse for you. When they've had their dose, they'll soon quieten down—unless I'm*wrong*. And—imagine it!—I sometimes am.' He was holding out his hand, a look of unadulterated, generous, wholly masculine admiration on his vigilant, assured features.

'By gad!' he said. 'All three! But then *you* know *I* know what you can manage when hard pressed. So that's all right.' He was plunging downstairs into the night, and Emilia was trying in vain to keep up with him.[Pg 267]

'And after the first dose and the powders, Dr. Wilson, I shouldn't, I suppose, wake either of them up to give them any *more* medicine—not until the morning?'

'As a general rule, Mrs. Hadleigh,' replied the doctor, carefully putting on his hat and glancing as he did so into the strip of looking-glass on the wall, 'it's wiser never to wake *anybody* up, merely to give them physic—and certainly not mere doctor's physic.'

[Pg 268]

THE PICNIC

There was an empty, pensive look on Miss Curtis's face as she stood there, solitary, by the (as yet unblinded) shop-door, the finger and thumb of her small firm hand idly twisting the pencil stuck in between the two little black buttons of her black bodice. She was looking out through the glass of the door into the street, while Miss Mavor on the further side of the shop was drawing down the other blinds—a swoop and a swish to each, in turn. Miss Mavor did everything like that.

It was the first week of a hot September. The homeward stream of people in the street outside had long since begun to ebb. A late evening sky hung over London, painting with its faint colours the glassy windows of the houses opposite—right down, Miss Curtis noticed, to the top of the first floor. There the darker parts began. All quiet; all serene; and the close of another busy competent day.

With her set, square, capable face, its dark eyes in curious contrast to the pallor of the skin, she seemed to have fallen into a reverie. She herself with her neat handbag and her admirable umbrella would soon be returning to her lodgings. All lights out, she

would open this door, shut it, lock the padlock, give it a tug and, after one look to left and right just in case of 'suspicious characters', she would go off home. And[Pg 269]anybody who happened to meet and look at her would know that she was a woman well able to take care of herself—or of anybody or anything else, for that matter.

Miss Curtis wasn't proud of it, but she knew she could be relied on. And so she had got on in the world, and was still getting on. You can never tell, indeed, into what comfortable port a capable head will not finally conduct you if softly and steadily you follow its nose. Miss Curtis's nose stood out straight and able. She would have made a formidable figure-head if, head and bust, she had been modelled in wood and dyed with woad and crimson for the purpose. But though, since she was now manageress of the 'establishment' and to that extent her own mistress, she could in most things have her own way, yet she was always the first to come, and to-night as on all other nights she would be the last to go. She just lived for her business; that's what it came to.

Silly pretty little Phyllis had left the shop at least an hour before. Miss Curtis had been reminded of her by the sight of yet another belated tip-tap young woman tripping along in her champagne stockings to her own particular tryst. The child had asked her for time off—and much too soon after the last occasion. But it is difficult to say No, even to a butterfly—when it happens to be in love. Miss Curtis had always believed in a firm hand, but not in *too* firm a hand. You must keep up appearances, and you must keep the rules—or discipline will suffer. But the rod of iron was not one of her fetishes, except in relation to herself.

Nobody was watching her now, the day was over, and for the moment she could let appearances take care of themselves. So every sign of competence and efficiency had gradually drained out of her features as she went on looking out into the street. Her face had become gentle, almost demure. It now resembled, quite unknown to herself, the plush-framed photograph on her mantelpiece which had been taken of her as a fat little girl in a round hat. She had sunk into the deeps as much[Pg 270] as that, reducing her to the wish that this pensive coloured scene might go on for ever.

But it wouldn't. Life wasn't like that, though you *had* to stand aside sometimes and have a look at it, if only in order to keep on taking your part. Otherwise the less attention you gave it the better. It was hopeless to let it interfere with your—career. Still you had your melting moments—silly ones, too; even dangerous perhaps. Mere memories of them did no harm, though. They helped. They made even really silly people more intelligible—and there was scarcely a moment in Miss Curtis's day when there wasn't some silly person about. They also kept a firm hand flexible. Indeed there were little events even in Miss Curtis's past—just a few—that would occasionally intrude into her mind like shy exotic animals into a highly conventional park—as if positively on purpose to amuse her.

Perhaps the queerest of all, the most absurd and ridiculous, yet in some ways the easiest to recall without minding much—simply because it *was* so absurd, so meaningless—was that few days' holiday she had spent at the seaside, about five years ago. Some memories are like ghosts. So was this. Miss Curtis, at any rate, never knew when it was not going to reappear. And she was almost sure to find it lurking in wait for her at this particular hour of this particular sort of day.

And here, as if to prove it, was that blind man again, with his black goggles and his tin and his stick and his dog, tapping and groping along the darkening pavement outside. He never failed to call its cue. No marvel in that. Occasionally, if nobody was looking, Miss Curtis had slipped out to put a soundless penny into his tin, and he would lift his unshaven chin at her as if he still hoped he could take a look at so unexpected a patron through those awful lantern-like spectacles. Once, one summer evening, she had actually dropped a shilling into his tin. It wasn't sentiment; she knew he wasn't to be pitied so much as all that; but there are ways of letting *yourself* down,[Pg 271] if you harden right off. But to-night—well, Miss Mavor was close upon her. 'There goes that old one-eyed humbug with the dog,' she was saying, and down came her last blind. 'I bet *he's* got some money in the bank.'

Miss Curtis watched him absently out of sight. She didn't reply; Miss Mavor said everything like that. As for the blind beggar's having money in the bank, so had Miss Curtis, and a good deal more than this time five years ago. That particular summer indeed she had not only been out of a job for a few weeks, but instead of at once looking for another she had taken a holiday and just blued some of her savings. In really nice apartments, too. But then of course Miss Curtis, at her age, was never in any doubt of a job when she wanted one. She wasn't exactly lucky; she was efficient. Yet heavens, what a fool she had been! What a simpleton!—and absolutely nothing to show for it, not even to herself when the lights were out, and she was alone.

Simply because she *was* so efficient, and looked so ungullible and was so completely trustworthy, it was almost a solace now to realize that she could ever have been quite so fantastically silly—idiotic. Still, with memories of that kind silence is best. There are limits. Miss Curtis would no more have dreamed of sharing this old ghost with, say, Miss Mavor, than a crocus would dream of blossoming at the foot of the North Pole. And the funny thing was, it was partly because it hadn't been bad *enough*—looked at in cold blood. You can stand up to the really tragic and—and brazen things out. At least Miss Curtis supposed you could.

It had been at Newhampton—a nice quiet select little place. And it hadn't been in the horrible height of August either—the Newhampton 'season'—but at the end of May, when only the idle rich can afford to enjoy such resorts. She remembered it as clearly as if she had been reading about it the night before in a novel. For the matter of that she remembered even *what* novel she had been reading about an hour or two before

she[Pg 272] had set out that afternoon on her last solitary picnic—the picnic that had never come off. Oh dear me, how amusing!—with her broken thermos flask, her raspberry-jam sandwiches and her currant bun. After that little *contretemps* she had sat alone under the sand-dunes, staring at the sea, or with her eyes tight shut—for three solid hours; and then at last by a long way round had come back, sandwiches and bun still uneaten, to her apartments.

Lying half inside her bedroom, in shadow, and half on its canopied balcony, in the sun, she had spent the first part of that afternoon in a deck-chair—dressed ready to go out—her rather dingy-looking novel in her hand. By stooping forward a little and peeping round the brick corner of the balcony to the left she could see the placid English channel, steadfastly intent on its imitation of the colour of a baby's eyes. A tang of salt and sea-weed and stale fish was in the air, and that queer fizz of expectation which frequents all seaside places was in her mind.

'Mind!' Why your very inside gives a little happy jump every time even an idle boatman suggests a sail. She could even recall the exact look of the table at her midday meal—some dry cold tongue and stewed gooseberries and cream—though she hadn't eaten very much of either. That done, and cleared away, there she had lolled—yes, lolled—two cushions behind her head, her legs drawn up sideways under her, but very very carefully so that neither blouse nor tailor-made skirt should suffer from creases, while she continued to devour that precious novel. Simply to make the time go by. Not think of two things at once! What utter nonsense. Yet how silly a story it had been. Even Phyllis would have turned up her nose at such a 'fullyton' as that.

It was so silly that she herself had never finished it, and now never would. She had even forgotten to return the book to the stuffy little circulating library that had seemed such a ravishing addition to Newhampton the day after she had arrived. That was the queerest thing of all, perhaps—why[Pg 273] (when her own little affair—affair!—was over), a story so silly, so exaggerated, so unreal should have become positively nauseating in memory—almost as if it had been an extract from her own autobiography.

Hearts Aflame: that was the title. And its author had chosen for his hero a man positively made and designed for victories over the inflammable sex. Nothing very original in that, perhaps. He was always most beautifully dressed, either in plus-fours or for the evening, and with one glance of his piercing blue eyes, with one befondlement, and with the iciest *sang-froid* he broke hearts wherever he went, never even turning aside to glance at the remains. And yet so far as Miss Curtis could see he never got the least bit of pleasure out of any heart in any condition—green, ripe, or rotten. It was merely a habit. He was just a Don Juan. On the other hand he was a Don Juan who had made a slip—before the story opened. For an Italian Countess had somehow succeeded in marrying him in spite of his efforts (even then apparent) to

practise the part of Henry VIII without incurring its responsibilities. Poor hysterical racked drugged creature, by Chapter XXIII she had long ago of course lost every shred of belief or faith in him. And yet she had continued to hope (though nothing the author could say persuaded Miss Curtis that the Countess had *really* hoped), he would some day turn over a new leaf—one, that is, that would not be merely tantamount to turning over a new lady-love. As if such men had any leaves to turn!

The frail little night-orbed Countess had had her wits about her too. She had remained an angler long after she had caught her fish—or rather had been caught by her fish. But in Chapter XXIV she had begun doing what Miss Curtis had often noticed ladies, especially titled ladies, often do in novels—she had decided to win back her husband by means of her charms. That was odd, too. The author kept on talking about the Countess's charms, but even Miss Curtis had felt bound to agree with her promiscuous husband that some of them[Pg 274] weren't very conspicuous. They were at any rate hopelessly unpractical, and unlikely even, according to Miss Curtis's second-hand experience of such matters, to last out a honeymoon. Perhaps this was because she was so foreign. Whether or not, Miss Curtis couldn't have supposed that any one—even an Italian Countess, could be of her own sex and yet be so, well, shameless. In such a stupid way, too. She had positively no reserve. She said things to her husband, even when she knew he didn't care, that you couldn't possibly say to *any* body if you remembered you were ever going to be alone again. She entreated him, she besought him—that was the word—to be 'kinder', to return to her, to remember all her sacrifices. 'Oh,' she would cry, grovelling at his feet, her sultry lambent eyes raining tears down her pale olive cheeks. 'Oh, how I love you! How I love you!' And then in the same breath those very same eyes would be snapping crackers at him, 'Oh, how I *hate* you! *How* I hate you!' Remarks like that, of course, are like holding the candle of your life in the middle and asking *any* Don Juan to burn it up at both ends.

And then had come Chapter XXV. In a desperate effort to retrieve her husband's affections the Countess had sent to Paris for the most seductive of new confections in ivory silk with jewels to match that Worth could supply—for she had still managed somehow to cling to the remnant of her prenuptial fortune. Miss Curtis had not cared much for the look of this 'model' as it appeared in print. Perhaps that was because the book had been written by a man. But how silly of him not to ask his wife or his sister or his mother or a female friend what she thought of it. Anyhow the Countess had sent for it, and it had come, and there it lay, in its original package where her maid had put it—on her own little bed in her own little bedroom. And the Night of Nights was still to come. Alas, when the night did come her husband, morally speaking, had put even himself beyond the pale—though what the Countess thought of it Miss Curtis was never to discover. Miss Curtis[Pg 275] had got thus far and no further. The wretched man, that is, at his wits' end to convince his last lady of his good intentions—though lady was perhaps hardly the word to use for her—had given the milliner's box

precisely as it stood and with all its contents—and without even seeing if they would fit, *to*that last lady and—well, that was the end of it.

For at this point Miss Curtis had let the book fall back into her lap, had folded her hands on its open pages and—realizing that she must set off now if she was to set off at all—with a long-drawn shuddering sigh of relief, expectation, dread and sheer physical fatigue, all in one, had stared vacantly out at the houses on the other side of the street. She would read what came after in bed that night.

But she didn't read anything in bed that night. She had lain (though not for nearly so many hours as she had imagined next morning), staring into the dark, and every now and then softly laughing; and in a way in which she had never laughed since, and would never, if she could help it, laugh again.

For Miss Curtis in less than a week at Newhampton had fallen in love. She had fallen in love with a stranger sitting at a window at the other end of the esplanade. Not that she had ever confessed this in so many raw unrecallable words, even to herself. Not even at the time, when she had been at least five years younger. Five!—more like fifty. But one can know and never say: and if she had not been in love, why had the mere shadow of that homeward-bound, cadaverous blind man in the street made her feel slightly sick? And why, whenever the opportunity came, did she find herself staring like this out of the glass door of the shop into the darkening street if it were not something of a pleasure to feel a little sick like that?

Well, it didn't much matter now. She had long ago recovered her balance and could recall without a single pang every little incident that had followed the final putting aside of that utterly fatuous novel. Stories like that were of course[Pg 276] *known* as 'sensational'. But life! Why the mere packing up of her sandwiches and her bun, her little talk with her landlady as she filled her flask with tea, the last glance of herself in the painted looking-glass between the photographs and the texts over the chimneypiece in her landlady's sitting-room, the mere catching up of her gloves, as with a whisk of her tailor-made skirt she turned aside and with chin a little raised, bloused shoulders a little squared, she once more faced an experience which had become the very elixir of her existence—what did it all amount to but proof that writers of novels only dabble in tinctures while the essence for ever escapes them! You don't have to be a clay-coloured little Countess with Southern blood in your veins to find *that* out!

Miss Curtis had met her landlady again at the foot of the stairs, and had caught the far-away little cockcrow in her own heart at sight of the faded old eyes 'taking her in'. Probably they were no longer merely faded now—she had never seen the old woman since, had only written that once, and then no more. And yet the house must still be there, sunning itself in the marine breezes, and may be somebody else's card

with APARTMENTS in silver letters in the sitting-room window. Things went on whatever your idea of them might be. She remembered even what her landlady had said—just a few words. She had told her to enjoy herself while she was young—as had Solomon the Wise in other terms, and had added: 'What's the seaside *for* but to lay, as you might say, in that direction?'

Mrs. Evan's seaside, as Miss Curtis had heard two or three times on the very morning of her arrival, had lain so little in that direction that only once during her long married and widowed life at Newhampton had she ventured out to the end of the pier. And then she hadn't been able to see 'much in it what they fancy'. But you mustn't of course judge of good counsel by the counsellor. Miss Curtis had smiled at the old woman, with her head on one side, as if with the thought that,[Pg 277] if you want to look as nice as you possibly can, it is as well to practice doing so at every opportunity.

And mention had been made of an egg—a nice fresh egg for her supper; she remembered that too, though not the egg itself. 'There's always a nice fresh egg'—they were her landlady's very words, and Miss Curtis had replied with the utmost gaiety and aplomb that if there weren't, why, there wouldn't be any more chickens and therefore there wouldn't be any more eggs. And they had both of them laughed. At that gush of inward exultation it hadn't seemed to matter the least bit in the world whether or not she was ever going to eat anything again as long as she lived. But she had none the less assured the old woman she would adore an egg—'As *you* boil them, you know!'—and had then sallied out into the hot air down the sleepy street, and turned off towards the blue, bright, salty, sea-sweet esplanade.

There, she had paused. She had not only paused, but seated herself in one of the little glass and cast-iron shelters and gazed out at the far-away flurry of smoke of a small steamer, that was steadily pushing its way round the extreme edge of the world, bound, like Miss Curtis, for some unknown port. And she had tried, and tried in vain, to take stock of herself.

Wasn't it really and truly worse than ridiculous, almost as silly as that black-eyed, painted-up, feather-witted little Italian Countess herself, and much, after all, in the same way, to be sitting there actually out of breath, almost *unable* to breathe, simply in expectation of seeing a strange man? And him not in the open, mind, but seated at a balconied window similar to but rather more spacious than the one she had just left, and gazing as she was now, out to sea? The crisis had come so suddenly too. One glimpse at that lonely face and shoulders and she was never, never to forget him, though she *was* to get over him, so to speak.

Like most things in life that seem to mean anything, it had all happened so instantly, so absolutely unforeseeably. Miss[Pg 278] Curtis had been just walking as usual along by herself—off to the sand-dunes once more, and a little absent in mind—and without

in the least knowing why, as she came to the flagstaff she had lifted her eyes and looked straight up across at him. And there he was—up there on the other side of the street as if he had been waiting for her for months. There was something extraordinarily gentlemanly in his appearance—gentlemanly in the real sense. This was one of the first things she had noticed afterwards when she was back in her rooms again. And though he had been smiling—smiling straight out across at her, it was impossible to have taken the least offence at such boldness. It wasn't boldness. It was as natural as a child who likes the look of a stranger—of any sex—and of course doesn't mind showing it. There wasn't in fact the least little symptom of the cheeky, of the fast, in that smile. It was quiet, and far-away; *lonely*—that was the word.

And taken at a disadvantage like this, Miss Curtis had only been able to gaze blankly back. She was perfectly certain of that. And then after what had seemed an interminable exchange of secrets, she had lowered her head, averted her face, and hastened on to the dunes.

There, oddly enough, she had eaten up the whole of her tea at least half an hour before its usual time. A most curious thing—that just that first look from a stranger should have given her an appetite like a schoolgirl's at a birthday party, and that the next should have taken it almost completely away. For there had been a next. More than one. She simply couldn't help herself. The following afternoon she had no more been able to resist marching steadily along past the striped bathing-machines and the boats, with the sea-wash in her ears, and the marvellous vivacity of it all tingling her senses, and she herself openly bound—she didn't deny it—for that shallow bow-window and its occupant, than she could stop herself yawning when she was tired.

And the one gnawing anxiety that followed was not that[Pg 279] she ever scanned that window in vain, but that nothing else ever happened at all. There the young man would be—not in the least *too* young, of course—with that marvellous quiet dark face of his which she knew now by heart if ever woman can, yet with precisely the same remote welcoming smile on its features. That; and nothing more.

As for herself—and Miss Curtis had never minded acknowledging this the least little bit—why should she?—the third time she had, quite definitely, smiled back. She had raised her square face—and she knew she wasn't so bad-looking—and welcoming, all-hospitable, had given him smile for smile, and so openly that if they had met in the street, it couldn't else but have resulted in his raising his hat! And he, not in the least shocked—she wasn't such an idiotic judge of character as all that—had simply smiled on: a smile not exactly wistful, not exactly melancholy or sad, but as if its owner were in search of something of which he was only vaguely aware.

But why vaguely? Why vaguely? If only Miss Curtis hadn't been a little short-sighted, or had had the courage to wear *pince-nez*—which she did not consider suited her—she

might have been able to explore that question more closely. All that she knew for certain was this, that day after day and *after* she had first smiled back, that dark pale handsome romantic face was always turned in her direction when she came stepping along the sandy esplanade, and that it always wore the same look of genuine expectation, if not exactly of increasing interest. Of all this she was sure. And it had almost in her own phrase worn the inside out of her—the joy and expectation and waiting and doubting and longing of the whole thing.

And what if it had? Wasn't every seaside resort frequented by dark piratical creatures, or fresh curly-haired fair ones, on the look-out for conquests? And much older ones, too: and much worse. But far from bothering about them, Miss Curtis had never paid any more attention to the species than she had to the Dad-and-Mum-and-three-little-nippers kind of[Pg 280] tripper at Easter or in August, or to the let-the-world-go-by young lovers on the beach. This young man at the window hadn't the faintest resemblance to such buccaneers. Obviously he wasn't even a visitor. He didn't even wear clothes different from the clothes you wear in London; just dark blue or dark grey, so far as she could see, and always, unless her short sight misled her, as nicely finished off as if he had just left the hands of a valet.

At first her heart had sunk at the thought that he was perhaps a 'resident'. Residents of course never take the smallest notice of mere visitors. Far from it. Except on Sundays at church-time or when they go shopping they don't even appear on the esplanade, and if they do, they take good care to show that they are used to it and not much enjoying it. Why merely living at the seaside should make you so haughty and exclusive Miss Curtis had never troubled to consider. Besides, this young man at the window—he must be a *little* under thirty, she supposed—wasn't haughty and he was obviously not absolutely exclusive. Perhaps then he couldn't be a resident. But if he were neither a resident nor a visitor, what on earth could he be? And if he was a resident would he ever come out?

While Miss Curtis was only at Chapter XXI of *Hearts Aflame* she had ventured on in speculation even as far as that. And it was not because of any—well, whatever you like to call it—but because she couldn't be quite certain what the smile meant, that she hadn't quite consciously ventured further yet. Worse, she had begun to realize that though still far-away, his was a smile neither serene nor happy but a little pathetic. It was the smile of someone who is in search of something. What? Understanding? Companionship? Sympathy? Miss Curtis simply didn't know. And if it was any of these things, what ought she to do? If only—not the sexes themselves—but the conduct of the sexes could be sometimes reversed! Without any fatal results. If only she could have marched up[Pg 281] to the door, knocked, asked for him and said, 'Well, here I am, you see. You want me? I have come. What can I do? Positively anything you ask of me.' A smile can sink as deep into one's innermost consciousness as that!

Miss Curtis, who was at this moment quite alone—for Miss Mavor was now putting on her things—as she gazed on vacantly out into the London street, all its sunset colours now faded, didn't care a jot now*what* he had wanted. The only thing that mattered was that he hadn't wanted her. Not that she bore him any ill-will on that score. Not only would she never see him again; she would never see his like again. On his account she had given up all interest in men absolutely and for ever. Her every faculty was now centred on the practical—on her 'career'. The only male creature she still had any interest in was a nephew and she was going to leave him all her savings. Besides, look at that flossy little fly-away Phyllis and the dark secretive Miss Mavor and the rest. What a stupid waste, when every hour even of their working day was merely a wait between the acts of some silly love affair. The 'Pictures', a joy-ride, *some* young man always sapping their efficiency.

Miss Curtis's affair would never have been a mere love affair; it would have been a life affair. She knew that, at any rate. She knew perfectly well that if that smiling one at the window had suggested—quite simply even at their first meeting—that he wanted her to spend the rest of her life in his service, she wouldn't have hesitated. She knew that if for some reason best known to himself, he had merely nodded his head at her, to let her know that only her dead body washed up from out of the sea next morning would be of any use to him, in she'd have gone.

That would have been a funny eventuality if you like. But are eventualities that don't occur of the slightest importance? No smile now would ever bring Miss Curtis's sound healthy body to any such pass as that. Old age might, but so far as she[Pg 282] knew she was not intolerably terrified at the thought that her sea might then be a trifle cold. Even the fact that five years ago, she was already tending towards the spinsterish hadn't seemed to matter in the least. It made the shock when it came the more amusing to recall. It was almost her last little lesson, so to speak, on the brink. That thermos flask of tea, for example—and what an indescribable flavour it always had, like tepid metal, and those damp raspberry-jam sandwiches! In a moment of weakness she had owned that raspberry jam was her favourite of all jams, and her landlady had remembered it.

Anyhow, no one really young and silly and gullible and romantic would have taken food on such an expedition. It was not as though the face at the window would share it. She knew perfectly well that it was for her own sustenance alone—though it had quickly ceased to be. In fact the flavour of raspberry jam even as a memory was

slightly indigestible. Miss Curtis was sorry her inside could betray her like that. Sitting among the sand-dunes with the long grey-green nodding grasses, the faint winds stirring their surface under those sunny heavens, and the bright platter of the empty sea—that would only have been pleasanter and pleasanter to remember. But not so the raspberry jam!

And now, in memory, Miss Curtis had come out of the glass and cast-iron shelter to which her feverish excitement had consigned her. It had been for only a very few minutes—to quiet down. With a glance at its one other occupant, an old gentleman, of whose countenance—since he was muffled up to the eyes in shawls—nothing was visible except spectacles, she had set out once more. It had been her new rule to keep her eyes fixed firmly on the barometer under the flagstaff on the front until she was nearly opposite the balcony, and then to cast only one firm straight intent glance up at the window, before—and this was the most horrible abyss to remember—before sitting down on a neighbouring seat, a few yards[Pg 283] further on. Yes, she could be frank with herself about even that now. She had accustomed herself to sit down there—in wait for him. She had definitely broken herself in to that, and solely with the intention of lying in wait for him. Of lying in wait for him—like other women. Her one scrap of redeeming decency being that once she was seated she never by a fraction of an inch turned her head. Indeed sitting there—horribly stiff and hot and self-conscious—she *might* be out of sight of him—unless of course, he changed his position at the window to look. And wasn't that perhaps the least one could expect—when at any rate one had oneself sunk so low? It was on this afternoon however she was to learn that it is actually possible in this world to sink as low as that, and nobody, no human being anyhow, be a penny the richer. While you yourself might remain—well, what? Indescribably poorer? Just because you have been humbled to the dust? Because you've been taught your lesson? Had there been need to learn *that*? And supposing it had not been a lesson—a holiday task?

A slow smile had stolen into Miss Curtis's face—not sour but extraordinarily resolute, even a little grim. But never mind all that. It was the *last* afternoon of her degradation she was now thinking of. Questions were useless now.

She had found him there at his window just as usual, just as immobile, and almost excruciatingly alone, as if simply stricken with solitude. Smiling, oh yes; but—she hadn't any doubt of it now—unhappy. It was absurd to deny it any longer. He was alone, he was desperate, he needed help. At this it seemed that an emotion of infinite understanding, of selfless abandonment, had swamped over her. She didn't even smile back *that* afternoon. She only looked. But with all her self—mind, heart, and soul and

all these thirty years of long waiting—welling over in her eyes. It was no good mincing matters. She had felt like that: just swamped—like some clumsily-handled Sunday tripper's rowing-boat that has[Pg 284] landed wrong side on on the beach with a smart sea running. Every drop of blood in her body seemed at that moment to have come to a standstill. Then the gulp, the clutch at her bag, and she had sat down.

She had sat down, her back to the high pleasant house behind her and a few paces to her left, with its late Georgian greenish balconies. And there she had simply waited on and on and on. She had to do so; there was no help for it; to-morrow—or the next day—she must be going back. She couldn't blue all her savings, not to the very last stiver. Why then he must realize it; his very intelligence would reveal it if only she gave him time. She would wait, and he would declare himself. To ignore her now! With a face like that, a smile so unmotived, so wistful! Perfidy like *that* was not possible even in this perfidious world. The bottom of things didn't come out quite like that.

So she had sat on and on, only once drifting on, for fifty yards or so, very very slowly, her eyes on the sea, and then returning—without so much as an eyelash lifted towards the window. And as she sat down there the second time—her heart grown a little cold, her mind miserable with wrangling voices, there had presented itself in the skies opposite to her the most astonishing sunset she had ever seen.

It appeared as if the clouds must have been waiting in the wings all day for this last huge transformation scene. They were journeying, rank on rank, each to its appointed place, not only drenching heaven and earth with an enormous pomp of colour, but widening, shallowing, patterning the whole western horizon and even the zenith arched over her simple head. It was an amazingly joyful spectacle. One could hardly believe that again and again and again throughout the centuries of the earth's solitary and peopled existence just such vast preparations as these must often have been made before—as if for the entry of some all-powerful and all-merciful potentate. Yet one who never actually appeared. And it didn't[Pg 285] occur to Miss Curtis that, strictly speaking, the immense scene she was contemplating was hers alone; that every instant it was beginning a little further westward to some other spectator; indeed—sobering thought—that sunset was always going on for someone; and daybreak too, for that matter.

For herself that evening the two extremes seemed to have combined into one. And then, night. During those last brief minutes she had realized as she watched what it is to be in the presence of a life of infinite possibilities, crammed, brimmed with joys and anguish and responsibilities and delights that no foresight could apprehend. She was to realize too at the end of those few minutes what it is—so far as she was concerned—to see it instantaneously fade away and die, while still these lovely apparitions of the heavens burned on, in their turn too to fade away. For this life of

which she had caught this marvellous glimpse had itself never even been a possibility—merely an illusion. Worse, a delusion.

Miss Curtis was not smiling now as she stood looking out into the street. Her face had never worn an expression so assured and resolute and indomitable. What a solace is a career, what a never-wearisome refuge plenty to do! How wise, how sagacious to retire and just look on. At least so it seemed now.

At Newhampton that evening an awful moment had intervened, a moment almost appallingly ridiculous to recall. For you can't actually remember racking pain of mind and spirit any more than you can remember bodily agony. Voices had sounded out behind her as she sat with her little bag clutched in her tailor-made lap, her whole person positively blazing with the preternatural dyes of the west. And one of those voices she was to remember—it had sounded familiar too, though she had never heard it before—to her dying day. It was the voice of the Destroyer.

The esplanade at this moment had been all but deserted[Pg 286]—empty. Two men—and as if a tocsin had proclaimed him she *knew* who one of them was—two men had come straight across from the house behind her, had passed the seat on her left about twenty yards away, had then turned right, and now were but a pace or two distant. She positively saw all this, as if she had eyes between her shoulder-blades. And she had sat on, motionless, half-suffocated with suspense, unable for an instant to stir hand or foot.

Then, with that vast western light for help, she had looked up—straight into the unknown one's face, straight into his eyes. And though they were fixed in her direction they had made no sign. None—just none. How could they? For though they were wide open they were veiled by a peculiar film, and even if the unknown one's hand had not been resting on his companion's arm, she would have realized at once that he was blind.

It was curious, perhaps, that being so, he could be capable—as that curiously vague gentle smile seemed to testify—of enjoying this spectacle of light and colour and refulgence, of sea, air, and sky. But Miss Curtis had never thought it curious. She had first heard only the voice, without catching the words, and then had gulped down the heart that had come into her mouth, and had so clumsily clutched at the wrong end of her bag, that her thermos flask had slipped out of it, had rolled with extraordinary animation out of her lap and fallen with an incredible crash on to the asphalt beneath.

'What's that, what's that?' the voice had cried out, and a panic-stricken expression had transfigured the mute pale face.

'It's all right,' the other replied. 'It's only a lady who has dropped something.' And then as if in confidence: 'As a matter of fact, a bottle of tea, poor thing.'

The last words had been scarcely more than muttered. But in moments of extreme torture the senses may be exceedingly acute and the whole soul observant. They had remained fixed in Miss Curtis's mind as finally as if they had been recorded in[Pg 287] wax for the gramophone. 'A bottle of tea.' But since something that seemed very much like her whole being, her very heart itself had at this moment been shattered into bits, it wasn't till some little time after, when the deeper wounds were numbing, that she felt the full destructiveness of that 'poor thing'. To see ourselves as others see us and not through the distortion of self-deception, rapture, and romance—'Poor thing!'—in the very words with which she herself had sometimes compassionated in silence some blowsy bedraggled tripper—or worse! 'And so—*ad infinitum*.' *That*, anyhow, only amused her now.

And that had been the end of it. Miss Curtis had stooped—the blood rushing to her head and staining her vision as she did so—and had picked up her broken flask. It looked a little disgusting but she had stuffed it back into her bag with her raspberry-jam sandwiches and her bun. Then she had swept her hands down over her lap almost as if she had finished a most delicious meal and wanted to get rid of the crumbs. And then she had got up and gone off on her picnic to the sand-dunes. And then....

But now Miss Mavor, having finished her last few little jobs—and all lip-sticked and freshly powdered for the evening—was ready to go. Miss Curtis herself pulled down the last dark-blue blind, the blind that covered the glass of the door. And she herself turned the handle and opened that door.

'Good night, Miss Curtis,' said Miss Mavor.

'Good night,' said Miss Curtis; then turned back into the vacant and half-lighted shop to get her own neat handbag and admirable umbrella, and to put on her hat and coat.

ALL HALLOWS

'*And because time in itselfe...can receive no alteration, the hallowing...must consist in the shape or countenance which we put upon the affaires that are incident in these days.*'

RICHARD HOOKER

It was about half-past three on an August afternoon when I found myself for the first time looking down upon All Hallows. And at glimpse of it, fatigue and vexation passed away. I stood 'at gaze', as the old phrase goes—like the two children of Israel sent in to spy out the Promised Land. How often the imagined transcends the real. Not so All Hallows. Having at last reached the end of my journey—flies, dust, heat, wind—having at last come limping out upon the green sea-bluff beneath which lay its walls—I confess the actuality excelled my feeble dreams of it.

What most astonished me, perhaps, was the sense not so much of its age, its austerity, or even its solitude, but its air of abandonment. It lay couched there as if in hiding in its narrow sea-bay. Not a sound was in the air; not a jackdaw clapped its wings among its turrets. No other roof, not even a chimney, was in sight; only the dark-blue arch of the sky; the narrow snowline of the ebbing tide; and that gaunt coast fading away into the haze of a west over which were already gathering the veils of sunset.[Pg 289]

We had met, then, at an appropriate hour and season. And yet—I wonder. For it was certainly not the 'beauty' of All Hallows, lulled as if into a dream in this serenity of air and heavens, which was to leave the sharpest impression upon me. And what kind of first showing would it have made, I speculated, if an autumnal gale had been shrilling and trumpeting across its narrow bay—clots of wind-borne spume floating among its dusky pinnacles—and the roar of the sea echoing against its walls! Imagine it frozen stark in winter, icy hoar-frost edging its every boss, moulding, finial, crocket, cusp!

Indeed, are there not works of man, legacies of a half-forgotten past, scattered across this human world of ours from China to Peru, which seem to daunt the imagination with their incomprehensibility? Incomprehensible, I mean, in the sense that the passion that inspired and conceived them is incomprehensible. Viewed in the light of the passing day, they might be the monuments of a race of demi-gods. And yet, if we could but free ourselves from our timidities, and follies, we might realize that even we ourselves have an obligation to leave behind us similar memorials—testaments to the creative and faithful genius not so much of the individual as of Humanity itself.

However that may be, it was my own personal fortune to see All Hallows for the first time in the heat of the Dog Days, after a journey which could hardly be justified except by its end. At this moment of the afternoon the great church almost cheated one into the belief that it was possessed of a life of its own. It lay, as I say, couched in

its natural hollow, basking under the dark dome of the heavens like some half-fossilized monster that might at any moment stir and awaken out of the swoon to which the wand of the enchanter had committed it. And with every inch of the sun's descending journey it changed its appearance.

That is the charm of such things. Man himself, says the philosopher, is the sport of change. His life and the life around[Pg 290] him are but the flotsam of a perpetual flux. Yet, haunted by ideals, egged on by impossibilities, he builds his vision of the changeless; and time diversifies it with its colours and its 'effects' at leisure. It was drawing near to harvest now; the summer was nearly over; the corn would soon be in stook; the season of silence had come, not even the robins had yet begun to practice their autumnal lament. I should have come earlier.

The distance was of little account. But nine flinty hills in seven miles is certainly hard commons. To plod (the occupant of a cloud of dust) up one steep incline and so see another; to plod up that and so see a third; to surmount that and, half-choked, half-roasted, to see (as if in unbelievable mirage) a fourth—and always stone walls, discoloured grass, no flower but ragged ragwort, whited fleabane, moody nettle, and the exquisite stubborn bindweed with its almond-burdened censers, and always the glitter and dazzle of the sun—well, the experience grows irksome. And then that endless flint erection with which some jealous Lord of the Manor had barricaded his verdurous estate! A fly-infested mile of the company of that wall was tantamount to making one's way into the infernal regions—with Tantalus for fellow-pilgrim. And when a solitary and empty dung-cart had lumbered by, lifting the dumb dust out of the road in swirling clouds into the heat-quivering air, I had all but wept aloud.

No, I shall not easily forget that walk—or the conclusion of it—when footsore, all but dead beat—dust all over me, cheeks, lips, eyelids, in my hair, dust in drifts even between my naked body and my clothes—I stretched my aching limbs on the turf under the straggle of trees which crowned the bluff of that last hill still blessedly green and verdant, and feasted my eyes on the cathedral beneath me. How odd Memory is—in her sorting arrangements. How perverse her pigeon-holes.

It had reminded me of a drizzling evening many years ago. I had stayed a moment to listen to an old Salvation Army[Pg 291] officer preaching at a street corner. The sopped and squalid houses echoed with his harangue. His penitents' drum resembled the block of an executioner. His goatish beard wagged at every word he uttered. 'My brothers and sisters,' he was saying, 'the very instant our fleshly bodies are born they begin to perish; the moment the Lord has put them together, time begins to take them to pieces again. *Now* at this very instant if you listen close, you can hear the nibblings and frettings of the moth and rust within—the worm that never dies. It's the same with human causes and creeds and institutions—just the same. O, then, for that Strand of

Beauty where all that is mortal shall be shed away and we shall appear in the likeness and verisimilitude of what in sober and awful truth we are!'

The light striking out of an oil-and-colourman's shop at the street corner lay across his cheek and beard and glassed his eye. The soaked circle of humanity in which he was gesticulating stood staring and motionless—the lassies, the probationers, the melancholy idlers. I had had enough. I went away. But it is odd that so utterly inappropriate a recollection should have edged back into my mind at this moment. There was, as I have said, not a living soul in sight. Only a few seabirds—oyster-catchers maybe—were jangling on the distant beach.

It was now a quarter to four by my watch, and the usual pensive 'lin-lan-lone' from the belfry beneath me would soon no doubt be ringing to evensong. But if at that moment a triple bob-major had suddenly clanged its alarm over sea and shore I couldn't have stirred a finger's breadth. Scanty though the shade afforded by the wind-shorn tuft of trees under which I lay might be—I was ineffably at peace.

No bell, as a matter of fact, loosed its tongue that stagnant half-hour. Unless then the walls beneath me already concealed a few such chance visitors as myself, All Hallows would be empty. A cathedral not only without a close but without a[Pg 292] congregation—yet another romantic charm. The Deanery and the residences of its clergy, my old guide-book had long since informed me, were a full mile or more away. I determined in due time, first to make sure of an entry, and then having quenched my thirst, to bathe.

How inhuman any extremity—hunger, fatigue, pain, desire—makes us poor humans. Thirst and drouth so haunted my mind that again and again as I glanced towards it I supped up in one long draught that complete blue sea. But meanwhile, too, my eyes had been steadily exploring and searching out this monument of the bygone centuries beneath me.

The headland faced approximately due west. The windows of the Lady Chapel therefore lay immediately beneath me, their fourteenth-century glass showing flatly dark amid their traceries. Above it, the shallow V-shaped, leaden ribbed roof of the chancel converged towards the unfinished tower, then broke away at right angles—for the cathedral was cruciform. Walls so ancient and so sparsely adorned and decorated could not but be inhospitable in effect. Their stone was of a bleached bone-grey; a grey that none the less seemed to be as immaterial as flame—or incandescent ash. They were substantial enough, however, to cast a marvellously lucent shadow, of a blue no less vivid but paler than that of the sea, on the shelving sward beneath them. And that shadow was steadily shifting as I watched. But even if the complete edifice had vanished into the void, the scene would still have been of an incredible loveliness.

The colours in air and sky on this dangerous coast seemed to shed a peculiar unreality even on the rocks of its own outworks.

So, from my vantage place on the hill that dominates it, I continued for a while to watch All Hallows; to spy upon it; and no less intently than a sentry who, not quite trusting his own eyes, has seen a dubious shape approaching him in the dusk. It may sound absurd, but I felt that at any moment I too might surprise All Hallows in the act of revealing what in[Pg 293] very truth it looked like—and *was*, when no human witness was there to share its solitude.

Those gigantic statues, for example, which flanked the base of the unfinished tower—an intense bluish-white in the sunlight and a bluish-purple in shadow—images of angels and of saints, as I had learned of old from my guide-book. Only six of them at most could be visible, of course, from where I sat. And yet I found myself counting them again and yet again, as if doubting my own arithmetic. For my first impression had been that seven were in view—though the figure furthest from me at the western angle showed little more than a jutting fragment of stone which might perhaps be only part and parcel of the fabric itself.

But then the lights even of day may be deceitful, and fantasy plays strange tricks with one's eyes. With exercise, none the less, the mind is enabled to detect minute details which the unaided eye is incapable of particularizing. Given the imagination, man himself indeed may some day be able to distinguish what shapes are walking during our own terrestrial midnight amid the black shadows of the craters in the noonday of the moon. At any rate, I could trace at last frets of carving, minute weather marks, crookednesses, incrustations, repairings, that had before passed unnoticed. These walls, indeed, like human faces, were maps and charts of their own long past.

In the midst of this prolonged scrutiny, the hypnotic air, the heat, must suddenly have overcome me. I fell asleep up there in my grove's scanty shade; and remained asleep, too, long enough (as time is measured by the clocks of sleep), to dream an immense panoramic dream. On waking, I could recall only the faintest vestiges of it, and found that the hand of my watch had crept on but a few minutes in the interval. It was eight minutes past four.

I scrambled up—numbed and inert—with that peculiar sense of panic which sometimes follows an uneasy sleep. What[Pg 294] folly to have been frittering time away within sight of my goal at an hour when no doubt the cathedral would soon be closed to visitors, and abandoned for the night to its own secret ruminations. I hastened down the steep rounded incline of the hill, and having skirted under the sunlit expanse of the walls, came presently to the south door, only to discover that my forebodings had been justified, and that it was already barred and bolted. The

discovery seemed to increase my fatigue fourfold. How foolish it is to obey mere caprices. What a straw is a man!

I glanced up into the beautiful shell of masonry above my head. Shapes and figures in stone it showed in plenty—symbols of an imagination that had flamed and faded, leaving this signature for sole witness—but not a living bird or butterfly. There was but one faint chance left of making an entry. Hunted now, rather than the hunter, I hastened out again into the full blazing flood of sunshine—and once more came within sight of the sea; a sea so near at last that I could hear its enormous sallies and murmurings. Indeed I had not realized until that moment how closely the great western doors of the cathedral abutted on the beach.

It was as if its hospitality had been deliberately designed, not for a people to whom the faith of which it was the shrine had become a weariness and a commonplace, but for the solace of pilgrims from over the ocean. I could see them tumbling into their cockle-boats out of their great hollow ships—sails idle, anchors down; see them leaping ashore and straggling up across the sands to these all-welcoming portals—'Parthians and Medes and Elamites; dwellers in Mesopotamia and in the parts of Egypt about Cyrene; strangers of Rome, Jews and Proselytes—we do hear them speak in our own tongue the wonderful works of God.'

And so at last I found my way into All Hallows—entering by a rounded dwarfish side-door with zigzag mouldings. There hung for corbel to its dripstone a curious leering face,[Pg 295] with its forked tongue out, to give me welcome. And an appropriate one, too, for the figure I made!

But once beneath that prodigious roof-tree, I forgot myself and everything that was mine. The hush, the coolness, the unfathomable twilight drifted in on my small human consciousness. Not even the ocean itself is able so completely to receive one into its solacing bosom. Except for the windows over my head, filtering with their stained glass the last western radiance of the sun, there was but little visible colour in those great spaces, and a severe economy of decoration. The stone piers carried their round arches with an almost intimidating impassivity.

By deliberate design, too, or by some illusion of perspective, the whole floor of the building appeared steadily to ascend towards the east, where a dark wooden multitudinously figured rood-screen shut off the choir and the high altar from the nave. I seemed to have exchanged one universal actuality for another: the burning world of nature, for this oasis of quiet. Here, the wings of the imagination need never rest in their flight out of the wilderness into the unknown.

Thus resting, I must again have fallen asleep. And so swiftly can even the merest freshet of sleep affect the mind, that when my eyes opened, I was completely at a loss.

Where was I? What demon of what romantic chasm had swept my poor drowsy body into this immense haunt? The din and clamour of an horrific dream whose fainting rumour was still in my ear, became suddenly stilled. Then at one and the same moment, a sense of utter dismay at earthly surroundings no longer serene and peaceful, but grim and forbidding, flooded my mind, and I became aware that I was no longer alone. Twenty or thirty paces away, and a little this side of the rood-screen, an old man was standing.

To judge from the black and purple velvet and tassel-tagged gown he wore, he was a verger. He had not yet realized, it seemed, that a visitor shared his solitude. And yet he[Pg 296] was listening. His head was craned forward and leaned sideways on his rusty shoulders. As I steadily watched him, he raised his eyes, and with a peculiar stealthy deliberation scanned the complete upper regions of the northern transept. Not the faintest rumour of any sound that may have attracted his attention reached me where I sat. Perhaps a wild bird had made its entry through a broken pane of glass and with its cry had at the same moment awakened me and caught his attention. Or maybe the old man was waiting for some fellow-occupant to join him from above.

I continued to watch him. Even at this distance, the silvery twilight cast by the clerestory windows was sufficient to show me, though vaguely, his face: the high sloping nose, the lean cheekbones and protruding chin. He continued so long in the same position that I at last determined to break in on his reverie.

At sound of my footsteps his head sunk cautiously back upon his shoulders; and he turned; and then motionlessly surveyed me as I drew near. He resembled one of those old men whom Rembrandt delighted in drawing: the knotted hands, the black drooping eyebrows, the wide thin-lipped ecclesiastical mouth, the intent cavernous dark eyes beneath the heavy folds of their lids. White as a miller with dust, hot and draggled, I was hardly the kind of visitor that any self-respecting custodian would warmly welcome, but he greeted me none the less with every mark of courtesy.

I apologized for the lateness of my arrival, and explained it as best I could. 'Until I caught sight of you,' I concluded lamely, 'I hadn't ventured very far in: otherwise I might have found myself a prisoner for the night. It must be dark in here when there is no moon.'

The old man smiled—but wryly. 'As a matter of fact, sir,' he replied, 'the cathedral is closed to visitors at four—at such times, that is, when there is no afternoon service. Services are not as frequent as they were. But visitors are rare too. In[Pg 297] winter, in particular, you notice the gloom—as you say, sir. Not that I ever spend the night here: though I am usually last to leave. There's the risk of fire to be thought of and...I think I should have detected your presence here, sir. One becomes accustomed after many years.'

There was the usual trace of official pedantry in his voice, but it was more pleasing than otherwise. Nor did he show any wish to be rid of me. He continued his survey, although his eye was a little absent and his attention seemed to be divided.

'I thought perhaps I might be able to find a room for the night and really explore the cathedral to-morrow morning. It has been a tiring journey; I come from B——'

'Ah, from B——; it *is* a fatiguing journey, sir, taken on foot. I used to walk in there to see a sick daughter of mine. Carriage parties occasionally make their way here, but not so much as once. We are too far out of the hurly-burly to be much intruded on. Not that them who come to make their worship here are intruders. Far from it. But most that come are mere sightseers. And the fewer of them, I say, in the circumstances, the better.'

Something in what I had said or in my appearance seemed to have reassured him. 'Well, I cannot claim to be a regular churchgoer,' I said. 'I am myself a mere sightseer. And yet—even to sit here for a few minutes is to be reconciled.'

'Ah, reconciled, sir:' the old man repeated, turning away. 'I can well imagine it after that journey on such a day as this. But to live here is another matter.'

'I was thinking of that,' I replied in a foolish attempt to retrieve the position. 'It must, as you say, be desolate enough in the winter—for two-thirds of the year, indeed.'

'We have our storms, sir—the bad with the good,' he agreed, 'and our position is specially prolific of what they call sea-fog. It comes driving in from the sea for days and nights together—gale and mist, so that you can scarcely see your open hand in front of your eyes even in broad daylight. And[Pg 298] the noise of it, sir, sweeping across overhead in that wooliness of mist, if you take me, is most peculiar. It's shocking to a stranger. No, sir, we are left pretty much to ourselves when the fine-weather birds are flown.... You'd be astonished at the power of the winds here. There was a mason—a local man too—not above two or three years ago was blown clean off the roof from under the tower—tossed up in the air like an empty sack. But'—and the old man at last allowed his eyes to stray upwards to the roof again—'but there's not much doing now.' He seemed to be pondering. 'Nothing open.'

'I mustn't detain you,' I said, 'but you were saying that services are infrequent now. Why is that? When one thinks of——' But tact restrained me.

'Pray don't think of keeping me, sir. It's a part of my duties. But from a remark you let fall I was supposing you may have seen something that appeared, I understand, not many months ago in the newspapers. We lost our dean—Dean Pomfrey—last November. To all intents and purposes, I mean; and his office has not yet been filled. Between you and me, sir, there's a hitch—though I should wish it to go no further.

They are greedy monsters—those newspapers: no respect, no discretion, no decency, in my view. And they copy each other like cats in a chorus.

'We have never wanted to be a notoriety here, sir: and not of late of all times. We must face our own troubles. You'd be astonished how callous the mere sightseer can be. And not only them from over the water whom our particular troubles cannot concern—but far worse—parties as English as you or me. They ask you questions you wouldn't believe possible in a civilized country. Not that they care what becomes of us—not one iota, sir. We talk of them masked-up Inquisitors in olden times, but there's many a human being in our own would enjoy seeing a fellow-creature on the rack if he could get the opportunity. It's a heartless age, sir.'

This was queerish talk in the circumstances: and after all I[Pg 299] myself was of the glorious company of the sightseers. I held my peace. And the old man, as if to make amends, asked me if I would care to see any particular part of the building. 'The light is smalling,' he explained, 'but still if we keep to the ground level there'll be a few minutes to spare; and we shall not be interrupted if we go quietly on our way.'

For the moment the reference eluded me: I could only thank him for the suggestion and once more beg him not to put himself to any inconvenience. I explained, too, that though I had no personal acquaintance with Dr. Pomfrey, I had read of his illness in the newspapers. 'Isn't he,' I added a little dubiously, 'the author of *The Church and the Folk*? If so, he must be an exceedingly learned and delightful man.'

'Ay, sir.' The old verger put up a hand towards me. 'You may well say it: a saint if ever there was one. But it's worse than "illness", sir—it's oblivion. And, thank God, the newspapers didn't get hold of more than a bare outline.'

He dropped his voice. 'This way, if you please'; and he led me off gently down the aisle, once more coming to a standstill beneath the roof of the tower. 'What I mean, sir, is that there's very few left in this world who have any place in their minds for a sacred confidence—no reverence, sir. They would as lief All Hallows and all it stands for were swept away to-morrow, demolished to the dust. And that gives me the greatest caution with whom I speak. But sharing one's troubles is sometimes a relief. If it weren't so, why do those Catholics have their wooden boxes all built for the purpose? What else, I ask you, is the meaning of their fasts and penances?

'You see, sir, I am myself, and have been for upwards of twelve years now, the dean's verger. In the sight of no respecter of persons—of offices and dignities, that is, I take it—I might claim to be even an elder brother. And our dean, sir, was a man who was all things to all men. No pride of place, no vauntingness, none of your apron-and-gaiter high-and-mightiness whatsoever, sir. And then that! And to come on[Pg 300] us without warning; or at least without warning as could be taken as *such*.' I followed his eyes into the darkening stony spaces above us; a light like tarnished silver lay over the

soundless vaultings. But so, of course, dusk, either of evening or daybreak, would affect the ancient stones. Nothing moved there.

'You must understand, sir,' the old man was continuing, 'the procession for divine service proceeds from the vestry over yonder out through those wrought-iron gates and so under the rood-screen and into the chancel there. Visitors are admitted on showing a card or a word to the verger in charge; but not otherwise. If you stand a pace or two to the right, you will catch a glimpse of the altar-screen—fourteenth-century work, Bishop Robert de Beaufort—and a unique example of the age. But what I was saying is that when we proceed for the services *out* of here *into* there, it has always been our custom to keep pretty close together; more seemly and decent, sir, than straggling in like so many sheep.

'Besides, sir, aren't we at such times in the manner of an *array*, "marching as to war", if you take me: it's a lesson in objects. The third verger leading: then the choristers, boys and men, though sadly depleted; then the minor canons; then any other dignitaries who may happen to be present, with the canon in residence; then myself, sir, followed by the dean.

'There hadn't been much amiss up to then, and on that afternoon, I can vouch—and I've repeated it *ad naushum*—there was not a single stranger out in this beyond here, sir—nave or transepts. Not within view, that is: one can't be expected to see through four feet of Norman stone. Well, sir, we had gone on our way, and I had actually turned about as usual to bow Dr. Pomfrey into his stall, when I found to my consternation, to my consternation, I say, he wasn't there! It alarmed me, sir, and as you might well believe if you knew the full circumstances.

'Not that I lost my presence of mind. My first duty was to[Pg 301] see all things to be in order and nothing unseemly to occur. My feelings were another matter. The old gentleman had left the vestry with us: that I knew: I had myself robed 'im as usual, and he in his own manner, smiling with his "Well, Jones, another day gone; another day gone." He was always an anxious gentleman for *time*, sir. How we spend it and all.

'As I say, then, he was behind me when we swepp out of the gates. I saw him coming on out of the tail of my eye—we grow accustomed to it, to see with the whole of the eye, I mean. And then—not a vestige; and me—well, sir, nonplussed, as you may imagine. I gave a look and sign at Canon Ockham, and the service proceeded as usual, while I hurried back to the vestry thinking the poor gentleman must have been taken suddenly ill. And yet, sir, I was not surprised to find the vestry vacant, and him not there. I had been expecting matters to come to what you might call a head.

'As best I could I held my tongue, and a fortunate thing it was that Canon Ockham was then in residence and not Canon Leigh Shougar, though perhaps I am not the one

to say it. No, sir, our beloved dean—as pious and unworldly a gentleman as ever graced the Church—was gone for ever. He was not to appear in our midst again. He had been'—and the old man with elevated eyebrows and long lean mouth nearly whispered the words into my ear—'he had been absconded—abducted, sir.'

'Abducted!' I murmured.

The old man closed his eyes, and with trembling lids added, 'He was found, sir, late that night up there in what they call the Trophy Room—sitting in a corner there, weeping. A child. Not a word of what had persuaded him to go or misled him there, not a word of sorrow or sadness, thank God. He didn't know us, sir—didn't know *me*. Just simple; harmless; memory all gone. Simple, sir.'

It was foolish to be whispering together like this beneath these enormous spaces with not so much as a clothes-moth[Pg 302] for sign of life within view. But I even lowered my voice still farther: 'Were there no premonitory symptoms? Had he been failing for long?'

The spectacle of grief in any human face is afflicting, but in a face as aged and resigned as this old man's—I turned away in remorse the moment the question was out of my lips; emotion is a human solvent and a sort of friendliness had sprung up between us.

'If you will just follow me,' he whispered, 'there's a little place where I make my ablutions that might be of service, sir. We would converse there in better comfort. I am sometimes reminded of those words in Ecclesiastes: "And a bird of the air shall tell of the matter." There is not much in our poor human affairs, sir, that was not known to the writer of that book.'

He turned and led the way with surprising celerity, gliding along in his thin-soled, square-toed, clerical spring-side boots; and came to a pause outside a nail-studded door. He opened it with a huge key, and admitted me into a recess under the central tower. We mounted a spiral stone staircase and passed along a corridor hardly more than two feet wide and so dark that now and again I thrust out my finger-tips in search of his black velveted gown to make sure of my guide.

This corridor at length conducted us into a little room whose only illumination I gathered was that of the ebbing dusk from within the cathedral. The old man with trembling rheumatic fingers lit a candle, and thrusting its stick into the middle of an old oak table, pushed open yet another thick oaken door. 'You will find a basin and a towel in there, sir, if you will be so kind.'

I entered. A print of the Crucifixion was tin-tacked to the panelled wall, and beneath it stood a tin basin and jug on a stand. Never was water sweeter. I laved my face and hands and drank deep; my throat like a parched river-course after a drought. What

appeared to be a tarnished censer lay in one[Pg 303] corner of the room; a pair of seven-branched candlesticks shared a recess with a mouse-trap and a book. My eyes passed wearily yet gratefully from one to another of these mute discarded objects while I stood drying my hands.

When I returned, the old man was standing motionless before the spike-barred grill of the window, peering out and down.

'You asked me, sir,' he said, turning his lank waxen face into the feeble rays of the candle, 'you asked me, sir, a question which, if I understood you aright, was this: Was there anything that had occurred *previous*that would explain what I have been telling you? Well, sir, it's a long story, and one best restricted to them perhaps that have the goodwill of things at heart. All Hallows, I might say, sir, is my second home. I have been here, boy and man, for close on fifty-five years—have seen four bishops pass away and have served under no less than five several deans, Dr. Pomfrey, poor gentleman, being the last of the five.

'If such a word could be excused, sir, it's no exaggeration to say that Canon Leigh Shougar is a greenhorn by comparison; which may in part be why he has never quite hit it off, as they say, with Canon Ockham. Or even with Archdeacon Trafford, though he's another kind of gentleman altogether. And *he* is at present abroad. He had what they call a breakdown in health, sir.

'Now in my humble opinion, what was required was not only wisdom and knowledge but simple common sense. In the circumstances I am about to mention, it serves no purpose for any of us to be talking too much; to be for ever sitting at a table with shut doors and finger on lip, and discussing what to most intents and purposes would hardly be called evidence at all, sir. What is the use of argufying, splitting hairs, objurgating about trifles, when matters are sweeping rapidly on from bad to worse. I say it with all due respect and not, I hope, thrusting myself into what doesn't concern me: Dr. Pomfrey[Pg 304] might be with us now in his own self and reason if only common caution had been observed.

'But now that the poor gentleman is gone beyond all that, there is no hope of action or agreement left, none whatsoever. They meet and they meet, and they have now one expert now another down from London, and even from the continent. And I don't say they are not knowledgable gentlemen either, nor a pride to their profession. But why not tell *all*? Why keep back the very secret of what we know? That's what I am asking. And, what's the answer? Why simply that what they don't want to believe, what runs counter to their hopes and wishes and credibilities—and comfort—in this world, that's what they keep out of sight as long as decency permits.

'Canon Leigh Shougar *knows*, sir, what *I* know. And how, I ask, is he going to get to grips with it at this late day if he refuses to acknowledge that such things are what

every fragment of evidence goes to prove that they are. It's *we*, sir, and not the rest of the heedless world outside, who in the long and the short of it are responsible. And what I say is: no power or principality here or hereunder can take possession of a place while those inside have faith enough to keep them out. But once let that falter—the seas are in. And when I say no power, sir, I mean—with all deference—even Satan himself.' The lean lank face had set at the word like a wax mask. The black eyes beneath the heavy lids were fixed on mine with an acute intensity and—though more inscrutable things haunted them—with an unfaltering courage. So dense a hush hung about us that the very stones of the walls seemed to be of silence solidified. It is curious what a refreshment of spirit a mere tin basinful of water may be. I stood leaning against the edge of the table so that the candlelight still rested on my companion.

'What is *wrong* here?' I asked him baldly.

He seemed not to have expected so direct an inquiry. 'Wrong, sir? Why, if I might make so bold,' he replied with a wan, far-away smile and gently drawing his hand down one[Pg 305] of the velvet lapels of his gown, 'if I might make so bold, sir, I take it that you have come as a direct answer to prayer.'

His voice faltered. 'I am an old man now, and nearly at the end of my tether. You must realize, if you please, that I can't get any help that I can understand. I am not doubting that the gentlemen I have mentioned have only the salvation of the cathedral at heart—the cause, sir; and a graver responsibility yet. But they refuse to see how close to the edge of things we are: and how we are drifting.

'Take mere situation. So far as my knowledge tells me, there is no sacred edifice in the whole kingdom—of a piece, that is, with All Hallows not only in mere size and age but in what I might call sanctity and tradition—that is so open—open, I mean, sir, to attack of this peculiar and terrifying nature.'

'Terrifying?'

'*Terrifying*, sir; though I hold fast to what wits my Maker has bestowed on me. Where else, may I ask, would you expect the powers of darkness to congregate in open besiegement than in this narrow valley? First, the sea out there. Are you aware, sir, that ever since living remembrance flood-tide has been gnawing and mumbling its way into this bay to the extent of three or four feet *per annum*? Forty inches, and forty inches, and forty inches corroding on and on: Watch it, sir, man and boy as I have these sixty years past and then make a century of it. Not to mention positive leaps and bounds.

'And now, think a moment of the floods and gales that fall upon us autumn and winter through and even in spring, when this valley is liker paradise to young eyes than any

place on earth. They make the roads from the nearest towns well-nigh impassable; which means that for some months of the year we are to all intents and purposes clean cut off from the rest of the world—as the Schindels out there are from the mainland. Are you aware, sir, I continue, that as we stand now we are above a mile from traces of the nearest human habitation, and[Pg 306] them merely the relics of a burnt-out old farmstead? I warrant that if (and which God forbid) you had been shut up here during the coming night, and it was a near thing but what you weren't—I warrant you might have shouted yourself dumb out of the nearest window if window you could reach—and not a human soul to heed or help you.'

I shifted my hands on the table. It was tedious to be asking questions that received only such vague and evasive replies: and it is always a little disconcerting in the presence of a stranger to be spoken to so close, and with such positiveness.

'Well', I smiled, 'I hope I should not have disgraced my nerves to such an extreme as that. As a small boy, one of my particular fancies was to spend a night in a pulpit. There's a cushion, you know!'

The old man's solemn glance never swerved from my eyes. 'But I take it, sir,' he said, 'if you had ventured to give out a text up there in the dark hours, your jocular young mind would not have been prepared for any kind of a congregation?'

'You mean,' I said a little sharply, 'that the place is haunted?' The absurd notion flitted across my mind of some wandering tribe of gipsies chancing on a refuge so ample and isolated as this, and taking up its quarters in its secret parts. The old church must be honeycombed with corridors and passages and chambers pretty much like the one in which we were now concealed: and what does 'cartholic' imply but an infinite hospitality within prescribed limits? But the old man had taken me at my word.

'I mean, sir,' he said firmly, shutting his eyes, 'that there are devilish agencies at work here.' He raised his hand. 'Don't, I entreat you, dismiss what I am saying as the wanderings of a foolish old man.' He drew a little nearer. 'I have heard them with these ears; I have seen them with these eyes; though whether they have any positive substance, sir, is beyond my small knowledge to declare. But what indeed might we expect[Pg 307] their substance to *be*? First: "I take it," says the Book, "to be such as no man can by learning define, nor by wisdom search out." Is that so? Then I go by the Book. And next: what does the same Word or very near it (I speak of the Apocrypha) say of their *purpose*? It says—and correct me if I go astray—"Devils are creatures made by God, and *that for vengeance*."

'So far, so good, sir. We stop when we can go no further. Vengeance. But of their power, of what they can *do*, I can give you definite evidences. It would be a byword if once the rumour was spread abroad. And if it is *not* so, why, I ask, does every expert that comes here leave us in haste and in dismay? They go off with their tails between

their legs. They see, they grope in, but they don't believe. They *invent*reasons. And they *hasten* to leave us!' His face shook with the emphasis he laid upon the word. 'Why? Why, because the experience is beyond their knowledge, sir.' He drew back breathless and, as I could see, profoundly moved.

'But surely,' I said, 'every old building is bound in time to show symptoms of decay. Half the cathedrals in England, half its churches, even, of any age, have been "restored"—and in many cases with ghastly results. This new grouting and so on. Why, only the other day.... All I mean is, why should you suppose mere wear and tear should be caused by any other agency than——'

The old man turned away. 'I must apologize,' he interrupted me with his inimitable admixture of modesty and dignity. 'I am a poor mouth at explanations, sir. Decay—stress—strain—settling—dissolution: I have heard those words bandied from lip to lip like a game at cup and ball. They fill me with nausea. Why, I am speaking not of dissolution, sir, but of *repairs*, *restorations*. Not decay, *strengthening*. Not a corroding loss, an awful *progress*. I could show you places—and chiefly obscured from direct view and difficult of a close examination, sir, where stones lately as rotten as[Pg 308] pumice and as fretted as a sponge have been replaced by others fresh-quarried—and nothing of their kind within twenty miles.

'There are spots where massive blocks a yard or more square have been *pushed* into place by sheer force. All Hallows is safer at this moment than it has been for three hundred years. They meant well—them who came to see, full of talk and fine language, and went dumb away. I grant you they meant well. I allow that. They hummed and they hawed. They smirked this and they shrugged that. But at heart, sir, they were cowed—horrified: all at a loss. Their very faces showed it. But if you ask me for what purpose such doings are afoot—I have no answer; none.

'But now, supposing you yourself, sir, were one of them, with *your* repute at stake, and you were called in to look at a house which the owners of it and them who had it in trust were disturbed by its being re-edificated and restored by some agency unknown to them. Supposing that! *Why*,' and he rapped with his knuckles on the table, 'being human *and not one of us* mightn't you be going away too with mouth shut, because you didn't want to get talked about to your disadvantage? And wouldn't you at last dismiss the whole thing as a foolish delusion, in the belief that living in out-of-the-way parts like these cuts a man off from the world, breeds maggots in the mind?

'I assure you, sir, they don't—not even Canon Ockham himself to the full—they don't believe even me. And yet, when they have their meetings of the Chapter they talk and wrangle round and round about nothing else. I can bear the other without a murmur. What God sends, I say, we humans deserve. We have laid ourselves open to it. But

when you buttress up blindness and wickedness with downright folly, why then, sir, I sometimes fear for my own reason.'

He set his shoulders as square as his aged frame would permit, and with fingers clutching the lapels beneath his chin, he[Pg 309] stood gazing out into the darkness through that narrow inward window.

'Ah, sir,' he began again, 'I have not spent sixty years in this solitary place without paying heed to my own small wandering thoughts and instincts. Look at your newspapers, sir. What they call the Great War is over—and he'd be a brave man who would take an oath before heaven that *that* was only of human designing—and yet what do we see around us? Nothing but strife and juggleries and hatred and contempt and discord wherever you look. I am no scholar, sir, but so far as my knowledge and experience carry me, we human beings are living to-day merely from hand to mouth. We learn to-day what ought to have been done yesterday, and yet are at a loss to know what's to be done to-morrow.

'And the Church, sir. God forbid I should push my way into what does not concern me; and if you had told me half an hour gone by that you were a regular churchman, I shouldn't be pouring out all this to you now. It wouldn't be seemly. But being not so gives me confidence. By merely listening you can help me, sir; though you can't help *us*. Centuries ago—and in my humble judgement, rightly—we broke away from the parent stem and rooted ourselves in our own soil. But, right or wrong, doesn't that of itself, I ask you, make us all the more open to attack from him who never wearies in going to and fro in the world seeking whom he may devour?

'I am not wishing you to take sides. But a gentleman doesn't scoff; you don't find him jeering at what he doesn't rightly understand. He keeps his own counsel, sir. And that's where, as I say, Canon Leigh Shougar sets me doubting. He refuses to make allowances; though up there in London things may look different. He gets his company there; and then for him the whole kallyidoscope changes, if you take me.'

The old man scanned me an instant as if inquiring within himself whether, after all, I too might not be one of the outcasts. 'You see, sir,' he went on dejectedly, 'I can bear what[Pg 310] may be to come. I can, if need be, live on through what few years may yet remain to me and keep going, as they say. But only if I can be assured that my own inmost senses are not cheating and misleading me. Tell me the worst, and you will have done an old man a service he can never repay. Tell me, on the other hand, that I am merely groping along in a network of devilish *delusion*, sir—well, in that case I hope to be with my master, with Dr. Pomfrey, as soon as possible. We were all children once; and now there's nothing worse in this world for him to come into, in a manner of speaking.

'Oh, sir, I sometimes wonder if what we call childhood and growing up isn't a copy of the fate of our ancient forefathers. In the beginning of time there were Fallen Angels, we are told; but even if it weren't there in Holy Writ, we might have learnt it of our own fears and misgivings. I sometimes find myself looking at a young child with little short of awe, sir, knowing that within its mind is a scene of peace and paradise of which we older folk have no notion, and which will fade away out of it, as life wears on, like the mere tabernacling of a dream.'

There was no trace of unction in his speech, though the phraseology might suggest it, and he smiled at me as if in reassurance. 'You see, sir—if I have any true notion of the matter—then I say, heaven is dealing very gently with Dr. Pomfrey. He has gone back, and, I take it, his soul is elsewhere and at rest.'

He had come a pace or two nearer, and the candlelight now cast grotesque shadows in the hollows of his brows and cheekbones, silvering his long scanty hair. The eyes, dimming with age, were fixed on mine as if in incommunicable entreaty. I was at a loss to answer him.

He dropped his hands to his sides. 'The fact is,' he looked cautiously about him, 'what I am now being so bold as to suggest, though it's a familiar enough experience to me, may put you in actual physical danger. But then, duty's duty, and[Pg 311] a deed of kindness from stranger to stranger quite another matter. You seem to have come, if I may say so, in the nick of time; that was all. On the other hand, we can leave the building at once if you are so minded. In any case we must be gone well before dark sets in; even mere human beings are best not disturbed at any night-work they may be after. The dark brings recklessness: conscience cannot see as clear in the dark. Besides, I once delayed too long myself. There is not much of day left even now, though I see by the almanac there should be a slip of moon to-night—unless the sky is overclouded. All that I'm meaning is that our all-in-all, so to speak, is the calm untrammelled evidence of the outer senses, sir. And there comes a time when—well, when one hesitates to trust one's own.'

I have read somewhere that it is only its setting—the shape, the line, the fold, the angle of the lid and so on—that gives its finer shades of meaning and significance to the human eye. Looking into his, even in that narrow and melancholy illumination, was like pondering over a grey, salt, desolate pool—such as sometimes neighbours the sea on a flat and dangerous coast.

Perhaps if I had been a little less credulous, or less exhausted, I should by now have begun to doubt this old creature's sanity. And yet, surely, at even the faintest contact with the insane, a sentinel in the mind sends up flares and warnings; the very landscape changes; there is a sense of insecurity. If, too, the characters inscribed by

age and experience on a man's face can be evidence of goodness and simplicity, then my companion was safe enough. To trust in his sagacity was another matter.

But then, there was All Hallows itself to take into account. That first glimpse from my green headland of its louring yet lovely walls had been strangely moving. There are buildings (almost as though they were once copies of originals now half-forgotten in the human mind) that have a singular influ[Pg 312]ence on the imagination. Even now in this remote candle-lit room, immured between its massive stones, the vast edifice seemed to be gently and furtively fretting its impression on my mind.

I glanced again at the old man: he had turned aside as if to leave me, unbiased, to my own decision. How would a lifetime spent between these sombre walls have affected *me*, I wondered? Surely it would be an act of mere decency to indulge their worn-out hermit! He had appealed to me. If I were ten times more reluctant to follow him, I could hardly refuse. Not at any rate without risking a retreat as humiliating as that of the architectural experts he had referred to—with my tail between my legs.

'I only wish I could hope to be of any real help.'

He turned about; his expression changed, as if at the coming of a light. 'Why, then, sir, let us be gone at once. You are with me, sir: that was all I hoped and asked. And now there's no time to waste.'

He tilted his head to listen a moment—with that large, flat, shell-like ear of his which age alone seems to produce. 'Matches and candle, sir,' he had lowered his voice to a whisper, 'but—though we mustn't lose each other; you and me, I mean—*not*, I think, a naked light. What I would suggest, if you have no objection, is your kindly grasping my gown. There is a kind of streamer here, you see—as if made for the purpose. There will be a good deal of up-and-downing, but I know the building blindfold and as you might say inch by inch. And now that the bell-ringers have given up ringing it is more in my charge than ever.'

He stood back and looked at me with folded hands, a whimsical childlike smile on his aged face. 'I sometimes think to myself I'm like the sentry, sir, in that play by William Shakespeare. I saw it, sir, years ago, on my only visit to London—when I was a boy. If ever there were a villain for all his fine talk and all, commend me to that ghost. I see him yet.'[Pg 313]

Whisper though it was, a sort of chirrup had come into his voice, like that of a cricket in a baker's shop. I took tight hold of the velveted tag of his gown. He opened the door, pressed the box of safety matches into my hand, himself grasped the candlestick and then blew out the light. We were instantly marooned in an impenetrable darkness. 'Now, sir, if you would kindly remove your walking shoes,' he muttered close in my

ear, 'we should proceed with less noise. I shan't hurry you. And please to tug at the streamer if you need attention. In a few minutes the blackness will be less intense.'

As I stooped down to loose my shoe-laces I heard my heart thumping merrily away. It had been listening to our conversation apparently! I slung my shoes round my neck—as I had often done as a boy when going paddling—and we set out on our expedition.

I have endured too often the nightmare of being lost and abandoned in the stony bowels of some strange and prodigious building to take such an adventure lightly. I clung, I confess, desperately tight to my lifeline and we groped steadily onward—my guide ever and again turning back to mutter warning or encouragement in my ear.

Now I found myself steadily ascending; and then in a while, feeling my way down flights of hollowly worn stone steps, and anon brushing along a gallery or corkscrewing up a newel staircase so narrow that my shoulders all but touched the walls on either side. In spite of the sepulchral chill in these bowels of the cathedral, I was soon suffocatingly hot, and the effort to see became intolerably fatiguing. Once, to recover our breath we paused opposite a slit in the thickness of the masonry, at which to breathe the tepid sweetness of the outer air. It was faint with the scent of wild flowers and cool of the sea. And presently after, at a barred window, high overhead, I caught a glimpse of the night's first stars.

We then turned inward once more, ascending yet another spiral staircase. And now the intense darkness had thinned a[Pg 314] little, the groined roof above us becoming faintly discernible. A fresher air softly fanned my cheek; and then trembling fingers groped over my breast, and, cold and bony, clutched my own.

'Dead still here, sir, if you please.' So close sounded the whispered syllables the voice might have been a messenger's within my own consciousness. 'Dead still, here. There's a drop of some sixty or seventy feet a few paces on.'

I peered out across the abyss, conscious, as it seemed, of the huge superincumbent weight of the noble fretted roof only a small space now immediately above our heads. As we approached the edge of this stony precipice, the gloom paled a little, and I guessed that we must be standing in some coign of the southern transept, for what light the evening skies now afforded was clearer towards the right. On the other hand, it seemed the northern windows opposite us were most of them boarded up, or obscured in some fashion. Gazing out, I could detect scaffolding poles—like knitting needles—thrust out from the walls and a balloon-like spread of canvas above them. For the moment my ear was haunted by what appeared to be the droning of an immense insect. But this presently ceased. I fancy it was internal only.

'You will understand, sir,' breathed the old man close beside me—and we still stood, grotesquely enough, hand in hand—'the scaffolding over there has been in position a

good many months now. It was put up when the last gentleman came down from London to inspect the fabric. And there it's been left ever since. Now, sir!—though I implore you to be cautious.'

I hardly needed the warning. With one hand clutching my box of matches, the fingers of the other interlaced with my companion's, I strained every sense. And yet I could detect not the faintest stir or murmur under that wide-spreading roof. Only a hush as profound as that which must reign in the Royal Chamber of the pyramid of Cheops faintly swirled in the labyrinths of my ear.[Pg 315]

How long we stayed in this position I cannot say; but minutes sometimes seem like hours. And then, without the slightest warning, I became aware of a peculiar and incessant vibration. It is impossible to give a name to it. It suggested the remote whirring of an enormous mill-stone, or that—though without definite pulsation—of revolving wings, or even the spinning of an immense top.

In spite of his age, my companion apparently had ears as acute as mine. He had clutched me tighter a full ten seconds before I myself became aware of this disturbance of the air. He pressed closer. 'Do you see that, sir?'

I gazed and gazed, and saw nothing. Indeed even in what I had seemed to *hear* I might have been deceived. Nothing is more treacherous in certain circumstances—except possibly the eye—than the ear. It magnifies, distorts, and may even invent. As instantaneously as I had become aware of it, the murmur had ceased. And then—though I cannot be certain—it seemed the dingy and voluminous spread of canvas over there had perceptibly trembled, as if a huge cautious hand had been thrust out to draw it aside. No time was given me to make sure. The old man had hastily withdrawn me into the opening of the wall through which we had issued; and we made no pause in our retreat until we had come again to the narrow slit of window which I have spoken of and could refresh ourselves with a less stagnant air. We stood here resting awhile.

'Well, sir?' he inquired at last, in the same flat muffled tones.

'Do you ever pass along here alone?' I whispered.

'Oh, yes, sir. I make it a habit to be the last to leave—and often the first to come; but I am usually gone by this hour.'

I looked close at the dim face in profile against that narrow oblong of night. 'It is so difficult to be sure of oneself,' I said. 'Have you ever actually *encountered* anything—near at hand, I mean?'

'I keep a sharp look-out, sir. Maybe they don't think me of enough importance to molest—the last rat, as they say.'[Pg 316]

'But *have* you?'—I might myself have been communicating with the phantasmal *genius loci* of All Hallows—our muffled voices; this intense caution and secret listening; the slight breathlessness, as if at any instant one's heart were ready for flight: 'But *have* you?'

'Well yes, sir,' he said. 'And in this very gallery. They nearly had me, sir. But by good fortune there's a recess a little further on—stored up with some old fragments of carving, from the original building, sixth-century, so it's said: stone-capitals, heads and hands, and such like. I had had my warning, and managed to leap in there and conceal myself. But only just in time. Indeed, sir, I confess I was in such a condition of terror and horror I turned my back.'

'You mean you heard, but didn't look? And—something came?'

'Yes, sir, I seemed to be reduced to no bigger than a child, huddled up there in that corner. There was a sound like clanging metal—but I don't think it was metal. It drew near at a furious speed, then passed me, making a filthy gust of wind. For some instants I couldn't breathe; the air was gone.'

'And no other sound?'

'No other, sir, except out of the distance a noise like the sounding of a stupendous kind of gibberish. A calling; or so it seemed—no human sound. The air shook with it. You see, sir, I myself wasn't of any consequence, I take it—unless a mere obstruction in the way. But—I have heard it said somewhere that the rarity of these happenings is only because it's a pain and torment and not any sort of pleasure for such beings, such apparitions, sir, good or bad, to visit our outward world. That's what I have heard said; though I can go no further.

'The time I'm telling you of was in the early winter—November. There was a dense sea-fog over the valley, I remember. It eddied through that opening there into the candlelight like flowing milk. I never light up now: and, if I[Pg 317] may be forgiven the boast, sir, I seem to have almost forgotten how to be afraid. After all, in any walk of life a man can only do his best, and if there weren't such opposition and hindrances in high places I should have nothing to complain of. What is anybody's life, sir (come past the gaiety of youth), but marking time.... Did you hear anything *then*, sir?'

His gentle monotonous mumbling ceased and we listened together. But every ancient edifice has voices and soundings of its own: there was nothing audible that I could put a name to, only what seemed to be a faint perpetual stir or whirr of grinding such as (to one's over-stimulated senses) the stablest stones set one on top of the other with an ever slightly varying weight and stress might be likely to make perceptible in a world of matter. A world which, after all, they say, is itself in unimaginably rapid rotation, and under the tyranny of time.

'No, I hear nothing,' I answered: 'but please don't think I am doubting what you say. Far from it. You must remember I am a stranger, and that therefore the influence of the place cannot but be less apparent to me. And you have no help in this now?'

'No, sir. Not now. But even at the best of times we had small company hereabouts, and no money. Not for any substantial outlay, I mean. And not even the boldest suggests making what's called a public appeal. It's a strange thing to me, sir, but whenever the newspapers get hold of anything, they turn it into a byword and a sham. Yet how can they help themselves?—with no beliefs to guide them and nothing to stay their mouths except about what for sheer human decency's sake they daren't talk about. But then, who am I to complain? And now, sir,' he continued with a sigh of utter weariness, 'if you are sufficiently rested, would you perhaps follow me on to the roof? It is the last visit I make—though by rights perhaps I should take in what there is of the tower. But I'm too old now for that—clambering and climbing over naked beams; and the ladders are not so safe as they were.'[Pg 318]

We had not far to go. The old man drew open a squat heavily-ironed door at the head of a flight of wooden steps. It was latched but not bolted, and admitted us at once to the leaden roof of the building and to the immense amphitheatre of evening. The last faint hues of sunset were fading in the west; and silver-bright Spica shared with the tilted crescent of the moon the serene lagoon-like expanse of sky above the sea. Even at this height, the air was audibly stirred with the low lullaby of the tide.

The staircase by which we had come out was surmounted by a flat penthouse roof about seven feet high. We edged softly along, then paused once more; to find ourselves now all but *tête-à-tête* with the gigantic figures that stood sentinel at the base of the buttresses to the unfinished tower.

The tower was so far unfinished, indeed, as to wear the appearance of the ruinous; besides which, what appeared to be scars and stains as if of fire were detectable on some of its stones, reminding me of the legend which years before I had chanced upon, that this stretch of coast had more than once been visited centuries ago by pillaging Norsemen.

The night was unfathomably clear and still. On our left rose the conical bluff of the headland crowned with the solitary grove of trees beneath which I had taken refuge from the blinding sunshine that very afternoon. Its grasses were now hoary with faintest moonlight. Far to the right stretched the flat cold plain of the Atlantic—that enormous darkened looking-glass of space; only a distant lightship ever and again stealthily signalling to us with a lean phosphoric finger from its outermost reaches.

The mere sense of that abysm of space—its waste powdered with the stars of the Milky Way; the mere presence of the stony leviathan on whose back we two humans now stood, dwarfed into insignificance beside these gesturing images of stone, were

enough of themselves to excite the imagination. And—whether matter-of-fact or pure delusion—this old ver[Pg 319]ger's insinuations that the cathedral was now menaced by some inconceivable danger and assault had set my nerves on edge. My feet were numb as the lead they stood upon; while the tips of my fingers tingled as if a powerful electric discharge were coursing through my body.

We moved gently on—the spare shape of the old man a few steps ahead, peering cautiously to right and left of him as we advanced. Once with a hasty gesture he drew me back and fixed his eyes for a full minute on a figure—at two removes—which was silhouetted at that moment against the starry emptiness: a forbidding thing enough, viewed in this vague luminosity, which seemed in spite of the unmoving stare that I fixed on it to be perceptibly stirring on its windworn pedestal.

But no; 'All's well!' the old man had mutely signalled to me, and we pushed on. Slowly and cautiously; indeed I had time to notice in passing that this particular figure held stretched in its right hand a bent bow, and was crowned with a high weather-worn stone coronet. One and all were frigid company. At last we completed our circuit of the tower, had come back to the place we had set out from, and stood eyeing one another like two conspirators in the clear dusk. Maybe there was a tinge of incredulity on my face.

'No, sir,' murmured the old man, 'I expected no other. The night is uncommonly quiet. I've noticed that before. They seem to leave us at peace on nights of quiet. We must turn in again and be getting home.'

Until that moment I had thought no more of where I was to sleep or to get food, nor had even realized how famished with hunger I was. Nevertheless, the notion of fumbling down again out of the open air into the narrow inward blackness of the walls from which we had just issued was singularly uninviting. Across these wide flat stretches of roof there was at least space for flight, and there were recesses for concealment. To gain a moment's respite, I inquired if I should have much[Pg 320] difficulty in getting a bed in the village. And as I had hoped, the old man himself offered me hospitality.

I thanked him; but still hesitated to follow, for at that moment I was trying to discover what peculiar effect of dusk and darkness a moment before had deceived me into the belief that some small animal—a dog, a spaniel I should have guessed—had suddenly and surreptitiously taken cover behind the stone buttress nearby. But that apparently had been a mere illusion. The creature, whatever it might be, was no barker at any rate. Nothing stirred now; and my companion seemed to have noticed nothing amiss.

'You were saying', I pressed him, 'that when repairs—restorations—of the building were in contemplation, even the experts were perplexed by what they discovered? What did they actually say?'

'Say, sir!' Our voices sounded as small and meaningless up here as those of grasshoppers in a noonday meadow. 'Examine that balustrade which you are leaning against at this minute. Look at that gnawing and fretting—that furrowing above the lead. All that is honest wear and tear—constant weathering of the mere elements, sir—rain and wind and snow and frost. That's honest *nature*-work, sir. But now compare it, if you please, with this St. Mark here; and remember, sir, these images were intended to be part and parcel of the fabric as you might say, sentries on a castle—symbols, you understand.'

I stooped close under the huge grey creature of stone until my eyes were scarcely more than six inches from its pedestal. And, unless the moon deceived me, I confess I could find not the slightest trace of fret or friction. Far from it. The stone had been grotesquely decorated in low relief with a gaping crocodile—a two-headed crocodile; and the angles, knubs and undulations of the creature were cut as sharp as with a knife in cheese. I drew back.

'Now cast your glance upwards, sir. Is that what you would call a saintly shape and gesture?'[Pg 321]

What appeared to represent an eagle was perched on the image's lifted wrist—an eagle resembling a vulture. The head beneath it was poised at an angle of defiance—its ears abnormally erected on the skull; the lean right forearm extended with pointing forefinger as if in derision. Its stony gaze was fixed upon the stars; its whole aspect was hostile, sinister and intimidating. I drew aside. The faintest puff of milk-warm air from over the sea stirred on my cheek.

'Ay, sir, and so with one or two of the rest of them,' the old man commented, as he watched me, 'there are other wills than the Almighty's.'

At this, the pent-up excitement within me broke bounds. This nebulous insinuatory talk!—I all but lost my temper. 'I can't, for the life of me, understand what you are saying,' I exclaimed in a voice that astonished me with its shrill volume of sound in that intense lofty quiet. 'One doesn't *repair* in order to destroy.'

The old man met me without flinching. 'No, sir? Say you so? And why not? Are there not two kinds of change in this world?—a building-up and a breaking-down? To give strength and endurance for evil or misguided purposes, would that be power wasted, if such was your aim? Why, sir, isn't that true even of the human mind and heart? We here are on the outskirts, I grant, but where would you expect the enemy to show himself unless in the outer defences? An institution may be beyond saving, sir: it may be being restored for a worse destruction. And a hundred trumpeting voices would make no difference when the faith and life within is tottering to its fall.'

Somehow, this muddle of metaphors reassured me. Obviously the old man's wits had worn a little thin: he was the victim of an intelligible but monstrous hallucination.

'And yet you are taking it for granted,' I expostulated, 'that, if what you say is true, a stranger could be of the slightest help. A visitor—mind you—who hasn't been inside the doors[Pg 322] of a church, except in search of what is old and obsolete, for years.'

The old man laid a trembling hand upon my sleeve. The folly of it—with my shoes hanging like ludicrous millstones round my neck!

'If you please, sir,' he pleaded, 'have a little patience with me. I'm preaching at nobody. I'm not even hinting that them outside the fold circumstantially speaking aren't of the flock. All in good time, sir; the Almighty's time. Maybe—with all due respect—it's from them within we have most to fear. And indeed, sir, believe an old man: I could never express the gratitude I feel. You have given me the occasion to unbosom myself, to make a clean breast, as they say. All Hallows is my earthly home, and—well, there, let us say no more. You couldn't *help me*—except only by your presence here. God alone knows who can!'

At that instant, a dull enormous rumble reverberated from within the building—as if a huge boulder or block of stone had been shifted or dislodged in the fabric; a peculiar grinding nerve-wracking sound. And for the fraction of a second the flags on which we stood seemed to tremble beneath our feet.

The fingers tightened on my arm. 'Come, sir; keep close; we must be gone at once' the quavering old voice whispered; 'we have stayed too long.'

But we emerged into the night at last without mishap. The little western door, above which the grinning head had welcomed me on my arrival, admitted us to *terra firma* again, and we made our way up a deep sandy track, bordered by clumps of hemp agrimony and fennel and hemlock, with viper's bugloss and sea-poppy blooming in the gentle dusk of night at our feet. We turned when we reached the summit of this sandy incline and looked back. All Hallows, vague and enormous, lay beneath us in its hollow, resembling some natural prehistoric outcrop of that sea-worn rock-bound coast; but strangely human and saturnine.[Pg 323]

The air was mild as milk—a pool of faintest sweetnesses—gorse, bracken, heather; and not a rumour disturbed its calm, except only the furtive and stertorous sighings of the tide. But far out to sea and beneath the horizon summer lightnings were now in idle play—flickering into the sky like the unfolding of a signal, planet to planet—then gone. That alone, and perhaps too this feeble moonlight glinting on the ancient glass, may have accounted for the faint vitreous glare that seemed ever and again to glitter across the windows of the northern transept far beneath us. And yet how easily deceived is the imagination. This old man's talk still echoing in my ear, I could have

vowed this was no reflection but the glow of some light shining fitfully from within outwards.

We paused together beside a flowering bush of fuchsia at the wicket-gate leading into his small square of country garden. 'You'll forgive me, sir, for mentioning it; but I make it a rule as far as possible to leave all my troubles and misgivings outside when I come home. My daughter is a widow, and not long in that sad condition, so I keep as happy a face as I can on things. And yet: well, sir, I wonder at times if—if a personal sacrifice isn't incumbent on them that have their object most at heart. I'd go out myself very willingly, sir, I can assure you, if there was any certainty in my mind that it would serve the cause. It would be little to me if——' He made no attempt to complete the sentence.

On my way to bed, that night, the old man led me in on tiptoe to show me his grandson. His daughter watched me intently as I stooped over the child's cot—with that bird-like solicitude which all mothers show in the presence of a stranger.

Her small son was of that fairness which almost suggests the unreal. He had flung back his bedclothes—as if innocence in this world needed no covering or defence—and lay at ease, the dews of sleep on lip, cheek, and forehead. He was breathing so quietly that not the least movement of shoulder or narrow breast was perceptible.[Pg 324]

'The lovely thing!' I muttered, staring at him. 'Where is he now, I wonder?' His mother lifted her face and smiled at me with a drowsy ecstatic happiness, then sighed.

And from out of the distance, there came the first prolonged whisper of a wind from over the sea. It was eleven by my watch, the storm after the long heat of the day seemed to be drifting inland; but All Hallows, apparently, had forgotten to wind its clock.

[Pg 325]

THE TRUMPET

'*For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel...*'
'*And he said...Am I my brother's keeper?*'

The minute church, obscurely lit by a full moon that had not yet found window-glass through which her direct beams could pierce into its gloaming, was deserted and silent. Not a sound, within or without, disturbed its stony quiet—except only the

insect-like rapid ticking of a clock in the vestry, and the low pulsating thump of a revolving cogwheel in the tower above the roof. Here and there a polished stone gleamed coldly in the vague luminous haze—a marble head, a wing-tip, a pointing finger, the claws and beak of the eagle on the brazen lectern, the two silvergilt candlesticks flanking the colourless waxen flowers upon the altar. So secret and secluded seemed the church within its nocturnal walls that living creature might never have been here at all—or creatures only so insignificant and transitory as to have left no perceptible trace behind them.

Like a cataleptic's countenance it hinted moreover at no inward activity of its own. And yet, if—fantastic notion—some unseen watcher through the bygone centuries had kept it perpetually within gaze, he might at last have concluded that it possessed a *sort* of stagnant life or animation, at least in its passive obedience to the influences of time, change,[Pg 326] decay, and the laws of gravitation. Now it revealed not the faintest symptom of it. If, on the other hand, any immaterial sentinel were still, as ever, on guard within it, he made no sign of his presence here.

Unhasteningly, like water dripping from a fateful urn, the thump-recorded moments ebbed away; and it was approaching midnight and first cockcrow when from beyond the thick stone chancel walls there came the sound of a stealthy footfall, crunching the rain-soaked gravel. An owl squawked, the footsteps ceased; and after a brief pause, began again. The groping rattle of a key in the wards of a lock followed, and presently—with a motion so slow that it was barely perceptible—the heavy curtain that hung over the entrance to the vestry began as if with an extreme caution to be drawn aside; and the slender cone-shaped rays from the thick glass of a small bull's-eye lantern—its radiance thinning into the dusk of the moonlight as it expanded in area—to funnel inquisitively to and fro.

The lantern-bearer himself now appeared—a small boy. His thick fair hair was tousled over a pale forehead, his mouth was ajar and his lips were drawn back a little above his teeth, his eyes gleamed as they moved. The collar of his dark greatcoat had been turned up about his ears, but nevertheless disclosed in the crevice between its lapels the stripes of his pyjama's jacket which had been tucked into a pair of old flannel breeches. Stockinged ankles and damp mud-stained rubber shoes showed beneath the greatcoat. His cheeks at this moment were so pale as scarcely to be tinged with red, and since the pupils of his blue eyes were dilated to their full extent they appeared to be all but jet-black. He was shivering, in part by reason of the cold, in part because of certain inward qualms and forebodings. Only by an effort was he preventing his teeth from beginning to chatter. Still acutely cautious and intent, his head thrust forward, his eyes searching the darker recesses of the building around him as they followed the direction of his tiny searchlight, he stole a pace or two for[Pg 327]ward, the border of the heavy curtain furtively swinging-to behind him. In spite of the door-key safe in his

pocket, he appeared to be divided in mind between hope and dread that he might prove to be not the sole occupant of the church.

Where there is space enough for the human cranium to pass, the shoulders, it is said, can follow; and particularly if they all three belong to a child. One small diamond-paned window in the vestry he had already observed was open. Images, too, less substantial in appearance than those of human beings were occupying his mind's eye. When then a little owl in the dark of the yew tree over the south gate in the moonlit churchyard again suddenly screeched, he started as if at an electric shock. And twice his mouth opened before he managed to call low and hoarsely, 'Are you there, Dick?... Dick, are you there?'

Not a stony eyelid in the heads around him had so much as flickered at this timid challenge. The stooping eagle—a large shut Bible on its outstretched wings—had stirred not a feather; the pulpit remained cavernously empty. But a few high-panelled pews, relics of the past, were within view, and even moonlight and lantern-light combined were powerless to reveal anything or anybody that might be hiding behind them. The trespasser appeared to be on the point of retiring as secretly as he had come, when a jangling gurgle, as of some monster muttering in its sleep, began to sound above his head, and the clock chimes rang out the second quarter of the hour. The vibrant metal ceased to hum; and, as if reassured by this interruption, he drew out of his pocket a large stone—a flint such as his remote ancestors would have coveted—roughly dumb-bell in shape, and now waisted with a thick and knotted length of old blindcord. This primitive weapon, long treasured for any emergency, he gently deposited on the shelf behind him, and then followed it into the pew.

Lantern still in hand, he seated himself on the flat faded red cushion that lay along the seat. It was that of one of the mighty, the rector's warden. Even in this half-light, as easily[Pg 328] as a cat in the dark, he could spy out all about him now, organ-recess to gallery; but he opened his brand-new lantern none the less and trimmed as best he could with his finger nail its charred and oily wick. The fume and stench of the hot metal made him sneeze, whereupon he clicked-to the glass, covered it with his hand, and began listening again. 'Sneak,' he muttered, then suddenly plumped down on the hassock at his feet, rapidly repeated a prayer, with a glance over his shoulder half-covertly crossed himself, then as promptly sat up again; glancing as he did so at the pulpit over his head which he was accustomed to find comfortably brimmed with his father's portly presence.

Fortified by his prayer and by his wrath with the friend who it seemed at the last moment had abandoned their enterprise, he was now comparatively at ease. Tortoise-fashion he snuggled down in his greatcoat in the corner of the pew, having discovered that by craning his neck a little he could fix his vacant eyes on the brilliant disc of the still-ascending moon.

She was the Hunter's moon, and her beams had now begun to silver a clear-glassed square-headed window high up in the south wall of the chancel. He watched her intently, lost in astonishment that at this very moment she should be keeping tryst with him here. But before she had edged far enough above the sill to greet the gilded figure of an angel that surmounted an ornate tomb opposite her peephole, a faint thief-like shuffle from the direction of the vestry door caught his ear. He instantly dropped out of sight into the shelter of his pew. The shuffling ceased, the door creaked. He crouched low; a smile at once apprehensive and malicious creasing his still-childish face. He would give his friend Dick a taste of his own physic.

In the hush, an anguished *Oh, oh, oh, oh!*—like the wailing of a lost soul, fountained up from his lips into the dusk of the roof. *Oh, oh, oh!* Then silence—and silence. And still there came no response. The smile faded out of his face; he had[Pg 329] begun to shiver again. He was positively certain that this must be the friend whom he was expecting. And yet—suppose it was not! He leapt up, flashing at the same instant his toy lantern full into the glittering eyes of a dwarfish and motionless shape which were fixed on him through the sockets of a pitch-black battered mask—a relic of the last Fifth of November.

He had realized what trick was being played on him almost before he had time to be afraid. Nevertheless, for a few moments, his mouth wide-open, he had failed to breathe; and stood shuddering with rage as well as terror. His friend Dick, however, having emerged from his lair in the folds of the curtain, was now plunging about half doubled-up and almost helpless with laughter.

'You silly fool!' he fumed at him in a whisper, 'what did you want to do that for? Shut up! Shut *up*, I tell you! You think it's funny, I suppose. Well, I don't. You're hours late already, and I'm going home. Stop it, do you hear? Can't you remember you're in a *church*?'

From beneath its mask a small sharp-nosed and utterly sober face now showed itself—all laughter gone. 'Who began it, then?' Dick expostulated, dejectedly squeezing his pasteboard mask into his pocket. 'You tried it first on me, with your Oh-oh-oh-ing. And now just because ... You didn't think of "church" then.'

'Well, I do now. Besides, it's near the time, and I might have broken my neck for all you cared, getting out of the window. What made you so late?'

Dick had been eyeing his friend as might a sorrowful mouse a slice of plum cake a few inches out of its reach. 'I'm sorry, Philip,' he said. 'I didn't mean any harm; honest, I didn't. It was only a lark.' He turned penitently away, and the next instant, as if all troubles were over and all discord pacified, began peeping about him with the movements and anglings of some little night-creature on unexpectedly finding itself in an utterly strange place.[Pg 330]

'I say, Philip,' he whispered, 'doesn't it look creepy, just—the moon shining in? I had a dream, and then I woke. But I couldn't have come before. My father was downstairs with a lamp, reading. Besides I was waiting for you *out*side, under the trees. Why did you come *in*? It's by the gate you see them. That's what my mother heard *your* mother say. Oh, I'm glad I came; aren't you?'

The sentences were sprayed out in minute beads of words like the hasty cadenzas of a bird. The neat black head, the small bright eyes, the shallow wall of close-cropped hair, the sloping shoulders—every line, movement and quick darting variation of posture gave him a resemblance to a bird—including the alert, quick, shy yet fearless spirit within that neat skull's brittle walls.

Philip, who had been intently watching him meanwhile, had now recovered his equanimity, his pulse had sobered down, but he was still only partially placated, and querulous.

'Of course I came in. What was the good of loafing out there where *any*body might see us? It's cold and mouldy enough in here. You don't seem to remember I mustn't go out at night, because of my chest. I've been waiting until my feet are like stones. Did you hear that owl just now—or something?'

Dick having at last ventured in from the other end of the pew, had now seated himself beside his friend on the flat crimson cushion.

'Golly!' he exclaimed, his sharp eyes now fixed on the flint, 'what's that for? I shouldn't care to have a crump over the head with that!' He peered up winningly into his companion's fair face. 'I didn't really expect you would come, Philip. But', he sighed, 'I'm glad.'

'Didn't I *say* I would come?' retorted Philip in a small condescending voice. 'That's nothing.' He nodded at his stone. 'I always carry that at night. How was I to know...? *Didn't* I?'

The neat small head nodded violently. 'M'm.'

'Then why didn't you expect me to?'[Pg 331]

'Oh, well, I didn't.' A thin ingratiating little smile passed over Dick's face and as quickly vanished. 'It wasn't so easy for you as it was for me. That's why.'

'That stone', said Philip incisively, 'keeps any harm from happening to me. It's got magic in it.'

'Has it, Philip?... What did *that*? He was eyeing the patch of dried blood on the hand that clutched the bent wire handle of the lantern.

'Oh, that?' was the lofty reply. 'That's nothing; that was only the rope. It burned like billy-ho, and I fell half-way from my bedroom window-sill on to the lawn. An awful crack. But nobody heard me, even though the other windows were wide open round the corner. You could see them against the sky. My mother always sleeps with her windows open—all the year round. A doctor in London told her it would be good for her. I don't believe that about your father reading, though. When everybody is in bed and asleep! I didn't even know your father *could* read.'

'Well, he was, or I wouldn't have said so. He was reading the Bible. How could I tell that if he wasn't reading at all?'

'Anyhow, I bet it wasn't the Bible. Even my father wouldn't do that—not after evening prayers. Would he whack you much if he caught you?'

Dick shook his head. 'No fear. My mother won't have *him* punishing me, whatever happens. He preaches at me no end; and says I'll never be good for anything. Once,' he added pensively, as if scarcely able to believe his own ears, 'once he said I was a little imp of hell. Then my mother flared up. But he wouldn't beat me; oh no, he wouldn't beat me. Yesterday my mother came back with a big bundle of old clothes. There was a black silk jacket, and some stockings and hats and feathers and things, an *enormous* bundle. And this—look!'

He undid a button of his jacket and pulled out from underneath it a pinch of an old green silk dressing-gown.

'Why, that's mine!' said Philip. 'I've had it for ages.' He[Pg 332] stared at it censoriously, as if dubious whether or not to ask for it back. 'But I don't think I want it now, because it's miles too small for me. My grandmother gave it me for a Christmas present donkey's years ago. She's so rich she doesn't mind *what* things cost—when she gives me anything. That's real Spitalfields silk, that is; you can't get it anywhere now. You'll crumple it up and spoil it if you wear it stuffed in like that.' He peered closer. 'What have you got on underneath it? You're all puffed out like a turkey-cock.'

Dick promptly edged back from the investigating finger, a sly look of confusion passing swiftly over his face. 'That's my other clothes,' he explained.

'What *I* say,' said Philip, still eyeing his companion as if only a constant vigilance could hope to detect what he might not be up to next, 'what *I* say is, your mother's jolly lucky to get expensive things given to her—good things, even if they *are* left-offs. Most of our old stuff goes to the Jumble Sales. I bet,' he suddenly broke off, 'I bet if your *real* father found you skulking here, he'd whack you hot and strong.'

The alert and supple body beside his own had suddenly stiffened, and the dangling spindle legs beneath the pew ceased to swing.

'No, he wouldn't,' Dick hardly more than whispered.

'Why not?'

'For one thing he just wouldn't. He knows he's nothing to do with me; not now; and leaves me alone. For all that, I went out rabbiting with him one night last summer. And nobody knew. It was warm and still and pitch-dark—not like this; and when the moon began to come up over the woods, he sent me home. I know *he* wouldn't either. Besides,' he drew in his chin a little as if the words were refusing to come out of his throat, 'he's dead.'

'Dead! Oh, I say! I like that! Oh no, he isn't; *that's* not true. *He* isn't dead. Why, I heard them reading out about him in the newspaper only a few weeks ago. That's what you *say*.[Pg 333] I know what has become of him; and I bet your tongue is burning. What's more, if your other father hadn't been Chapel you would never have had *any* father—not to show, I mean. Your mother would have been just like any other woman, though I don't suppose she could have gone on living in the village. But as he *is* Chapel, and, according to what you say, sits up as late as this reading in the Bible, I can't understand why he lets you sing in our choir. I call *that* a hypocrite. I'd like to see my father letting *me* go to Chapel. He must be just a hypocrite, Bible or not.'

Dick made no attempt whatever to examine this delicate moral question. 'Oh no, he isn't,' he retorted hotly. 'He's as good as yours any day. He goes by what my mother says: if you are Chapel, keep Chapel.*She's* not a hypocrite. And you'd better not say so, either.'

'I didn't say it. I didn't say that your mother was a hypocrite; not a *hypocrite*. I like your mother. And nobody's going to prevent me from going with you either, if I want to. Not if I want to. Your mother's been jolly decent to me—often. Mrs. Fuller sneaks: *she* doesn't.'

'So is your mother to me—when you aren't there. At least she talks to me sometimes then. And I'm glad you're my friend, Philip. The other day she gave me a hunch of cake, and she made me share a sip of wine from my mother's glass. Because it was her birthday. Some day I'm going to be a sailor, and going to sea. She had been crying, because her eyes were red; and *your* mother said that crying was no use at all—because I'm growing up more and more like her every day, and shall be a comfort to her when I'm a man. And so I will; you *see*!'

'"Wine"! Did she just? But that was only because she's always kind to people—to everybody. She doesn't mind *who* it is. That's why she likes being liked by everybody. But after what my father read out in the newspaper, he said he entreated her to be more careful. She must think of *him*, my father said.[Pg 334] He didn't want to have

the village people talking. He tapped his eyeglasses on the paper and said it was a standing scandal. That's what he said. He was purple in the face.' His voice rather suddenly fell silent, as if, like a dog, he had scented indiscretions. 'But I say: *if* your real father is just dead, he would be the very person according to you to be coming here to-night. *Then* you'd look mighty funny, I should think.'

Dick's legs, like opposed pendulums, had begun very sluggishly to swing again. 'Oh no, I wouldn't, because that's just what doesn't happen; and I told you so. It's the people who are going to die soon—next year—who come: *their* ghosts. Wouldn't they look white and awful, Philip, coming in under the yew tree.... I expect its roots go down all among the coffins. Shall we go out now and watch? It's as bright as day; you could see a bird hopping about.'

'"Ghosts"!' was the derisive reply. 'I like that! *You* can. I'm not. How can they be ghosts, silly, if they're still alive? Besides, even if there are such things, and even if what your mother told you is really true, you said yourself that they would come *into* the church. So if any *should* come and we keep here and hide and peep over the edge, they can't possibly see us—if ghosts do see. And then we shall be near the door in there. They would be surprised to find that one open, I should think. But even if they were, and ghosts don't mind doors, they wouldn't come in at a potty little door like that.'

He paused as if to listen, and continued more boldly. 'Not, mind you, that I believe a single word of anything you've said—all that stuff. Not really. I came...' he faltered, turning his head away, 'only just for a game, and because you dared me to. Why you asked me to come *really* is because you were frightened of being here alone. You wait and see, I'll dare *you* in a minute. Besides, how do you know anybody *is*going to die in the village next year—except old Mrs. Harrison? And she's been dying ever since I can remember. She takes snuff,[Pg 335] but she can't stir a foot out of her bed. I bet she hasn't any ghost left. *She*wouldn't come.' The sentence suddenly concluded in a prodigious shuddering yawn. It reminded him that he was cold and that the fatal moment was rapidly nearing. 'Did they say, before, or after, the clock strikes?'

Dick paused a moment before replying, and then piped up confidently: 'It's the very second while the last clump of the bell is sounding. That's when they get to the church. Because it's midnight. And all the ghosts begin to walk then. Some come up out of their graves. But'—he sighed, as if saddened at the poverty of his expectations—'only very seldom. The people who go to heaven wouldn't want to, and the Devil wouldn't let the others out. At least that's what I think.'

'What *you* think! And yet,' retorted Philip indignantly, 'you talk all that stuff about ghosts; and believe it too. I'd just like to see your ghost. That'd be a skinny one if you like—like a starved bird. Would *you* come back?'

Dick leant his body forward; he was sitting on his hands; and at this his black, close-cropped head nodded far more vigorously than a china Mandarin's. 'I don't *know*' he said; 'but I like being out at night. I like—oh, everything.... If ghosts can smell,' he began again in small matter-of-fact tones, 'they'd soon snuff *us* out. Look at it smoking.'

The two boys sat mute for a while, watching the tiny slender thread of sooty smoke from the lantern wreathing up in the luminous air; and in the silence—which, after their tongues had ceased chattering, immediately flooded the church fathoms deep—they stayed, listening; their senses avid for the faintest whisper. But the night was windless, and the earth coldly still in the deathly radiance of the moon. And if the Saints in their splendour were themselves assembled in the heavens to celebrate their earthly festival, no sound of their rejoicings reached these small pricked-up human ears.

'If,' at last Dick exploded, gazing up into the vaporous glooms of the roof above his head, 'if any more light comes[Pg 336] in, the walls will burst. I love the moon; I love the light.... *I*'m going to have a peep.'

With a galvanic wriggle he had snatched his arm free from Philip's grasp, had nimbly whipped out of the pew, and vanished behind the curtain that concealed the vestry door.

Philip shuffled uneasily in his seat, hesitating whether or not to follow him. But from a native indolence and for other motives, and in spite of his incredulity, he decided to stay where he was. It seemed safer than the churchyard. From a few loose jujubes in his greatcoat pocket he chose the cleanest, and sat quietly sucking, his eyes fixed on the monument that not only dominated but dwarfed the small but lovely chancel. The figure of its angel was now bathed with the silver of the moon. With long-toed feet at once clasping and spurning the orb beneath them, it stood erect, on high. Chin out-thrust, its steadfast sightless eyes were fixed upon the faded blue and geranium red of the panelled roof. Its braided locks drawn back from a serene and impassive visage, its left hand lay flat upon its breast, and with the right it clasped a tapering, uplifted, bell-mouthed, gilded trumpet, held firmly not against but at a little distance from its lips.

Unlike Dick, Philip was not a chorister. He was none the less his father's son, and as soon as he had learned to behave himself, to put his penny in the plate and to refrain from babbling aloud, he had been taken to church every Sunday morning. This had been as natural an accompaniment of the Sabbath as clean underclothes, Etons, and hot sausages for breakfast. Thus he had heard hundreds of his father's sermons—

sermons usually as simple as they were short. If only he had listened to them he might by now have become well-founded in dogma, a plain but four-square theologian. Instead of listening, however, he would usually sit 'thinking'. Side by side with his mother, his cheek all but brushing her silks, with their delicate odours, his fingers—rather clammy fingers when[Pg 337] the weather was hot—lightly clasping hers while he counted over and over the sharp-stoned rings on her dainty fingers, he had been wont to follow his fancies.

Morning service had been the general rule. During the last few years however his mother had become the victim of periodical sick headaches, of lassitude and palpitations, and had been given strict injunctions not to overdo things, to rest. Occasionally too she had worldly-minded visitors, including a highly unorthodox sister, whom it would be tactless even to attempt to persuade to spend her Sundays as, usually, she felt dutifully impelled to spend her own. All this she would confide to Philip. She must on no account, she repeatedly admonished him, be alarmed or worried, distressed or disturbed. As for his stout and rubicund father, who was at least ten years her senior, he adored every bone in her body. But though by nature placable and easy-going, he was also subject to outbursts of temper and fits of moroseness as periodical as her attacks of migraine. It was therefore prudent, if only for her sake, to avoid anything in the nature of a scene. 'So Philip,' she would cajole him, 'you will *promise* me to be a good boy, and you'll go to church this evening, won't you—instead of now? And you won't make any fuss about it? You know your father wishes it.'

Philip might demur, and, if it was practicable, bargain with her; but at heart he much preferred this arrangement. It meant that on these particular Sundays he was safe from interference, and could spend the whole morning as he pleased. It was too the darkening evenings about the time of the equinox, when it was not yet necessary to light the brass oil-lamps that hung in the nave, and two solitary candlesticks alone gleamed spangling in the pulpit—it was these he loved best. Only the village and farm people came to evening service, and not many even of them. Philip would sit in his pew, and, absorbed in his secret cogitations, enjoy the whole hour. The church changed then its very being. It welled over with mystery.[Pg 338] Even in the joy of a Harvest Festival, when he could admire the flowers and vegetables and the gigantic loaf of bread under the lectern, the bloom of grapes and apples, the minute sheaves of wheat and barley gently nodding their heads to the more impulsive strains of the organ, there was still a faint tinge of sadness. And the unheeded sermon drowsed his senses like an incantation. His father's honeyed pulpit voice rose and fell like that of some dulcet Old Man of the Sea; and he himself, though not, like Dick, sporting and whispering noiselessly with his surpliced choir-mates out of sight of the preacher, was at any rate beyond any direct scrutiny. Meanwhile the bulky family cook, his mother's usual proxy on these occasions, would settle down beside him into a state of apathy so

complete, her cotton-gloved hands convulsively clasped over her diaphragm, that it was only by an occasional sniff he could tell that she was perhaps leading as active an internal life as he was, and was neither asleep nor dead.

Now and then he had himself been wafted away in sleep into regions of the most exorbitant scenery, events and vagaries; to be aroused suddenly by, 'And now to God, the Father...', blear-eyed, lost, and with so violent a start that it had all but dislocated his neck. The most beguiling and habitual of these reveries had been concerned with the angel. How and when his speculations on it had originated, what random bird had dropped this extravagant seed of a hundred daydreams into his mind, was beyond discovery now. But it was to the cook that he had confided his first direct questions concerning it.

One low thundery evening, during their brief solitary journey through the churchyard into the hedged-in narrow lane by the coach-house and stables, and so through the garden and back to the rectory, he had managed to blurt out, 'Mrs. Sullivan, why did they make the angel so as she can't *blow* the trumpet?' And this although his mind had been busied over the wholly different and more advanced problem[Pg 339]—What exactly would happen if for any reason she ever did?

Until this moment Mrs. Sullivan had been unaware of the angel's perpetual predicament, and her attitude was cautious and tentative.

'I *expect*', she said, 'it was because they couldn't help themselves. Besides, Master Philip, what you are talking about isn't a real angel, no more than what her trumpet is a real trumpet. And who's to say if even a real angel could blow a trumpet that isn't real. I wouldn't care to go so far as that myself. Besides who's to know as she is a she?'

Here, in this darker quiet, under the thick-leaved ilexes, Philip always drew a little nearer to his stout and panting companion; and sometimes for reassurance slipped a hand under her elbow. Free again, and the stars visible in the autumn sky, he had ventured to protest.

'But *why* couldn't they? And of course it's a she. Besides it was *I* who said she can't. *I* told *you*. It's three inches at least from her mouth. Like this. I've measured it heaps and heaps of times.'

'"*Measured* it"' Master Philip! Well, that's a nice thing to be getting up to! All I can say is if that's the kind of mischief you are after I don't know what your father wouldn't say.'

'I didn't mean *really*,' was the impatient reply. 'How could I? I meant by looking, of course. How *could* I mean "really"?' There was scorn in his voice, even though his question had fallen like a hint from heaven into the quiet of his mind.

'If it's just guessing,' Mrs. Sullivan had complacently decided, 'I wouldn't suppose it could be *three*. And, though *your* young eyes may be better than mine, it might be no more than just a shadow.... It looks as if it had been raining, according to all these puddles.'

Philip had paid no attention to the puddles, except that he had continued to enjoy quietly walking through them. 'But[Pg 340] you said just now,' he persisted, 'that you'd never even seen the angel. So how can you possibly tell? Anyhow, it *is* three, it's more than three, it's more likely four or five. You don't seem to remember how far she is up under the roof. Why, the end of her trumpet nearly touches the ceiling. *I* think that was silly. *Why* didn't they?'

They were drifting back to his original riddle again. But Mrs. Sullivan, reminded of another kind of trumpet, was meditating vaguely at this moment on a deaf bedridden sister who lived in the Midlands. 'I never knew a boy with so many questions,' she answered him ruminatively, almost as if she were explaining the situation to a third party. 'I suppose it's because the Last Day hasn't risen on us as yet. That at least is what it was meant to mean for the gentleman that's laid in the tomb beneath it—and for all of us for that matter. God send it never may!'

'You mean *you* think *she* is waiting for the Last Day? I don't know what you mean by "never". There must be *a* Last Day, and that would be *the* Last Day. And if she's waiting for that, what will happen then—*after* the last?'

'Well, Master Philip, if you are the son of your own father, which I take you to be, you should best be able to answer that question for yourself. I don't hold with such pryings. It's far from ready *I'm* likely to be.'

'Why not?'

'Because', said Mrs. Sullivan, 'I'm getting old, and time is not what it was. When I was a young girl I nearly brooded all the blood out of my body thinking of things like that; though you might not suppose so now. Not that the young should or need be doing so, though I'm not saying there's no need even for *them* not to mind their p's and q's. There is.'

'What are p's and q's?'

But this tepid and lifeless inquiry might have been borne on the winds of Arabia, it seemed so far away.

'Goodness gracious, you've got a tongue like an empty[Pg 341] money-box. I see your mamma has gone to bed. Let's hope her sick headache is no worse. And here comes the Rector.'

Philip had accepted Mrs. Sullivan's complex solution of his difficulty with reservations, and had pondered continually on parts of it. After that, apart perhaps from a stray dog or bird, or a strange human face, nothing in church, or in the scriptures, not even Jezebel or the Scarlet Woman, or Gideon, or Og, or Samson's foxes in the wheat, or golden Absalom hanging in the oak tree, or hairy Esau with his mess of pottage, or Elisha and the widow's cruse—nothing had so instantly galvanized him into a rapt attention as the least word he heard uttered about an angel or a trumpet. He had even taken to searching the Bible on his own account to satisfy his craving.

To-night, none the less, was the first time he had ever been alone with his angel—wholly alone. And he had risked a good deal for her sake—a caning from his father; a break-neck fall from his bedroom window if the clothes-line had proved as rotten as it looked; a scurry, heart in mouth, through the fusty dark of the shrubbery; and the possibility, far more affrighting than he had confessed, of strange meetings at the lych gate. Besides there was the humiliation of having been beguiled into this crazy expedition by a friend who was frowned at if not forbidden, and who was not only one of the 'village boys', but clouded and compromised at that.

It was a companionship that fretted Philip at times almost beyond bearing, but from which he could not contrive to break free. Scrubbed and polished Dick might be, but he never *looked* clean. He could be stupider than an owl, and yet was as sharp and quick as a pygmy sparrow-hawk, and feared nothing and nobody. Sometimes even the mere sight of his intent, small-nosed face, and its dark eyes, now darting with life and eagerness, now laden with an inscrutable melancholy; of his very hands, even—small and quick, and his tiny pointed[Pg 342] ears filled Philip with an acute distaste. Yet there was a curious and continual fascination in his company.

He was like a mysterious and unintelligible little animal, past caging or taming, and possessed of a spirit of whose secret presence he himself was completely unaware. Contrariwise, he could be as demure, submissive and affectionate as a little girl, and it was past all hope to discover where his small mind was ranging. Philip admired, despised, was jealous of, and sometimes bitterly hated him.

Why, he wondered, did his father always become so flustered and unreasonable at the mere mention of his name; or why his mother either, for that matter? If an unexpected tradesman's bill from London or the county town accompanied his *Morning Post*, why was the heated discussion of this particular topic almost bound sooner or later to follow? First 'words'—and these of a steadily densening drift; a desultory wrangle; but

at last his mother, flaming with anger, in tears, would flare up like a loose heap of gunpowder, and his father would subside into a sulky and cowed acquiescence.

Even if Dick was *not* the son of the sober and crusted old wheelwright at the other end of the village, what did that matter? And if Dick's mother *was* so close a confidante of his own mother, what did that? Wasn't there every reason why she should be? Only a few years before this, she had been parlourmaid at the Rectory, a quiet, fair, meditative creature. And then all of a sudden she had left and got married. But she was still the best 'help' in the house imaginable. No one could wait at table so deftly and sedately as she could; and not even Philip's indolent and elegant mother was such a marvel with her needle. And yet she was so quiet and so far-away that when suddenly spoken to she would start and flush as if she had but just come out of some secret hiding-place.

It was only the spiteful new cook, Mrs. Sullivan's successor, who had steadily refused to be won over; and Philip hated *her* anyhow. His father, on the other hand, took no more notice[Pg 343] of Dick when he passed him by in the Rectory garden than if he had been a toadstool.

It was a mystery. If ever on any rare feast or festival, there was a solo to be sung in the minute village choir, it was Dick who sang it—'As pants the hart', 'With verdure clad'—and as roundly and sweetly and passionlessly as the strains of some small woodland flute. His voice at any rate would need no angelic tuition—even in a better world. Nevertheless, although the Rector had been known to boast of the prowess of his choir, Philip could not recall a single word of commendation from his father after the service was over, not even so much as a pompous little pat on the head. So far as *he* was concerned, Dick might have been a deaf-mute.

Yet if nuts, or peppermints, or marbles, or a grasshopper, or a glow-worm in a matchbox were brought into church for furtive display, and Dick was discovered to be the culprit, very little happened. Other boys when they were caught were given a good lecture in the Rector's study, and one runagate far less enterprising than Dick had been expelled from the choir.

However closely he listened, Philip could never unravel the secret of this mystery. Even when he most enjoyed Dick's company, he could never for a moment conceal his own sense of superiority. At one moment he might be green with envy of Dick's silly, dare-devil, scatter-brained ways; at the next utterly despise him. There was a perpetual conflict in his mind between affection, jealousy and contempt. And Dick would detect these secret feelings, as they were expressed solely in his face and actions, as neatly and quickly as a robin pecks up crumbs. Yet he never referred to them, or for more than a minute or two together seemed to resent a single one.

Just now, however, his protective stone and the increasing stench of his lantern unheeded, Philip had all but forgotten what had brought him into his present extraordinary situation. Like the restless imp he always was, Dick had taken himself off. Let him stay away, then! Meanwhile he had himself sat[Pg 344] stolidly on, lost in contemplation, the prey of the most fantastic and ridiculous hopes and forebodings.

The church was brimmed so full of limpid moonlight that at any moment, it seemed, the stone walls, the pulpit, the roof itself might vanish away like the fabric of a dream. Its contents appeared to have no more reality than the reflections in a glass. Every crevice in the mouldings of the arches, every sunken flower and leaf in the mullions of the windows, even the knot in the wood of the pew beneath his nose stood out as if it had been blacked in with Indian ink. Every jut and angle, corbel and finial, marble nose and toe and finger seemed to have been dipped in quicksilver. And Philip, his eyes fixed on the faintly-golden, winged, ecstatic figure—mutely 'shaking her gilded tresses in the air'—whose gaze he pined and yet feared even in imagination to meet, was lost for the time being to the world of the actual. He failed even to notice urgent reminders that one of his legs from knee to foot had gone numb, and that he was stone-cold.

The premonitory whirring rumble of the clock over his head and the chimes of midnight roused him at last from this lethargy. He 'came to', and listened starkly to the muffled, sullen booming of the bell, as if he had suddenly escaped from the mazes of a dream. '...Eleven... Twelve'. The sonorous vibrations ebbed into inaudibility, and a dead and empty silence again prevailed. He had steadily assured himself, from the moment the project had been decided on, that nothing would happen. Nothing *had* happened. He felt spiritless and vacant, and now realized miserably that in spite of this radiance and beauty, he was further away from his angel than he had ever been before. It was she who had withdrawn herself from him, and with that withdrawal a faltering speechless faith and belief in her had almost faded out of his heart.

And as he crouched there, chilled and sick, there rose suddenly into the night beyond the chancel windows a restrained[Pg 345] yet fiendish screech, compared with which his own *Oh, oh, oh,* had been sweet as the lamentations of a mermaid. Even though he had instantly guessed its origin, he sat appalled. His eyes fixed on the heavy folds of the curtain that had softly swayed forward as if in a waft of the wind through the open door, he had in his horror almost ceased to breathe. What if he were mistaken? What ghoulish wraith might *not* be skulking there! All but indetectably the curtain was edging apart to disclose at length a lean faceless shape draped as if with a shroud from

its flat-topped shapeless and featureless head downwards. Even in his consternation he marvelled at the delicate play of the moonlight in the folds of the cambric. With pointing sooty finger, this ridiculous scarecrow had now begun noiselessly edging towards his pew. The effort to prevent a yell of terror from escaping his throat had brought the taste of blood to Philip's lip; and he at once fell into a violent passion.

'You're nothing but a damn silly little fathead,' he bawled, as it were, under his breath, 'and it would serve you jolly well right if I gave you a good licking. Stop that rot! Stop it! Come *out*! I say!'

The spectre, notwithstanding had fallen into a solemn yet nimble negro shuffle and a voice out of its middle began to intone:

> *Dearly beloved brethren, is it not a sin*
> *To eat raw potatoes and throw away the skin?*
> *The skin feeds the pigs and the pigs feed you;*
> *Dearly beloved brethren, is—it—not—*TRUE?

Pat with the last word, and having flung off the Rector's surplice and discarded the semi-hairless broom of the old church charwoman, Dick edged out of his disguise, looking smaller and skinnier than ever. Then it was as if his high spirits, having learned that the same jest is seldom successful twice, had been crushed out of him for good by this last rebuke. He stood dumbly staring at Philip, like a stricken and downcast little monkey that has been chastised by its master.[Pg 346]

'Keep your silly wig on,' he expostulated at last. 'That's what you always do. You can't take any joke unless you've made it yourself. I'm tired of being here. There's nothing coming—and there never was. Perhaps if you had been alone...' Unstable as water, his mood began to revive again. '*I* know! Let's go down to the mill-pond, Philip, and look at the fish. The moon's like glass. You could catch 'em with your hands with that lantern. Let's try. Come on.'

'Oh no, you don't,' retorted Philip morosely. 'You needn't suppose you're going to wriggle out like that. You dared me to come, and I dare *you* to stay. Anyhow, you shan't put your nose ever into our house again or into the garden, either, I can promise you, if you're nothing but a sneak—and afraid. I know something that will soon put a stop to that.'

Dick stood irresolute, eyeing him sharply, his high cheekbones a bright red, his eyes shining, his mouth ajar.

'I'm not a sneak. And who'—a doleful quaver jarred his thin clear treble voice—'who *wants* to come into your silly old garden. If my mother...Besides, you *know* I'm not afraid!'

'Oh, do I!' A crafty stealthy designing look had crept into Philip's fair face, and a slight haze into his blue eyes. A faint ambiguous smile faded out of his angel features. He glanced covertly about him. 'What's more likely is you only want to show off,' he sneered. 'Wheedle.' He half yawned. 'You know perfectly well that I shouldn't be here now except for some silly story you told me and couldn't have understood. Dare for yourself! Why, you haven't even the pluck to climb up into the belfry and give the least tiny ding on one of the bells. Not all alone.'

'Oh, wouldn't I! Yes, I would. Where's the key? There's an old owl's nest in the belfry.... "*One!*"—why, even if anybody in the village woke and heard it, they'd think it was nothing but the wind.'

'Well, *three* dings, then. Anybody can make excuses. And[Pg 347] you knew I haven't the key! What's more, you wouldn't take a single flower, not even a scrap of a green leaf, from one of those vases up there.'

Dick's gaze angled swiftly over the silver candlesticks upon the altar, the snow-white linen, the rich silk embroidered frontal, with its design in gold thread—I.H.S., the flat hueless shields of hot-house flowers. 'Yes, I would, if I can reach them.'

'Oh, would you! And there you are again—"*if!*" But you shan't—not while *I'm* here. That would be worse than stealing even, because this is a church, and that's the altar. And that's holy. This is not one of your mouldy old chapels.' Once again he glanced about him. 'I bet this, then. You wouldn't go up into the gallery and scratch out the eye in *that*—not even if I lent you my knife to do it with. Why, you'd be scared even of falling off the chair!'

The 'that' he was referring to was an ancient painted lozenge-shaped hatchment, fastened by tenpenny nails in its clumsy black frame to the lime-washed western wall. It was blazoned with a coat of arms, and above the coat was a crest—the turbaned head of a Saracen in profile; and beneath the coat, in bold Gothic lettering, the one word, *Resurgam*.

Dick gazed motionlessly at its darkened green and vermilion and at the tilted head. 'Yes, I would,' he muttered. 'What does *Resurgam* mean?'

'It's Latin,' replied Philip, as if he were a little mollified by the modesty of the inquiry. 'And it means, *I shall rise up again*. But it *might* be the subjunctive. It's what's called a motto, and the head's the crest, and the body's down in the vault. I expect he was a crusader. Anyhow, *any*body could do that; because you know very well it mightn't be noticed for ages. Never, p'raps. Besides, what's the use?... I'll give you a last chance. I'll tell you what you *wouldn't* do, not if you stayed here for a month of Sundays, and not a single soul came into the church to see you!'[Pg 348]

His cheek had crimsoned. He nodded his head violently. 'You wouldn't climb up that, and—and blow that trumpet.'

Dick wheeled about, lifting his dark squirrel-bright eyes as he did so towards the Angel, and looked. He continued to look: the angel at this moment of its nightly vigil, though already the hand that clasped the trumpet had lost its silver, seemed with an ineffable yearning as if about to leap into a cataract of moonlight, like a siren erecting her green-haired head and shoulders out of a rippleless sea to scan the shore.

'You *said*, what would be the use?' he protested at last in a small, scarcely audible voice, and without turning his head. 'Even if I did, no one would hear.... Why do you *want* me to?'

'*Who* "wants" you to!' came the mocking challenge. 'You asked me to give you a dare. And now—what did I say! Shouldn't *I* hear? I don't believe you've ever even looked at it, not even *seen* it before!'

'Oh, haven't I!' Dick faltered. 'You say that only because on Sundays I don't sit on your side. And what's the use? Staring up gives you a crick in the neck. But it's not because I am afraid.... Besides, she's only made of stone.' In spite of this disparagement he continued to gaze at the angel.

'*Is* she then! Stone! That's all you know about it. She's made of wood, silly. How could she be that colour if it were marble or even *any* stone? Anybody could see that! And even if she *is* only wood, there are people all over the world who worship idols and—and images. I don't mean just savages either. If she'—for an instant his eyes shut and revolved beneath their pale rounded lids—'if she or anybody else was to blow through that trumpet, it would be the Last Day. I say it, and I *know*. Even if your father has ever heard of angels, I bet he doesn't believe in them. I'm *sure* he doesn't. My father does believe in them, though. And if you had ever really listened to what he reads out about them in the Lessons you'd know too. *I—have.*'[Pg 349]

He sat for a moment, torpid as a spider engaged in digesting or contemplating a visitor to its nets. Dick's small, alert, yet guileless face was still turned away from him, upwards and sidelong. As one may put one's ear to a minute device in clockwork and listen to the wheels within going round, the very thoughts in his cropped, compact head seemed audible. And then, as if after a sudden decision to dismiss the subject from his mind, Philip casually picked up his bull's-eye lantern, idly twisted its penthouse top, and directed first a greenish, then a thin red beam of light towards the lustrous monument. But the moon made mock of this trivial rivalry.

'What,' was Dick's husky inquiry at last, 'what *does* the Bible say about angels? It must be a lovely place where they are, Philip.'

Philip ignored the sentimental comment. 'Oh, heaps of things. I couldn't tell you; not half of them, not a quarter.' A mild, absent-minded, almost hypnotic expression now veiled his pale cold features. He began again as though he were repeating a lesson, in tones low yet so confident that the whole church could easily play eavesdropper to his every word. Nevertheless the sentences followed one another tardily and piecemeal, as if, like a writer of books, he could not wholly trust his faculties, as though words and ideas were stubborn things to set in order and be made even so much as to hint at what was pent up in his mind.

'Well, first there was St. Paul; he went to a man's house who had *seen* an angel. Then there was the angel who came to tell his mother about Samuel, when she was sitting alone sewing in her bedroom.... And there was the angel that spoke to a man called Lot before he came out of a place called Sodom that was burned in the desert and his wife was turned into a pillar of salt. Because she turned back. Oh, heaps! *You*seem to suppose that because people can't see them now, there never were angels. What about the sea-serpent, then; and what about[Pg 350] witches? And what about the stars millions and billions of miles out in space, and mites and germs and all that, so teeny-tiny *no*body ever saw them until microscopes and telescopes were invented? I've looked through a microscope, so I know.'

Dick nodded vacantly. 'If people can *see* them,' he admitted, 'there must be sea-serpents. And I *have* seen a witch. There's one lives in Colney Bottom, and everybody says she's a witch. She's humpty-backed, with straggly grey hair all over her shoulders. I crept in through the trees once and she was in her garden digging potatoes. At least I *think* it was potatoes. She was talking; but there was nobody there and it wasn't to *me*. But you were telling me about the angels, Philip. Won't you go on?'

'"Go on"!' echoed Philip in derision, and began again fumbling with his lantern. 'Good heavens, you don't expect me to tell you half the Bible, do you? Why don't you listen? I don't believe you've any more brains than a parrot. "Go on"! Why, *everybody* has heard of the angel that when Moses was with his sheep called to him out of the middle of the burning bramble bush on the mountains. Its leaves and branches were all crackling with flames. That's another. And when Elijah was once lying asleep in the desert under a juniper tree an angel came in the morning and touched him to wake him because he had brought him some cake, and some fresh water to drink. That,' he pondered a moment or two, 'that was before the ravens. And I suppose you've never even heard of Joshua either? He was a captain of Israel. And when he was standing dressed in his armour on the sand, with his naked sword in his hand, and looking at the enormous walls of Jericho, he saw an angel there beside him, in armour too, just

as you might see a man in a wood at night. They stood there together looking at the *enormous* walls of Jericho. But you couldn't see them very plainly because it was getting dark, and there weren't any lamps or lights in the houses. So nobody inside knew that they were there, not even the woman who[Pg 351] had talked to the two spies who had stolen the bunches of grapes.'

Philip, unperceived, had quickly and suddenly glanced at his friend, who, his face wholly at peace, had meanwhile been emptily watching the coloured lights succeeding one another in the round, glass, owl-like eye of the toy lantern.

'I should like to see an angel,' he said.

'Oh, would you? Then that's all you know about it. There are thousands upon thousands of them, most of them miles taller than any giant there ever was and others no bigger than—than ordinary. Not all of them have only two wings either; some of them have six—here, and here, and here; with two they fly and with two they cover their faces when they are asleep. And they have names too; else God wouldn't be able to call them. But don't you go and think they are like *us*; because they aren't. They are more like demons or ghosts—real ghosts, I mean, not the kind *you* were talking about. And I don't believe either that just because anything is made of wood or stone, it hasn't any life at all—not at *all*. Even savages couldn't be as stupid as all that. You only *think* you could touch angels. But you couldn't. And some angels, though I don't know even myself if they are most like women or men'—his voice ebbed away almost into a whisper, like that of a child murmuring in its sleep, as if he were not only nearing the end of his resources, but was losing himself in the rapture of some ineffable vision in his mind—'some angels are far far more beautiful to look at than any woman, even the most beautiful woman there ever was. And even than—*that*!'

Yet again Dick lifted his intense small eyes towards the image. It had, it seemed, as if in an instant, returned to an appearance of mute immobility; but only in the nick of time, to elude his silent questioning.

'I shouldn't mind any angel,' he said, 'if it were only like that. Not *mind*, I mean. If she *looked* at me, perhaps I might. She's like Rebecca, the girl that lives up at the farm. My[Pg 352] mother taught me a hymn once to say when I am in bed. I can't remember the beginning now, but some of it I can:

Four corners to my bed;
Four angels round my head:
One to bless, and one to pray,
And one to bear my soul away....

If you are not afraid, she says, not anywhere, ever, *nothing* can do anything against you.'

'Oh, they can't, can't they! That just shows all *you* know about it. Besides, what you've been saying is only a rhyme for children. It's only a rhyme. My nurse told me that ages ago. Those angels are only one kind. Why, there are angels so enormously strong that if one of them no more than touched even the roof of this church with the tip of his finger it would crumble away into dust. Like that'—he firmly placed his own small forefinger on the dried-up corpse of a tiny money-spider that had long since expired in the corner of the pew—'absolutely into dust. And their voices are as loud as thunder, so that when one speaks to another, the sound of their shouting sweeps clean across the sky. And some fly up out of the sea, out of the East, when the sun rises; and some come up out of a huge frightful pit. And some come up out of the water, deep dangerous lakes and great rivers, and they stand on the water, and can *fly*—straight across, as if it was lightning, from one edge of the world to the other—like tremendous birds. I should jolly well like to see what a pilot of an aeroplane would do at the edge of the night if he met one. They can'—he bent forward a little, his pale face now faintly greened with his own lantern—'they can see without looking; and they stay still, like great carved stones, in a light—why, this moon wouldn't be even a candle to it!

'And some day they will pour awful things out of vials down on the earth and reap with gigantic sickles not just ordinary corn, but men and women. Men and women. And[Pg 353] besides the sea,' his rather colourless eyes had brightened, his cheeks had taken on a gentle flush, his nervous fingers were clasping and unclasping themselves over the warm metal of his lantern, 'and besides the sea, they can stand and live exulting in the sun. But on the earth here they are invisible, at least *now*, except when they come in dreams. Besides, everybody has two angels; though they never get married, and so there are never any children angels. They are called cherubs. And I know this too—you can tell they are there even when you cannot see them. You can hear them listening. If *they* have charge of you, nothing can hurt you, not the rocks—nor the ice—not even of the highest mountains. And that was why the angel spoke to Balaam's donkey when they were on the mountain pass, because he wished not to frighten him; and the donkey answered. But if you were cursed by one for wickedness, then you would wither up and die like a gnat, or have awful pains, and everything inside of you would melt away like water. And don't forget either that the devil has crowds of angels under his command who were thrown out of heaven millions of years ago, long before Adam and Eve. They are as proud as he is, and they live in hell.... They are awful.'

It was doubtful if Dick had been really attending to this prolonged, halting, almost monotoned harangue; his face at any rate suggested that his thoughts had journeyed off on a remote and marvelling errand of their own.

'Well,' he ventured at last, with a profound half-stifled sigh, 'I *would* climb it anyway. And not because you dared me to, either. Even *you* couldn't say what I might not see up there.'

He tiptoed a pace or two nearer the shallow altar steps and again fixed his eyes on his quarry. 'What about the trumpet?' he suddenly inquired, with a ring of triumph in his voice, as if he had at last managed to corner his learned friend. 'The trumpet? You didn't say a single word about the trumpet.'[Pg 354]

'Well, what if I didn't?' was the flat acrimonious answer. 'I can't say two things at once, can I? You don't know *any*thing. And that is simply because you never pay any attention. You're just like a fly buzzing about among the plates seeing what you can pick up. I don't suppose, if I asked you even now, you could tell me a single word of *all* that I've been saying!'

Dick turned, glancing a little sadly and wistfully at his friend. 'I could, Philip. At least, I think I could. Besides flies do settle sometimes; I suppose then they are asleep.'

'Oh, well, anyhow,' replied Philip coldly, 'I don't think I want to. But I could if I had the time.' He sighed. 'You don't even seem to understand there are so many *kinds* of trumpets. You don't seem ever to have heard even of Gideon's trumpets. Some are made of brass and some are silver and some are great shells and some are made out of sheep's horns, rams'. And in the old days, ages ago, war-horses loved the sound of trumpets—I don't mean just men going hunting. It made them laugh and prance, with all their teeth showing. "*Ha-ha!*"—like that. Simply maddened to go into battle. And besides, clergymen, priests they were called in those days, used to have trumpets, but that was ages before Henry VIII. And they used to blow them, like that one, up there, when there was a new moon; and when,' he glanced sidelong, his eyelids drooping a little furtively over his full eyes, and his voice fell to a mumble, 'and when there was a *full* moon too. And at the end there will be incense, and dreadful hail, and fire, and scorpions with claws like huge poisonous spiders. And there's a Star called Wormwood; and there will be thousands and thousands of men riding on horses with heads like lions....' He fell silent and sat fumbling for a few moments. 'But I wasn't really going to talk about all that. It's only because *I* have listened. And it's just what I've said already, and I know the very words too.' He nodded slowly as if he were bent on imparting a deathless and invaluable secret: '"The[Pg 355] trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised." Those are the very words. And *I* see what they mean.'

Dick had meanwhile become perfectly still, as if some inward self were lost in a strange land. He appeared to be profoundly pondering these matters. 'And supposing,' he muttered at length, as though like the prophet he had swallowed Philip's little book and it were sweet as honey, 'supposing *nothing* happens, Philip? If I do? Perhaps *that* trumpet is only solid wood all through. Then it wouldn't make *any* sound.

Then you would only burst your cheeks, trying. Wouldn't it be funny—if I burst my cheeks, trying!'

'That,' replied Philip, disdaining the suggestion, 'that would only mean that it isn't really a trumpet. But you wouldn't even be *thinking* of that if you weren't too frightened to try. You're only talking.'

'*You* wouldn't.'

'I like that!' cried Philip, as if in a brief ecstasy. 'Oh, I like that! Who *thought* of the angel, may I ask? Who *asked* to be dared? Besides, as I have said again and again, this is my father's church; and chapel people don't believe in angels. They don't believe in anything that really matters.'

'You can say what you like about chapel people,' said Dick stubbornly, his eyes shining like some dangerous little animal's that has been caught in a snare. 'But I'm *not* afeard even if you won't go yourself.'

'Oh, well'—a cold and unforeseen fit of anxiety had stolen into Philip's mind as he sat staring at his friend. 'I don't care. Come on, let's clear out of this, I say. You can *try* if you want to, but I'm not going to*watch*. So don't get blaming anything on to me. It's nothing to do with me. That's just what you always do. You're a silly little weathercock. First, yes; then, no.'

Cramped and spiritless, he had got down from his pew and, as if absent-mindedly, had pushed his magic dumb-bell flint into his greatcoat pocket and shut off the light of his lantern.[Pg 356] The moonlight, which a few moments before, from pavement to arching roof, had suffused the small church through and through, had begun to thin away into a delicate dusk again; and at the withdrawal even of the tiny coloured lights of the lantern, its pallor on the zigzag-fretted walls and squat thick stone shafts of the piers had become colder. Moreover the quietude around them had at once immeasurably deepened again now that the two boys' idle chirruping voices were stilled.

Philip took up the lantern, and looked at his friend. A curious, crooked, scornful alarm showed on his own delicate features. But it was the scorn in it that his ardent, undersized and peeping devotee had detected most clearly. His intensely dark eyes were searching Philip's face with an astonishing rapidity.

'You said, "blaming",' he half entreated. 'And did I ever? I—I... Haven't I always shown that we—I...! It's only because I didn't think anything might happen. But I'm

not afeard, whatever you may think. Besides, you asked me, Philip. And anything—*any*thing you asked me.... So it couldn't be *only* a dare.'

Like a cork on a shallow stream that has come momentarily to rest in the midst of rippling and conflicting currents, Philip stood motionless, his pondering eyes intent on the young adventurer whom he had at last decoyed into action. A faintly apprehensive, faintly melancholy expression had now crept into his features. The cold detaining fingers he had thrust out of his coat-sleeve fell slackly to his side again. For Dick had already straddled over the thick red plaited cord that dangled between nave and chancel, disclosing as he did so a frayed gaping hole in the canvas of one of his shoes. Their rubber soles made not the faintest sound as he trod lightly over the thick Persian rug and the stone slabs towards the great monument in the further corner, only a few paces from the altar.[Pg 357]

It was a monument constructed of many ornate marbles, and these supplied cold couch and canopy for the effigy in alabaster of a worthy knight who, as its inscription declared, had long ago surrendered the joys and sorrows of this world. He reposed, rather uneasily, on his left elbow; his attire, ruff and hose, not less decorative and rococo than the wreathings and carvings, the cherubs and pilasters of his tomb. But like an Oriental bed in a small English bedroom, the tomb was a size or two too large for the church.

Until this moment Philip had not fully realized its loftiness, and how angularly its pinnacles soared up under the roof. Dark and dwarfed against the whiteness of its marble, Dick had now begun to climb. But he had mounted only a few feet from the ground when Philip noticed that the moon had now abandoned the carved ringlets, the rounded cheeks, the upturned sightless face of his angel. Though her pinions and feet were still chequered with its silvering beams, her trump now lifted its mouth into a cold and sullen gloom. An unendurable misgiving had begun to stir in him.

'The moon's gone, Dick,' he whispered across. 'What's the good? Come down!'

'I say,' came the muffled but elated answer, 'the ledges are simply thick with dust, and don't they just cut into the soles of your feet. I can't hear what you're saying.'

'I said,' repeated Philip, still patiently, 'come down!' But he might as well have been pleading with the angel itself. There came no response. 'Dick, Dick,' he reiterated, 'I said, Come down! Oh, I'm going.' In a sudden fever he pushed his way under the curtain into the vestry and vanished. But it was only a ruse. He came flying back in a few moments as if in utter consternation.

'Quick, Dick; quick, I say!' he all but shouted. 'Come down! There's someone, something *coming*. It isn't a man and it isn't a woman. Quick! It won't be a minute before it's in the church. Oh you silly, silly fool! I tell you there's someone

coming!'[Pg 358] His voice broke away into a sob of bewilderment, rage, apprehension and despair. 'My God,' he called, 'I'll tell my father of this! You see if I don't.'

But the snail-slow groping figure, still radiantly lit with the moon's downcast beams as it continued to scale the monument, was far too much engrossed in its mission to pay any attention to him now, and hardly paused until with a small, black, broken-nailed hand it had securely clasped the angel's foot. 'I'm nearly up, Philip,' he called down at last. 'Look! *Look*, where I am! I'm even with the gallery now, and can hardly see because of the dazzle. It's cold and still and awful, but oh, *peace*ful; and I can see into the moon. The angel's lovely too, close to, but much, much bigger. Supposing I blow with all my might and the trumpet doesn't sound? It won't be my fault, will it? And we will still keep friends, always, won't we, Philip?'

'Oh, you fool, you idiot crock fool,' called Philip hoarsely. 'Didn't I *tell* you, didn't I tell you, what might come to *every*body?...And you believed it! Oh, it was all a story, a lie, a story. Dick, I will give you anything in the world if you will only come down.'

'I don't want anything in the world,' was the dull, stubborn retort. Even as he spoke, the lower dust-dried hand had crept cautiously up to join its fellow, and in a few moments, himself half in and half out of the moonlight, his fingers were clutching the acorn tassels of the cord that bound its convoluted hood to the angel's head. Philip was now all but past motion or speech. He was shivering from head to foot, and praying inarticulately in his terror, 'Oh God, make him come down! Oh God, make him come down!'

'I believe', a calm but rapturous voice was declaring, 'it *is* hollow, and I *think* she knows I'm here. You won't say I was afraid now! Philip, I'd do anything in the world for you.'

But at this moment, it seemed, the ancient guardians of the sanctity of the edifice had deemed it discreet to intervene. A[Pg 359] cock crowed from its perch in the hen-roost at the farm where Rebecca now lay fast asleep. A vast solemn gust of wind evoked from nowhere out of space had swept across the churchyard and in at the open vestry door, powerful enough in its gust to belly out the dark green felt curtain and to add its edge of terror to Philip's appalled state of mind. 'Look! Quick! It's coming. Didn't I *say* it was all...'

And this time the small human creature clinging to its goal, a lean skinny arm outstretched above his head, had heard the warning cry. 'Who? What's coming?' he called, faint and far. 'Oh, it's lovely up here. I'm alone. I can't stop now. I'm nearly there.'

'I say, you are *not* to, you are *not* to.' Philip was all but dancing in helpless fear and fury. 'It's wicked! It's *my* angel, it's *my* trumpet! I hate you! Listen!—I tell you! I *command* you to come down!'

But his adjurations had become as meaningless as is now the song the Sirens sang.

A rending snap, abrupt as that of a pistol shot, had echoed through the church. The tapering wooden trumpet, never since its first fashioning visited by any other living creature than capricious fly and prowling spider, had splintered off clean from the angel's grasp. And without a cry, a syllable, either of triumph or despair, Dick had fallen vertically on to the flagstones beneath, the thud of his small body, and the minute crack as of some exquisitely delicate and brittle vessel exposed to too extreme a tension being followed by a silence soft, and thick, and deep as deep and heavy snow.

The stolid pendulum had resumed its imperturbable thumping again, the fussy vestry clock its protest against such indifference. By any miracle of mercy, *could* this be only yet another of this intrepid restless little Yorick's infinite jests? The sharp-nosed crusader continued alabaster-wise to stare into his future. The disgraced angel, breast to lock-crowned head,[Pg 360] stood now in shadow as if to hide her shame. Her mute wooden trumpet remained clutched in a lifeless hand...No.

'Dick! Dick!' an anguished stuttering voice at last contrived to whisper. 'I didn't mean it. On my oath I didn't mean it. Don't let me down...Dick, are you dead?'

But since no answer was volunteered, and all courage and enterprise had ebbed into nausea and vertigo, the speaker found himself incapable of venturing nearer, and presently, as thievishly as he had entered it, crept away out into the openness of the churchyard, and so home.

[Pg 361]

THE HOUSE

Having ascended the three semi-circular damp-darkened steps into his porch, Mr. Asprey slipped his latch-key into its lock with a peculiar disrelish. He was utterly

tired, exhausted—finished. Yet nothing, it seemed, could persuade his fevered mind to desist from its futile activities, although its one need was to be at rest....

In a few brief hours he would be compelled to surrender this very key, since he would be leaving the house he knew so well: finally, if not 'for good'. Everything had been made ready for his departure. His two maid-servants, the ample Emily and the angular Ada, having muffled the furniture with their sepulchral dust-sheets, and left their charge neat and seemly had departed but a few hours before, bound for their new situations. How odd a destiny!

Mr. Asprey, being much older than either of them, had, he assumed, deeper roots. At daybreak it would be *his* turn, and as yet he was by no means certain of any particular 'place'. Indeed of recent years he had given little thought to this eventuality. He had merely stayed on.

And now his eviction was no longer a question of to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow. Why indeed should he 'wait' until then? And yet, taken for all in all, this house of his had proved a pleasant one; peculiar here and there in[Pg 362] 'style' perhaps, yet not wildly eccentric; commodious yet compact, a heritage adjusted to his private purposes, fairly central and yet secluded. He had of course seen and envied residences with amenities more charming—a poor excuse for having neglected his own! But renovation had proved impracticable, and repairs far from satisfactory. In what sense and in what degree it actually*belonged* to him remained one of its many mysteries. Taxes fell due and he had been compelled to meet them. But of rent—hardly a peppercorn; of definite agreement, contract, in early life so frequently referred to by his spiritual pastors and masters—not a trace. If positive landlord there were (himself perhaps the architect) Mr. Asprey of late years had seldom 'called on' him, even in a merely metaphorical sense. And now—well, the one thing certain was that he had been given notice to quit.

Midnight had struck; the stars of the morning, though faintly hazed with a drift of dove-like cloud, were already traversing the heavens. In a little while it would be winter dawn. He had always hated change, and resented decay. Nevertheless destiny was spudding at his tap root.

The door ajar, and finger still on key, he turned reluctantly to look back. He had been wandering for hours alone in the darkness, and now he gazed forsakenly and forlornly at the gentle familiar prospect—the wooded downward slope, the faint line of low hills towards the south in the thin illumination of the night, and away, beyond the far horizon line, a soundless sea. The whole world was all but deathly still; and what weak fickle wind there was had lately changed its direction. The dark was turning colder.

And still—almost as if he were dubious whether he were being deceived by dream or wide awake—Mr. Asprey continued to ponder. However sharply he mistrusted the term, he realized that he had been a little*psychic* of late: that, prey of foreboding, he had been living much too closely secluded (even for him) in his own mind. His staid old family doctor,[Pg 363] notoriously incompetent at any such extremity as this, had but yesterday morning given him up. A prying probing alienist, more skilful in analysing human pudding-stone than quartz, might even have declared him a trifle 'mental'. The notion amused Mr. Asprey. Convinced of his own security, and aware that in these hazy matters silence is best, he had always enjoyed being a trifle mental. Partly perhaps for this reason he had no acute hankering to re-enter his house. He hated all good-byes. They entailed not only leaving but being left. Still, only the rankest discourtesy would admit of his posting off from so habitual and, despite its numerous defects and restrictions, so genial a residence with none; not even a grieved *adieu*, an ironic *au revoir*. And there was so much to say good-bye *to*! Houses, as the years collect, become densely populated. This is especially apparent, Mr. Asprey meditated, when they are about to be left vacant; and memories vividly revived may prove stubborn to exorcise.

They resemble a garden once beloved if seldom weeded, its wilder parts, its transitory solitudes, nearest to the heart and to the imagination. Tears cannot now refresh it, or sighs stir its seeded grasses, and the pitcher is broken at the well. This was the sad and enfeebling fact—Mr. Asprey was being victimized by his past. What folly! Since the future would see to his own interment, why not let that remain buried? 'Is thy servant a dog?' Of recent months, moreover—though often in a perfunctory fashion—it had been Mr. Asprey's odd custom to 'go over' his house before retiring for the night. He had become almost timidly apprehensive of fire, indeed of any 'act of God'; and he had acquired a belated passion for being tidy. Few hours for this were now left to him. He must make the most of them.

First, then, he would descend into the kitchen if merely to make sure that his breakfast would be ready for him at about half-past seven. Then he would go on his rounds, even more attentively and systematically than he usually did: Who goes[Pg 364] there? *Qui vive?* How fortunate that this was so clearly not an occasion for electric light; since it is not only the most execrable of illuminants to be 'mental' by and in, but, owing to pure prejudice, Mr. Asprey had refrained from having it installed in his ancestral home. He might be in the nature of an introvert, but he was not a spy on himself. He had always enjoyed using his eyes, but seldom with the intention of showing anything or anybody up. He abhorred 'high lights'.

He withdrew the key, groped his way into the house, lit the candle which he had left ready in its old dish-shaped brass holder on a table, and shut the door. For a few moments he stood listening to the tardy and stentorian *Now-then: Now-then* of his grandfather's clock, then made his way to the back parts of the house and down the

worn stone steps into the kitchen quarters. What mice were abroad at once scampered away with alacrity to warn their housemates that he was approaching: a few sluggish cockroaches were departing at leisure with the same tidings. Mr. Asprey scanned them an instant to make sure that they were real—aware at the same moment of the surmise that his next abode might be frequented by another species of vermin—then glanced about him. Everything was prepared. Everything was in order. That, of course, was Emily's doing.

Half the long speckless deal table was covered with a charming chequered tablecloth; the mound under the tea-cloth was without doubt a loaf of bread; the milk was creaming; and there the toast-rack, and the butter in its almost lordly dish. A conical coffee-pot dominated the neighbouring stove, for in spite of silly antiquated aversions, Mr. Asprey had been unable to evade gas. And two plump new-laid eggs stood side by side in their cups upon a plate. From their calm featureless faces they openly surveyed Mr. Asprey, and he them. Human existence, they seemed to be preaching, resembles an egg. In spite of a myriad apparent replicas it is unique, self-contained. Break the shell, you cannot repair it again. Some eggs are[Pg 365] good, others are horrid. The stale are an affliction to God and man. And not every specimen need necessarily harbour a chick. And as he stood thus quietly looking, he was also listening. It was as though the vacant house over his head were an echoing shell, and he its hermit crab.

Otherwise there was no reason to linger here; none whatever. Well, he would ascend to the attics and, room by room, proceed slowly down again. The actual order mattered little, except that it is perhaps the doors of a house that should be examined last. They are the usual way out, and in.

Stair by stair went up poor weary Mr. Asprey; but, come to the attics, made no attempt to enumerate, or to individualize the many Emilys and Adas who had occupied them each in turn. He had always prided himself on being by intention at least a righteous master. He had never deliberately thought of Emilys or Adas as being of else than flesh and blood. He knew we are all human.

None the less he could clearly recall one or two of whose felicity when they were under his roof he now felt a little uncertain. And in retrospect even a discourtesy may seem a crime. Nor, he noticed, had he hitherto been aware either that his last Emily had had no mat on her old oilcloth, or that her ewer was chipped; that a castor was wanting to Ada's bed and that there was no fire-grate in her room. Pampering, oh no! But he *might* have inquired, Are you quite happy here? And if he *could* stay on a little, he would see that their successors....Alone on this uppermost landing close under the roof—a trickle of water ding-donging there like funeral bells in the old lead cistern bespeaking a leaky tap below—he could see into either attic just as he pleased. Each in turn, he solemnly bowed to them—it was the most he could manage—and went on.

As fleeting a look into the lumber room also sufficed. It would never do to botanize long there! But at the closed door of the room at the foot of the top staircase he paused indeed.[Pg 366] It had been of old his nursery; and he was aware how easy it is to be otiose concerning one's early years. One is so seldom in retrospect a Child of the World. He opened the door and looked in—high fender, coloured pictures in their maple frames, rocking-horse, box of bricks. What dreadful emblems objects may become! And although, with that inward eye of his, which had recently been so active, he saw for a vivid instant his old nurse sitting beside the empty grate—slippered feet, stooping head, and clicking needles all complete—she immediately vanished. And instead, he was looking at a small boy, who was now exactly as far away in time as she was; though much further away in most things else.

He was sitting in a bare empty-looking room at a desk, stained with ink, and scarred with letters cut in the wood; and out of his blue eyes and plain face, pen between fingers, he was gazing through the window and over the low brick wall beyond it. It was a spring day out there in the meadows, and the towering clouds with their scarves of rain had but just drifted from over the face of the sun. So that at this moment the whole scene was lit—bright grass, green-beaded trees, tumbling stream—with a miraculously radiant panorama of delicate light. Mr. Asprey didn't look at things like that now, or rather no April morning ever enravished him like that now. His psychic skull must have contracted. It was as if all things were lovely if only you *could* see them—and in the proper light.

Yet in the very midst of this ecstatic reverie of looking, this inky boy—he realized—knew how intensely unhappy he was. He was homesick; he was a muff; he was being kept in; and he deserved to be. None the less, at sight of the child, Mr. Asprey had become aware of a peculiar compassion. Unhappy the creature might be, but there was no sign that he knew that he himself—whether unhappy or not—would soon be gone for ever. Also, Mr. Asprey was even more perfectly confident that in that young distant mind there was not a vestige of regret that when its owner grew up to be a man he would remain[Pg 367] childless. How odd then that at the precise moment when he was abandoning his house for good, he should suddenly be convicting himself of the charge of deliberate heirlessness! To be leaving positively no one behind him who might some day be doing as he was doing now—well, he did not at all enjoy the look of the black cap that topped the bewigged, long, grey, thin-nosed judicial countenance already engaged in trying his case. Black cap apart, even the severest judge upon the bench, glancing up at his prisoner, may nod with a cold, 'Be calm, take your time; I am listening. One word even yet might put you right.'

This in mind, Mr. Asprey promptly took his little notebook out of his pocket—battered and dingy after more than eleven months' wear—and jotted down: 'Secure as soon as may be a natural, pleasant young woman, quiet, non-temperamental, easy, happy-looking, and in need of a good home—to ensure a son and heir. Leave her

practically everything. This appears to be rather urgent.' It appeared to be so urgent that Mr. Asprey added his initials: *A.A.A.* Even in the act of writing he noticed, too, but did not stay to consider it, that a quite definite young woman for this purpose had emerged out of the groves of memory, was now in his mind's eye. But since he could not have been more than eight years old when she stole his heart away, not even a line in the Agony Column of the *Times*, that had so little to do with time absolute, would now be likely to have any effect. It was a pity. He was afraid it was now too late to be doing even 'his best'.

He closed the door, listened again a moment—what *habits* habits become!—meditating as he did so on the deep lovely blue of his candle flame, and passed on down the shabbily carpeted corridor to the next nearest bedroom. This was his father's and his mother's room or rather it had been theirs many years ago. Their son in the meantime, either in act or thought, had little visited it. It remained as they themselves had left it—the four-poster bed, the ponderous wardrobe, the grey marble-[Pg 368]slabbed mahogany washstand, the Landseer engravings. Nor can you be said to *remember*—certainly not to remember a mother—if the happy event is dependent on some casual reminder.

The twin pair of old Venetian blinds now hung lowered to their very last slack slats. The old red damask curtains were undrawn. And there stood Mr. Asprey once more, peering in over his candle flame. And such was the unusual state of his mind that when he came to again he could not have said how long he had remained in this abstracted posture. His absent-mindedness however was chiefly due to the fact that his inward gaze meanwhile had been intent on a large visionary granite sarcophagus topped with an eighteenth-century urn and canopied over by the vast, fringed, heavily laden boughs of a prodigious cedar tree, its edges scintillating like a Maharaja with bead-like rows of full-sized raindrops.

It was engrossing to observe how apart from this transient jewellery the beam of his candle enlivened the delicate greys and browns and blacks of the corrosive lichens and the bright green of the moss on this vast emblem. The moss indeed was almost as vividly verdant as the meadows had been. But *did* moss grow on granite? Still stranger was it, in Mr. Asprey's experience, that he should be able to spell out the words that were graven on the stone. He would have supposed them to be long since indecipherable. Amazed at the incredibly gross egotism of the inscription, he read: HERE LIES MY F.... In plain honest lettering, too; nothing Gothic. For though he was unable to peer round to make sure, there was not a doubt in the world that ATHER followed immediately after the F. Actuality may be grossly abrupt and inartistic enough, but no *human* stonecutter, surely, had ever so clumsily divided the word *father* as that! It was merely yet another jape of the strange jinnee of the dream world—never busier, Mr. Asprey had frequently observed, than when one is wide awake.

However that might be, it was abysmally damp here and[Pg 369] atrociously dark. As for the brooding cedar that roofed the tomb, to judge by these gigantic water-crystalled twigs, it could hardly be less than a mile high. It all comes of neglect, thought Mr. Asprey. But whose? How much was all this his father's cumulative dark, how much his own? And why this dateless urn, when filial forgetfulness had been concerned solely with a Victorian angel in Portland stone? Mr. Asprey gave it up. Nor could he be certain whether a father who leaves his son so early an orphan, or that son grown old is the more to blame for any sad and protracted oblivion and neglect. Both surely had been indolent—his departed father in his son's dreams; and he himself in the waking day. Not that this was an hour for recriminations; he must merely strive to be fair. He had too the comfort of realizing that if his mother was lying side by side with that father within these dense cold lost stone walls, she seemed to be perfectly calm and happy. *She* hadn't even so much as turned to smile at him. And though this might be a consolation as dubious as it was sentimental, it was at least of her own sharing. Besides, like Mr. Asprey himself, she had always loved moss—'Look, Tony, the very instant rain comes!... It's just like a parrot!'

This time a little hesitantly then, out came his battered pocket-book again: 'Have f's grave attended to,' he scrawled in it. 'remove angel;? replace it with some other kind???'

He paused in a fleeting attempt to petrify even in symbolic image one of Donne's angels, then added as an afterthought: 'If possible, go myself'. He trusted none the less that the expedition would not entail any attempt to fell that antediluvian cedar. He saw himself looking up at it, axe in hand, and the vast and vacant heavens beyond it.

Mr. Asprey closed his parents' bedroom door after him as reverently as he hoped that the less fickle-minded son and heir whom he had vowed some day to be responsible for would finally close his bedroom door after *him*. At grave risk of[Pg 370] extinguishing his candle, he snuffed its wick between finger and thumb, and continued on his way down the corridor, thus creating the most fantastic shadows in leering and quixotic motion, but at the same time dispersing its narrow darkness as he went. His next two memoranda, or agenda, both of them concerned with a play-room that for many years—seemingly now how unjustly few!—had been used for his mature private work, were of so personal and secret a kind that he laboriously scribbled them into his book in an amateurish shorthand which he had invented in his youth. One of these, briefly translated, ran: 'Tell Self it didn't so *much* matter.' The other was decisively to the opposite effect.

His third and fourth memoranda, in longhand, related to a seldom-used guest-room. Even in the light of one brief candle, this was a room of a most charming pink and white; and particularly since its old-fashioned chintz curtains were at this moment concealing the view from the shuttered windows beyond them—of a dark, leafless, and fruitless orchard behind the house, and an empty dog-kennel. Once within this small sanctuary, and deeply relieved at having passed in furtive celerity his own shut bedroom door without personal and perilous interruption, Mr. Asprey might as well have ventured 'just as he was' into some evening Reception, so multitudinous was the silent company that had at once phantomwise thronged about him. With sharp febrile nose and dark begloomed eyes, his long lank fingers shielding his candle flame, Mr. Asprey paused until they had, so to speak, become accustomed to his intrusion among them, had thereupon mournfully thinned away, and had left him to himself. After all one *can't* possibly make things right with more than a mere fraction of one's past! No sinner, surely; hardly even a saint?

At length alone again, Mr. Asprey allowed his gaze to rest a little wistfully on a portrait in water-colour on the wall. The young woman depicted in it must have sat looking sideways[Pg 371] at the artist. Thus the longer Mr. Asprey gazed at her, the clearer it became that in a peculiarly open and yet stealthy fashion she was sharing his scrutiny. Twenty years at least now severed him and her; and not a single faded petal or pinch of incense had Mr. Asprey recently offered at her shrine. It may, or may not, be discreet when you have fallen in love to 'tell'. That may depend on the degree of the infatuation, the attitude of the object, the propriety of the passion, and even the state of your health. The only alternative is to allow the toxin, the crisis, to become bygones as quietly and rapidly as de-'crystallization' permits. Mr. Asprey could not now choose between them. He had been more or less in love more than once, and having 'told' once or twice, had told no more. And *do* hearts warmed up become as indigestible as he had always feared?

This silent, reticent, searching creature here, with the sidelong eyes and early Edwardian sleeves, was herself one of the told-no-mores. But as he continued to meet her motionless eyes, and himself at last ventured to smile faintly, surely she had smiled faintly back? He tried again; there was no doubt of it. How inadequate a word may 'reassurance' be! There could of course be only one solution to so arresting an enigma; and this, yet again, a tragically sentimental one. She must whatever *then* her state of being, have loved him 'all the time'; that is, always; and for ever. In other words, long before they had ever met; to meet no more. That is, until this very moment!

Mr. Asprey had turned slightly giddy. He was being 'mental' with a vengeance. Still, since he would have no further opportunities for self-adjustment in his earthly home, he was now striving to be strictly honourable. So he forthwith jotted into his diary: 'Explain somehow to Frances M. why I *had* to arrange about the pleasant-looking

young woman—good-tempered, but not temperamental—because of an heir.' This entry much amused its writer. He looked up, and without question[Pg 372] Frances M.'s painted smile revealed an amusement at least equal to his own.

Thus complacent, he was about to continue on his valedictory pilgrimage when his glance, having vaguely wandered over the room, rested on a dark old wooden box in a shadow-infested corner on the other side of the flounced dressing-table. He could hardly believe anything so wooden could be so eloquent. It was as if Conscience had been actually searching for evidence against him—and evidence how stale! Yet there was no need—and in any case he had no wish to pass within range of the looking-glass on the table—there was no need to *open* the box. At sight of it Mr. Asprey had recalled instantly what it secreted; namely, the manuscript of a novel written by a friend. He had left it, long, long ago in Mr. Asprey's keeping in the hope of friendly criticism and appreciation; and three weeks afterwards he had been drowned at sea. Mr. Asprey's heart fell cold within him at remembering that he had let a full fortnight pass without even a glance at its first page; that he had, in fact, waited for his friend to be drowned before unsealing his MS. He had then, with increasing distaste and reluctance, read on to a breakfast 'scene' between three of the characters in the story one dismal morning in a dastardly December.

It described to perfection a virulent quarrel in which the unhappy human beings concerned had said everything they thought, or thought they thought, of human life and of one another. And in the course of this dispute a pot of liquid marmalade had been upset over an iniquitous love letter and the French tablecloth. Poe's raven's *Nevermore* was a cry of lyrical rapture by comparison with that marmalade. The whole chapter was one of the most vivid and caustic fragments of realism, or actualism, in fiction that Mr. Asprey had ever had the misfortune to share. And having heard of its author's tragic end, he had put the MS. away in this box, had entombed it there, with a relief beyond words. He had always fondly[Pg 373] suspected that even naturalistic books may deeply affect their readers, and that, 'in parts', life is so real that it is wiser not to be too earnest about it. An overdose of honey, yes: but liquid marmalade?

Indeed, he himself, having finished this eighth chapter, had decided to read no more. And that no doubt had been grossly unfair. He acknowledged it; while his drowned fair-haired friend amid gently wavering sea-flowers out of his submarine ooze now quietly continued to watch him from beneath half-shut lids—an indefensible device, since his body had been recovered and interred inland! However that might be, his somnolent eyes *were* fixed on Mr. Asprey's, and Mr. Asprey continued serenely to meet them; with more serenity, indeed, than he had confronted Frances M. in the water-colour—all reservations over. He agreed, oh, yes! that there was money in the MS.; and, possibly, even a few years' fame. He agreed that his friend's widow would have enjoyed the money—though not perhaps the fame, since she had never inquired

after her husband's masterpiece. None the less Conscience was astray this time, and he mustn't give in. With a little nervous nod at the mute drowned face, he put his candle down on the bed and opened his notebook again: 'At very first opportunity burn O.P.'s novel. And better not tell Mrs. P. (or the younger P.'s—not, at least, without a look at them first), when it is done; i.e. in this case *help* "the dead past".'

Thus poor Mr. Asprey proceeded on his way, tidying things up, placating as far as he was capable, his jinnee, his familiar—to the tune of at least ten small pages of illegible notes; until at length, the winter night very much older, he returned into the kitchen again. Poor gentleman, there was no need to remind himself that the small hours are an inept opportunity for the making of inventories, and that a house which one is about to leave for ever is not their happiest place. It entails far too hasty an elaboration; and sentimentalists and romanticists[Pg 374] may be fully as conscientious as cynics. Was it not true that, whichever Dean Swift may have been, he bequeathed to a friend in his will his third best hat?

Mr. Asprey glanced at his watch. Gracious heaven, it was a quarter-past seven. Adieux may exhaust a large quantity of time. There was to be no more sleep for him now. In less than an hour the conveyance—to use as conciliatory a word for it as possible—would be calling for him, to take him away. Winter daybreak, indeed, was already thievishly groping on the glass behind the dark blue canvas blind and the rusted bars of the kitchen window. He shivered. But since he had attempted to lay so many ghosts on his rounds it was no wonder that this semi-subterranean chamber struck now so cold and so still. Foolishly, perhaps, he began listening again. This would never do. Besides, Mr. Asprey was tired of listening. He left his guttering stub of candle on the table, put his notebook down on the stove, and lit the gas under his antiquated tin coffee-pot. None of your new-fangled glass contrivances for Emily!

He turned about and glanced at his breakfast things. The shrouded loaf was on the table as he had left it: but the eggs were now mere eggs. They had lost all their looks. And where was his table-napkin? He recollected that even overnight he had noticed that something was missing, and nothing, of course, could be allowed to be missing on such an occasion as this; certainly not a napkin. As do the dinner-jacketed in the remotest oases of the Empire, Mr. Asprey felt he must keep up appearances. But where *was* the missing napkin? Upstairs in the sideboard, probably. Shunning what might be a fruitless journey, he hauled open one of the drawers in the kitchen dresser, just in case. And he did this so violently that it fell on to the floor at his feet, to be immediately followed by a small dark object that had apparently been wedged in and had long lain concealed behind it. And lo and behold, as he stooped to examine this

nondescript object, with a most[Pg 375] peculiar suggestion of the sea having yet again given up its dead, he recognized it.

It was a pocket-wallet, his: a wallet that had mysteriously vanished at least nine years ago. On the other hand it was a pocket-wallet that had vanished not quite so mysteriously as not to result in the dismissal with the usual month's notice of the reigning Emily-and-Ada dynasty at that time. It is impossible to discriminate in these matters. Under a common cloud they were, under a common cloud they went. And here, except that in this fuscous candle-gleam he couldn't tell at a glance whether the wallet now contained the treasure it had once contained—here was ample proof that he had been at least, say, *half* justified. Whether half or even wholly, however, should he have left the question where left it had been? He had never inquired into the fate of the two females concerned; he had merely left them to their future. To do so now would be a signally belated procedure, even if a practicable one. Well, then, that being so, should he or should he not examine the wallet? To be hesitating again—pestilent habit—at such a moment as this!

Elderly Mr. Asprey stood up, a little giddy after that few moments' concentration at such an angle; and there, standing immediately opposite to him, rounded, squat, in a large apron, with wisps of faded straw-coloured hair and a tallowish face, was none other than the very Emily in question. By no means a shy or demurring or furtive or embarrassed Emily either; she stood there looking at him, quietly, almost pensively, more than resignedly—as if perhaps she were waiting for morning orders. And what set her apart from all the other old friends he had been negotiating with up above was the fact—and it sharply interested him—that her apparition obstructed the view of what was immediately behind it. To this degree—and to this degree alone, no doubt—she was substantial; whereas what the mere jinnee of fevered memory produces for one's comfort or otherwise can very seldom be said to be[Pg 376] that. And though Mr. Asprey had never succumbed to Materialism, this was a soothing discovery. He might need Emily later. Besides if she was not wholly ideal, pure fantasy, mere mind-stuff of the past, was there not less likelihood of sentimentality in this encounter? However that might be, here was this dumpy, anxious, tallow-faced Mrs. Grosvenor, quite as large as life, though obviously many years dead, looking up and back at him as if she had come to bid him a discreet god-speed, and was meanwhile asking for...what?

Mr. Asprey hesitated no longer. He stooped again, picked up the wallet, and there and then, without the least investigatory squeeze between finger and thumb, handed it over to the poor old soul. But why 'poor'? It is little short of idiotic to call the perfectly competent, whatever their 'state in life' may be, *poor*. 'And would you tell Ada?' Mr. Asprey smilingly added.

The one queer thing in this little interchange, was that as the wallet passed from Mr. Asprey's outstretched hand into Mrs. Grosvenor's—and she herself had hardly

stretched out hers at all, not so much even as if she were suggesting a small gratuity or remembrance—it had ceased to be real. Unlike the marmalade in the MS., it had ceased even to be realistic. Or rather it had become Mrs. Grosvenor's real. And she had accepted it with so natural and benign a grace that it suggested nothing short of, 'Well, sir, I must say one good turn deserves another.' With which, almost as if she were on her way at once to keep the implied promise, her background reappeared. Mrs. Grosvenor was gone.

She had vanished so abruptly and irretrievably that a disastrous sense of dejection and loss and discomfort—cold, kitchen solitude, hushed mice, day-secreted cockroaches—had descended again like a veil of the dingiest crape upon Mr. Asprey's mind. Almost any interruption would be better than that.[Pg 377]

And at once, and as if to order, an interruption came; and with it an overpowering, almost stifling, aroma of coffee. He turned about, but turned too late. Fountaining over in a miracle of iridescent bubbles stood his beautiful burnished coffee-pot, foaming like Etna with her billowing lava, its lid dancing—more fatefully than any receptacle James Watt had ever idly spied upon—above its froth. This, of course, in itself was a minor tragedy that could easily be remedied. The homely aroma was deliciously refreshing. But no expert of any museum of any country in the wide world would be able to decipher for him the sodden script which Mr. Asprey now gingerly attempted to rescue from this overwhelming cascade. It was a disaster. He had taken the utmost pains he could with his corrigenda, at what had seemed so brief a notice. There was no time now to begin again; and even if there were, any revised list, even if it were twice as long as the original, would prove, he knew, to be completely different. Indeed while, sad-eyed and breathless, having turned off the gas tap, Mr. Asprey continued to survey these sordid relics, he fancied he heard the sound of wheels. Wheels! Now! Surely, surely not!

Tragi-comedy by all means; but was there the least need to be ironical? His will hovered in an agony of hesitation; his eye discovered no help anywhere. There is no peace for the wicked. He hastened out of the kitchen as fast as—being so old and weary—he *could* hasten, without positively breaking into an undignified canter in his own house. And—oh, for a respite! Oh that his ears had misled him and there were even but one mere moment left! The instant he reached his front door he flung it open; and there and then, in astonishment, but not in dismay, Mr. Asprey all but fell down dead.

Another order of jinnee than his had also been busy in the small hours. The December sun was rising in the east. Out of the east came he. And above that sun, a strange celestiality had usurped the wide horizon: low luminous clouds, in tiers of[Pg 378] dappling colour against the crystalline nought of space. Line upon line they lay, in horizontal glory, waiting. Where had Mr. Asprey seen before this description of beauty, marvellous and cold? So much for the far. And the near? From the tiniest of the leaves of the bushes at his elbow, from every two-edged blade of grass on the powdery path, to the remotest wood between his house and the calm sea, this private world of his was edged, skinned, furred with hoar-frost—hoar-frost of such a splendour that it seemed to be all the colours in earth and heaven, and eye and mind, blazing in a rapture of delight. Alas, Mr. Asprey!—how vulgar now and mean seemed all his efforts. He had ceased to breathe. It was as though his mortal being had become a mere organ of vision: '*Orgy in Silver* by Jinnium Naturæ'—a masterpiece! His very soul had begun pondering on the catalogue his nimble mind had presented him with. It *must* be merely Nature's; the blind enchantress's—it always had been. How else?

But before he could determine the question, though not the faintest motion of the air in this infinite waste of wasteless light was manifest, the door that he had left ajar behind him had, unperceived by Mr. Asprey, already begun to stir upon its hinges. There sounded a tiny click in the supreme silence. He turned his head. Too late, again!—the door was shut. And since between heaven and earth there followed not the remotest hint of an approaching *kloop-kloop* of hoof or muffled clatter of wheel, it looked as if he must be intended to walk. So he set out.

[Pg 379]

'WHAT DREAMS MAY COME'

Emmeline did not know what had happened to her, but at once supposed she had been asleep. Her body gently swaying and rocking in passive obedience to the almost soundless motion of the coach, she gazed out blankly into the window glass, cold and lustrous as a frozen pool in some outlandish and benighted valley. Vaguely reflected there, she scanned her pale and solemn face—'a nice tidy face', as a friend had once summarized it—wide brows, high-boned oval cheeks, a firm, quiet mouth, and these now darkly questing, searching, startled eyes. No answer to any question there. She turned towards the hunched-up shape of the driver seated in his glass cab; and continued awhile to survey the great hump of his shoulders and sprawling arms as if through a faint inward mist. He sat crouched together, his hands seemingly clasped on the steering wheel, his high-angled coat-collar helmeting a motionless head.

No wonder he was cold! A jagged hole gaped in his glass screen like a huge black star. This was no surprise, yet it filled her with perplexity. What was wrong? Surely the blazing light had dismally dimmed in the bulbs over her head? And how came it that she was *alone* now in the strange vacancy of the coach—a vacancy faint with fumes to which she herself could give no name? Fumes familiar enough, but not of petrol[Pg 380]—sweeter, more nebulous, dangerous, affrighting. Alone! Why, but an instant before, that faint image of herself had been smiling at another reflection beside it in this very glass! Her glance came to rest at last on the angle of the seat on which she was sitting, and there it stayed. What inconceivable, sudden and violent wrench could have twisted sidelong like that its heavy metal framework?

It must have been raining, too, while she slept—and slept through this! Raining heavily, if so; the dark stain on the thick grey fabric of the seat had soaked it through. She put out a tentative finger but refrained from touching it; then craned round her head in search of the conductor. The wreathing mist which dimmed her eyes obscured him too a little; but there he was, huddled and stooping forward on the backmost seat of all, elbows on knees, his face cupped in his hands, his eyes, it appeared, fixed on the floor. He might so have sat for ages, like a wax image immured in a museum, like Rodin's *Le Penseur*. Nevertheless of the immediate past the sight of him had recalled not a vestige.

Where had she come from? Where was she going to? Her mind was in a terrifying confusion. Apart from this deadly lethargy as of a profound and leaden slumber, she felt no pain, no discomfort even. The grey suede handbag beneath her clasped, gloved hands still lay in her lap. This she had instantly recognized. It was brand-new; it had been a gift. But when? From whom? Tears, it seemed, had begun forlornly rolling down her cheeks from out of her eyes. She opened the bag, fumbling hastily through its familiar contents, and found among them a scrap of paper—the remains of a broken envelope, scribbled over with what appeared to be a singularly eccentric handwriting.

This object, surely, she had *never* seen before, and yet in its dinginess, in its extreme familiarity, it seemed now far more actual than the rest. She stooped, gazing at it, then lifting it into the dingy light endeavoured in vain to read what it said.[Pg 381] The divisions between the words, the words themselves, arranged like those of an address, even the ridiculously prolonged loops of the letters—all this was clear enough, and yet she could decipher not a single syllable. A misery of misgiving swept over her; what dreadful fate had overtaken her? What next?

The cumbrous vehicle swayed stolidly on, its hidden engine throbbing hardly more audibly than if it were within her own breast. It was country here—bare, high, tangled trees to the left, skirting the road which glimmered on in front of her into the faint vague starlight; fields fading out obscurely on the right. She was lost—all memory

gone. What next? And yet again those dark reflected panic-stricken eyes in the glass encountered her own; vividly, senselessly pleading for an answer.

Clutching in panic at the bar in front of her, she raised herself to her feet, turned, and stumbling unsteadily along from seat to seat, leaned close over the man, the conductor, where he sat by the yawning door. 'Where am I?' she called at him. 'Where are we going to? What is wrong?'

He did not stir. Only his eyes cold and blue as turquoises in his face, quietly lifted themselves and confronted her own, as if in some long-postponed and secret assignation. She thrust out her scrap of paper. He stared at it, but still said nothing. And she in turn continued to watch him, appalled yet not astonished.

'I want to stop,' she called at last. 'I want to get out. There was someone....' It was as if the driver had himself been expecting the summons. The pace of the coach had instantly slackened, the wheels drew to a standstill.

'All I want to know is where we are—what has happened?' she called. 'But there,' her voice had softened as if she were addressing a child, 'I am sorry—sorry. I see you are ill. You, too, have suffered!' But *had*she spoken, or merely supposed that she had spoken? As if in unspeakable relief, his eyelids gently obscured again the bright blue eyes. He had resumed, it seemed, an inexhaustible reverie.[Pg 382]

Her handbag clutched under her elbow, she descended from the coach. But before she could advance even a pace or two towards the driver, she heard the grinding of the gears; and the low, stertorous throbbing of the engine—so near and inward that it seemed a pulsation in her own body rather than a movement from the outer world—had become audible once more. He mustn't let *that* stop for long, she muttered cajolingly to herself; and smiled as if amused at the notion. And already, in utter silence now, the coach had vanished round the turn of the road.

It was odd that she should be less horrified, and even less confused now that she was alone, as completely alone, indeed, as a derelict ship at sea—a ship abandoned by her crew. She hesitated an instant, her eyes fixed on the constellation of the Great Bear. 'North'—an inward voice reminded her. At which, as if bidden, she at once began to walk in its direction, while she tried her utmost to restrain that voice from making any further comment, from asking any further questions.

Instead, she kept her inward eyes fixed on the reflected image of the face, of her own face, as she had seen it in the coach window glass. After all, she argued, so long as she kept *that* steadily in view she was sure of all that mattered most. She couldn't be utterly helpless, utterly astray, with her own inward eyes for guidance. You will always have *someone* with you, surely, so long as you have yourself, a self, she

meant, still in some degree triumphant however dreadfully cowed at—well, at *this* kind of experience!

The death-still, leafless woods to her left hand had begun to thin a little, and presently high iron gates, shielded, it appeared, with coats of arms, revealed themselves, glistening faintly in the gloom. But not with dew. She had realized this instantly. They were coated with the winter night's first faint hoar-frost. She could detect the tiny, delicate crunch of the crystals even beneath her gloved fingers as she stood pondering, her hand clasping the iron bar. And at its cold, she had[Pg 383] become suddenly as completely detached from her surroundings as a character who has escaped from a story.

A dense avenue of evergreen trees—ilex? holly? yew?—lay beyond the iron bars, a cave of impenetrable darkness. Still, this, too, was quite simple. She would go in. It seemed indeed that her dream in the coach from which she had been so rudely awakened had prepared her for this—and even for what might he in wait.

The hinges made no sound at all as she pushed the gate open. It was as if they had been carefully oiled for her coming. There must be a well-kept and an old house beyond this, she thought to herself. Her foot fell silently on the gravel, owing, she supposed, to the moss beneath her shoe; since there were no weeds, and the turf fell gently away to its neatly trimmed edges under the dark prodigious branches. It occurred to her that ages, ages ago, she had once looked down into a place as full as this of stones. She could have counted them, although the place itself was past recollection; and very cold.

She fancied, too, she could discern wheel-marks; and even these dim rounded pebbles glimmered with the stars. So she went on, one urgent question on her lips. Apart from the diffused and dusky starshine, there was no light at all under the porch. To take breath she had paused again, her eyes on the iron bell-pull.

'"Emmeline",' she whispered to herself. '"Emmeline", I must remember that!'

And then the door had swung gently open, as if into a softly glowing cavern of light, dazzling at first after the dark, like Ali Baba's. At which she secretly smiled to herself, for she had been on the very point of saying to the man who had so immediately answered her summons, *Sesame!* when but an instant before she had been steadily reminding herself to say, Emmeline.

Although not a single feature of it was perceptible, somewhere, *some*where, she had seen this dark lean meditative face[Pg 384] before—these clothes even, the dove-grey waistcoat, the funereal morning coat. And, while she strove in vain to place this memory, she heard herself explaining, while he quietly listened—a face, however vigilant, that one could never suspect of eavesdropping!—that there had been an

accident, a dreadful accident, and that the coach had gone on. 'You see, I'm really not sure, not at all sure, where I am; and—and what I am. Would, do you think, *this* be of any help?'

It was absurdly unconventional, she knew that well enough, talking to this butler-man as though he were her father confessor; but then what does one expect in such crises as these? She might have read of it all in a book.

The man had solemnly nodded over the scrap of paper—much too solemnly to be really convincing. He might have come out of one of the *Alices*! 'Yes, madam,' he said. And now she had been *definitely*reminded of something real—of an hotel, of a busy entrance hall, and of someone actually with her there whom she knew very well indeed, but who was out of sight, behind her.

'Yes, madam; this is right. This is the house. Have you any luggage?'

It seemed so preposterously meaningless a question that she had been quite unable to inquire *what* 'house'—how could it possibly be *the* house—before she had found herself following her guide's sinister coat-tails as he moved on swiftly and silently in front of her, as if on wheels, over the paving stones. Paving stones! Emmeline watched them closely, as she followed him, trying, like a child, with the utmost care to avoid stepping on the cracks between them. A strange house indeed, and yet again one not wholly unfamiliar. The hall, the succession of rooms, the corridors through which she followed on, were all of stone, nothing but frigid lifeless echoing stone. It was as if a pyramid had engulfed her. Her guide then must be Cheops. She knew *that* name well enough—Cheops. And yet the air, while thin and stifling, was laden with the delicious[Pg 385] odour of flowers—of spring flowers, too, beneath which, none the less, hung and haunted the nameless fumes of the motorcoach.

'He seems to know *his* way,' she thought to herself, 'and soon....' But the man had stopped, had opened a door, allowing her to pass on in front of him. 'This is the room,' he said. 'My master will be here directly.'

His 'master'! 'But I wanted...' she began; 'I shouldn't have come if....' Her heart was throbbing now so thickly yet flutteringly—and faster far than any engine—that she could hardly utter the words. And then it was too late. The man had gone, had shut-to the door behind him. 'My paper! My paper!' she cried after him, in consternation.

But though she listened intently, not an echo of a footfall on the flagstones outside had answered her. She was alone again—abandoned. And this room also was of stone—floors, walls, and ceiling! and lit solely by two candles, flanking a wide chimneypiece—a chimneypiece far more closely resembling an altar stone than any she had ever seen before. And beyond it, that doorless vacancy—could that be another way out?

Out, and without an instant's delay, and before that other, the master, came, Emmeline *knew* she must get. But when, after listening again, she attempted to move, it was as if she were pushing her way through a deepening sea of heavy water, which threatened every instant to rise and engulf her. The faint light of the two candles scarcely blurred the gloom of the room beyond. But she could see there what appeared to be a bed, a bed which had no footboard and was draped with the dimly luminous whiteness of a vast sheet that hung in heavy vertical folds on either side of it down to the floor. And beneath it she knew there lay concealed what she dared not look at, and yet what also she knew with her whole soul now depended upon her. For what?

A dreadful terror seized her. She was shuddering from head[Pg 386] to foot, as if in an unearthly cold, as though every slender bone in her body were brittle as ice. Well, she must wait a moment. That might be all that was needed. Then she would perhaps have life and strength to face this fresh ordeal. Yet all that her *own* heart now thirsted for was an infinite peace and silence—a nothingness—wherein to be at rest.

Besides, the Master of the House, as the man had said, might be stealing in upon her at any moment; and what kind of personage would this be, if his own servant had a face so featureless, so cold, and so indifferent?

She turned instinctively towards the light of the candles. They stood as if in mute collusion on either side of a picture, of what appeared to be a portrait—obscure and sombre. Of a more intense blackness indeed even than the star in the broken window of the coach. Whose portrait? She drew near, and, as it seemed to her, these walls, of an unendurable frigidity, heightened, as if in a dream, as she did so; so that in order to see the picture fully she had to mount the stone that stood in front of this altar-like chimneypiece, with its fireless and yawning cavity.

With extreme stealth she gently pushed one of the candlesticks a little nearer and gazed up at the picture. And, as with a sheep that has scented the slaughter-house, a sudden paroxysm of misgiving swept over her mind; and then as swiftly, in an instant, was utterly gone. This, she realized, and as plainly as if the man himself had told her so—this must be the portrait of the Master of the House. And she mustn't stay too long to examine it because there was this other thing to do that she so much dreaded. Besides he himself would soon be here.

Nevertheless—and although the face in the portrait was as familiar to her as her own, and had been so even from her early childhood, it seemed that a complete lifetime's scrutiny could not exhaust its mysteries, its promises. She was terrified no longer, but consoled. Indeed it was against this very consolation that, utterly weak and weary, she knew she must[Pg 387] strive. Yet still she gazed and hungered on, her glance roving insatiably over the arch of the bare bone above the brows, the fretted exquisite zigzag sutures, like brooks in a wilderness, traversing it north and south, and east and west.

Once, however familiar, she could not have endured for long the fleshlessness of this countenance, the dark double vacancy where its nostrils should have been. But to say it 'grinned'—those even teeth set in that narrow arc in their regular sockets—why, even its owner, Emmeline almost smiled at the conviction, would have scoffed at such an insult!

And the vacant orbits gazed back at her, tonguelessly declaring their inexhaustible resources. If you peer down into a grave, it is nothing but a black shallow four-cornered cavity dug out of the passive surface of the earth. But these inscrutable hollows, surely, conveyed an assurance of the immortal mind that had had its dwelling behind them, even though all memory there (at which irony she again smiled softly to herself) appeared to have vanished.

'This, Emmeline,' she was repeating to herself, '*this*, Emmeline, is the Master of the House. This, Emmeline, is the Master of the House.' The childish syllables sounded on in consciousness like a tiny runlet of water threading a dried-up bed of pebbles.

So engrossed had she become that, although her inward attention had for many moments been aware of the inscription beneath the portrait, she had not yet attempted to read it. And now when she endeavoured to do so, the task proved all but as difficult as had been the deciphering of the scrap of paper which she had found in her bag. And yet again like a child she was compelled to spell out the letters. The candles bathed her eyelids with their beams as she stood there, almost *become* a child again. '*All hope abandon ye who enter here!*'

What? *What?* There must be some mistake! This couldn't be so—not after the serene silence of the blue-eyed conductor, his chin cupped in his hands. She leaned the candle closer till[Pg 388] it guttered. No, no, not '*all*'. It was she herself who had made the mistake. It was not '*all* hope'; it was '*no* hope'. Why, then, if so, she promised the all-promising but unpromising sockets whence radiant eyes must once have shone, she need do nothing more than merely wait.

And at this, yet again the frenzied fear seized her that she must—that there was still that other ordeal to be faced, that on this depended her everlasting peace, and that in but another moment she would be too late. She seized one of the candlesticks and hastened into the further room, the stones beneath her feet seeming to withdraw themselves as she did so, so that this brief journey left her almost completely exhausted.

Come to the bed, she paused and listened, steadily surveying the shape that was now outlined there beneath her eyes. Sleeping Prince Charming, and she the Beauty! Again she smiled, but in a languid, self-pitying, wistful fashion, as if under the influence of a dense narcotic. 'What dreams may come...' she was whispering to herself. That was because of Yorick, of course. How cold these lips must be—*would* be! And did she

really *want* to waken the sleeper? Even for his own sake?—when the Master of the House might....

Hsst! What was that? *Had* a door opened? A chill breath as of jonquils and of that detestable, that odious other sweetness had rilled into the room. A sickening moment of agony followed. Why *try*? And then suddenly she had stooped and had lifted the uppermost corner of the sheet....

And now it was not Emmeline who was the child, but this Naughty One whom she had found hiding under the sheet in the Master's house, pretending, shamming. Cold lips, indeed! Emmeline in all her dreams had never seen a face so youthful or more lovely. It was drawing nearer to her, too, the lips a little parted as if in astonished welcome of her kiss....

And now she had really opened her eyes, to find herself gazing intently into the similitude of this very face, not a[Pg 389] dream-face, but a real face, that of a fair young woman, her young head surmounted by a nurse's cap, her downcast gaze fixed on the hands of a watch which she held in her right hand, the fingers of the other hand gently but firmly encircling Emmeline's wrist. For a while Emmeline never so much as stirred. Hardly even her eyes moved except first to survey the strange spotless whiteness of the ceiling above her head, and then to slide tardily downwards and sideways until they rested on a glass-full of jonquils, that stood in the scintillating rays of a little electric lamp beside her bed. Theirs, then, was this delicious fragrance in the air. Motionless, their green stalks piercing the bright and vivid water. They refreshed her thirsty eyes—a miracle of beauty. For centuries, as it seemed—though it can but have been seconds, since the nurse herself was counting them—Emmeline then struggled to make her lips say but one word. They faltered, just like an infant's when it is about to cry, but at last the three syllables managed to escape from them.

'*Sesame!*' she whispered, solemnly. No less solemnly the young nurse had lifted her eyelids—eyes blue as the flower of the chicory.

'That's better!' she said. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. That's *all* you need say.'

'But I must,' began Emmeline, groping with hovering fingers over the bandage on her head, 'I must tell you just one thing.... I have been dreaming of you and—and.... Who was that?' she broke off to exclaim, as if in a momentary panic.

"Ssh now! You must keep very, very quiet,' said the nurse. 'That was only the doctor.'

'Ah, yes.' Emmeline tremblingly drew her hand down from her head, and in so doing caught the glimmer of the sapphires on her ring finger. The faintest frown of perplexity masking the clear pallor of her brow, she continued for a while steadily scrutinizing them. And then—as if a curtain had[Pg 390] soundlessly lifted in the little theatre of her mind—recognition came.

'Look,' she said, holding the finger up to the nurse's inspection. 'Is—is he...*safe*?'

The blue eyes hadn't faltered. 'Waiting,' she replied.

'Well—in that case,' murmured an ever drowsier voice, 'I am...'—there was a long pause—'glad.'

And with that Emmeline had already escaped from actuality again, had fallen asleep; and not even the most vigilant and skilful of nurses can keep a chart of her patient's dreams.

[Pg 391]

THE VATS

Many years ago now—in that once upon a time which is the memory of the imagination rather than of the workaday mind, I went walking with a friend. Of what passed before we set out I have nothing but the vaguest recollection. All I remember is that it was early morning, that we were happy to be in one another's company, that there were bright green boughs overhead amongst which the birds floated and sang, and that the early dews still burned in their crystal in the sun.

We were taking our way almost at haphazard across country: there was now grass, now the faintly sparkling flinty dust of an English road, underfoot. With remarkably few humans to be seen, we trudged on, turning our eyes ever and again to glance laughingly, questioningly, or perplexedly at one another's, then slanting them once more on the blue-canopied countryside. It was spring, in the month of May, I think, and we were talking of Time.

We speculated on what it was, and where it went to, touched in furtive tones on the Fourth Dimension and exchanged 'the Magic Formula'. We wondered if pigs could see time as they see the wind, and wished we could recline awhile upon those bewitching banks where it grows wild. We confessed to each other how of late we had been pining in our secret hearts for just a brief spell of an *eternity* of it. Time[Pg 392] wherein we could be and think and dream all that each busy, hugger-mugger,

feverish, precipitate twenty-four hours would not allow us to be or to think or dream. Impracticable, infatuate desire! We desired to muse, to brood, to meditate, to embark (with a buoyant cargo) upon that quiet stream men call reverie. We had all but forgotten how even to sleep. We lay like Argus of nights with all our hundred eyes ajar.

There were books we should never now be able to read; speculations we should never be able to explore; riddles we should never so much as hear put, much less expounded. There were, above all, waking visions now past hoping for; long since shut away from us by the stream of the hasty moments—as they tick and silt and slide irrecoverably away. In the gay folly of that bright morning we could almost have vowed there were even other 'selves' awaiting us with whom no kind of precarious tryst we had ever made we had ever been faithful to. Perhaps they and we would be ready if only the world's mechanical clocks would cease their trivial moralisings.

And memories—surely they would come arrowing home in the first of the evening to haunts serene and unmolested, if only the weather and mood and season and housing we could offer were decently propitious. We had frittered away, squandered so many days, weeks, years—and had saved so little. Spendthrifts of the unborrowable, we had been living on our capital—a capital bringing in how meagre an 'interest'—and we were continually growing poorer. Once, when we were children, and in our own world, an hour had been as capacious as the blue bowl of the sky, and of as refreshing a milk. Now its successors haggardly snatched their way past our sluggard senses like thieves pursued.

Like an hour-glass that cannot tell the difference between its head and its heels; like a dial on a sunless day; like a timepiece wound-up—wound-up and bereft of its pendulum; so were we. Age, we had hideously learned, devours life as a[Pg 393] river consumes flakes of the falling snow. Soon we should be beggars, with scarcely a month to our name; and none to give us alms.

I confess that at this crisis in our talk I caught an uncomfortable glimpse of the visionary stallions of my hearse—ink-black streaming manes and tails—positively galloping me off—wreaths, glass, corpse and all, to keep their dismal appointment with the grave: and even at that, abominably late.

Indeed, our minds had at length become so profoundly engaged in these pictures and forebodings as we paced on, that a complete aeon might have meanwhile swept over our heads. We had talked ourselves into a kind of oblivion. Nor had either of us given the least thought to our direction or destination. We had been following not even so much as our noses. And then suddenly, we 'came to'. Maybe it was the unwonted silence—a silence unbroken even by the harplike drone of noonday—that recalled us to ourselves. Maybe the air in these unfamiliar parts was of a crisper quality, or the

mere effect of the strangeness around us had muttered in secret to our inward spirits. Whether or not, we both of us discovered at the same instant and as if at a signal, that without being aware of it, and while still our tongues were wagging on together on our old-fashioned theme, we had come into sight of the 'Vats'. We looked up, and lo!—they lay there in the middle distance, in cluster enormous under the cloudless sky: and here were we!

Imagine two age-scarred wolf-skinned humans of prehistoric days paddling along at shut of evening on some barbarous errand, and suddenly from a sweeping crest on Salisbury Plain descrying on the nearer horizon the awful monoliths of Stonehenge. An experience resembling that was ours this summer day.

We came at once to a standstill amid the far-flung stretches of the unknown plateau on which we had re-found ourselves, and with eyes fixed upon these astonishing objects, stood and[Pg 394] stared. I have called them Vats. Vats they were not; but rather sunken Reservoirs; vast semi-spherical primeval Cisterns, of an area many times that of the bloated and swollen gasometers which float like huge flattened bubbles between earth and heaven under the sunlit clouds of the Thames. But no sunbeams dispread themselves here. They lay slumbering in a grave, crystal light, which lapped, deep as the Tuscarora Trough, above and around their prodigious stone plates, or slats, or slabs, or laminæ; their steep slopes washed by the rarefied atmosphere of their site, and in hue of a hoary green.

As we gazed at them like this from afar they seemed to be in number, as I remember, about nine, but they were by no means all of a size. For one or two of the rotundas were smaller in compass than the others, just as there may be big snails or mushrooms in a family, and little ones.

But any object on earth of a majesty or magnitude that recalls the pyramids is a formidable spectacle. And not a word passed between us, scarcely a glance, as with extreme caution and circumspection we approached—creeping human pace by pace—to view them nearer.

A fit of shivering came over me, I recollect, as thus advantaged I scanned their enormous sides, shaggy with tufts of a monstrous moss and scarred with yard-wide circumambulations of lichen. Gigantic grasses stooped their fatted seedpods from the least rough ledge. They might be walls of ice, so cold their aspect; or of a matter discoverable only in an alien planet.

Not—though they were horrific to the *eye*—not that they were in themselves appalling to the soul. Far rather they seemed to be emblems of an ineffable peace; harmless as, centuries before Noah, were the playing leviathans in a then privy Pacific. And when one looked close on them it was to see myriads of animated infinitesimals in crevice and cranny, of a beauty, hue and symmetry past eye to seize. Indeed, there was a hint

remotely human in the looks of these Vats. The[Pg 395] likeness between them resembled that between generations of mankind, countless generations old. Contemplating them with the unparalleled equanimity their presence at last bestowed, one might almost have ventured to guess their names. And never have I seen sward or turf so smooth and virginally emerald as that which heaved itself against their brobdingnagian flanks.

My friend and I, naturally enough, were acutely conscious of our minuteness of stature as we stood side by side in this unrecorded solitude, and, out of our little round heads, peered up at them with our eyes. Obviously their muscous incrustations and the families of weeds flourishing in their interstices were of an age to daunt the imagination. Their ancestry must have rooted itself here when the dinosaur and the tribes of the megatherium roamed earth's crust and the pterodactyl clashed through its twilight—thousands of centuries before the green acorn sprouted that was to afford little Cain in a fallen world his first leafy petticoats. I realized as if at a sigh why smiles the Sphinx; why the primary stars have blazed on in undiminishing midnight lustre during Man's brief history and his childish constellations have scarcely by a single inch of heaven changed in their apparent stations.

They wore that air of lively timelessness which decks the thorn, and haunts the half-woken senses with the odour of sweet-brier; yet they were grey with the everlasting, as are the beards of the patriarchs and the cindery craters of the Moon. Theirs was the semblance of having been lost, forgotten, abandoned, like some foundered Nereid-haunted derelict of the first sailors, rotting in dream upon an undiscovered shore. They hunched their vast shapes out of the green beneath the sunless blue of space, and for untrodden leagues around them stretched like a paradisal savanna what we poor thronging clock-vexed men call Silence. Solitude.

In telling of these Vats it is difficult to convey in mere words even a fraction of their effect upon our minds. And not[Pg 396] merely our minds. They called to some hidden being within us that, if not their coeval, was at least aware of their exquisite antiquity. Whether of archangelic or daemonic construction, clearly they had remained unvisited by mortal man for as many centuries at least as there are cherries in Damascus or beads in Tierra del Fuego. Sharers of this thought, we two dwarf visitors had whispered an instant or so together, face to face; and then were again mute.

Yes, we were of one mind about that. In the utmost depths of our imaginations it was clear to us that these supremely solitary objects, if not positively cast out of thought, had been abandoned.

But by whom? My friend and I had sometimes talked of the divine Abandoner; and also (if one can, and may, distinguish between mood and person, between the dream and the dreamer) of It. Here was the vacancy of His presence; just as one may be

aware of a filament of His miracle in the smiling beauty that hovers above the swaying grasses of an indecipherable grave-stone.

Looking back on the heatless and rayless noonday of those Vats, I see, as I have said, the mere bodies of my friend and me, the upright bones of us, indescribably dwarfed by their antediluvian monstrosity. Yet within the lightless bellies of these sarcophagi were heaped up, we were utterly assured (though *how*, I know not) floods, beyond measure, of the waters for which our souls had pined. Waters, imaginably so clear as to be dense, as if of melted metal more translucent even than crystal; of such a tenuous purity that not even the moonlit branches of a dream would spell their reflex in them; so costly, so far beyond price, that this whole stony world's rubies and sapphires and amethysts of Mandalay and Guadalajara and Solikamsk, all the treasure-houses of Cambalech and the booty of King Tamburlane would suffice to purchase not one drop.

It is indeed the unseen, the imagined, the untold-of, the[Pg 397] fabulous, the forgotten that alone lies safe from mortal moth and rust; and these Vats—their very silence held us spell-bound, as were the Isles before the Sirens sang.

But how, it may be asked. No sound? No spectral tread? No faintest summons? And not the minutest iota of a superscription? None. I sunk my very being into nothingness, so that I seemed to become but a shell receptive of the least of whispers. But the multitudinous life that was here was utterly silent. No sigh, no ripple, no pining chime of rilling drop within. Waters of life; but infinitely still.

I may seem to have used extravagant terms. My friend and I used none. We merely stood in dumb survey of these crusted, butt-like domes of stone, wherein slept *Elixir Vitae*, whose last echo had been the Choragium of the morning stars.

God knows there are potent explosives in these latter days. My friend and I had merely the nails upon our fingers, a penknife and a broken pair of scissors in our pockets. We might have scraped seven and seventy score growths of a Nebuchadnezzar's talons down to the quick, and yet have left all but unmarked and unscarred those mossed and monstrous laminæ. But we had tasted the untastable, and were refreshed in spirit at least a little more endurably than are the camel-riders of the Sahara dream-ridden by mirage.

We knew now and for ever that Time-pure *is*; that here—somewhere awaiting us and all forlorn mankind—lay hid the solace of our mortal longing; that doubtless the Seraph whose charge is the living waters will in the divine hour fetch down his iron key in his arms, and—well, Dives, rich man and crumb-waster that he was, pleaded out of the flames for but one drop of them. Neither my friend nor I was a Dives then, nor was ever likely to be. And now only I remain.

We were Children of Lazarus, ageing, footsore, dusty and athirst. We smiled openly and with an extraordinary gentle felicity at one another—his eyes and mine—as we turned away from the Vats.

Alone

A very old man
Lives in yon house.
The squeak of the cricket,
The stir of the mouse,
Are all he knows
Of the earth and us.
Once he was young,
Would dance and play,
Like many another
Young popinjay;
And run to his mother
At dusk of day.
And colours bright

he delighted in;
The fiddle to hear,
And to lift his chin,
And sing as small
As a twittering wren.
But age apace
Comes at last to all;
And a lone house filled
With the cricket's call;
And the scampering mouse
In the hollow wall.

All That's Past

Very old are the woods;
And the buds that break
Out of the brier's boughs,
When March winds wake,
So old with their beauty are--

Oh, no man knows
Through what wild centuries
Roves back the rose.
Very old are the brooks;
And the rills that rise
Where snow sleeps cold beneath
The azure skies
Sing such a history
Of come and gone,
Their every drop is as wise
As Solomon.
Very old are we men;
Our dreams are tales
Told in dim Eden
By Eve's nightingales;
We wake and whisper awhile,
But, the day gone by,
Silence and sleep like fields
Of amaranth lie.

Alone [The abode of the nightingale is bare]

The abode of the nightingale is bare,
Flowered frost congeals in the gelid air,
The fox howls from his frozen lair:
Alas, my loved one is gone,
I am alone:
It is winter.
Once the pink cast a winy smell,
The wild bee hung in the hyacinth bell,
Light in effulgence of beauty fell:
Alas, my loved one is gone,
I am alone:
It is winter.
My candle a silent fire doth shed,
Starry Orion hunts o'erhead;

Come moth, come shadow, the world is dead:
Alas, my loved one is gone,
I am alone:
It is winter.

"Where Is Thy Victory?"

None, none can tell where I shall be
When the unclean earth covers me;
Only in surety if thou cry
Where my perplexed ashes lie,
Know, 'tis but death's necessity
That keeps my tongue from answering thee.
Even if no more my shadow may
Lean for a moment in thy day;
No more the whole earth lighten, as if,
Thou near, it had nought else to give:
Surely 'tis but Heaven's strategy
To prove death immortality.
Yet should I sleep--and no more dream,
Sad would the last awakening seem,
If my cold heart, with love once hot,
Had thee in sleep remembered not:
How could I wake to find that I
Had slept alone, yet easefully?
Or should in sleep glad visions come:
Sick, in an alien land, for home
Would be my eyes in their bright beam;
Awake, we know 'tis not a dream;
Asleep, some devil in the mind
Might truest thoughts with false enwind.
Life is a mockery if death
Have the least power men say it hath.
As to a hound that mewing waits,
Death opens, and shuts to, his gates;

Else even dry bones might rise and say,--
"'Tis _ye_ are dead and laid away."
Innocent children out of nought
Build up a universe of thought,
And out of silence fashion Heaven:
So, dear, is this poor dying even,
Seeing thou shall be touched, heard, seen,
Better than when dust stood between.

Age

This ugly old crone--
Every beauty she had
When a maid, when a maid.
Her beautiful eyes,
Too youthful, too wise,
Seemed ever to come
To so lightless a home,
Cold and dull as a stone.
And her cheeks--who would guess
Cheeks cadaverous as this
Once with colours were gay
As the flower on its spray?
Who would ever believe
Aught could bring one to grieve
So much as to make
Lips bent for love's sake
So thin and so grey?
O Youth, come away!
As she asks in her lone,
This old, desolate crone.
She loves us no more;
She is too old to care
For the charms that of yore
Made her body so fair.
Past repining, past care,

She lives but to bear
One or two fleeting years
Earth's indifference: her tears
Have lost now their heat;
Her hands and her feet
Now shake but to be
Shed as leaves from a tree;
And her poor heart beats on
Like a sea--the storm gone.

Autumn

There is a wind where the rose was;
Cold rain where sweet grass was;
And clouds like sheep
Stream o'er the steep
Grey skies where the lark was.
Nought gold where your hair was;
Nought warm where your hand was;
But phantom, forlorn,
Beneath the thorn,
Your ghost where your face was.
Sad winds where your voice was;
Tears, tears where my heart was;
And ever with me,
Child, ever with me,
Silence where hope was.

The Dark Chateau

In dreams a dark chateau
Stands ever open to me,
In far ravines dream-waters flow,
Descending soundlessly;
Above its peaks the eagle floats,
Lone in a sunless sky;

Mute are the golden woodland throats
Of the birds flitting by.
No voice is audible. The wind
Sleeps in its peace.
No flower of the light can find
Refuge beneath its trees;
Only the darkening ivy climbs
Mingled with wilding rose,
And cypress, morn and evening, time's
Black shadow throws.
All vacant, and unknown;
Only the dreamer steps
From stone to hollow stone,
Where the green moss sleeps,
Peers at the rivers in its deeps,
The eagle lone in the sky,
While the dew of evening drips,
Coldly and silently.
Would that I could steal in!--
Into each secret room;
Would that my sleep-bright eyes could win
To the inner gloom;
Gaze from its high windows,
Far down its mouldering walls,
Where amber-clear still Lethe flows,
And foaming falls.
But ever as I gaze,
From slumber soft doth come
Some touch my stagnant sense to raise
To its old earthly home;
Fades then that sky serene;
And peak of ageless snow;
Fades to a paling dawn-lit green,
My dark chateau.

Dream Song

Sunlight, moonlight,
Twilight, starlight-
Gloaming at the close of day,
And an owl calling,
Cool dews falling
In a wood of oak and may.
Lantern-light, taper-light,
Torchlight, no-light:
Darkness at the shut of day,
And lions roaring,
Their wrath pouring
In wild waste places far away.
Elf-light, bat-light,
Touchwood-light and toad-light,
And the sea a shimmering gloom of grey,
And a small face smiling
In a dream's beguiling
In a world of wonders far away.

Dust To Dust

Heavenly Archer, bend thy bow;
Now the flame of life burns low,
Youth is gone; I, too, would go.
Even Fortune leads to this:
Harsh or kind, at last she is
Murderess of all ecstasies.
Yet the spirit, dark, alone,
Bound in sense, still hearkens on
For tidings of a bliss foregone.
Sleep is well for dreamless head,
At no breath astonished,
From the Gardens of the Dead.

I the immortal harps hear ring,
By Babylon's river languishing.
Heavenly Archer, loose thy string.

The Dwelling-Place

Deep in a forest where the kestrel screamed,
Beside a lake of water, clear as glass,
The time-worn windows of a stone house gleamed
Named only "Alas."
Yet happy as the wild birds in the glades
Of that green forest, thridding the still air
With low continued heedless serenades,
Its heedless people were.
The throbbing chords of violin and lute,
The lustre of lean tapers in dark eyes,
Fair colours, beauteous flowers, faint-bloomed fruit
Made earth seem Paradise
To them that dwelt within this lonely house:
Like children of the gods in lasting peace,
They ate, sang, danced, as if each day's carouse
Need never pause, nor cease.
Some to the hunt would wend, with hound and horn,
And clash of silver, beauty, bravery, pride,
Heeding not one who on white horse upborne
With soundless hoofs did ride.
Dreamers there were who watched the hours away
Beside a fountain's foam. And in the sweet
Of phantom evening, 'neath the night-bird's lay,
Did loved with loved-one meet.
All, all were children, for, the long day done,
They barred the heavy door against lightfoot fear;
And few words spake though one known face was gone,
Yet still seemed hovering near.
They heaped the bright fire higher; poured dark wine;
And in long revelry dazed the questioning eye;

Curtained three-fold the heart-dismaying shine
Of midnight streaming by.
They shut the dark out from the painted wall,
With candles dared the shadow at the door,
Sang down the faint reiterated call
Of those who came no more.
Yet clear above that portal plain was writ,
Confronting each at length alone to pass
Out of its beauty into night star-lit,
That word "Alas!"

Echo

"Who called?" I said, and the words
Through the whispering glades,
Hither, thither, baffled the birds--
"Who called? Who called?"
The leafy boughs on high
Hissed in the sun;
The dark air carried my cry
Faintingly on:
Eyes in the green, in the shade,
In the motionless brake,
Voices that said what I said,
For mockery's sake:
"Who cares?" I bawled through my tears;
The wind fell low:
In the silence, "Who cares? who cares?"
Wailed to and fro.

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The Empty House

See this house, how dark it is
Beneath its vast-boughed trees!
Not one trembling leaflet cries
To that Watcher in the skies--

"Remove, remove thy searching gaze,
Innocent, of heaven's ways,
Brood not, Moon, so wildly bright,
On secrets hidden from sight."
"Secrets," sighs the night-wind,
"Vacancy is all I find;
Every keyhole I have made
Wails a summons, faint and sad,
No voice ever answers me,
Only vacancy."
"Once, once ..." the cricket shrills,
And far and near the quiet fills
With its tiny voice, and then
Hush falls again.
Mute shadows creeping slow
Mark how the hours go.
Every stone is mouldering slow.
And the least winds that blow
Some minutest atom shake,
Some fretting ruin make
In roof and walls. How black it is
Beneath these thick-boughed trees!

==========

An Epitaph

Here lies a most beautiful man,
Light of step and heart was he;
I think he was the most beautiful man
That ever was in the West Country.
But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;
However rare--rare it be;
And when I crumble, who will remember
This man of the West Country?

Estranged

Author: Walter De la Mare

No one was with me there--
Happy I was--alone;
Yet from the sunshine suddenly
A joy was gone.
A bird in an empty house
Sad echoes makes to ring,
Flitting from room to room
On restless wing:
Till from its shades he flies,
And leaves forlorn and dim
The narrow solitudes
So strange to him.
So, when with fickle heart
I joyed in the passing day,
A presence my mood estranged
Went grieved away.
=-
==========

Even In The Grave

I laid my inventory at the hand
Of Death, who in his gloomy arbour sate;
And while he conned it, sweet and desolate
I heard Love singing in that quiet land.
He read the record even to the end--
The heedless, livelong injuries of Fate,
The burden of foe, the burden of love and hate;
The wounds of foe, the bitter wounds of friend:
All, all, he read, ay, even the indifference,
The vain talk, vainer silence, hope and dream.
He questioned me: "What seek'st thou then instead?"
I bowed my face in the pale evening gleam.
Then gazed he on me with strange innocence:
"Even in the grave thou wilt have thyself," he said.
==========

Evening

When twilight darkens, and one by one,
The sweet birds to their nests have gone;
When to green banks the glow-worms bring
Pale lamps to brighten evening;
Then stirs in his thick sleep the owl
Through the dewy air to prowl.
Hawking the meadows swiftly he flits,
While the small mouse atrembling sits
With tiny eye of fear upcast
Until his brooding shape be past,
Hiding her where the moonbeams beat,
Casting black shadows in the wheat.
Now all is still: the field-man is
Lapped deep in slumbering silentness.
Not a leaf stirs, but clouds on high
Pass in dim flocks across the sky,
Puffed by a breeze too light to move
Aught but these wakeful sheep above.
O what an arch of light now spans
These fields by night no longer Man's!
Their ancient Master is abroad,
Walking beneath the moonlight cold:
His presence is the stillness, He
Fills earth with wonder and mystery.

==========

Fare Well

When I lie where shades of darkness
Shall no more assail mine eyes,
Nor the rain make lamentation
When the wind sighs;
How will fare the world whose wonder
Was the very proof of me?
Memory fades, must the remembered
Perishing be?

Oh, when this my dust surrenders
Hand, foot, lip, to dust again,
May these loved and loving faces
Please other men!
May the rustling harvest hedgerow
Still the Traveller's Joy entwine,
And as happy children gather
Posies once mine.
Look thy last on all things lovely,
Every hour. Let no night
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber
Till to delight
Thou have paid thy utmost blessing;
Since that all things thou wouldst praise
Beauty took from those who loved them
In other days.

==========

The Flight

How do the days press on, and lay
Their fallen locks at evening down,
Whileas the stars in darkness play
And moonbeams weave a crown--
A crown of flower-like light in heaven,
Where in the hollow arch of space
Morn's mistress dreams, and the Pleiads seven
Stand watch about her place.
Stand watch--O days no number keep
Of hours when this dark clay is blind.
When the world's clocks are dumb in sleep
'Tis then I seek my kind.

==========

For All The Grief

For all the grief I have given with words
May now a few clear flowers blow,

In the dust, and the heat, and the silence of birds,
Where the lonely go.
For the thing unsaid that heart asked of me
Be a dark, cool water calling--calling
To the footsore, benighted, solitary,
When the shadows are falling.
O, be beauty for all my blindness,
A moon in the air where the weary wend,
And dews burdened with loving-kindness
In the dark of the end.

==========

The Funeral

They dressed us up in black,
Susan and Tom and me--
And, walking through the fields
All beautiful to see,
With branches high in the air
And daisy and buttercup,
We heard the lark in the clouds--
In black dressed up.
They took us to the graves,
Susan and Tom and me,
Where the long grasses grow
And the funeral tree:
We stood and watched; and the wind
Came softly out of the sky
And blew in Susan's hair,
As I stood close by.
Back through the fields we came,
Tom and Susan and me,
And we sat in the nursery together,
And had our tea.
And, looking out of the window,
I heard the thrushes sing;

But Tom fell asleep in his chair,
He was so tired, poor thing.
==========
Haunted [From out the wood I watched them shine]

From out the wood I watched them shine,--
The windows of the haunted house,
Now ruddy as enchanted wine,
Now dark as flittermouse.
There went a thin voice piping airs
Along the grey and crooked walks,--
A garden of thistledown and tares,
Bright leaves, and giant stalks.
The twilight rain shone at its gates,
Where long-leaved grass in shadow grew;
And black in silence to her mates
A voiceless raven flew.
Lichen and moss the lone stones greened,
Green paths led lightly to its door,
Keen from her hair the spider leaned,
And dusk to darkness wore.
Amidst the sedge a whisper ran,
The West shut down a heavy eye,
And like last tapers, few and wan,
The watch-stars kindled in the sky.
==========
Life

Hearken, O dear, now strikes the hour we die;
We, who in our strange kiss
Have proved a dream the world's realities,
Turned each from other's darkness with a sigh,
Need heed no more of life, waste no more breath
On any other journey, but of death.
And yet: Oh, know we well
How each of us must prove Love's infidel;

Still out of ecstasy turn trembling back
To earth's same empty track
Of leaden day by day, and hour by hour, and be
Of all things lovely the cold mortuary.

==========

Myself

There is a garden, grey
With mists of autumntide;
Under the giant boughs,
Stretched green on every side,
Along the lonely paths,
A little child like me,
With face, with hands, like mine,
Plays ever silently;
On, on, quite silently,
When I am there alone,
Turns not his head; lifts not his eyes;
Heeds not as he plays on.
After the birds are flown
From singing in the trees,
When all is grey, all silent,
Voices, and winds, and bees;
And I am there alone:
Forlornly, silently,
Plays in the evening garden
Myself with me.

==========

Nobody Knows

Often I've heard the Wind sigh
By the ivied orchard wall,
Over the leaves in the dark night,
Breathe a sighing call,
And faint away in the silence
While I, in my bed,

Wondered, 'twixt dreaming and waking,
What it said.
Nobody knows what the Wind is,
Under the height of the sky,
Where the hosts of the stars keep far away house
And its wave sweeps by --
Just a great wave of the air,
Tossing the leaves in its sea,
And foaming under the eaves of the roof
That covers me.
And so we live under deep water,
All of us, beasts and men,
And our bodies are buried down under the sand,
When we go again;
And leave, like the fishes, our shells,
And float on the Wind and away,
To where, o'er the marvellous tides of the air,
Burns day.

==========

The Old House

A very, very old house I know-
And ever so many people go,
Past the small lodge, forlorn and still,
Under the heavy branches, till
Comes the blank wall, and there's the door.
Go in they do; come out no more.
No voice says aught; no spark of light
Across that threshold cheers the sight;
Only the evening star on high
Less lonely makes a lonely sky,
As, one by one, the people go
Into that very old house I know.

==========

The Old Stone House

Nothing on the grey roof, nothing on the brown,
Only a little greening where the rain drips down;
Nobody at the window, nobody at the door,
Only a little hollow which a foot once wore;
But still I tread on tiptoe, still tiptoe on I go,
Past nettles, porch, and weedy well, for oh, I know
A friendless face is peering, and a still clear eye
Peeps closely through the casement
as my step goes by.

==========

Remembrance

The sky was like a waterdrop
In shadow of a thorn,
Clear, tranquil, beautiful,
Dark, forlorn.
Lightning along its margin ran;
A rumour of the sea
Rose in profundity and sank
Into infinity.
Lofty and few the elms, the stars
In the vast boughs most bright;
I stood a dreamer in a dream
In the unstirring night.
Not wonder, worship, not even peace
Seemed in my heart to be:
Only the memory of one,
Of all most dead to me.

==========

The Ruin

When the last colours of the day
Have from their burning ebbed away,
About that ruin, cold and lone,
The cricket shrills from stone to stone;
And scattering o'er its darkened green,

Bands of the fairies may be seen,
Chattering like grasshoppers, their feet
Dancing a thistledown dance round it:
While the great gold of the mild moon
Tinges their tiny acorn shoon.

==========

Sleep

Men all, and birds, and creeping beasts,
When the dark of night is deep,
From the moving wonder of their lives
Commit themselves to sleep.
Without a thought, or fear, they shut
The narrow gates of sense;
Heedless and quiet, in slumber turn
Their strength to impotence.
The transient strangeness of the earth
Their spirits no more see:
Within a silent gloom withdrawn,
They slumber in secrecy.
Two worlds they have--a globe forgot
Wheeling from dark to light;
And all the enchanted realm of dream
That burgeons out of night.

==========

The Song Of The Secret

Where is beauty?
Gone, gone:
The cold winds have taken it
With their faint moan;
The white stars have shaken it,
Trembling down,
Into the pathless deeps of the sea.
Gone, gone
Is beauty from me.

The clear naked flower
Is faded and dead;
The green-leafed willow,
Drooping her head,
Whispers low to the shade
Of her boughs in the stream,
Sighing a beauty,
Secret as dream.

==========

Sorcery

"What voice is that I hear
Crying across the pool?"
"It is the voice of Pan you hear,
Crying his sorceries shrill and clear,
In the twilight dim and cool."
"What song is it he sings,
Echoing from afar;
While the sweet swallow bends her wings,
Filling the air with twitterings,
Beneath the brightening star?"
The woodman answered me,
His faggot on his back:--
"Seek not the face of Pan to see;
Flee from his clear note summoning thee
To darkness deep and black!"
"He dwells in thickest shade,
Piping his notes forlorn
Of sorrow never to be allayed;
Turn from his coverts sad
Of twilight unto morn!"
The woodman passed away
Along the forest path;
His ax shone keen and grey
In the last beams of day:
And all was still as death:--

Only Pan singing sweet
Out of Earth's fragrant shade;
I dreamed his eyes to meet,
And found but shadow laid
Before my tired feet.
Comes no more dawn to me,
Nor bird of open skies.
Only his woods' deep gloom I see
Till, at the end of all, shall rise,
Afar and tranquilly,
Death's stretching sea.

The Stranger [Half-hidden in a graveyard]

Half-hidden in a graveyard,
In the blackness of a yew,
Where never living creature stirs,
Nor sunbeam pierces through,
Is a tomb, green and crooked,--
Its faded legend gone,--
With but one rain-worn cherub's head
Of smouldering stone.
There, when the dusk is falling,
Silence broods so deep
It seems that every wind that breathes
Blows from the field of sleep.
Day breaks in heedless beauty,
Kindling each drop of dew,
But unforsaking shadow dwells
Beneath this lonely yew.
And, all else lost and faded,
Only this listening head
Keeps with a strange unanswering smile
Its secret with the dead.

==========

The Stranger [In the woods as I did walk]

In the woods as I did walk,
Dappled with the moon's beam,
I did with a Stranger talk,
And his name was Dream.
Spurred his heel, dark his cloak,
Shady-wide his bonnet's brim;
His horse beneath a silvery oak
Grazed as I talked with him.
Softly his breast-brooch burned and shone;
Hill and deep were in his eyes;
One of his hands held mine, and one
The fruit that makes men wise.
Wondrously strange was earth to see,
Flowers white as milk did gleam;
Spread to Heaven the Assyrian Tree,
Over my head with Dream.
Dews were still betwixt us twain;
Stars a trembling beauty shed;
Yet--not a whisper comes again
Of the words he said.
==========
Time Passes

There was nought in the Valley
But a Tower of Ivory,
Its base enwreathed with red
Flowers that at evening
Caught the sun's crimson
As to Ocean low he sped.
Lucent and lovely
It stood in the morning
Under a trackless hill;
With snows eternal
Muffling its summit,
And silence ineffable.

Sighing of solitude
Winds from the cold heights
Haunted its yellowing stone;
At noon its shadow
Stretched athwart cedars
Whence every bird was flown.
Its stair was broken,
Its starlit walls were
Fretted; its flowers shone
Wide at the portal,
Full-blown and fading,
Their last faint fragrance gone.
And on high in its lantern
A shape of the living
Watched o'er a shoreless sea,
From a Tower rotting
With age and weakness,
Once lovely as ivory.

==========

The Vacant Day

As I did walk in meadows green
I heard the summer noon resound
With call of myriad things unseen
That leapt and crept upon the ground.
High overhead the windless air
Throbbed with the homesick coursing cry
Of swallows that did everywhere
Wake echo in the sky.
Beside me, too, clear waters coursed
Which willow branches, lapsing low,
Breaking their crystal gliding forced
To sing as they did flow.
I listened; and my heart was dumb
With praise no language could express;

Longing in vain for him to come
Who had breathed such blessedness
On this fair world, wherein we pass
So chequered and so brief a stay;
And yearned in spirit to learn, alas,
What kept him still away.

==========

Vigil

Dark is the night,
The fire burns faint and low,
Hours--days--years,
Into grey ashes go;
I strive to read,
But sombre is the glow.
Thumbed are the pages,
And the print is small;
Mocking the winds
That from the darkness call;
Feeble the fire that lends
Its light withal.
O ghost, draw nearer;
Let thy shadowy hair,
Blot out the pages
That we cannot share;
Be ours the one last leaf
By Fate left bare!
Let's Finis scrawl,
And then Life's book put by;
Turn each to each
In all simplicity:
Ere the last flame is gone
To warm us by.

==========

When The Rose Is Faded

When the rose is faded,
Memory may still dwell on
Her beauty shadowed,
And the sweet smell gone.
That vanishing loveliness,
That burdening breath
No bond of life hath then
Nor grief of death.
'Tis the immortal thought
Whose passion still
Makes of the changing
The unchangeable.
Oh, thus thy beauty,
Loveliest on earth to me,
Dark with no sorrow, shines
And burns, with Thee.

==========

The Window

Behind the blinds I sit and watch
The people passing - passing by;
And not a single one can see
My tiny watching eye.
They cannot see my little room,
All yellowed with the shaded sun;
They do not even know I'm here;
Nor'll guess when I am gone.

==========

Winter [Clouded with snow]

Clouded with snow
The cold winds blow,
And shrill on leafless bough
The robin with its burning breast
Alone sings now.
The rayless sun,
Day's journey done,

Sheds its last ebbing light
On fields in leagues of beauty spread
Unearthly white.
Thick draws the dark,
And spark by spark,
The frost-fires kindle, and soon
Over that sea of frozen foam
Floats the white moon.
==========

Haunted

By Walter de la Mare

From out the wood I watched them shine, —
  The windows of the haunted house,
Now ruddy as enchanted wine,
  Now dark as flittermouse.

There went a thin voice piping airs
  Along the grey and crooked walks, —
A garden of thistledown and tares,
  Bright leaves, and giant stalks.

The twilight rain shone at its gates,
  Where long-leaved grass in shadow grew;
And back in silence to her mates
  A voiceless raven flew.

Lichen and moss the lone stones greened,
  Green paths led lightly to its door,
Keen from her lair the spider leaned,
  And dusk to darkness wore.

Amidst the sedge a whisper ran,
  The West shut down a heavy eye,
And like last tapers, few and wan,
  The watch-stars kindled in the sky.

The Return

Walter de la Mare

"Look not for roses in Attalus his garden, or wholesome flowers in a venomous plantation. And since there is scarce any one had, but some others are the worse for him; tempt not contagion by proximity, and hazard not thyself in the shadow of corruption." -- Sir Thomas Browne

CHAPTER I

THE churchyard in which Arthur Lawford found himself wandering that mild and golden September afternoon was old, green, and refreshingly still. The silence in which it lay seemed as keen and mellow as the light--the pale, almost heatless, sunlight that filled the air. Here and there robins sang across the stones, elvishly shrill in the peace of harvest. The only other living creature there seemed to Lawford to be his own rather fair, not unsubstantial, rather languid self, who at the noise of the birds had raised his head and glanced as if between content and incredulity across his still and solitary surroundings. An increasing inclination for such lonely ramblings, together with the feeling that his continued ill-health had grown a little irksome to his wife, and that now that he was really better she would be relieved at his absence, had induced him to wander on from home without much considering where the quiet lanes were leading him. And in spite of a peculiar melancholy that had welled up into his mind during these last few days, he had certainly smiled with a faint sense of the irony of things on lifting his eyes in an unusually depressed moodiness to find himself looking down on the shadows and peace of Widderstone. With that anxious irresolution which illness so often brings in its grain he had hesitated for what must have been some few minutes before actually entering the graveyard. But once safely within he had begun to feel extremely loth to think of turning back again, and this not the less at remembering with a real foreboding that it was now drawing towards evening, that another day was nearly done. He trailed his umbrella behind him over the grass-grown paths; staying here and there to read some time-worn inscription; stooping a little broodingly over the dark green graves. Not for the first time during the long, laborious convalescence that had followed apparently so slight an indisposition, a fleeting sense almost as if of an unintelligible remorse had overtaken him, a vague thought that behind all these past years, hidden as it were from his success, lay something not yet quite reckoned with. How often as a boy had he been rapped into a galvanic activity out of those deep reveries he used to fall into--those fits of a kind of fishlike day-dream. How often, and even far beyond boyhood, had he found himself bent on some distant thought or fleeting vision that the sudden clash of self-possession had made to seem quite illusory, and yet had left so strangely haunting. And now the old habit had stirred out of its long sleep, and, through the gate that Influenza in departing had left ajar, had returned upon him.

"But I suppose we are all pretty much the same, if we only knew it," he had consoled himself. "We keep our crazy side to ourselves; that's all. We just go on for years and years doing and saying whatever happens to come up--and really keen about it too"--he had glanced up with a kind of challenge in his face at the squat little belfry--"and then, without the slightest reason or warning,

down you go, and it all begins to wear thin, and you get wondering what on earth it all means." Memory slipped back for an instant to the life that in so unusual a fashion seemed to have floated a little aloof. Fortunately he had not discussed these inward symptoms with his wife. How surprised Sheila would be to see him loafing in this old, crooked churchyard! How she would lift her dark eyebrows, with that handsome, indifferent tolerance! He smiled, but a little confusedly; yet the thought gave even a spice of adventure to the evening's ramble.

He loitered on, scarcely thinking at all now, stooping here and there. These faint, listless ideas made no more stir than the sunlight gilding the fading leaves, the crisp turf underfoot. With a slight effort he stooped even once again;--

"Stranger, a moment pause and stay;
In this dim chamber hidden away
Lies one who once found life as dear
As now he finds his slumber here;
Pray, then, the Judgment but increase
His deep, his everlasting peace!"

"But then, how do you know lie you at peace?" Lawford audibly questioned, gazing at the doggerel. And yet, as his eye wandered over the blunt green stone and the rambling, crimson-berried brier that had almost encircled it with its thorns, the echo of that whisper rather jarred. He was, he supposed, rather a dull creature-at least people seemed to think so-and he seldom felt at ease even with his own small facetiousness. Besides, just that kind of question was getting very common. Now that cleverness was the fashion most people were clever--even perfect fools; and cleverness after all was often only a bore: all head and no body. He turned languidly to the small cross-shaped stone on the other side.

"Here lies the body of Ann Hard, who died in child-bed,
Also of James, her infant son."

He muttered the words over with a kind of mournful bitterness. "That's just it--just it; that's just how it goes!" . . . He yawned softly; the pathway had come to an end. Beyond him lay ranker grass, one and another obscurer mounds, an old scarred oak seat, shadowed by a few everlastingly green cypresses and coral-fruited yew-trees. And above and beyond all hung a pale blue arch of sky with a few voyaging clouds like silvered wood, and the calm, wide curves of stubble field and pasture land. He stood with vacant eyes, not in the least aware how queer a figure he made with his gloves and his umbrella and his hat among the stained and tottering gravestones. Then, just to linger out his hour, and half sunken in reverie, he walked slowly over to the few solitary graves beneath the cypresses.

One only was commemorated with a tombstone, a rather unusual oval-headed stone, carved at each corner into what might be the heads of angels, or of pagan dryads, blindly facing each other with worn-out, sightless faces. A low, curved stone canopy arched over the grave with a crevice so wide between its stones that Lawford actually bent down and slid in his gloved fingers between them. He straightened himself with a sigh, and followed with extreme difficulty the well-nigh illegible inscription:--

"Here lie ye bones of one,
Nicholas Sabathier, a Stranger to this Parish,
who fell by his own hand on ye
Eve of St. Michael and All Angels. MDCCXXXIX."

Of the date he was a little uncertain. The "hand" had lost its "n" and "d"; and all the "Angels" rain had erased. He was not quite sure even of the "Stranger." There was a great rich "S," and the twisted tail of a "g"; and, whether or no, Lawford smilingly thought, he is no Stranger now. But how rare and how memorable a name! French evidently; probably Huguenot. And the Huguenots, he remembered vaguely, were a rather remarkable "crowd." He had, he thought, even played at "Huguenots" once, with blood immeasurable spilt at twilight. What was the man's name? Coligny; yes, of course, Coligny. "And I suppose," Lawford continued, muttering to himself, "I suppose this poor beggar was put here out of the way. They might, you now," he added confidentially, raising the ferrule of his umbrella, "they might have stuck a stake through you, and buried you at the cross-roads!" And again a feeling of ennui, a faint disgust at his poor little witticism, clouded over his mind. It was a pity thoughts always ran the easiest way, like water in old ditches.

'"Here lie ye bones of one, Nicholas Sabathier,'" he began murmuring again--"merely bones, mind you; brains and heart are quite another story. And it's pretty certain the fellow had some kind of brains. Besides, poor devil! he killed himself. That seems to hint at brains . . . Oh, for goodness' sake!" he cried out; so loud that the sound of his voice alarmed even a robin that had perched on a twig almost within touch, with glittering eye intent above its dim red breast on this other and even rarer stranger.

"I wonder if it is XXXIX.; it might be LXXIX." Lawford cast a cautious glance over his round, grey shoulder, then laboriously knelt down beside the stone, and peeped into the gaping cranny. There he encountered merely the tiny, pale-green, faintly conspicuous eyes of a large spider, confronting his own. It was for the moment an alarming, and yet a faintly fascinating experience. The little, almost colourless, fires remained so changeless. But still, even when at last they had actually vanished into the recesses of that quiet habitation, Lawford did not rise from his knees. An utterly unreasonable feeling of dismay, a sudden weakness and weariness had come over him.

"What is the good of it all?" he asked himself inconsequently--this monotonous, restless, stupid life to which he was soon to be returning, and for good. He began to realize how ludicrous a spectacle he must be, kneeling here amid the weeds and grass beneath the solemn cypresses. "Well, you can't have everything," seemed loosely to express his disquiet.

He stared vacantly at the green and fretted gravestone, dimly aware that his heart was beating with an unusual effort. He felt ill and weak. He leant his hand on the stone and lifted himself on to the low wooden seat near by. He drew off his glove and thrust his bare hand under his waistcoat, with his mouth a little ajar, and his eyes fixed on the dark, square turret, its bell sharply defined against the evening sky.

"Dead!" a bitter inward voice seemed to break into speech; "Dead!" The viewless air seemed to be flocking with hidden listeners. The very clearness and the crystal silence were their ambush. He alone seemed to be the target of gold and hostile scrutiny. There seemed to be not a breath to breathe in this crisp, pale sunshine. It was all to rare, too thin. The shadows lay like wings

everlastingly folded. The robin that had been his only living witness lifted its throat, and broke, as if from the uttermost outskirts of reality, into its shrill, passionless song. Lawford moved heavy eyes from one object to another--bird--sun-gilded stone--those two small earth-worn faces--his hands--a stirring in the grass as of some creature labouring to climb up. It was useless to sit here any longer. He must go back now. Fancies were all very well for a change, but must be only occasional guests in a world devoted to reality. He leaned his hand on the dark grey wood, and closed his eyes. The lids presently unsealed a little, momentarily revealing astonished, aggrieved pupils, and softly, slowly they again descended. . . .

The flaming rose that had swiftly surged from the west into the zenith, dyeing all the churchyard grass a wild and vivid green, and the stooping stones above it a pure faint purple, waned softly back like a falling fountain into its basin. In a few minutes only a faint orange burned in the west, dimly illuminating with its band of light the huddled figure on his low wood seat, his right hand still pressed against a faintly bearing heart. Dusk gathered; the first white stars appeared; out of the shadowy fields a nightjar purred. But there was only the silence of the falling dew among the graves. Down here, under the ink-black cypresses, the blades of the grass were stooping with cold drops; and darkness lay like the hem of an enormous cloak, whose jewels above the breast of its wearer might be in the unfathomable clearness the glittering constellations. . . .

In his small cage of darkness Lawford shuddered and raised a furtive head. He stood up and peered eagerly and strangely from side to side. He stayed quite still, listening as raptly as some wandering night-beast to the indiscriminate stir and echoings of the darkness. He cocked his head above his shoulder and listened again, then turned upon the soundless grass towards the hill. He felt not the faintest astonishment or strangeness in his solitude here; only a little chilled, and physically uneasy; and yet in this vast darkness a faint spiritual exaltation seemed to hover. He hastened up the narrow path, walking with knees a little bent, like an old labourer who has lived a life of stooping, and came out into the dry and dusty lane. One moment his instinct hesitated as to which turn to take--only a moment; he was soon walking swiftly, almost trotting, downhill with this vivid exultation in the huge dark night in his heart, and Sheila merely a little, angry, Titianesque cloud on a scarcely perceptible horizon. He had no notion of the time; the golden hands of his watch were indiscernible in the gloom. And presently, as he passed by, he pressed his face close to the cold glass of a little shop-window, and saw the time there by an old Swiss cuckoo-clock. He would if he hurried just be home before dinner.

He broke into a low, steady trot, gaining speed as he ran on, vaguely elated to find how well his breath was serving him. An odd smile darkened his face at remembrance of the thoughts he had been thinking. There could be little amiss with the heart of a man who could shamble along like this, taking even a pleasure, an increasing pleasure, in this long, wolf-like stride. He turned round occasionally to look into the face of some fellow-wayfarer whom he had overtaken, for he felt not only this unusual animation, this peculiar zest, but that, like a boy on some secret errand, he had slightly disguised his very presence, was going masked, as it were. Even his clothes seemed to have connived at this queer illusion. No tailor had for these ten years allowed him so much latitude. He cautiously at last opened his garden gate and with soundless agility mounted the six stone steps, his latch-key ready in his gloveless hand, and softly let himself into the house.

Sheila was out, it seemed, for the maid had forgotten to light the lamp. Without pausing to take off his great-coat, he hung up his hat, ran nimbly upstairs, and knocked with a light knuckle on his bedroom door. It was closed, but no answer came. He opened it, shut it, locked it, and sat down on the bedside for a moment, in the darkness, breathless and elated. There was little the matter with his heart now. It beat hard, but vigorously and equably, so that he could scarcely hear any other sound, as he sat erect and still, like some night animal, wary of danger, attentively alert. Then he rose from the bed, threw off his coat, which was clammy with dew, and lit a candle on the dressing-table.

Its narrow flame lengthened, drooped, brightened, gleamed clearly. He glanced around him, unusually contented--at the ruddiness of the low fire, the brass bedstead, the warm red curtains, the soft silveriness here and there. It seemed as if a heavy and dull dream had withdrawn out of his mind. He would go again some day, and sit on the little hard seat beside the crooked tombstone of the friendless old Huguenot. He opened a drawer, took out his razors, and, faintly whistling, returned to the table and lit a second candle. And still with this strange heightened sense of life stirring in his mind, he drew his hand gently over his chin and looked into the glass.

For an instant he stood head to foot icily still, without the least feeling, or thought, or stir--staring into the looking-glass. Then an inconceivable drumming beat on his ear. A warm surge, like the onset of a wave, broke upward, flooding neck, face, forehead, even his hands with colour. He caught himself up and wheeled deliberately, completely round, his eyes darting to and fro, suddenly to fix themselves in a prolonged stare, while he took a deep breath, caught back his self-possession and paused. Then he turned and once more confronted the changed strange face in the glass.

Without a sound he drew up a chair and sat down, just as he was, frigid and appalled, at the foot of the bed. To sit like this, with a kind of incredibly swift torrent of consciousness, bearing thoughts like straws and bubbles on its surface, could not be called thinking. Some stealthy key had simply opened the sluice of memory. And words, voices, faces of mockery streamed through, without connection, tendency, or senses. His hands hung between his knees, a deep and settled frown darkened his face, stooping out of the direct rays of the light, and his eyes wandered like busy and inquisitive, but stupid, animals over the floor.

If, in that flood of unintelligible thoughts, anything clearly recurred at all, it was the memory of Sheila. He saw her face, lit, transfigured, distorted, stricken, appealing, horrified. His lids narrowed; a vague terror and horror mastered him. He hid his eyes in his hands and cried without sound, without tears, without hope, like a desolate child. He ceased crying; and sat without stirring. And it seemed after an age of vacancy and meaninglessness he heard a door shut downstairs, a distant voice, and then the rustle of some one slowly ascending the stairs. Some one turned the handle; in vain; tapped. "Is that you, Arthur?"

For an instant Lawford paused, then like a child listening for an echo, answered, "Yes, Sheila." And a sigh broke from him; his voice, except for a little huskiness, was slightly unchanged.

"May I come in?" Lawford stood softly up and glanced once more into the glass. His lips set tight, and a slight frown settled between the long, narrow, intensely dark eyes.

"Just one moment, Sheila," he answered slowly, "just one moment."

"How long will you be?"

He stood erect and raised his voice, gazing the while impassively into the glass.

"It's no use," he began, as if repeating a lesson, "it's no use your asking me, Sheila. Please give me a moment, a . . . I am not quite myself, deark," he added quite gravely.

The faintest hint of vexation was in the answer.

"What is the matter? Can't I help? It's so very absurd--"

"What is absurd?" he asked dully.

"Why, standing like this outside my own bedroom door. Are you ill? I will send for Dr. Simon."

"Please, Sheila, do nothing of the kind. I am not ill. I merely want a little time to think." There was again a brief pause; and then a little rattling at the handle.

"Arthur, I insist on knowing at once what's wrong; this does not sound a bit like yourself. It is not even quite like your own voice."

"It is myself," he replied stubbornly, staring fixedly into the glass. "You must give me a few moments, Sheila. Something has happened. My face. Come back in an hour."

"Don't be absurd; it's simply wicked to talk like that. How do I know what you are doing? As if I can leave you for an hour in uncertainty! Your face! If you don" open at once I shall believe there's something seriously wrong; I shall send Ada for assistance."

"If you do that Sheila, it will be disastrous. I cannot answer for the con . . . Go quietly downstairs. Say I am unwell; don't wait dinner for me; come back in an hour; oh, half an hour!"

The answer broke out angrily. "You must be mad, beside yourself, to ask such a thing. I shall wait in the next room until you call."

"Wait where you please," Lawford replied, "but tell them downstairs."

"Then if I tell them to wait until half-past eight, you will come down? You say you are not ill; the dinner will be ruined. It's absurd."

Lawford made no answer. He listened awhile, then he deliberately sat down once more to try to think. Like a squirrel in a cage his mind seemed to be aimlessly, unceasingly astir. "What is it really? What is it really?--really?" He sat there and it seemed to him his body was transparent as glass. It seemed he had no body at all--only the memory of an hallucinatory reflectin in the glass, and this inward voice crying, arguing, questioning, threatening out of the silence--"What is ir really--really--\\\really?///" And at last, cold, wearied out, he rose once more and leaned between the two long candle-flames, and stared on--on--on, into the glass. He gave that long, dark face that had been foisted on him tricks to do--lift an eyebrow, frown. There was scarcely any perceptible

pause between the wish and its performance. He found to his discomfiture that the face answered instantaneously to the slightest emotion, even to his fainter secondary thoughts; as if these unfamiliar features were not entirely within control. He could not, in fact, without the glass before him, tell precisely what that face was expressing. He was still, it seemed, keenly sane. That he would discover for certain when Sheila returned. Terror, rage, horror had fallen back. If only he felt ill, or was in pain; he would have rejoiced at it. He was simply caught in some unheard-of snare--caught, how? when? where? by whom?

CHAPTER II

BUT the coolness and deliberation of his scrutiny, had to a certain extent calmed Lawford's mind and given him confidence. Hitherto he had met the little difficulties of life only to vanquish them with ease and applause. Now he was standing face to face with the unknown. He burst out laughing, into a long, low, helpless laughter. Then he arose and began to walk softly, swiftly, to and fro across the room--from wall to wall seven paces, and at the fourth, that awful, unseen, brightly-lit profile passed as swiftly over the tranquil surface of the looking-glass. The power of concentration was gone again. He simply paced on mechanically, listening to a Babel of questions, a conflicting medley of answers. But above all the confusion and turmoil of his brain, as the boatswain's whistle rises above a storm, so sounded that same infinitesimal voice, incessantly repeating another question now, "What are you going to do? What are you going to do?"

And in the midst of this confusion, out of the infinite, as it were, came another sharp tap at the door, and all within sank to utter stillness again.

"It's nearly half-past eight, Arthur; I can't wait any longer."

Lawford cast a last fleeting look into the glass, turned, and confronted the closed door. "Very well, Sheila, you shall not wait any longer." He crossed over to the door, and suddenly a vehement idea flashed into his mind.

He tapped on the panel. "Sheila," he said softly, "I want you first, before you come in, to get me something out of my old writing-desk in the smoking-room. Here is the key." He pushed a tiny key from off the ring he carried beneath the door. "In the third little drawer from the top, on the left side, is a letter; please don't say anything now. It is the letter you wrote me, you will remember, after I had asked you to marry me. You scribbled in the corner under your signature the initials 'Y.S.O.A.'--do you remember? They meant, You Silly Old Arthur!--do you remember? Will you please get that letter at once?"

"Arthur," answered the voice from without, empty of all expression, "what does all this mean, this mystery, this hopeless nonsense about a silly letter? What has happened? Is this a miserable form of persecution? Are you mad?--I refuse to get the letter."

Lawford stooped, black and angular, against the door. "I am not mad. Oh, I am in the deadliest earnest, Sheila. You must get the letter, if only for your own peace of mind." He heard his wife hesitate as she turned. He heard a sob. And once more he waited.

"I have brought the letter," came the low toneless voice again.

"Have you opened it?"

There was a rustle of paper. "Are the letters there--underlined three times--'Y.S.O.A?"'

"The letters are there."

"And the date of the month is underneath, 'April 3rd.' No one else in the whole world, living or dead, could know of this but ourselves, Sheila?"

"Will you please open the door?"

"No one?"

"I suppose not--no one."

"Then come in." He unlocked the door and opened it. A dark, rather handsome woman, with sleek hair, in a silk dress of a dark rich colour entered. Lawford closed the door. But his face was in shadow. He had still a moment's respite.

"I need not ask you to be patient," he began quickly; "if I could possibly have spared you--if there had been anybody in the world to go to . . . I am in a horrible, horrible trouble, Sheila. It is inconceivable. I said I was sane: so I am, but the fact is, I went out for a walk; it was rather stupid, perhaps, so soon: and I think I was taken ill, or something--my heart. A kind of fit, a nervous fit. Possibly I am a little unstrung, and it's all, it's mainly fancy: but I think, I can't help thinking itg has a little distorted--changed my face; everything, Sheila; except, of course, myself. Would you mind looking?" He walked slowly and with face averted towards the dressing-table.

"Simply a nervous--to make such a fuss, to scare!" began his wife, following him.

Without a word he took up the two old china candlesticks, and held them, one in each lank-fingered hand, before his face and turned.

Lawford could see his wife--every tint and curve and line as distinctly as she could see him. Her cheeks never had much colour; now her whole face visible darkened, from pallor to a dusky leaden grey, as she gazed. It was not an illusion, then; not a miserable hallucination. The unbelievable, the inconceivable, had happened. He replaced the candles with trembling fingers, and sat down.

"Well," he said, "what is it really; what is it really, Sheila? What on earth are we to do?"

"Is the door locked?" she whispered. He nodded. With eyes fixed stirlessly on his face, Sheila unsteadily seated herself, a little out of the candlelight, in the shadow. Lawford rose and put the key of the door on his wife's little rose-wood prayer-desk at her elbow, and deliberately sat down again.

"You said a 'fit'--where?"

"I suppose--is--is it very different--hopeless? You will understand my being . . . O Sheila, what am I to do?" His wife sat perfectly still, watching him with unflinching attention.

"You gave me to understand--'a nervous fit'; where?"

Lawford took a deep breath, and quietly faced her again. "In the old churchyard, Widderstone; I was looking at--at the gravestones."

"A fit; in the old churchyard, Widderstone--you were 'looking at the gravestones'?"

Lawford shut his mouth. "I suppose so--a fit," he said presently. "My heart went a little queer, and I sat down and fell into a kind of doze--a stupor, I suppose. I don't remember anything more. And then I woke; like this."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know what?"

"'Like that.'"

He turned slowly towards the looking-glass. "Why, here I am!"

She gazed at him steadily; and a hard, incredulous, almost cunning glint came into her wide blue eyes. She took up the key carelessly, glanced at it; glanced at him. "It has made me--I mean the first shock, you know--it has made me a little faint." She walked slowly, deliberately to the door, and unlocked it. "I'll get a little sal volatile." She softly drew out the key, and without once removing her eyes from his face, opened the door and pushed the key noiselessly in on the other side. "Please stay there; I won't be a minute."

Lawford's face smiled--a rather desperate, yet for all that a patient, resolute smile. "Oh yes, of course," he said, almost to himself, "I had not foreseen, at least--you must do precisely what you please, Sheila. You were going to lock me in. You will, however, before taking any final step, please think over what it will entail. I did not think you would, after such proof, in this awful trouble--I did not think you would simply disbelieve me, Sheila. Who else is there to help me? You have the letter in your hand. Isn't that sufficient proof? It was overwhelming proof to me. And even I doubted too; doubted myself. But never mind; why I should have dreamed you would believe me; or taken this awful thing differently, I don't know. It's rather awful to have to go on alone. But there, think it over. I shall not stir until I hear the voices. And then: honestly, Sheila, I couldn't face quite that. I'd sooner give up altgogether. Any proof you can think of--I will--O God, I cannot bear it!" He covered his face with his hands; but in a moment looked up, unmoved once more. "Why, for that matter," he added slowly, and, as it were, with infinite pains, a faint thin smile again stealing into his face, "I think," he turned wearily to the glass, "I think it's almost an improvement!"

Something deep in those dark, clear eyes, out of that lean adventurous face, gleamed back at him, as it were, the distant flash of a heliograph, height to height, flashing "Courage!" He shuddered, and shut his eyes. "But I would really rather," he added in a quiet, childlike way, "I would really rather, Sheila, you left me alone now."

His wife stood irresolute. "I understand you to explain," she said, "that you went out of this house, just your usual self, this afternoon, for a walk; that for some reason you went to Widderstone--to

read the tombstones,' that you had a heart attack, or, as you said at first, a fit, that you fell into a stupor, and came home like--like this. Am I likely to believe all that? Am I likely to believe such a story as that? Whoever you are, whoever you may be, is it likely? I am not in the least afraid. I thought at first it was some silly practical joke. I thought that at first." She paused, but no answer came. "Well, I suppose in a civilised country there is a remedy even for a joke as wicked as that."

Lawford listened patiently. "She is pretending; she is trying me; she is feeling her way," he kept repeating to himself. "She knows I am I, but hasn't the courage . . . Let her talk!"

"I shall leave the door open," Sheila continued. "I am not, as you no doubt very naturally assumed--I am not going to do anything either senseless or heedless. I am merely going to ask your brother Cecil to come it, if he is at home, and if not, no doubt our old friend Mr. Montgomery would--would help us." Her scrutiny was still and concentrated, like that of a cat above a mouse's hole.

Lawford sat crouched together in the candle-light. "By all means, Sheila," he said, slowly choosing his words, "if you think poor old Cecil, who next January will have been dead three years, will be of any use in our difficulty. Who Mr. Montgomery is . . ." His voice dropped in utter weariness. "You did it very well, my dear," he added softly.

Sheila gently closed the door and sat down on the bed. He heard her softly crying, he heard the bed shaken with her sobs. But a slow glance towards the steady candle-flames restrained him. He let her cry on alone. When she had become a little more composed he stood up. "You have had no dinner," he managed to blurt out at last, "you will be faint. It's useless to talk, even to think, any more to-night. Leave me to myself for a while. Don't look at me any more. Perhaps I can sleep: perhaps if I sleep it will come right again. When the servants are gone up I will come down. Just let me have some--some medical book, or other; and some more candles. Don't think, Sheila; don't even think!"

Sheila paid him no attention for awhile. "You tell me not to think," she began, in a low, almost listless voice; "why--I wonder I am in my right mind. And 'eat'! How can you have the heartlessness to suggest it? You don't seem in the least to realise what you say. You seem to have lost all--all consciousness. I quite agree, it is useless for me tgo burden you with my company while you are in your present condition of mind. But you will at least promise me that you won't take any further steps in this awful business." She could not, try as she would, bring herself again to look at him. She rose softly, paused a moment with sidelong eyes, then turned deliberately towards the door. "What, what have I done to deserve all this?"

And again that voice, so extraordinarily like, and yet in some vague fashion more arresting, more resonant than her husband's broke incredibly out once more. "You will please leave the key, Sheila. I am ill, but I am not yet in the padded room. And please understand, I take no further steps in 'this awful business' until I hear a strange voice in this house." Sheila paused, but the quiet voice rang in her ear, desperately yet convincingly. She took the key out of the lock, placed it on the bed, and with a sigh, that was not quite without a hint of relief in its misery, she rustled downstairs.

She speedily returned. "I have brought the book," she said hastily. "I could only find the one volume. I have said you have taken a fresh chill. No one will disturb you."

With fumbling fingers Lawford, when completely deserted, opened Quain's "Dictionary of Medicine." He had never had much curiosity, and had always hated what he disbelieved, but none the less he had heard occasionally of absurd and questionable experiments. He remembered even to have glanced over reports of cases in the newspapers concerning disappearances, loss of memory, dual personality. Cranks . . . Oh yes, he thought now, with a sense of cold humiliating relief, there had been such cases as his before. They were no doubt curable. They must be comparatively common in America--that land of jangled nerves. Possibly bromide, rest, a battery. . . . But Quain, it seemed, shared his prejudices, at least in this edition, or had hidden away all such apocryphal matter beneath technical terms, where no sensible man could find it. "Besides," he muttered angrily, "what's the good of your one volume?" He flung it down and strode to the bed, and rang for the bell. Then suddenly recollecting himself, he paused and listened. There came a tap on the door. "Is that you, Sheila?" he called, doubtfully.

"No, sir, it's me," came the answer.

"Oh, don't trouble; I only wanted to speak to your mistress. It's all right."

"Mistress has gone out, sir," replied the voice.

"Gone out?"

"Yes, sir; she told me not to mention it; but I suppose as you asked----"

"Oh, that's all right; never mind; I didn't ring." He stood with face uplifted, thinking.

"Can I do anything, sir?" came the faint, nervous question after a long pause.

"One moment, Ada," he called in a loud voice. He took out his pocket-book, sat down, and scribbled a little note. He hardly noticed how changed his handwriting was--all the clear round letters crabbed and irregular.

"Are you there, Ada?" he called. "I am slipping the note beneath the door; just draw back the mat; that's it. Take it at once, please, to Mr. Critchett's, and be sure to wait for an answer. Then come back direct to me, up here. I don't think, Ada, your mistress believes much in Critchett; but I have fully explained what I want. He has made me up many prescriptions. Explain that to his assistant if he is not there. Go at once, and you will be back before she is. I should be so very much obliged, tell him. 'Mr. Arthur Lawford.'"

The minutes slowly drifted by. He sat quite still, in the clear, untroubled light, waiting in the silence of the empty house. And for the first time he was confronted with the cold incredible horror of his ordeal. Who would believe, who could believe, that behind this strange and awful, yet how simple mask, lay himself? What test; what heaped-up evidence of identity would break it down? It was all a loathsome ignominy. It was utterly absurd. It was----"

Suddenly, with a kind of ape-like cunning, he deliberately raised a long lean forefinger and pointed it at the shadowy crystal of the looking-glass. Perhaps he was dead, was really and indeed changed in body, was fated really and indeed to change in soul, into That. "It's that beastly voice again,"

Lawford cried out loud, looking vacantly at his upstretched finger. And then, hand and arm, not too willingly, as it were, obeyed; relaxed and fell to his side. "You must keep a tight hold, old man," he muttered to himself. "Once, once you lose yourself the least symptom of that--the least symptom, and it's all up!" And the fools, the heartless, preposterous fools had brought him one volume!

When on earth was Ada coming back? She was lagging on purpose. She was in the conspiracy too. Oh, it should be a lesson to Sheila! Oh, if only daylight would come! "What are you going to do--to do--to DO?" He rose once more and paced his silent cage. To and fro, thinking no more; just using his eyes, compelling them to wander from picture to picture, bedpost to bedpost; now counting aloud his footsteps; now humming; only, only to keep himself from thinking. At last he took out a drawer and actually began arranging its medley of contents: ties, letters, studs, concert and theatre programmes--all higgledy-piggledy. And in the midst of this childlike stratagem he heard a faintg sound, as of heavy water trickling from a height. He turned. A thief was in one of the candles. It was guttering out. He would be left in darkness. He turned hastily without a moment's heed, to call for light, flung the door open, and full in the flare of a lamp, illuminating her pale forehead and astonished face beneath her black straw hat, stood face to face with Ada.

With one swift dexterous movement he drew the door to after him, looking straight into her almost colourless steady eyes. "Ah," he said instantly, in a high, faint voice, "the powder, thank you; yes, Mr. Lawford's powder; thank you, thank you. He must be kept absolutely quiet--absolutely. Mrs. Lawford is following. Please tell her that I am here, when she returns. Mr. Critchett was in, then? Thank you. Extreme, extreme silence, please." Again that knotted, melodramatic finger raised itself on high; and within that lean, cadaverous body the soul of its lodger quailed at this spectral boldness. But it was triumphant. The maid at once left him and went downstairs. He heard faint voices in muffled consultation. And in a moment Sheila's silks rustled once more on the staircase. Lawford put down the lamp, and watched her deliberately close the door.

"What does this mean?" she began swiftly, "I understand that--Ada tells me a stranger is here; giving orders, directions. Who is he? where is he? You bound yourself on your solemn promise not to stir till I returned. You . . . How can I, how can we get decently through this horrible business if you are so wretchedly indiscreet? You sent Ada to the chemist's. What for? What for? I say."

Lawford watched his wife with an almost extraneous interest. She was certainly extremely interesting from that point of view, that very novel point of view. "It's quite useless," he said, "to get in the least nervous or hysterical. I don't care for the darkness just now. That was all. Tell the girl I am a strange doctor--Dr. Simon's new partner--you are clever at conventionalities, Sheila. Invent! I said out patient must be kept quiet--I really think he must; that is all, so far as Ada is concerned. . . . What on earth else are we to say?" he broke out. "That, for the present to everybody, is our only possible story. It will give us what we must have--time. And next--where is the second volume of Quain? I want that. And next--why have you broken faith with me?" Mrs. Lawford sat down. This sudden and baffling outburst had stupefied her.

"I can't, I can't make head or tail of what you say. And as for having broken faith, as you call it, would any wife, would any sane woman, face what you have brought on us, a situation like this, without seeking advice and help? Mr. Bethany will be perfectly discreet--if he thinks discretion desirable. He is the only available friend we have close enough to ask at once. And things of this

kind are, I suppose, if anybody's concern, his. It's certain to leak out. Everybody will hear of it. Don't flatter yourself you are going to hush up a thing like this for long. You can't keep living skeletons in a cupboard. You think only of yourself, only of your own misfortune. But who's to know, pray, that you really are my husband--if you are? The sooner I get the vicar on my side the better for us both. Who in the whole of the parish--I ask you--and you must have the sense left to see that--who will believe that a respectable man, a gentleman, a Churchman, would deliberately go out to seek an afternoon's amusement in a poky little country churchyard? Why, apart from everything else, that was absolutely mad to start with. Can you really wonder at the result?" Probably because she still steadfastly refused to look at him, her memory kept losing its hold on the appalling fact of his change. She only realised fully that she was in a great, unwarrantable, and insurmountable difficulty, but until she actually lifted her eyes for a moment she had not fully realised what that difficulty was. She got up with a sudden and horrible nausea. "One moment," she said, "I will see if the servants have gone to bed."

That long, saturnine face, behind which Mr. Lawford lay in a dull and desperate ambush, smiled. Something partaking of its clay, some reflex ghost of its rather remarkable features, was even a little amused at Sheila.

She returned in a moment, and stood in profile in the doorway. "Will you come down?" she remarked, distantly.

"One moment, Sheila," Mr. Lawford began miserably. "Before we take this irrevocable step, a step I implore you to postpone awhile--for what comes, I suppose, may go--what precisely have you told the vicar? I must in fairness know that."

"In fairness," she began ironically, and suddenly broke off. Her husband had turned the flame of the lamp low down in the vacant room behind them; the corridor was lit but obscurely by the chandelier far down in the hall below. A faint, inexplicable dread fell softly and coldly on her heart. "Have you no trust in me?" she murmured a little bitterly. "I have simply told you the bare facts."

They softly descended the stairs; she first, the dark figure following close behind her.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Bethany sat awaiting them in the dining-room, a large, heavily-furnished room with a great benign looking-glass on the mantelpiece, a marble clock, and rich old damask curtains. Fleecy silver hair was all that was visible of their visitor when they entered. But Mr. Bethany rose out of his chair when he heard them, and with a little jerk, turned sharply round. Thus it was that the gold-spectacled vicar and Lawford first confronted each other, the one brightly illuminated, the other framed in the gloom of the doorway. Mr. Bethany's first scrutiny was timid and courteous, but beneath it he tried to be keen, and himself hastened round the table almost at a trot, to obtain, as delicately as possible, a closer view. But Lawford, having shut the door behind him, had gone straight to the fire and seated himself, leaning his face in his hands. Mr. Bethany smiled faintly, waved his hand almost as if in blessing, but certainly in peace, and tapped Mrs. Lawford into the chair upon the other side. But he himself remained standing.

"Mrs. Lawford has, I declare, been telling family secrets," he began, and paused, peering. "But there, you will forgive an old friend's intrusion--this little confidence about a change, my dear fellow--about a ramble and a change?" He sat down, put up his kind little puckered face and peered again at Lawford, and then very hastily at his wife. But all her attention was centred on the bowed figure opposite to her. Lawford responded to this cautious advance without raising his head.

"You do not wish me to repeat all that my wife tells me she has told you?"

"Dear me, no," said Mr. Bethany cheerfully, "I wish nothing, nothing, old friend. You must not burden yourself with me. If I may be of any help, here I am. . . . Oh, no, no, . . ." he paused, with blinking eyes, but wits still shrewd and alert. Why doesn't the man raise his head? he thought. A mere domestic dipute!

"I thought," he went on ruminatingly, "I thought on Tuesday, yes, on Tuesday, that you weren't looking quite the thing. Indeed, I remarked on it. But now, I understand from Mrs. Lawford that the malady has taken a graver turn--eh, Lawford, an heretical turn? I hear you have been wandering from the true fold." Mr. Bethany leaned forward with what might be described as a very large smile, in a very small compass. "And that, of course, entailed instant retribution." He broke off solemnly. "I know Widderstone churchyard well; a most verdant and beautiful spot. The late rector, a Mr. Strickland, was a very old friend of mine. And his wife, dear good Alicia, used to set out her babies, in the morning, to sleep and to play there, twenty, dear me, perhaps twenty-five years ago. But I did not know, my dear Lawford, that you----" and suddenly, without an instant's warning, something seemed to shout at him, "Look, look! He is looking at you!" He stopped, faltered, and a slight warmth came into his face. "And--and you were taken ill there?" His voice had fallen quite flat and faint.

"I fell asleep--or something of that sort," came the stubborn reply.

"Yes," said Mr. Bethany, brightly, "so your wife was saying. 'Fell asleep,' so have I too--scores of times;" he beamed, with beads of sweat glistening on his forehead. "And then--I'm not, I'm not persisting?"

"Then I woke; refreshed, I think, as it seemed--I felt much better and came home."

"Ah, yes," said his visitor. And after that there was a long, brightly lit, intense pause; at the end of which Lawford raised his face and again looked firmly at the kindly vicar.

Mr. Bethany was a very shrunken old man; he sat perfectly still, his head craned a little forward, and his veined hands clutching his bent, spare knees.

There wasn't the least sign of devilry, or outfacingness, or insolence in that lean, shadowy, steady head; and yet the vicar was compelled to sidle his glance away, so much the face shook him. He closed his eyes, too, as a cat does after exchanging too direct a scrutiny with human eyes. He put out towards, and withdrew, a groping hand from Mrs. Lawford.

"Is it," came a voice from somewhere, "is it a great change, sir? I thought perhaps I may have exaggerated--candle-light, you know."

Mr. Bethany remained still and silent, striving to entertain one thought at a time. His lips moved as if he were talking to himself. And again it was Lawford's faltering voice that broke the silence. "You see," he said, "I have never . . . no fit, or anything of that kind before. I remember on Tuesday . . . oh yes, quite well. I did feel seedy, very. And we talked, didn't we?--Harvest Festival. Mrs. Winn's flowers, the new offertory-bags, and all that. For God's sake, Vicar, it is not as bad as--as they make out?"

Mr. Bethany woke with a start. He leaned forward, and stretched out a long, black wrinkled sleeve, just managing to reach far enough to tap Lawford's knee. "Don't worry, don't worry," he said soothingly. "We believe, we believe."

It was, none the less, a sheer act of faith. He took off his spectacles and took out his handkerchief. "What we must do, eh, my dear," he half turned to Mrs. Lawford, "what we must do is to consult, yes, consult together. And later--we must have advice--medical advice; unless, as I very much suspectg, it is merely a little quite temporary physical aberration. Science, I am told, is making great strides, experimenting, groping after things which no sane man has ever dreamed of before--without being burned alive for it. What's in a name? Nerves, especially, Lawford."

Mrs. Lawford sat perfectly still, absorbedly listening, turning her face first this way, then that, to each speaker in turn. "That is what I thought," she said, and cast one fleeting glance across at the fireplace, "but----"

The little old gentleman turned sharply with half-blind eyes, and lips tight shut. "I think," he said, with a kind of austere humour, "I think, do you know, I see no 'but.'" He paused as if to catch the echo, and added, "It's our only course." He continued to polish round and round his glasses. Mrs. Lawford rather magnificently rose.

"Perhaps if I were to leave you together awhile: I shall not be far off. It is," she explained, as it were into a huge vacuum, "it is a terrible visitation." She moved gravely round the table and very softly and firmly closed the door after her.

Lawford took a deep breath. "Of course," he said, "you realise my wife does not believe me. She thinks," he explained naively, as if to himself, "she thinks I am an impostor. Goodness knows what she does think. I can't think much myself--for long!"

The vicar rubbed busily on. "I have found, Lawford," he said smoothly, "that in all real difficulties the only feasible plan is--is to face the main issue. The others right themselves. Now, to take a plunge into your generosity, Lawford. May I hear, for you've let me in far enough to make it impossible for me to get out--exactly the whole story? All that I know now, so far as I could gather from your wife, poor soul, is, of course, inconceivable; that you went out one man and came home another. You will understand, my dear man, I am speaking, as it were, by rote. God has mercifully ordered that the human brain works slowly; first the blow, hours afterwards the bruise. Oh, dear me, that man Hume--'on miracles'--positively amazing! So that too, please, you will be quite clear about; Credo--not--quia impossibile est, but because you, Lawford, have told me. Now then, if it won't be too wearisome to you, the whole story." He sat, lean and erect in his big chair, a hand resting loosely on each knee, in one spectacles, in the other a dangling pocket handkerchief. And

the dark, sallow, aquiline, formidable figure, with its oddly changing voice, re-told the whole story from the beginning.

"You were aware, then, of nothing different, I understand, until you actually looked into the glass?"

"Only vaguely. I mean that after waking I felt much better, more alert. And my thoughts----"

"Ah, yes, your thoughts?"

"I hardly know--oh, clear, as if I had had a real long rest. It was just like being a boy again. Influenza dispirits one so."

Mr. Bethany gazed without stirring. "And yet, you know," he said, "I can hardly believe, I mean conceive, how---- You have been taking no drugs, no quackery, Lawford?"

"I never dose myself," said Lawford, with sombre pride.

"God bless me, that's Lawford to the echo," thought his visitor. "And before----" he went on gently; "you see, I really cannot conceive how a mere fit could . . . Before you sat down you were quite alone?" He stuck out his head. "There was nobody with you?"

"With me? Oh no," came the soft answer.

"What had you been thinking of? In these days of faith-cures, and hypnotism, and telepathy, and subliminalities--why, the simple old world grows very confusing; but rarely, very rarely novel. You were thinking, you say; do you remember, perhaps, just the drift?"

"Well," began Lawford ruminatingly, "there was something curious even then, perhaps. I remember, for instance I knelt down to read an old tombstone. There was a little seat--no back. And an epitaph. The sun was just setting; some French name. And there was a long jagged crack in the stone, like the black line you know one sees after lightning. I mean it's as clear as that even now, in memory. Oh yes, I remember. And then, I suppose, came the sleep--stupid, sluggish: and then; well, here I am!"

"You are absolutely certain, then," persisted Mr. Bethany almost querulously, "there was no living creature near you. Bless me, Lawford, I see no unkindness in believing what the Bible itself relates. There are powers supernatural. Saul, and so on. We are all convinced of that. No one?"

"I remember distinctly," replied Lawford, in a calm, stubborn voice, "I looked up all around me, while I was kneeling there, and there wasn't a soul to be seen. Because, you see, it even then occurred to me that it would have looked rather queer--my wandering about like that, I mean. Facing me there were some cypress-trees, and beyond, a low sunken fence, and then, just open country. Up above there were the gravestones toppling down hill, where I had just strolled down, and sunshine!" He suddenly threw up his hand. "Oh, marvellous! streaming in gold, flaming, like God's own ante-chamber."

There was a pregnant pause. Mr. Bethany shrunk back a little into his chair. His lips moved; he folded his spectacles.

"Yes, yes," he said. And then very quietly he stole one mole-like look into his sidesman's face.

"What is Dr. Simon's number?" he said. Lawford was gazing gloomily into the fire. "Oh, Annandale," he replied absently. "I don't know the number."

"Do you believe in him? Your wife mentioned him. Is he clever?"

"Oh, he's new," said Lawford; "old James was our doctor. He--he killed my father." He laughed out shamefacedly.

"A sound, lovable man," said Mr. Betnahy, "one of the kindest men I ever knew; and a very old friend of mine."

And suddenly the dark face turned with a shudder from the fire, and spoke in a low trembling voice. "Only one thing--only one thing--my sanity, my sanity. If once I forget, who will believe me?" He thrust his long, lean fingers beneath his coat. "And mad," he added; "I would sooner die."

Mr. Bethany deliberately adjusted his spectacles. "May I, may I experiment?" he said boldly. There came a tap at the door.

"Bless me," said the vicar, taking out his watch, "it is a quarter to twelve. "Yes, yes, Mrs. Lawford," he trotted round to the door. "We are beginning to see light--a ray!"

"But I--I can see in the dark," whispered Lawford, as if at a cue, turning with an inscrutable smile to the fire.

The vicar came in again, wrapped up in a little tight grey great-coat, and a white silk muffler. He looked up unflinching into Lawford's face, and tears stood in his eyes. "Patience, patience, my dear fellow," he repeated gravely, squeezing his hand. "And rest, complete rest, is imperative. Just till the first thing to-morrow. And till then," he turned to Mrs. Lawford, where she stood looking in at the doorway, "oh yes, complete quiet; and caution!"

Mrs. Lawford let him out. He shook his head once or twice, holding her fingers. "Oh yes," he whispered, "it is your husband, not the smallest doubt. I tried; for myself. But something--something has happened. Don't fret him now. Have patience. Oh yes, it is incredible . . . the change! But there, the very first thing to-morrow." She closed the door gently after him, and stepping softly back to the dining-room, peered in. Her husband's back was turned, but he could see her in the looking-glass, stooping a little, with set face watching him, in the silvery stillness.

"Well," he said, "is the old----" he doggedly met the fixed eyes facing him there, "is our old friend gone?"

"Yes," said Sheila, "he's gone." Lawford sighed and turned around. "It's useless talking now, Sheila. No more questions. I cannot tell you how tired I am; and my head."

"What is wrong with your head?" inquired his wife discreetly.

The haggard face turned gravely and patiently. "Only one of my old headaches," he smiled, "my old bilious headaches--the hereditary Lawford variety." But his voice fell low again. "We must get to bed."

With a rather pretty and childish movement, Sheila gently drew her hands across her silk skirts. "Yes, dear," she said, "I have made up a bed for you in the large spare room. It is thoroughly aired." She came softly in, and hastened over to a closed work-tab that stood under the curtains and opened it.

Lawford watched her, utterly expressionless, utterly motionless. He opened his mouth and shut it again, still watching his wife stooping with ridiculously too busy fingers, searching through her coloured silks.

Again he opened his mouth. "Yes," he said, and stalked slowly towards the door. But there he paused. "God knows," he said, strangely and meekly, "I am sorry, sorry for all this. You will forgive me, Sheila?"

She looked up swiftly. "It's very tiresome, I can't find anywhere," she murmured, "I can't find anywhere the--the red-box key."

Lawford's cheek turned more sallow than ever. "You are only pretending to look for it," he said, "to try me. We both know perfectly well the lock is broken. Ada broke it."

Sheila let fall the lid. "I am so very glad the vicar was at home," she said brightly. "And mind, mind you rest, Arthur. There's nothing so bad but it might be worse. Oh, I can't, I can't bear it!" She sat down in a chair and huddled her face between her hands, sobbing on and on, without a tear.

Lawford listened and stared solemnly on. "Whatever it may be, Sheila, I will be loyal," he said.

Her sobs hushed, and again the cold horror crept over her. Nobody in the whole world could have said that "I will be loyal" quite like that--nobody but Arthur. She stood up, patting her hair. "I don't think my brain would bear much more. It's useless to talk, Arthur. If you will go up; I will put out the lamp."

CHAPTER IV

ONE solitary and tall candle burned on the great dressing-table. Faint, solitary pictures broke the blankness of each wall. The carpet was rich, the bed impressive, and the basins on the washstand as uninviting as the bed. Lawford sat down on the edge of the bed in complete isolation. He sat without stirring, listening to his watch ticking in his pocket. The china clock on the chimney-piece pointed cheerfully to the hour of dawn. It was exactly, he computed carefully, five hours and seven minutes fast. Not the slightest sound broke the stillness, until he heard, very, very softly and gradually, the key of his door turn in the oiled wards, and realised that he was a prisoner. Women were strange creatures. How often he had heard it said! he thought lamely. He felt no anger, no surprised nor resentment, at the trick. It was only to be expected. He could sit on till morning;

easily till morning. He had never noticed before how empty a well-furnished room could seem. It was his own room too; his best visitor's room. His father-in-law had slept here, with his whiskers on that pillow. His wife's most formidable aunt had been all night here, alone with these pictures. She certainly was . . . "But what are you doing here?" cried a voice suddenly out of his reverie.

He started up and stretched himself, and taking out the neat little packet that the maid had brought from the chemist's, he drew up a chair, and sat down once more in front of the glass. He sighed vacantly, rose and took down from the wall above the fireplace a tinted photograph of himself that Sheila had had enlarged about twelve years ago. It was a brighter, younger, hairier, but unmistakably the same dull, indolent Lawford who had ventured into Widderstone churchyard that afternoon. The cheek was a little plumper, the eyes not quite so full-lidded, the hair a little more precisely parted, the upper lip graced with a small blond moustache. He tilted the portrait into the candlelight, and compared it with this reflection in the glass of what had come out of Widderstone, feature with feature, with perfect composure and extreme care. Then he laid the ugly frame down on the table, and gazed quietly at the tiny packet. It was to be a day of queer experiences. He had never realised before with how many miracles mere everyday life is besieged. Here in this small punctilious packet lay a Sesame, a transformation, beside which the transformation of that rather flaccid face of the noonday into this tense, sinister face of midnight was but as a moving from house to house--a change just as irrevocable and complete, and yet so very normal. Which should it be, that--his face lifted itself once more to the icelike gloom of the looking-glass--that, or this?

It simply gazed back with a kind of quizzical pity on its lean features under the scrutiny of eyes so deep, so meaningful, so desolate, and yet so indomitably courageous. In the brain behind them a slow and stolid argument was in progress; the one baffling reply on the one side to every appeal on the other being simply, "What dreams may come?"

Those eyes surely knew something of dreams, else, why this violent and stubborn endeavour to keep awake? Lawford did indeed once actually frame the question, "But who the devil are you?" And it really seemed the eyes perceptibly widened or brightened. The mere vexation of this unparalleled position, Sheila's pathetic incredulity, his old vicar's laborious kindness, the tiresome network of experience into which he would be dragged struggling on the morrow, and on the morrow after that, and after that--the thought of all these things faded for the moment from his mind, lost if not their significance, at least their instancy. He simply sat face to face with the sheer difficulty of living on at all. He even concluded in a kind of lethargy that had nothing occurred, no "change," he might still be sitting here, Arthur Bennet Lawford, in his best visitor's room, deciding between inscrutable life and just--death. He supposed he was tired out. His thoughts hadn't even the energy to complete themselves. None cared but himself and this--this Silence.

"But what does it all mean?" the insistent voice he was getting to know so ell began tediously inquiring again. And every time he raised his eyes, or, rather, as in many cases it seemed, his eyes raised themselves, they saw this haunting face there--a face he no longer bitterly rebelled at, nor dimmed with scrutiny, but a face that was becoming a kind of hold on life, even a kind of refuge, an ally. It was a face that might have come out of a rather flashy book; such as is revered on the stage. "A rotten bad face," he whispered at it in his own familiar slang, after some such abrupt encounter; a fearless, packed, daring, fascinating face, with even--what?--a spice of genius in it. Whose the devil's face was it? What on earth was the matter? . . . "Brazen it out," a jubilant thought

cried suddenly; "follow it up; play the mate! give me just one opening. Think--think what I've risked!"

And all these voices, thought Lawford, in deadly lassitude, meant only one thing--insanity. A blazing, impotent indignation seized him. He leaned near, peering as it were out of a red dusky mist. He snatched up the china candlestick, and poised it above the sardonic reflection, as if to throw. Then slowly, with infinite pains, he drew back from the glass and replaced the candlestick on the table; stuffed his paper packet into his pocket, took off his boots and threw himself on to the bed. In a little while, in the faint, still light, he opened drowsily wandering eyes. "Poor old thing!" his voice murmured--"Poor old Sheila!"

CHAPTER V

IT WAS a little after daybreak when Mrs. Lawford, after listening at his door awhile, turned the key and looked in on her husband. Blue-grey light from between the venetian blinds just dusked the room. She stood in a bluish dressing-gown, her hand on her bosom, looking down on the lean, impassive face. For the briefest instant her heart had leapt with an indescribable surmise; to fall dull as lead once more. Breathing equably and quietly, the strange figure lay stretched upon the bed. "How can he sleep? How can he sleep?" she whispered with a black and hopeless indignation. What a night she had had! And he!

She turned noiselessly away. The candle had guttered to extinction. The big glass reflected her, voluminous and wan, her dark-ringed eyes, full lips, rich, glossy hair, and rounded chin. "Yes, yes," it seemed to murmur mournfully. She turned away, and drawing stealthily near stooped once more quite low, and examined the face on the pillow with lynx-like concentration. And though every nerve revolted at the thought, she was finally convinced, unwillingly even, but assuredly, that her husband was here. He seemed to haunt, like a ghostly emanation, this strange, detestable face--as memory supplies the features concealed beneath a mask. The face was still and stony, like one dead or imagined in wax, yet beneath it dreams were passing--silly, ordinary Lawford dreams. She was almost alarmed at the terribly rancorous hatred she felt for the face. . . . "It was just like Arthur to be so taken in!"

Then she too remembered Quain, and remembered also in the slowly paling dusk that the house would soon be stirring. She went out and noiselessly locked the door again. But it was useless to begin looking for Quain now--her husband had a good many dull book, most of them his "eccentric" father's. What must the servants be thinking? And what was all that talk about a mysterious visitor? She would have to question Ada--diplomatically. She returned to her room and sat down in an arm-chair, and waited. In sheer weariness she fell into a doze, and woke at the sound of dustpan and broom. She rang the bell, and asked for hot water, tea, and a basin of cornflour.

"And please, Ada, be as quiet as possible over your work; your master is in a nice sleep, and must not be disturbed on any account. In the front bedroom." She looked up suddenly. "By the way, who let Dr. Ferguson in last night?" It was dangerous, but successful.

"Dr. Ferguson in? Oh, you mean . . . He was in."

Sheila smiled resignedly. "Was in? What do you mean, 'was in'? And where were you, then?"

"I had been sent out to Critchett's, the chemist's."

"Of course, of course. So cook let Dr. Ferguson in, then? Why didn't you say so before, Ada? And did you bring the medicine with you?"

"It was in an envelope m'm. But cook is sure she heard no knock--not while I was out. So Dr. Ferguson must have come in quite unbeknown."

"Well, really," said Sheila, "it seems very difficult to get at the truth sometimes. And when illness is in the house I cannot understand why there should be no one available to answer the door. You must have left it ajar, unsecured, when you went out. And pray, what if Dr. Ferguson had been some common tramp? That would have been a nice thing!"

"I am quite certain, m'm, that I did shut the door. And cook says she never so much as stirred from the kitchen till I came down the area steps with the packet. And that's all I know about it, m'm; except that he was here when I came back. I did not know even there was a Dr. Ferguson; and my mother's lived here nineteen years."

"We must be thankful your mother enjoys such good health," replied Mrs. Lawford suavely. "Please tell cook to be very careful with the cornflour--to be sure it's well mixed and thoroughly done."

Mrs. Lawford's eyes followed with a certain discomfort those narrow print shoulders descending the stairs. And this abominable ruse was--Arthur's! She ran up lightly and listened with her ear to the panel of his door. And just as she was about to turn away again, there came a little light knock at the front door.

Mrs. Lawford paused at the loop of the staircase; and not altogether with gratitude or relief she heard the voice of Mr. Bethany, inquiring in cautious but quite audible tones after her husband.

She dressed quickly and went down. The little white old man looked very solitary in the long, fireless, drawing-room.

"I could not sleep," he said; "I don't think I grasped in the least, I don't indeed, until nearly home, the complexity of our problem. I came, in fact, to a lamp-post--casting a peculiar shadow, and then--you know how such thoughts seize us, my dear--like a sudden inspiration, I realised how tenuous, how appallingly tenuous a hold we have--we all have on personality. But that," he continued rapidly, "that's only for ourselves--and after the event. Ours, just now, is to act. And first----?"

"You really do, then--you really are convinced----" began Mrs. Lawford.

But Mr. Bethany was too quick. "We must be most circumspect. My dear friend, we must be most circumspect, for all aour sakes. And this, you'll say," he added, smiling, stretching out his arms, his soft hat in one hand, his umbrella in the other--"this is being circumspect--a seven o'clock in the morning call! But you see, my dear, I have come, as I took the precaution of explaining to the maid, because it's now or never to-day. It does so happen that I have to take a wedding for an old friend's niece at Witchett; so when in need, you see, Providence enables us to tell even the conventional

truth. Now really, how is he? has he slept? has he recalled himself at all? is there any change?--and, dear me, how are you?"

Mrs. Lawford sighed. "A broken night is really very little to a mother," she said. "He is still asleep. He hasn't, I think, stirred all night."

"Not stirred!" Mr. Bethany repeated. "You baffle me. And you have watched?"

"Oh, no," was the cheerful answer; "I felt that quiet, solitude, space, was everything; he preferred it so. He--he changed alone, I suppose. Don't you think it almost stands to reason that he will be alone. . . when he comes back? Wasn't I right? But there, it's useless, it's worse than useless, to talk like this. My husband is gone. Some terrible thing has happened. Whatever the mystery may be, he will never come back alive. My only fear is that I am dragging you into a matter that should from the beginning have been entrusted to---- Oh, it's monstrous!" It seemed for a moment as if she were blinking to keep back her tears, yet her scrutiny seemed merely to harden.

Only the merest flicker of the folded eyelids over the greenish eyes of her visitor answered the challenge. He stood small and black, peeping fixedly out of the window at the sunflecked laurels.

"Last night," he said slowly, "when I said goodbye to your husband, on the tip of my tongue were the words I have used, in season and out of season, for nearly forty-five years--"od knows best." Well, my dear lady, a sense of humour, a sense of reverence, or perhaps even a taint of scepticism--call it what you will--just interrupted them. Oh no, not any of these, my child; just pity, overwhelming pity. God does know best; but in a matter like this it is not even my place to say so; it would be good for none of us to endanger our souls even with verbal cant. Now, if, do you think, I had just five minutes' talk--five minutes; would it disquiet him?"

Only by an almost undignified haste, for the vicar was remarkably agile, Sheila managed to unlock the bedroom door without apparently his perceiving it, and with a warning finger she preceded him into the great bedroom.

"Oh, yes, yes," he was whispering to himself; "alone--well, well!" He hung his hat on his umbrella and leaned it in a corner, and then he turned.

"I don't think, you know, an old friend does him any wrong; but last night I had no real oppor----" He firmly adjusted his spectacles, and looked long into the dark, dispassioned face.

"H'm!" he said, and fidgeted, and peered again. Mrs. Lawford watched himkeenly.

"Do you still----" she began.

But at the same moment he too broke silence, suddenly stepping back with the innocent remark, "Has he--has he asked for anything?"

"Only for Quain."

"'Quain?'"

"The medical Dictionary."

"Oh, yes; bless me; of course. . . . A calm, complete sleep of utter prostration--utter nervous prostration. And can one wonder? Poor fellow, poor fellow!" He walked to the window and peered between the blinds. "Sparrows, sunshine--yes, and here's the postman," he said, as if to himself. Then he turned sharply round, with mind made up.

"Now, do you leave me here," he said. "Take half an hour's quiet rest. He will be glad of a dull old fellow like me when he wakes. And as for my pretty bride, if I missed the train, she must wait till the next--good discipline, my dear. Oh, dear me! I don't change. What a precious experience, now, this would have been for a tottery, talkative, owlish old parochial creature like me! But there, there! Light words make heavy hearts, I see. I shall be quite comfortable. No, no, I breakfasted at home. There's hat and umbrella; at 9.30 I can fly."

Mrs. Lawford thanked him mutely. He smilingly but firmly bowed her out and closed the door.

But eyes and brain had been very busy. He had looked at the gutted candle; at the tinted bland portrait on the dressing-table; at the chair drawn-up; at the boots; and now again he turned almost with a groan to the sleeper. Then he took out an envelope, on which he had jotted various memoranda, and waited awhile. Minutes passed and at last the sleeper faintly stirred, muttering.

Mr. Bethany stooped quickly. "What is it, what is it?" he whispered.

Lawford sighed. "I was only dreaming, Sheila," he said, and softly, peacefully opened his eyes, "I dreamed I was in the----" His lids narrowed, his dark eyes fixed themselves on the anxious spectacled face bending over him. "Mr. Bethany! Where! What's wrong?"

His friend put out his hand. "There, there," he said soothingly, "do not be disturbed; do not disquiet yourself!"

Lawford struggled up. Slowly, painfully consciousness returned to him. He glanced furtively round the room, at his clothes, slinkingly at the vicar; licked his lips; flushed with extraordinary rapidity; and suddenly burst into tears.

Mr. Bethany sat without movement, waiting till he should have spent himself. "Now, Lawford," he said gently, "compose yourself, old friend; we must face the music--like men." He went to the window, drew up the blind, peeped out, and took off his spectacles.

"The first thing to be done," he said, returning briskly to his chair, "is to send for Simon. Now, does Simon know you well?" Lawford shook his head. "Would he recognise you? . . . I mean . . ."

"I have only met him once--in the evening."

"Good; let him come immediately, then. Tell him just the facts. If I am not mistaken, he will pooh-pooh the whole thing; tell you to keep quiet, not to worry, and so on. My dear fellow, if we realised, say, typhoid, who'd dare to face it? That will give us time; to wait awhile, to recover our breath, to see what happens next. And if--as I don't believe for a moment.----Why, in that case I

heard the other day of a most excellent man--Grosser, of Wimpole Street; nerves. He would be absorbed. He'd bottle you in spirit, Lawford. We'll have him down quietly. You see? But there won't be any necessity. Oh no. By then light will have come. We shall remember. What I mean is this." He crossed his legs and pushed out his lips. "We are on quaky ground; and it's absolutely essential that you keep cool, and trust. I am yours, heart and soul--you know that. I own frankly, at first I was shaken. And I have, I confess, been very cunning. But first, faith, then evidence to bolster it up. The faith was absolute"--he placed one firm hand on Lawford's knee--"why, I cannot explain; but it was; the evidence is convincing. But there are others to think of. The shock, the incredibleness, the consequences; we must not scan too closely. Think with; never against! and bang go all the arguments! Your wife, poor dear, believes; but, of course, she is horribly----" he broke off; "of course she is shaken, you old simpleton! Time will heal all that. Time will wear out the mask. Time will tire out this detestable physical witchcraft. The mind, the self's the thing. That must--old fogey that I am for saying it--that must be kept unsmirched. We won't go wearily over the painful subject again. You told me last night, dear old friend, that you were absolutely alone at Widderstone. That is enough. But here we have visible facts, tangible effects, and there must have been a definite reason and a cause for them. I believe in the devil, in the Powers of Darkness, Lawford, as firmly as I believe he and they are powerless--in the long run. They--what shall we say?--have surrendered their intrinsicality. And you and I with God's help will just tire them out. And that ally gone, our poor dear old Mrs. Grundy will at once capitulate. Eh? Eh?"

Through all this long and somewhat arduous harangue, consciousness, like the gradual light of dawn, had been flooding that other brain. And the face that now confronted Mr. Bethany, though with his feeble, unaided sight he could only very obscurely discern it, was vigilant and keen, in every sharp-cut hungry feature.

A rather prolonged silence followed, the visitor peering mutely. The black eyes nearly closed, the face turned slowly towards the window, saw burnt-out candle, comprehensive glass.

"Yes, yes," he said; "I'll send for Simon at once."

"Good," said Mr. Bethany, and more doubtfully repeated "good." "Now there's only one thing left," he went on cheerfully. "I have jotted down a few test questions here; they are questions no one on this earth could answer but you, Lawford; just--just for external proofs. You won't, you can't, mistake my motive. We cannot foretell or foresee what need may arise for just such jogtrot primitive evidence. I propose that you now answer them here, in writing."

Mr. Lawford stood up and walked to the looking-glass, and paused. He put his hand to his head. "Yes," he said, "of course; it's a rattling good move. I'm not quite awake; myself, I mean. I'll do it, now." He took out a pencil case and tore another leaf from his pocket-book. "What are they?"

Mr. Bethany rang the bell. Sheila herself answered it. She stood on the threshold and looked across through a shaft of autumnal sunshine at her husband, and her husband with a quiet, strange smile looked across through the sunshine at his wife. Mr. Bethany waited in vain.

"I am just going to put the arch-impostor through his credentials," he said tartly. "Now then, Lawford!" He read out the questions, one by one, from his crafty little list, pursing his lips between each; and one by one Lawford, seated at the dressing-table, fluently scribbled his answers. Then

question and answer were rigorously compared by Mr. Bethany, with small white head bent close and spectacles poised upon the powerful nose, and signed and dated, and passed to Mrs. Lawford without a word.

Mrs. Lawford read question and answer where she stood, in complete silence. She looked up. "Many of these questions I don't know the answers to myself," she said.

"It is immaterial," said Mr. Bethany.

"One answer is--is inaccurate."

"Yes, yes, quite so; due to a mistake in a letter from myself."

Mrs. Lawford read quietly on, folded the papers, and held them out between finger and thumb. "The--handwriting . . ." she remarked very softly.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" said Mr. Bethany warmly; "all the general look and run of the thing different, but every real essential feature unchanged. Now into the envelopes. And now a little wax?"

Mrs. Lawford stood waiting. "There's a green piece of sealing-wax," almost drawled the quiet voice, "in the top right drawer of the nest in the study, which old James gave me the Christmas before last." He glanced with lowered eyelids at his wife's flushed cheek. Their eyes met.

"Thank you," she said.

When she returned the vicar was sitting in a chair, leaning his chin on the knobbed handle of his umbrella. He rose and lit a taper for her with a match from a little green pot on the table. And Mrs. Lawford, with trembling fingers, sealed the letter, as he directed, with his own seal.

"There!" he said triumphantly, "how many more such brilliant lawyers, I wonder, lie dormant in the Church? And who shall keep this? . . . Why, all three, of course." He went on without pausing, "Some little drawer now, secret and undetectable, with a lock." Just such a little drawer that locked itself with a spring lay by chance in the looking-glass. There the letter was hidden. And Mr. Bethany looked at his watch. "Nineteen minutes," he said. "The next thing, my dear child--we're getting on swimmingly; and it's astonishing how things are simplified by mere use--the next thing is to send for Simon."

Sheila took a deep breath, but did not look up. "I am entirely in your hands," she replied.

"So be it," said he crisply. "Get to bed, Lawford; it's better so. And I'll look in on my way back from Witchett. I came, my dear fellow, in such gloomy circumstances of mind; it was getting up too early; it fogs old brains. Goodbye, goodbye."

He squeezed his hand. Then, with umbrella under his arm, his hat on his head, the spectacles readjusted, he hurried out of the room. Mrs. Lawford followed him. For a few minutes Lawford sat motionless, with head bent a little, and eyes restlessly scanning the floor. Then he rose abruptly, and in a quarter of an hour was in bed, alone with his slow thoughts; while a basin of cornflour

stood untasted on a little table at his bedside, and a cheerful fire burned in the best visitor's room's tiny grate.

At half-past eleven Dr. Simon entered this soundless seclusion. He sat down beside Lawford, and took temperature and pulse. Then he half closed his lids, and scanned his patient out of an unusually dark, un-English face, with straight black hair, and listened attentively to his rather incoherent story. It was a story very much modified and rounded off. Nor did Lawford draw Dr. Simon's attention to the portrait, now smiling conventionally above their heads from the wall over the fireplace.

"It was rather bleak--the wind; and, I think, perhaps, I had had a touch of influenza. It was a silly thing to do. But still, Dr. Simon, one doesn't expect--well, there, I don't feel the same man--physically. I really cannot explain how great a change has taken place. And yet I feel perfectly fit in myself. And if it were not for--for being laughed at, I'd go back to town, to-day. Why my wife scarcely recognised me."

Dr. Simon continued his scrutiny. Try as he would, Lawford could not raise his downcast eyes to meet direct the doctor's polite attention.

"And what," said Dr. Simon, "what precisely is the nature of the change? Have you any pain?"

"No, not the least pain," said Mr. Lawford; "I think, perhaps, or rather my face is a little shrunken--andyet--lengthened;at least it feels so; and a faint twinge of rheumatism. But my hair--well, I don't know; it's difficult to say one's self." He could get on so very much better, he thought, if only his mind would be at peace and these preposterous promptings and voices were still.

Dr. Simon faced the window, and drew his hand softly over his head. "We never can be too cautious at a certain age, and especially after influenza," he said. "It undermines the whole system, and in particular the nervous system; leaving the mind the prey of the most melancholy--fancies. I should astound you, Mr. Lawford, with the devil influenza plays. . . . A slight nervous shock and a chill; quite slight, I hope. A few days' rest and plenty of nourishment. There's nothing; temperature inconsiderable. All perfectly intelligible. Most certainly reassure yourself! And as for the change you speak of"--he looked steadily at the dark face on the pillow and smiled amiably--"I don't think we need worry about that. It certainly was a bleak wind yesterday--and at a cemetery; my dear sir! It was indiscreet--yes, very." He held out his hand. "You must not be alarmed," he said, very distinctly with the merest trace of an accent; "air, sunshine, quiet, nourishment, sleep--that is all. The little window might be a few inches open, and--and any light reading."

He opened the door and joined Mrs. Lawford on the staircase. He talked to her quietly over his shoulder all the way downstairs. "It was, it was sporting with Providence--a wind, believe me, nearly due east, in spite of the warm sunshine."

"But the change--the change!" Mrs. Lawford managed to murmur tragically, as he strode to the door. Dr. Simon smiled, and gracefully tapped his forehead with a red-gloved finger.

"Humour him, humour him," he repeated indulgently. "Rest and quiet will soon put that little--trouble out of his head. Oh yes, I did notice it--the set drawn look, and the droop; quite so. Good morning."

Mrs. Lawford gently closed the door after him. A glimpse of Ada, crossing from room to room, suggested a precaution. She called out in her clearest notes. "If Dr. Ferguson should call while I am out, Ada, will you please tell him that Dr. Simon regretted that he was unable to wait? Thank you." She paused with hand on the balusters, then slowly ascended the stairs. Her husband's face was turned to the ceiling, his hands clasped above his forehead. She took up her stand by the fireplace, resting one silk-slippered foot on the fender. "Dr. Simon is reassuring," she said, "but I do hope, Arthur, you will follow out his advice. . . . He looks a fairly clever man. . . . But with a big practice. . . . Do you think, dear, he quite realised the extent of the--the change?"

"I told him what happened," said her husband's voice out of the bed-clothes.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Sheila soothingly; "but we must remember he is comparatively a stranger. He would not detect . . . "

"What did he tell you?" asked the voice.

Mrs. Lawford deliberately considered. If only he would always thus keep his face concealed, how much easier it would be to discuss matters rationally! "You see, dear," she said softly, "I know, of course, nothing about the nerves, but personally, I think his suggestion absurd. No mere fancy, surely, can make a lasting alteration in one's face. And your hair--I don't want to say anything that may seem unkind--but isn't it really quite a distinct shade darker, Arthur?"

"Any great strain will change the colour of a man's hair," said Lawford stolidly; "at any rate, to white. Why I read once of a fellow in India, a Hindoo, or something, who----"

"But have you had any intense strain, or anxiety?" broke in Sheila. "You might, at least, have confided in me; that is, useless---- But there, don't you think really, Arthur, it would be much more satisfactory in every way if we had further advice at once? Alice will be home next week. To-morrow is the Harvest Festival, and next week, of course, the Dedication; and, in any case, the Bazaar is out of the question. They will have to find another stallholder. We must do our utmost to avoid comment or scandal. Every minute must help to--to fix a thing like that. I own even now I cannot realise what this awful calamity means. It's useless to brood on it. We must, as the poor dear old vicar said only last night, keep our heads clear. But I am sure Dr. Simon was under a misapprehension. If, now, it was explained to him, a little more fully, Arthur--a photograph. Oh, anything on earth but this dreadful wearing uncertainty and suspense! Besides . . . is Simon quite an English name?"

Lawford drew further into his pillow. "Do as you think best, Sheila," he said. "For my own part, I believe it maybe as he suggests--partly an illusion, a touch of nervous breakdown. It simply can't be as bad as I think it is. If it were, you would not be here talking like this; and Bethany wouldn't have believed a word I said. Whatever it is, it's no good crying it on the housetops. Give me time, just time. Besides, how do we know what he really thought? Doctors don't tell their patients everything. Give the poor chap a chance, and more so if he is a foreigner. He's"--his voice sank almost to a

whisper--"he's no darker than this. And do, please, Sheila, take this infernal stuff away, and let me have something solid. I'm not ill--in that way. All I want is peace and quiet, time to think. Let me fight it out alone. It's been sprung on me. The worst's not over. But I'll win through; wait! And if not--well, you shall not suffer, Sheila. Don't be afraid! There are other ways out."

Sheila broke down. "Any one would think to hear you talk, that I was perfectly heartless. I told Ada to be most careful about the cornflour. And as for other ways out, it's a positively wicked thing to say to me when I'm nearly distracted with trouble and anxiety. What motive could you have had for loitering in an old cemetery? And in an east wind! It's useless for me to remain here, Arthur, to be accused of every horrible thing that comes into a morbid imagination. I will leave you, as you suggest, in peace."

"One moment, Sheila," answered the muffled voice. "I have accused you of nothing. If you knew all; if you could read my thoughts, you would be surprised, perhaps, at my---- On the other hand, I really do think, Sheila, it would be better for the present to discuss the thing no more. To-day is Friday. Give this miserable face a week. Talk it over with Bethany if you like. But I forbid"--he struggled up in bed, sallow and sinister--"I flatly forbid, please understand, any other interference till then. Afterwards you must do exactly as you please. Send round the Town Crier! But till then, silence!"

Sheila with raised head confronted him. "This, then, is your gratitude! So be it! Silence, no doubt! Until it's too late to take action. Until you have wormed your way in, and think you are safe. To have believed! Where is my husband? that is what I am asking you now. When and how you have learned his secrets God only knows, and your conscience! But he always was a simpleton at heart. I warn you, then. Until next Thursday I consent to say nothing provided you remain quiet; make no disturbance, no scandal here. The servants and all who inquire shall simply be told that my husband is confined to his room with--with a nervous breakdown, as you have yourself so glibly suggested. I am at your mercy, I own it. The vicar believes your preposterous story--with his spectacles off. You would convince anybody with the wicked cunning with which you have cajoled and wheedled him, with which you have deceived and fooled a foreign doctor. But you will not convince me. You will not convince Alice. I have friends in the world, though you may not be aware of it, who will not be quite so apt to believe any cock-and-bull story you may see fit to invent. That is all I have to say. To-night I tell the vicar all that I have just told you. And from this moment, please, we are strangers. I shall come into the room no more than necessity dictates. On Friday we resume our real parts. My husband . . . Arthur to . . . connive at . . . Phh!"

Rage had transfigured her. She scarcely heard her own words. They poured out senselessly, monotonously, one calling up another, as if from the lips of a Cassandra. Lawford sank back into bed, clutching the sheets with both lean hands. He took a deep breath and shut his mouth.

"It reminds me, Sheila," he began arduously, "of our first quarrel before we were married, the evening after your aunt Rose died at Llandudno--do you remember? You threw open the window, and I think--I saved your life." A pause followed. Then a queer, almost inarticulate voice added, "At least, I am afraid so!"

A cold and awful quietness fell on Sheila's heart. She stared fixedly at the tuft of dark hair, the only visible sign of her husband on the pillow. Then, taking up the basin of cold cornflour, she left the room. In a quarter of an hour she reappeared carrying a tray, with ham and eggs and coffee and honey inviting displayed. She laid it down.

"There is only one other question," she said, with perfect composure--"that of money. Your signature as it appears on the--the document drawn up this morning, would, of course, be quite useless on a cheque. I have, of course, taken all the money I could find of my husband's; it is in safety. You may, however, conceivably be in need of money; here is five pounds. I have my own cheque-book, and shall therefore have no need to consider the question again for--for the present. So far as you are concerned, I shall be guided solely by Mr. Bethany. He will, I do not doubt, take full responsibility."

"And may the Lord have mercy on my soul!" uttered a stifled, unfamiliar voice from the bed. Mrs. Lawford stooped. "Arthur!" she cried faintly, "Arthur!"

Lawford raised himself on his elbow with a sigh that was very near to being a sob. "Oh, Sheila, if you'd only be your real self! What is the use of all this pretence? Just consider my position a little. The fear and horror are not all on your side, dear. You called me Arthur even then. I'd willingly do anything you wish to save you pain; you know that. Can't we be friends even in this--this ghastly---- Won't you, Sheila?"

Mrs. Lawford drew back, struggling with a doubtful heart.

"I think," she said, "it would be better not to discuss that now."

The rest of the morning Lawford remained in solitude.

CHAPTER VI

THERE were three books in the room--Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Living and Dying," a volume of the Quiver, and a little gilded book on wildflowers. He read in vain. He lay and listened to the uproar of his thoughts on which an occasional sound--the droning of a fly, the cry of a milkman, the noise of a passing van--obtruded from the workaday world. The pale gold sunlight edged softly over the bed. He ate up everything on his tray. He even, on the shoals of nightmare, dreamed awhile. But by and by as the hours wheeled slowly on he grew less calm, less strenuously resolved on lying there inactive. Every sparrow that twittered cried reveille through his brain. He longed with an ardour strange to his temperament to be up and doing. What if it was, as he had in the excitement of the moment, suggested to Sheila, only a morbid delusion of mind; shared too in part by sheer force of his absurd confession? Even if he was going mad, who knows how peaceful a release that might not be? Could his shrewd old vicar have implicitly believed in him if the change were as complete as he supposed it? He flung off the bedclothes and locked the door. He dressed himself, noticing, he fancied, with a deadly revulsion of feeling, that his coat was a little too short in the sleeves, his waistcoat too loose. In the midst of his dressing came Sheila bringing his luncheon. "I'm sorry," he called out, stooping quickly beside the bed, "I can't talk now. Please put the tray down."

About half an hour afterwards he heard the door close, and peeping from behind the curtains saw his wife go out. All was drowsily quiet in the house. He devoured his lunch like a schoolboy. That finished to the last crumb, without a moment's delay he covered his face with a towel, locked the door behind him, put the key in his pocket, and ran lightly downstairs. He stuffed the towel into an ulster pocket, pot on a soft, wide-brimmed hat, and let himself noiselessly out. Then he turned with an almost hysterical delight and ran--ran like the wind, without pausing, without thinking, straight on, up one turning, down another, until he reached a broad open common, thickly wooded, sprinkled with gorse and hazel and may, and faintly purple with fading heather. There he flung himself down in the beautiful sunlight, among the yellowing bracken to recover his breath.

He lay there for many minutes, thinking almost with composure. Flight, it seemed, had for the moment quietened the demands of that other feebly struggling personality which was beginning to insinuate itself into his consciousness, which had so miraculously broken in and taken possession of his body. He would not think now. All he needed was a little quiet and patience before he threw off for good and all his right to be free, to be his own master, to call himself sane.

He scrambled up and turned his face towards the westering sun. What was there in the stillness of its beautiful splendour that seemed to sharpen his horror and difficulty, and yet to stir him to such a daring and devilry as he had never known since he was a boy? There was little sound of life; somewhere an unknown bird was singing, and a few late bees were droning in the bracken. All these years he had, like an old blind horse, stolidly plodded round and round in a dull self-set routine. And now, just when the spirit had come for rebellion, the mood for a harmless truancy, there had fallen with them too this hideous enigma. He sat there with the dusty silhouette of the face that was now drenched with sunlight in his mind's eye. He set off again up the stony incline. Why not walk on and on? In time real wholesome weariness would come; he could sleep at ease in some pleasant wayside inn, without once meeting the eyes that stood as it were like a window between himself and a shrewd, incredulous scoffing world that would turn him into a monstrosity and his story into a fable. And in a little while, perhaps in three days, he would awaken out of this engrossing nightmare, and know he was free, this black dog gone from his back, and (as the old saying expressed it without any one dreaming what it really meant) his own man again. How astonished Sheila would be; how warmly she would welcome him! . . . Oh yes, of course she would. He came again to a standstill. But no voice answered him out of that illimitable gold and blue. Nothing seemed aware of him. And as he stood there, doubtful as Cain on the outskirts of the unknown, he caught the sound of a footfall on the lonely and stony path.

The ground sloped steeply away to the left, and slowly mounting the hillside came mildly on an old lady he knew, a Miss Sinnet, an old friend of his mother's. There was just such a little seat as that other he knew so well, on the brow of the hill. He made his way to it, intending to sit quietly there until the little old lady had passed by. Up and up she came. Her large bonnet appeared, and then her mild white face, inclined a little towards him as she ascended. Evidently this very seat was her goal; and evasion was impossible. "Evasion!" . . . Memory rushed back and set his pulses beating. He turned boldly to the sun, and the old lady, with a brief glance into his face, composed herself at the other end of the little seat. She gazed out of a gentle reverie into the golden valley. And so they sat awhile. And almost as if she had felt the bond of acquaintance between them, she presently sighed, and addressed him: "A very, very, beautiful view, sir."

Lawford paused, then turned a gloomy, earnest face, gilded with sunshine. "Beautiful, indeed," he said, "but not for me. No, Miss Sinnet, not for me."

The old lady gravely turned and examined the aquiline profile. "Well, I confess, sir," she remarked urbanely, "you have the advantage of me."

Lawford smiled uneasily. "Believe me, it is little advantage."

"My sight," said Miss Sinnet precisely, "is not so good as I might wish; though better perhaps than I might have hoped; I fear I am not much wiser, sir; your face is still unfamiliar to me."

"It is not less unfamiliar to me," said Lawford. Whose trickery was this? He thought, putting such affected stuff into his mouth.

A faint lightening of pity came into the silvery and scrupulous countenance. "Ah, dear me, yes," she said courteously.

Lawford rested a lean hand on the seat. "And have you," he asked, "not the least recollection in the world of my face?"

"Now really, sir," she said, smiling blandly, "is that quite fair? Think of all the scores and scores of faces in seventy long years; and how very treacherous memory is! You shall do me the service of reminding me of one whose name has for the moment escaped me."

"I am the son of a very old friend of yours, Miss Sinnet," said Lawford quietly--"a friend that was once your schoolfellow at Brighton."

"Well, now," said the old lady, grasping her umbrella, "that is undoubtedly a clue; but then, you see, all but one of the friends of my girlhood are dead; and if I have never had the pleasure of meeting her son, unless there is a decided resemblance, how am I to recollect her by looking at him?"

"There is, I believe, a likeness," said Lawford.

She nodded her great bonnet at him with gentle amusement. "You are insistent in your fancy. Well, let me think again. The last to leave me was Fanny Urquhart, that was--let me see--last October. Now you are certainly not Fanny Urquhart's son," she stooped austerely, "for she never had one. Last year, I heard that my dear, dear Mrs. Jameson was dead. Her I hadn't met for many, many years. But, if I may venture to say so, yours is not a Scottish face; and she not only married a Scottish husband, but was herself a Dunbar. No, I am still at a loss."

A miserable strife was in her chance companion's mind, a strife of anger and recrimination. He turned his eyes wearily to the fast declining sun. "You will forgive my persistency, but I assure you it is a matter of life or death to me. Is there no one my face recalls? My voice?"

Miss Sinnet drew her long lips together, her eyebrows lifted with the fainted perturbation. "But he certainly knows my name," she said to herself. She turned once more, and in this still autumnal

beauty, beneath this pale blue arch of evening, these two human beings confronted one another again. She eyed him blandly, yet with a certain grave directness.

"I don't really think," she said, "you can be Mary Lawford's son. I could scarcely have mistaken him."

Lawford gulped and turned away. He hardly knew what this surge of feeling meant. Was it hope, despair, resentment; had he caught even the echo of an unholy joy? His mind for a moment became confused as if in the tumult of a struggle. He heard himself expostulate, "Ah, Miss Bennett, I fear I set you too difficult a task."

The old lady drew abruptly in, like a trustful and gentle snail into its shocked house. "Bennett, sir; by my name is not Bennett."

And again Lawford accepted the miserable prompting. "Not Bennett! . . . How can I ever then apologise for so frantic a mistake?"

The little old lady took form hold of her umbrella. She did not answer him. "The likeness, the likeness!" he began unctuously, and stopped, for the glance that dwelt fleeingly on him was cold with the formidable dignity and displeasure of age. He raised his hat and turned miserably home. He strode on out of the last gold into the blue twilight. What fantastic foolery of mind was mastering him? He cast a hurried look over his shoulder at the kindly and offended old figure sitting there, solitary, on the little seat, in her great bonnet, with back turned resolutely upon him--the friend of his dead mother who might have proved in his need a friend indeed to him. And he had by this insane caprice hopelessly estranged her. She would remember this face well enough now, he thought bitterly, and would take her place among his quiet enemies, if ever the day of reckoning should come. It was scandalous, it was banal to have abused her trust and courtesy. Oh, it was hopeless to struggle any more! The fates were against him. They had played him a trick. He was to be their transitory sport, as many a better man he could himself recollect had been before him. He would go home and give in; let Sheila do with him what she pleased. No one but a lunatic could have acted as he had, with just that frantic hint of method so remarkable in the insane.

He left the common. A lamplighter was lighting the lamps. A thin evening haze was on the air. If only he had stayed at home that fateful afternoon! Who, what had induced him, enticed him to venture out? And even with the thought welled up into his mind an intense desire to go to the old green time-worn churchyard again; to sit there contentedly alone, where none heeded the completest metamorphosis, down beside the yew-trees. What a fool he had been! There alone, of course, lay his only possible chance of recovery. He would go to-morrow. Perhaps Sheila had not yet discovered his absence; and there would be no difficulty in repeating so successful a stratagem. Remembrance of his miserable mistake, of Miss Sinnet, faintly returned to him as he swiftly mounted the steps to his porch. Poor old lady! He would make amends for his discourtesy when he was quite himself again. She should some day hear, perhaps, his infinitely tragic, infinitely comic experience from his own lips. He would take her some flowers, some old keepsake of his mother's. What would he not do when the old moods and brains of the stupid Arthur Lawford, whom he had appreciated so little and so superficially, came back to him.

He ran up the steps and stopped dead, his hand in his pocket, chilled and aghast. Sheila had taken his keys. He stood there, dazed and still, beneath the dim yellow of his own fanlight; and once again that inward spring flew back. "Brazen it out; brazen it out! Knock and ring!" He knocked flamboyantly, and rang.

There came a quiet step and the door opened. "Dr. Simon, of course, has called?" he inquired suavely.

"Yes, sir."

"Ah, and gone?--as I feared! And Mrs. Lawford?"

"I think Mrs. Lawford is in, sir."

Lawford put out a detaining hand. "We will not disturb her; we will not disturb her. I can find my way up; oh yes, and thank you!"

But Ada still palely barred the way. "I think, sir," she said, "Mrs. Lawford would prefer to see you herself; she told me most particularly 'all callers.' And Mr. Lawford was not to be disturbed on any account."

"Disturbed! God forbid!" said Lawford, but dark eyes failed to move these palest hazel. "Well," he continued nonchalantly, "perhaps--perhaps it would be as well if Mrs. Lawford should know that I am here. No, thank you, I won't come in. Please go and tell----" But even as the maid turned to obey, Sheila herself appeared at the dining-room door in hat and veil.

Lawford hesitated an immeasurable moment. In one swift glance he perceived the lamplit mystery of evening, beckoning, calling, pleading--Fly, fly! Home's here for you! Begin again, begin again! And there before him in quiet and hostile decorum stood maid and mistress. He took off his hat and stepped quickly in. "So late, so very late, I fear," he began glibly. "A sudden call, a perfectly impossible distance. Shall we disturb him, do you think?"

"Wouldn't it," began Sheila softly, "be rather a pity perhaps? Dr. Simon seemed to think . . . But, of course, you must decide that."

Ada turned quiet, small eyes.

"No, no, by no means," he almost mumbled.

And a hard, slow smile passed over Sheila's face. "Excuse me one moment," she said; "I will see if he is awake." She swept swiftly forward, superb and triumphant, beneath the gaze of those dark, restless eyes. But so still was home and street that quite distinctly a clear and youthful laughter was heard, and light footsteps approaching. Sheila paused. Ada, in the act of closing the door, peered out. "Miss Alice, ma'am," she said.

And in this infinitesimal advantage of time Dr. Ferguson had seized his vanishing opportunity, and was already swiftly mounting the stairs. Mrs. Lawford stood with veil half raised and coldly

smiling lips and, as if it were by pre-arrangement, her daughter's laughing greeting from the garden, and, from the landing above her, a faint--"Ah, and how are we now?" broke out simultaneously. And Ada, silent and discreet, had thrown open the door again to the twilight and to the young people ascending the steps.

Lawford was still sitting on his bed before a cold and ashy hearth when Sheila knocked at the door.

"Yes?" he said; "who's there?" No answer followed. He rose with a shuddering sigh and turned the key. His wife entered. "That little exhibition of finesse was part of our agreement, I suppose?"

"I say----" began Lawford.

"To creep out in my absence like a thief, and to return like a mountebank; that was part of our compact."

"I say," he stubbornly began again, "did you wire for Alice?"

"Will you please answer my question? Am I to be a mere catspaw in your intrigues, in this miserable masquerade before the servants? To set the whole place ringing with the name of a doctor that doesn't exist, and a bedridden patient that slips out of the house with his bedroom key in his pocket! Are you aware that the made has been hammering at your door every half-hour of your absence? Are you aware of that? How much," she continued in a low, bitter voice, "how much should I offer for her discretion?"

"Who was that with Alice?" inquired the same toneless voice.

"I refuse to be ignored. I refuse to be made a child of. Will you please answer me?"

Lawford turned. "Look here, Sheila," he began heavily, "what about Alice? If you wired; well, it's useless to say anything more. But if you didn't, I ask you just this one thing. Don't tell her!"

"Oh, I perfectly appreciate a father's natural anxiety."

Her husband drew up his shoulders as if to receive a blow. "Yes, yes," he said, "but you won't?"

The sound of a young laughing voice came faintly from below. "How did Jimmie Fortescue know she was coming home to-day?"

"Will you not inquire of Jimmie Fortescue for yourself?"

"Oh, what is the use of sneering?" began the dull voice again. "I am horribly tired, Sheila. And try how you will, you can't convince me that you believe for a moment I am not--myself, that you are as hard as you pretend. An acquaintance, even a friend might be deceived; but husband and wife--oh no! It5 isn't only a man's face that's himself--or even his hands." He looked at them, straightened them slowly out, and buried them in his pockets. "All I care about now is Alice. Is she, or is she not going to be told? I am simply asking you to give her just a chance."

"'Simply asking me to give Alice a chance'; now isn't that really just a little . . . ?"

Lawford slowly shook his head. "You know in your heart it isn't, Sheila; you understand me quite well, although you persistently pretend not to. I can't argue now. I can't speak up for myself. I am just about as far down as I can go. It's only Alice."

"I see; a lucid interval?" suggested his wife in a low, trembling voice.

"Yes, yes, if you like," said her husband patiently, "'a lucid interval.' Don't please look at my face like that, Sheila, think--think that it's just lupus, just some horrible disfigurement."

Not much light was in the large room, and there was something so extraordinarily characteristic of her husband in those stooping shoulders, in the head hung a little forward, and in the preternaturally solemn voice, that Sheila had to bend a little over the bed to catch a glimpse of the sallow and keener face again. She sighed; and even on her own strained ear her sigh sounded almost like one of relief.

"It's useless, I know, to ask you anything while you are in this mood," continued Lawford dully; "I know that of old."

The white, ringed hands clenched, "'Of old!'"

"I didn't mean anything. Don't listen to what I say. It's only--it's just Alice knowing, that was all; I mean--at once."

"Don't for a moment suppose I am not perfectly aware that it is only Alice you think of. You were particularly anxious about my feelings, weren't you? You broke the news to me with the tenderest solicitude. I am glad our--our daughter shares my husband's love."

"Look here," said Lawford densely, "you know that I love you as much as ever; but with this--as I am; what would be the good of my saying so?" Mrs. Lawford took a deep breath.

And a voice called softly at the door, "Mother, are you there? Is father awake? May I come in?"

In a flash the memory returned to her; twenty-four hours ago she was asking that very question of this unspeakable figure that sat hunched-up before her.

"One moment, dear," she called, and added in a very low voice, "come here!"

Lawford looked up. "What?" he said.

"Perhaps, perhaps," she whispered, "it isn't quite so bad."

"For mercy's sake, Sheila," he said, "don't torture me; tell the poor child to go away."

She paused. "Are you there, Alice? Would you mind, father says, waiting a little? He is so very tired."

"Too tired to . . . Oh, very well, mother."

Mrs. Lawford opened the door, and called after her. "Is Jimmie gone?"

"Oh, yes, hours."

"Where did you meet?"

"I couldn't get a carriage at the station. He carried my dressing-bag; I begged him not to. The other's coming on. You know what Jimmie is. How ver, very luck I did come home. I don't know what made me; just an impulse; they did laugh at me so. Father dear--do speak to me; how are you now?"

Lawford opened his mouth, gulped, and shook his head.

"Ssh, dear!" whispered Sheila, "I think he has fallen asleep. I will be down in a minute." Mrs. Lawford was about to close the door when Ada appeared.

"If you please ma'am," she said, "I have been waiting, as you told me, to let Dr. Ferguson out, but it's nearly seven, ma'am; and the table's not laid yet."

Sheila turned and looked over her shoulder into the room. "Do you think you will need anything more, Dr. Ferguson?" she asked in a sepulchral voice.

Again Lawford's lips moved; again he shook his head.

"One moment, Ada," she said closing the door. "Some more medicine--what medicine? Quick! She mustn't suspect?"

"'What medicine?'" repeated Lawford stolidly.

"Oh, vexing, vexing; don't you see we must send her out? Don't you see? What was it you sent to Critchett's for last night? Tell him that's gone; we want more of that."

Lawford stared heavily. "Oh, yes, yes," he said thickly, "more of that . . . "

Sheila, with a shrug of extreme distaste and vexation, hastily opened the door. "Dr. Ferguson wants a further supply of the drug which Mr. Critchett made up for Mr. Lawford yesterday evening. You had better go at once, Ada, and please make as much haste as you can."

"I say, I say," began Lawford; but it was too late, the door was shut.

"How I detest this wretched falsehood and subterfuge! What could have induced you . . . "

"Yes," said her husband, "what! I think I'll be getting to bed again, Sheila; I forgot I had been ill. And now I do really feel very tired. But I should like to feel--in spite of this hideous--I should like to feel we are friends, Sheila."

Sheila almost imperceptibly shuddered, crossed the room, and faced the still, almost lifeless mask. "I spoke," she said, "in a temper this morning. You must try to understand what a shock it has been to me. Now, I own it frankly, I know you are--Arthur. But God only knows how it frightens me, and--and--horrifies me." She shut her eyes beneath her veil. They waited on in silence awhile.

"Poor boy!" she said at last, lightly touching the loose sleeve; "be brave; it will all come right, soon. Meanwhile, for Alice's sake, if not for mine, don't give way to--to caprices, and all that. Keep quietly here, Arthur! And--forgive my impatience."

He put out his hand as if to touch her. "Forgive you!" he said humbly, pushing it stubbornly back into his pocket again. "Oh, Sheila, the forgiveness is all on your side. You know I have nothing to forgive." Again silence fell between them.

"Then, tonight," said Sheila wearily, drawing back, "we say nothing to Alice, except that you are too tired--just nervous prostration--to see her. What we should do without this influenza, I cannot conceive. Mr. Bethany will probably look in on his way home; and then we can talk it over--we can talk it over again. So long as you are like this, yourself, in mind, why! . . . What is it now?" she broke off querulously.

"If you please, ma'am, Mr. Critchett says he doesn't know Dr. Ferguson, his name's not in the Directory, and there must be something wrong with the message, and he's sorry, but he must have it in writing because there was more even in the first packet than he ought by rights to send. What shall I do, ma'am?"

Still looking at her husband, Sheila listened quietly to the end, and then, as if in disdain, she deliberately shrugged her shoulders, and went out to play her part unaided.

CHAPTER VII

HER husband turned wearily once more, and drawing up a chair sat down in front of the cold grate. He realised that Sheila thought him as much of a fool now as she had for the moment thought him an impostor, or something worse, the night before. That was at least something gained. He realised, too, in a vague way that the exuberance of mind that had practically invented Dr. Ferguson, and outraged Miss Sinnet, had quite suddenly flickered out. It was astonishing, he thought, with gaze fixed innocently on the black coals, that he should ever have done such things. He detested that kind of "rot"; that showy, theatrical, Jewish pose so many men prided their jackdaw brains about.

And he sat quite still, like a cat at a cranny, listening, as it were, for the faintest, remotest stir that might hint at any return of this--activity. It was the first really sane moment he had had since the "change." Whatever it was that had happened at Widderstone was now distinctly weakening in effect. Why, now, perhaps! He stole a thievish look over his shoulder at the glass, and cautiously drew finger and thumb down that beaked nose. Then he really quietly smiled, a smile he felt this abominable facial caricature was quite unused to, the superior Lawford smile of guileless contempt for the fanatical, the fantastic, and the bizarre. He wouldn't have sat with his fee ton the fender before a burnt-out fire. And the animosity of that "he," uttered only just under his breath, surprised even himself. It actually did seem as if there were a chance; if only he kept cool and collected. If the whole mind of a man was bent on being one thing, surely no power on earth, certainly not on

earth, could for long compel him to look another, any more (followed the resplendent thought) than vice versa.

That, in fact, was the trick that had been in fitful fashion played him since yesterday. Obviously, and apart altogether from his promise to Sheila, the best possible thing he could do would be to walk quietly over to Widderstone to-morrow and, simply covering precisely the same ground, like a child that has lost a penny, reverse the process; look at the graves, read the inscriptions on the weather-beaten stones, compose himself to sleep on the little seat. Magic, witchcraft, possession, and all that--well, Mr. Bethany might prefer to take it on the authority of the Bible if it was his duty. But it was at least mainly Old Testament stuff, like polygamy, Joshua, and the "unclean beasts." The "unclean beasts." It was simply, as Simon had said, mainly an affair of the nerves, like Indian jugglery. He had heard of dozens of such cases, or similar cases. And it was hardly likely that cases exactly like his own would be much bragged about, or advertised. All those mysterious "disappearances," too, which one reads about so repeatedly? What of them? Even now, he felt (and glanced swiftly behind him a the fancy), it would be better to think as softly as possible, not to hope too openly, certainly not to triumph in the least degree, just in case of--well--listeners. He would wrap up too. And he wouldn't tell Sheila of the project till he had come safely back. What splendid fun it would be to confess meekly to his escapade, and to be scolded, and then suddenly to reveal himself! He sat back and gazed with an almost malignant animosity at the face in the portrait, comely and plump.

An inarticulate, unfathomable depression rolled back on him, like a mist out of the sea. He hastily undressed, put watch and door-key and Critchett's powder under his pillow, paused, vacantly ruminated, and then replaced the powder in his waistcoat pocket, said his prayers, and got shivering to bed. He did not feel hurt at Sheila's leaving him like this. So long as she really believed in him! And now--Alice was home! He listened, trying not to shiver, for her voice; and sometimes heard, he fancied, the clear note. It was this beastly influenza that made him feel so cold and lifeless. But all would soon come right--that is, if only that face, luminous against the floating darkness within, would not appear the instant he closed his eyes.

But legions of dreams are Influenza's allies. He fell into a chill doze, heard voices innumerable, and one above the rest, shouting them down, until there fell a lull, and one, as it were, from far away said quite clearly and distinctly, "Why, my dear friend, surely you have heard the story of the poor old charwoman who talked Greek in her delirium! A little school French need not alarm us." And Lawford opened his eyes again on Mr. Bethany standing at his bedside.

"Tt, tt! There, I've been and waked him. And yet they say men make such excellent nurses in time of war. But there, Lawford, what did I tell you? Wasn't I now an infallible prophet? Your wife has been giving me a most glowing account--quite your old self, she tells me, except for just this--this touch of facial paralysis. And I think, do you know" (the kind old creature stooped over the bed, but still, Lawford noticed bitterly, still without his spectacles)--"yes, I really think there is a decided improvement; not quite so--drawn. We must make haste slowly. Wedderburn, you know, believes profoundly in Simon; pulled his wife through a most dangerous confinement. Don't tell a doctor too much! Too many symptoms rouse his wrath. And here's pills and tonics and liniments--a whole chemist's shop. Oh, we are getting on swimmingly."

Flamelight was flickering in the candled dusk. Lawford turned his head and saw Sheila's coiled, beautiful hair in the firelight.

"You haven't told Alice?" he asked.

"My dear good man," said Mr. Bethany, "of course we haven't. You shall tell her yourself on Monday. What an incredible tradition it will be! But you mustn't worry; you mustn't even think. And no more of these jaunts, eh? That Ferguson business--that was too bad. What are we going to do with the fellow now we have created him? He will come home to roost--mark my words; and as likely as not down the Vicarage chimney. I wouldn't have believed it of you, my dear fellow!" He beamed, but looked, none the less, very lean, and fagged, and depressed.

"How did the wedding go off?" Lawford managed to think of inquiring.

"Oh, A1," said Mr. Bethany. "I've just been describing it to Alice--the bride, her bridegroom, mother, aunts, cake, presents, finery, blushes, tears, and everything that was hers. We've been in fits, haven't we, Mrs. Lawford? And Alice says I'm a Worth in a clerical collar--didn't she? And that it's only Art that has kept me out of an apron. Now look here; quiet, quiet, quiet; no excitement, no pranks. What is there to worry about, pray? And now Little Dorrit's down with influenza too. And Craik and I will have double work to do. Well, well; goodbye, my dear. God bless you, Lawford. I can't tell you how relieved, how unspeakably relieved I am to find you so much--so much better. Feed him up, my dear, a la Esquimaux; blubber and weevils! And there goes the bell! I must have a biscuit. I've swallowed nothing but a Cupid in plaister of Paris since breakfast. Good-night; we shall miss you both--both."

But when Sheila returned her husband was sunk again into a quiet sleep, from which not even the many questions she desired to put to him seemed weighty enough to warrant his disturbance.

So when Lawford again opened his eyes he found himself lying awake, clear and refreshed, and very eager to get up. But upon the air lay the still hush of early morning. He tried in vain to catch back sleep again. A distant shred of dream still floated in his mind, like a cloud at evening. He rarely dreamed, but certainly something immensely interesting had but a moment ago eluded him. He sat up and looked at the clear red cinders and their maze of grottoes. He got out of bed and peeped through the blinds. To the east and opposite to him gardens and an apple-orchard ly, and there in strange beauty hung the morning star, and rose, rilling into the dusk of night the first grey of dawn. The street beneath its autumn leaves was vacant, charmed, deserted. Hardly since childhood had Lawford seen the dawn unless over his winter breakfast-table. Very much like a child now he stood gazing out of his bow-window--the child whom Time's busy robins had long ago covered over with the leaves of numberless hours. A vague exultation fumed up into his brain. Still on the borders of sleep, he unlocked the great wardrobe and took out an old faded purple and crimson dressing-gown that had belonged to his grandfather, the chief glory of every Christmas charade. He pulled the cowl-like hood over his head and strode majestically over to the looking-glass. He looked in thee a moment on the strange face, like a child dismayed at its own excitement, and a fit of sobbing that was half uncontrollable laughter swept over him. He threw off the hood and turned once more to the window. Consciousness had flooded back indeed. What would Sheila have said to see him there? The unearthly beauty and stillness, and man's small labours, garden and

wall and roof-tree, idle and smokeless in the light of daybreak--there seemed to be some half-told secret between them. What had life done with him to leave a reality so clouded? He put on his slippers, and, gently opening the door, crept with extreme caution up the stairs. At a long, narrow landing window he confronted a panorama of starry night--gardens, sloping orchards; and beyond them fields, hills, Orion, the Dogs, in the clear and cloudless darkness.

"My God, how beautiful!" a voice whispered. And a cock crowed mistily out. He stood staring like a child into the wintry brightness of a pastry-cook's. Then once more he crept stealthily on. He stooped and listened at a closed door, until he fancied that above the beating of his own heart he could hear the breathing of the sleeper within. Then, taking firm hold of the handle with both hands, he slowly, noiselessly turned it, and peeped in on Alice. The moon was long past her faint shining here. The blind was down. And yet it was not pitch dark. He stood with eyes fixed, waiting. Then he edged softly forward and knelt down beside the bed. He could hear her breathing now: long, low, quiet, unhastening--the miracle of life. He could just dimly discern the darkness of her hair against the pillow. Some long sealed spring of tenderness seemed to rise in his heart with a grief and an ache he had never known before. Here at least he could find a little peace, a brief pause, however futile and stupid all his hopes of the night before had been. He leant his head on his hands on the counterpane and refused to think. He felt a quick tremor, a startled movement, and knew that eyes wide open with fear were striving to pierce the gloom between them.

"There, there, dearest," he said in a low whisper, "it's only me, only me." He stroked the narrow hand and gazed into the shadowiness. Her fingers lay quiet and passive in his, with that strange sense of immateriality that sleep brings to the body.

He kissed her hand. "No, Alice, not worse. I couldn't sleep, that was all."

"Oh, and I came so utterly miserable to bed, because you would not see me. And mother would tell only so very little. I didn't even know you had been ill." She pressed his hand between her own. "But this, you know, is very, very naughty--you will take cold. What would she say?"

"I think we mustn't tell her, dear. I couldn't help it; I felt so much I wanted to see you. I have been rather miserable, Alice."

"Why?" she said, stroking his hand from wrist to finger-tips with one soft finger. "You mustn't be so miserable. You and me have never done such a thing before; have we? Was it that wretched old Flu, dear?"

It was too dark in the little fragrant room even to see her face so close to his own. And yet he feared. "Dr. Simon," she went on softly, "said it was. But isn't your voice a little hoarse, dear? and it sounds so melancholy in the dark. And oh"--she squeezed his wrist--"you have grown so thin! You do frighten me. Whatever should I do if you were really ill? And it was so odd, dear. When first I woke I seemed to be still straining my eyes in a dream, at such a curious, haunting face--not very nice. I am glad, I am glad you were here."

"What was the dream-face like?" came the muttered question.

"Dark and sharp, and rather dwelling eyes; you know those long faces one sees in dreams: like a hawk, like a conjuror's."

"Like a conjuror's"--it was the first unguarded and ungarbled criticism. "Perhaps, dear, if you find my voice different, and my hand shrunk up, you will find my face changed, too -- like a conjuror's. . . . What then?"

She laughed gaily and tenderly. "You silly silly! I should love you more than ever. Your hands are icy cold. I can't warm them nohow."

Lawford held tight his daughter's hand. "You do love me, Alice? You would not turn against me, whatever happened? Ah, you shall see, you shall see!" A sudden burning hope sprang up in him. Surely when all was well again these last few hours would not have been spent in vain. Like the shadow of death they had been, against whose darkness the green familiar earth seems beautiful as the plains of paradise. Had he but realised before how much he loved her--what years of life had been wasted in leaving it all unsaid! He came back from his reverie to find his hand wet with her tears. He stroked her hair, and touched gently her eyelids without speaking.

"You will let me come in to-morrow?" she pleaded; "you won't keep me out?"

"Ah, but, dear, you must remember your mother. She gets so anxious, and every word the doctor says is law. How would you like me to come again like this, perhaps;--like Santa Claus?"

"You know how I love having you," she said, and stopped. "But--but . . . " He leaned closer. "Yes, yes, come," she said, clutching his hand and hiding her eyes; "it is only my dream--that horrible, dwelling face in the dream; it frightened me so."

Lawford rose very slowly from his knees. He could feel in the dark his brows drawn down; there came a low, sullen beating on his ear; he saw his face as it were in dim outline against the dark. Rage and rebellion surged up in him; even his love could be turned to bitterness. Well, two could play at any game! Alice sprang up in bed and caught his sleeve. "Dearest, dearest, you must not be angry with me now!"

He flung himself down beside the bed. Anger, resentment died away. "You are all I have left," he said.

He stole back, as he had come, in the clear dawn to his bedroom.

It was not five yet. He put a few more coals on his fire and blew out the night-light, and lay down. But it was impossible to rest, to remain inactive. He would go down and search for that first volume of Quain. Hallucination, Influenza, Insanity--why, Sheila must have purposely mislaid it. A rather formidable figure he looked descending the stairs in the grey dusk of dawn. The breakfast-room was at the back of the house. He tilted the blind, and a faint light flowed in from the changing colours of the sky. He opened the glass door of the little bookcase to the right of the window, and ran eye and finger over the few rows of books. But as he stood there with his back to the room, just as the shadow of a bird's wing floats across the moonlight of a pool, he became suddenly conscious that something, somebody had passed across the doorway, and in passing had looked in on him. He

stood motionless, listening; but no sound broke the morning slumbrousness, except the far-away warbling of a thrush in the first light. So sudden, so transitory had been the experience it seemed now to be illusory; yet it had so caught him up, it had with so furtive and sinister a quietness broken in on his solitude, that for a moment he hesitated to move. A cold, indefinite sensation stole over him that he was being watched; that some dim, evil presence was behind him, waiting, patient and expectant, with eyes fixed unmovingly on him where he stood. But, watch and wait as silently as he might, only the day broadened at the window, and at last a narrow ray of sunlight stole trembling up into the dusky bowl of the sky.

At any rate Quain was found, with all the ills of life, from A to I; and Lawford turned back to his bondage with the book under his arm.

CHAPTER VIII

THE Sabbath, pale with September sunshine, and monotonous with chiming bells, had passed languidly away. Dr. Simon had come and gone, optimistic and urbane, yet with a faint inward dissatisfaction over a patient behind whose taciturnity a hint of mockery and subterfuge, seemed to lurk. Even Mrs. Lawford had appeared to share her husband's reticence. But Dr. Simon had happened on other cases in his experience where tact was required rather than skill, and time than medicine.

The voices and footsteps, even the frou-frou of worshippers going to church, the voices and footsteps of worshippers returning from church, had floated up to the patient's open window. Sunlight had drawn across his room in one pale beam, and vanished. A few callers had called. Hothouse flowers, waxen and pale, had been left with messages of sympathy. Even Mr. Critchett had respectfully and discreetly made his inquiries on his way home from chapel.

Lawford had spent most of his time in pacing to and fro in his soft slippers. The very monotony had eased his mind. Now and again he had lain motionless, with his face to the ceiling. He had dozed and awoke, cold and torpid with dream. He had hardly been aware of the process, but every hour had done something, it seemed, towards clarifying his point of view. A consciousness had begun to stir in him that was neither that of the old, easy Lawford, whom he had never been fully aware of before, nor of this strange, ghostly intelligence that haunted the hawklike, restless face, and plucked so insistently at his distracted nerves. He had begun in a vague fashion to be aware of them both, could in a fashion discriminate between them, almost as if there really were two spirits in stubborn conflict within him. It would, of course, wear him down in time. There could be only one end to such a struggle--the end.

All day he had longed for freedom, on and on, with craving for the open sky, for solitude, for green silence, beyond these maddening walls. This heedful, silken coming and going, these Sunday voices, this reiterant yelp of a single, peevish bell--would they never cease? And above all, betwixt dread and an almost physical greed, he hungered for night. He sat down with elbows on knees and head on his hands, thinking of night, its secrecy, its immeasurable solitude. His eyelids twitched; the fire before him had for an instant gone black out. He seemed to see dark, slow-gesturing branches, grass stooping beneath a grey and wind-swept sky. He started up; and remembrance of the morning returned to him--the glassy light, the changing rays, the beaming gilt upon the useless

books. Now, at last, at the windows, afternoon had begun to wane. And when Sheila brought up his tea, as if Chance had heard his cry, she entered in hat and stole. She put down the tray, and paused at the glass, looking across it out of the window.

"Alice says you are to eat every one of those delicious sandwiches, and especially the tiny omelette. You have scarcely touched anything to-day, Arthur. I am a poor one to preach, I am afraid; but you know what that will mean--a worse breakdown still. You really must try to think of--of us all."

"Are you going to church?" he asked in a low voice.

"Not, of course, if you would prefer not. But Dr. Simon advised me most particularly to go out at least once a day. We must remember, Arthur, this is not the beginning of your illness. Long-continued anxiety, I suppose, does tell on one in time. Anyhow, he said that I looked worried and run-down. I am worried. Let us both try for each other's sakes, or even if only for Alice's, to--to do all we can. I must not harass you; but is there any--do you see the slightest change of any kind?"

"You always look pretty, Sheila; to-night you look prettier: that is the only change, I think."

Mrs. Lawford's attitude intensified in it stillness. "Now, speaking quite frankly, what is it in you suggests these remarks at such a time? That's what baffles me. It seems so childish, so needlessly blind."

"I am very sorry, Sheila, to be so childish. But I'm not, say what you like, blind. You are pretty: I'd repeat it if I was burning at the stake."

Sheila lowered her eyes softly on to the rich-toned picture in the glass. "Supposing," she said, watching her lips move, "supposing--of course, I know you are getting better and all that--but supposing you don't change back as Mr. Bethany thinks, what will you do? Honestly, Arthur, when I think it over calmly, the whole tragedy comes back on me with such a force it sweeps me off my feet; I am for the moment scarcely my own mistress. What would you do?"

"I think, Sheila," replied a low, infinitely weary voice, "I think I should marry again." It was the same wavering, faintly ironical voice that had slightly discomposed Dr. Simon that same morning.

"'Marry again'!" exclaimed incredulously the full lips in the looking glass. "Who?"

"You dear!" Sheila turned softly round, conscious in a most humiliating manner that she had ever so little flushed.

Her husband was pouring out his tea, unaware, apparently, of her change of position. She watched him curiously. In spite of all her reason, of her absolute certainty, she wondered for a moment if this really could be Arthur. And for the first time she realised the power and mastery of that eager and far too hungry face. Her mind seemed to pause, fluttering in air, like a bird in the wind. She hastened rather unsteadily to the door.

"Will you want anything more, do you think, for an hour?" she asked.

Her husband looked up over his little table. "Is Alice going with you?"

"Oh yes; poor child, she looks so pale and miserable. We are going to Mrs. Sherwin's, and then on to church. You will lock your door?"

"Yes, I will lock my door."

"And I do hope Arthur--nothing rash!"

A change, that seemed almost the effect of actual shadow, came over his face. "I wish you could stay with me," he said slowly. "I don't think you have any idea what--what I go through."

It was as if a child had asked on the verge of terror for a candle in the dark. But an hour's terror is better than a lifetime of timidity. Sheila sighed.

"I think," she said, "I too might say that. But there! giving way will do nothing for either of us. I shall be gone only for an hour, or two at the most. And I told Mr. Bethany I should have to come out before the sermon: it's only Mr. Craik."

"But why 'Mrs. Sherwin'? She'd worm a secret out of one's grave."

"It's useless to discuss that, Arthur; you have always consistently disliked my friends. It's scarcely likely that you would find any improvement in them now."

"Oh, well----" he began. But the door was already closed.

"Sheila!" he called in a burst of anger.

"Well, Arthur?"

"You have taken my latchkey."

Sheila came hastily in again. "Your latchkey?"

"I am going out."

"'Going out!'--you will not be so mad, so criminal; and after your promise!"

He stood up. "It is useless to argue. If I do not go out, I shall certainly go mad. As for criminal--why, that's a woman's word. Who on earth is to know me?"

"It is of no consequence, then, that the servants are already gossiping about this impossible Dr. Ferguson; that you are certain to be seen either going or returning; that Alice is bound to discover that you are well enough to go out, and yet not well enough to say good-night to your own daughter?--oh, it's monstrous, it's a frantic, a heartless thing to do!" Her voice vaguely suggested tears.

Lawford eyed her coldly and stubbornly--thinking of the empty room he would leave awaiting his return, its lamp burning, its fireflames shining. It was almost a physical discomfort, this longing unspeakable for the twilight, the green secrecy and silence of the graves. "Keep them out of the way," he said in a low voice; "it will be dark when I come in." His hardened face lit up. "It's useless to attempt to dissuade me."

"Why must you always be hurting me? why do you seem to delight in trying to estrange me?" Husband and wife faced each other across the clear-lit room. He did not answer.

"For the last time," she said in a quiet, hard voice, "I ask you not to go."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Ask me not to come back," he said; "that's nearer your hope!" and turned his face to the fire. Without moving he heard her go out, return, pause, and go out again. And when he deliberately wheeled round in his chair the little key lay conspicuous there on the counterpane.

CHAPTER IX

THE last light of sunset lay in the west; a sullen wrack of cloud was mounting into the windless sky when Lawford entered the little country graveyard again by its old weather-worn lych-gate. The little old stone church with its square tower stood amid trees, its eastern window faintly aglow with crimson and purple. He could hear a steady, rather nasal voice through its open lattices. But the stooping stones and the cypresses were out of sight of its porch. He would not be seen down there. He paused a moment, however; his hat was drawn down over his eyes; he was shivering. He looked across and saw far over the harvest fields what seemed a growing pallor in the sky. He would have the moon to go home by. "Home!"--these trees, this tongueless companionship, this heavy, winelike air, this soundless turf--these in some obscure desolate fashion seemed far rather really home. His eyes wandered towards the fading crimson. And with that on his right hand he began softly, almost on tiptoe, descending the hill. It seemed to him that the steady eyes of the dead were watching him in his slow progress. The air seemed echoing with little faint, clear calls. He turned and snapped his fingers at a robin that was stalking him with its stony twittering from bush to bush. But when after some little time he came out of the narrow avenue and looked down, his heart misgave him, for some one was already sitting there on his low and solitary seat beneath the cypresses. He stood hesitating, looking steadily and yet half vacantly down on the motionless figure, and in a while a face was lifted in his direction, and undisconcerted eyes calmly surveyed him.

"I am afraid," began Lawford rather nervously--"I hope I am not intruding?"

"Not at all, not at all," said the stranger. "I have no privileges here; at least as yet."

Lawford again hesitated, then slowly advanced. "It's astonishingly quiet and beautiful," he said.

The stranger turned his head to glance over the fields. "Yes, it is, very," he replied. Thee was the faintest accent, a little drawl of unfriendliness in the remark.

"You often sit here?" Lawford peristed.

The stranger raised his eyebrows. "Oh yes, often." He smiled. "It is my own modest fashion of attending divine service. The congregation is rapt."

"My visits," said Lawford, "have been very few--in fact, so far as I know, I have only once been here before."

"I envy you the novelty." There was again the same faint, unmistakable antagonism in voice and attitude; and yet so deep was the relief in talking to one who hadn't the least suspicion of anything unusual in his appearance, that Lawford was extremely disinclined to turn back. He made another effort; for talking to strangers had always been something of a difficulty to him, and advanced towards the seat. "You mustn't indeed let me intrude upon you," he said, "but really I am very interested in this queer old place. Perhaps you would tell me something of its history?" He sat down. His companion moved slowly to the other side of the broken gravestone.

"To tell you the truth," he said, picking his way as it were from word to word, "its 'history,' as people call it, does not interest me in the least. After all, it's not when a thing is, but what it is, that much matters. What this is"--he glanced, with head bent, across the shadowy stones--"is pretty evident. Of course, age has its charms."

"And this is very old?"

"Oh yes, it's old right enough, as things go; but even age, perhaps, is mainly an affair of the imagination. There's a tombstone near that little old hawthorn, and there are two others side by side under the wall, still even legibly late seventeenth century. That's pretty good weathering." He smiled faintly. "Of course, the church itself is centuries older, drenched with age. But she's still sleep-walking while these old tombstones dream. Glow-worms and crickets are not such bad bed-fellows."

"What interested me most, I think," said Lawford haltingly, "was this." He pointed with his stick to the grave at his feet.

"Ah, yes, Sabathier's," said the stranger; "I know his peculiar history almost by heart."

Lawford found himself staring with unusual concentration into the rather long, pale face. "Not, I suppose," he resumed faintly--"not, I suppose, beyond what's there."

His companion leant his hand on the old stooping tombstone. "Well, you know, there's a good deal there"--he stooped over--"if you read between the lines. Even if you don't."

"A suicide," said Lawford, under his breath.

"Yes, a suicide; that's why our Christian countrymen have buried him outside of the fold. Dead or alive, they try to keep the wolf out."

"Is this, then, unconsecrated ground?" said Lawford.

"Haven't you noticed," drawled the other, "how green the grass grows down here, and how very sharp are poor old Sabathier's thorns? Besides, he was a stranger, and they kept him out."

"But, surely," said Lawford, "was it so entirely a matter of choice--the laws of the Church? If he did kill himself, he did."

The stranger turned with a little shrug. "I don't suppose it's a matter of much consequence to him. I fancied I was his only friend. May I venture to ask who you are so interested in the poor old thing?"

Lawford's mind was as calm and shallow as a millpond. He fidgeted. "Oh, a rather unusual thing happened to me here," he said. "You say you often come?"

"Often," said the stranger rather curtly.

"Has anything--ever--occurred?"

"'Occurred?'" He raised his eyebrows. "I wish it had. I come here simply, as I have said, because it's quiet; because I prefer the company of those who never answer one back, and who do not so much as condescend to pay me the least attention." He smiled and turned his face towards the quiet fields.

Lawford, after a long pause, lifted his eyes. "Do you think," he said softly, "it is possible one ever could?"

"'One ever could?'"

"Answer back?"

There was a low rotting wall of stone encompassing Sabathier's grave; on this the stranger sat down. He glanced up rather curiously at his companion. "Seldom the time and the place and the revenant altogether. The thought has occurred to others," he ventured to add.

"Of course, of course," said Lawford eagerly. "But it is an absolutely new one to me. I don't mean that I have never had such an idea, just in one's own superficial way; but"--he paused and glanced swiftly into the fast-thickening twilight--"I wonder: are they, do you think, really, all quite dead?"

"Call and see!" said the stranger softly.

"Ah, yes, I know," said Lawford. "But I believe in the resurrection of the body; that is what we say; and supposing, when a man dies--supposing it was most frightfully against one's will; that one hated the awful inaction that death brings, shutting a poor devil up like a child kicking against the door in a dark cupboard; one might--surely one might--justg quietly, you know, try to get out? Wouldn't you?" he added.

"And, surely," he found himself beginning gently to argue again, "surely, what about, say, him?" He nodded towards the old and broken grave that lay between them.

"What, Sabathier?" the other echoed, laying his hand upon the stone.

And a sheer enormous abyss of silence seemed to follow the unanswerable question.

"He was a stranger; it says so. Good God!" said Lawford, "how he must have wanted to get home! He killed himself, poor wretch! think of the fret and fever he must have been in--just before. Imagine it!"

"But it might, you know," suggested the other with a smile--"it might have been sheer indifference."

"'Nicholas Sabathier, Stranger to this parish'--no, no," said Lawford, his heart beating as if it would choke him. "I don't fancy it was indifference."

It was almost too dark now to distinguish the stranger's features, but there seemed a faint suggestion of irony in his voice. "And how do you suppose your angry, naughty child would set about it It's narrow quarters; how would he begin?"

Lawford sat quite still. "You say--I hope I am not detaining you--you say you have come here, sat here often, on this very seat; have you ever had--have you ever fallen asleep here?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired the other curiously.

"I was only wondering," said Lawford. He was cold and shivering. He felt instinctively it was madness to sit here in this thin, gliding mist that had gathered in swathes above the grass, milk-pale in the rising moon. The stranger turned away from him.

"'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come must give us pause,'" he said slowly, with a little satirical catch on the last word. "What did you dream?"

Lawford glanced helplessly about him. The moon cast lean, grey beams of light between the cypresses. But to his wide, wandering eyes it seemed that a radiance other than hers haunted these mounds and leaning stones. "Have you ever noticed it?" he said, putting out his hand towards his unknown companion; "this stone is cracked from head to foot? . . . But there"--he rose stiff and chilled--"I am afraid I have bored you with my company. You came here for solitude, and I have been trying to convince you that we are surrounded with witnesses. You will forgive my intrusion?" There was a kind of old-fashioned courtesy in his manner that he himself was dimly aware of. He held out his hand.

"I hope you will think nothing of the kind," said the other earnestly; "how could it be in any sense an intrusion? It's the old story of Bluebeard. And I confess I should very much like a peep into his cupboard too. Who wouldn't? But there, it's merely a matter of time, I suppose." He paused, and together they slowly ascended the path already glimmering with heavy dew. At the porch they paused once more. And now it was the stranger that held out his hand."

"Perhaps," he said, "you will give me the pleasure of some day continuing our talk. As for our friend below, it so happens that I have managed to pick up a little more of his history than the sexton seems to have known of--if you would care some time or other to hear it. I live only at the foot of the hill, not half a mile distant. Perhaps you could spare the time now?"

Lawford took out his watch. "You are really very kind," he said. "But, perhaps--well, whatever that history may be, I think you would agree that mine is even--but, there, I've talked too much about myself already. Perhaps to-morrow?"

"Why, to-morrow, then," said his companion. "It's a flat wooden house, on the left-hand side. Come at any time of the evening;" he paused again and smiled--"the third house after the Rectory, which is marked up on the gate. My name is Herbert."

Lawford took out his pocket-book and a card. "Mine," he said, handing it gravely to his companion, "is Lawford--at least . . ." It was really the first time that either had seen the other's face, unshadowed and clear-lit; and on Lawford's a moon almost at the full shone dazzingly. He saw an expression--dismay, incredulity, overwhelming astonishment--start suddenly into the dark, rather indifferent eyes.

"What is it?" he cried, hastily stooping close.

"Why," said the other, laughing and turning away, "I think the moon must have bewitched me too."

CHAPTER X

LAWFORD listened awhile before opening his door. He heard voices in the dining-room. A light shone faintly between the blinds of his bedroom. He very gently let himself in, and unheard, unseen, mounted the stairs. He sat down in front of the fire, tired out, and bitterly cold in spite of his long walk home. But his mind was wearier even than his body. He tried in vain to catch up the thread of his thoughts. He only knew for certain that so far as his first hope and motives had gone his errand had proved entirely futile. "How could I possibly fall asleep with that fellow talking there?" he had said to himself angrily; yet knew in his heart that their talk had driven every other idea out of his mind. He had not yet even glanced into the glass. His every thought was vainly wandering round and round the one curious hint that had drifted in, but which he had not yet been able to put into words. Supposing, though, that he had really fallen into a deep sleep, with none to watch or spy--what then? However ridiculous the idea, it was not more ridiculous, more incredible than the actual fact. He might, it was just possible that he would by now have actually awakened just his own familiar, every-day self again. And the thought of that--though he hardly realised its full import--actually did send him on tip-toe for a glance that more or less effectually set the question at rest. This was much the same dark, sallow face that had so much appalled him only two nights ago--expressionless, cadaverous, with shadowy hollows beneath the glittering eyes. And even as he watched it its lips, of their own volition, it seemed, drew together and questioned him--"Whose?"

He was not to be given much leisure, however, for fantastic reveries like this. As he leaned his head on his hands, gladly conscious that he could not possibly bear this incessant strain for long, Sheila opened the door. He started up.

"I wish you would knock," he said angrily; "you talk of quiet; you tell me to rest, and think; and here you come creeping and spying on me as if I was a child in a nursery. I refuse to be watched and guarded and peeped on like this." He knew that his hands were trembling, that he could not keep his eyes fixed, that his voice was nearly inarticulate.

Sheila drew in her lips. "I have merely come to tell you, Arthur, that Mr. Bethany has brought Mr. Danton into supper. He agrees with me it really would be advisable to take such a very old and prudent and practical friend into our confidence. You do nothing I ask of you. I simply cannot bear the burden of this incessant anxiety. Look, now, what your night walk has done for you! You look positively at death's door."

"What--what an instinct you have for the right word!" he said softly. "And Danton, of all people in the world! It was surely rather a curious, a thoughtless choice. Has he had supper?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He won't believe; too--bloated."

"I think," said Sheila indignantly, "it is hardly fair to speak of a very old and a very true friend of mine in such--well, vulgar terms as that. Besides, Arthur, as for believing--without in the least desiring to hurt your feelings--I must candidly warn you, some people won't."

"Come along," said Lawford, with a faint gust of laughter; "let's see!"

They went quickly downstairs, Sheila with less dignity, perhaps, than she had been surprised into since she left a slimmer girlhood behind. She swept into the gaze of the two gentlemen standing together on the hearthrug; and so was caught, as it were, between a rain of conflicting glances, for her husband had followed instantly, and stood now behind her, stooping a little, and with something between contempt and defiance confronting an old fat friend, whom that one brief challenging instant had congealed into a condition of passive and immovable hostility.

Mr. Danton composed his chin in his collar, and deliberately turned himself a little towards his companion. His small eyes wandered a little restlessly, and instantaneously met and rested on those of Mrs. Lawford.

"Arthur thought he would prefer to come down and see you himself."

"You take such formidable risks, Lawford," said Mr. Bethany in a dry, difficult voice.

"Am I really to believe" he began huskily--"I am sure, Bethany, you will---- My dear Mrs. Lawford!" said Danton, stirring vaguely, glancing restlessly.

"It was not my wish, Vicar, to come at all," said a voice from the doorway. "To tell you the truth, I am too tired to care a jot either way. And"--he lifted a long arm--"I must positively refuse to produce the least, the remotest proof that I am not, so far as I am personally aware, even the Man in the Moon. Danton at heart was always an incorrigible sceptic. Aren't you, T. D.? You pride your dear old brawn on it in secret."

"I really----" began Danton in a rich still voice.

"Oh, but you know you are," drawled on the clear, slightly hesitating long-drawn syllables; "it's your parochial metier. Firm, unctuous, subtle scepticism; and to that end your body flourishes. You

were born fat; you became fat; and fat, my dear Danton, has been deliberately thrust on you--in layers! Lampreys! You'll perish of surfeit some day, of sheer Dantonism. And fat, post mortem, Danton. Oh, what a basting's there!"

Mr. Bethany, with a convulsive effort, woke. He turned swiftly on Mrs. Lawford. "Why! why! could you not have seen?" he cried.

"It's no good, Vicar. She's all sheer Laodicean. Blow hot, blow cold. North, south, east, west--to have a weathercock for a wife is to marry the wind. There's nothing to be got from poor Sheila but . . ."

"Lawford!" the little man's voice was as sharp as the crack of a whip; "I forbid it. Do you hear me? I forbid it. Some self-command; by dear good fellow, remember, remember it's only the will, the will that keeps us breathing!"

Lawford peered as if out of a gathering dusk, that thickened and flickered with shadows before his eyes.

"What's he mean, then," he muttered huskily, "coming here with his black, still carcase--peeping, peeping--what's he mean, I say?" There was a moment's silence. Then with lifted brows and wide eyes, that to every one of his three witnesses left an indelible memory of clear and wolfish light within their glassy pupils, he turned heavily, and climbed back to his solitude.

"I suppose," began Danton, with an obvious effort to disentangle himself from the humiliation of the moment, "I suppose he was--wandering?"

"Bless me, yes!" said Mr. Bethany cordially--"fever! We all know what that means."

"Yes," said Danton, taking refuge in Mrs. Lawford's white and intent gaze.

"Just think, think, Danton--the awful incessant strain of such an ordeal! Think for an instant what such a thing means!"

Danton inserted a plump, white finger between collar and chin. "Oh yes! But--eh?--needlessly abusive. I never said I disbelieved him."

"Do you?" said Mrs. Lawford's voice.

He poised himself, as it were, on the monolithic stability of his legs. "Eh?" he said.

Mr. Bethany sat down at the table. "I rather feared some such temporary breakdown as this, Danton. I think I foresaw it. And now, just while we are all three alone here together in friendly conclave, wouldn't it be as well, don't you think, to confront ourselves with the difficulties? I know--we all know, that that poor half-demented creature is Arthur Lawford. This morning he was as sane, as lucid as I hope I am now. This awful calamity has suddenly fallen upon him--this change. I own frankly at the first sheer shock it staggered me as I think for the moment it has staggered you. But when I had seen the poor fellow face to face, heard him talk, and watched him there upstairs in

this silence stir and awake and come up again to his trouble out of his sleep, I had no more doubt in my own mind and heart that he was he than I have that I--poor fool--am I. We do in some mysterious way, you'll own at once, grow so accustomed--so inured, if you like--to each other's faces (masks though they be) that we hardly realise we see them when we are speaking together. And yet the slightest, the most infinitesimal change is instantly apparent. I have heard Lawford's own account. Conscious or unconscious, he has been through some terrific strain, some such awful conflict with the unseen powers that we--thank God!--have only read about, and never perhaps, until death is upon us, shall witness for ourselves. What more likely, more inevitable that that such a thing should leave its scar, its cloud, its masking shadow?--call it what you will. A smile can turn a face we dread into a face we'd die for. Some experience, which it would be nothing but a hideous cruelty and outrage to ask too closely aboutqone, perhaps, which he could, even if he would, poor fellow, give no account of--has put him temporarily at the world's mercy--a mere nine days' wonder, a byword. And that, my dear Danton, is just where we come it. We know the man himself; and it is to be our privilege to act as a buffer-state, to be intermediaries between him and the rest of this deadly, craving, sheepish world--for the time being; oh yes, just for the time being. Other and keener and more knowledgable minds than mine or yours will some day bring him back to us again. We don't attempt to explain; we can't; we simply believe."

But Danton merely continued to stare, as if into the quiet of an aquarium.

"My dear, good Danton," persisted Mr. Bethany with cherubic patience, "how old are you?"

"I don't see quite . . ." smiled Danton, with recovered ease, and rapidly mobilising forces. "Excuse the confidence, Mrs. Lawford, I'm forty-three."

"Good," said Mr. Bethany; "and I'm seventy-one, and this child here"--he pointed an accusing finger at Sheila--"is youth perpetual. So," he briskly brightened, "say, between us we're six score all told. Are we--can we, deliberately, with this mere pinch of years at our command out of the wheeling millioins that have gone--can we say, 'This is impossible,' to any single phenomenon? Can we?"

"No, we can't, of course," said Danton formidably, "not finally; that's all very well," he paused, and added, nodding his round head upward, "I suppose he can't hear?"

Mr. Bethany rose cheerfully. "All right, Danton; I am afraid you are exactly what the poor fellow in his delirium solemnly asseverated. And, jesting apart, it is in delirium that we tell our sheer, plain, unadulterated truth: you're a nicely covered sceptic. Personally, I refuse to discuss the matter. Mere dull, stubborn prejudice; bigotry, if you like. I will only remark just this--that Mrs. Lawford and I, in our inmost hearts, know. You, my dear Danton, forgive the freedom, merely incredulously grope. Faith versus reason--that prehistoric Armageddon. Some day, and a day not far distant either, Lawford will come back to us. This--this shutter will be taken down as abruptly as by some inconceivably drowsy heedlessness of common Nature it has been put up. He'll win through; and of his own sheer will and courage. But now, because I ask it, and this poor child here entreats it, you will say nothing to a living soul about the matter, say, till Friday? What step-by-step creatures we are, to be sure! I say Friday because it will be exactly a week then. And what's a week?--to Nature

scarcely the unfolding of a rose! But still, Friday be it. Then, if nothing has occurred, we will, we shall have to call a friendly gathering, we shall have to have a friendly consultation."

"I'm not, I hope, a brute, Bethany," said Danton apologetically; "but, honestly, speaking for myself, simply as a man of the world, it's a big risk to be taking on--what shall we call it?--on mere intuition. Personally, and even in a court of law--though Heaven forbid it ever reaches that stage--personally, I could swear that the fellow that stood abusing me there, in that revolting fashion, was not Lawford. It would be easier even to believe in him, if there were not that--that glaze, that shocking simulation of the man himself, the very man. But then, I am a sceptic; I own it. And 'pon my word, Mrs. Lawford, there's plenty of room for sceptics in a world like this."

"Very well," said Mr. Bethany crisply, "that's settled, then. With your permission, my dear," he added, turning untarnishably clear, childlike eyes on Sheila, "I will take all risks--even to the foot of the gibbet: accessory, Danton, after the face." And so direct and cloudless was his gaze that Sheila tried in vain to evade it and to catch a glimpse of Danton's small, agate-like eyes, now completely under mastery, and awaiting confidently the meeting with her own.

"Of course," she said, "I am entirely in your hands."

CHAPTER XI

LAWFORD slept far into the cloudy Monday morning, to wake steeped in sleep, lethargic, and fretfully haunted by inconclusive remembrances of the night before. When Sheila, with obvious and capacious composure, brought him his breakfast tray, he watched her face for some time without speaking.

"Sheila," he began, as she was about to leave the room again.

She paused, smiling.

"Did anything happen last night? Would you mind telling me, Sheila? Who was it was here?"

Her lids the least bit narrowed. "Certain, Arthur; Mr. Danton was here."

"Then it was not a dream?"

"Oh no," said Sheila.

"What did I say? What did he say? It was hopeless, anyhow."

"I don't quite understand what you mean by 'hopeless,' Arthur. And must I answer the other questions?"

Lawford drew his hand over his face, like a tired child. "He didn't--believe?"

"No, dear," said Sheila softly.

"And you, Sheila?" came the subdued voice.

Sheila crossed slowly to the window. "Well, quite honestly, Arthur, I was not very surprised. Whatever we are agreed about on the whole, you were scarcely yourself last night."

Lawford shut his eyes, and re-opened them full on his wife's calm scrutiny, who had in that moment turned in the light of the one drawn blind to face him again.

"Who is? Always?"

"No," said Sheila; "but--it was at least unfortunate. We can't, I suppose, rely on Mr. Bethany alone."

Lawford crouched over his food. "Will he blab?"

"Blab! Mr. Danton is a gentleman, Arthur."

Lawford rolled his eyes as if in temporary vertigo. "Yes," he said. And Sheila once more prepared to make a reposeful exit.

"I don't think I can see Simon this morning."

"Oh! Who, then?"

"I mean I would prefer to be left alone."

"Believe me, I had no intention to intrude." And this time the door really closed.

"He is in a quiet, soothing sleep," said Sheila a few minutes later.

"Nothing could be better," said Dr. Simon; and Lawford, to his inexpressible relief, heard the fevered throbbing of the doctor's motor-car rearise, and turned over and shut his eyes, dulled and exhausted with the still unfriendliness of the vacant room. His spirits had sunk, he thought, to their lowest ebb. He scarcely heeded the fragments of dreams--clear, green landscapes, amazing gleams of peace, the sudden, broken voices, the rustling and calling shadowinesses of subconsciousness in this quiet sunlight of reality. The clouds had broken, or had been withdrawn like a veil from the October skies. One thought alone was his refuge; one face alone haunted him with its peace; one remembrance soothed him--Alice. Through all his scattered and purposeless arguments he strove to remember her voice, the loving-kindness of her eyes, her untroubled confidence.

In the afternoon he got up and dressed himself. He could not bring himself to stand before the glass and deliberately shave. He even smiled at the thought of playing the barber to that lean chin. He dressed by the fireplace.

"I couldn't rest," he told Sheila, when she presently came in on one of her quiet, cautious, heedful visits; "and one tires of reading even Quain in bed."

"Have you found anything?' she inquired politely.

"Oh yes," said Lawford wearily; "I have discovered that infinitely worse things are infinitely commoner. But there's nothing quite so picturesque!"

"Tell me," said Sheila, with refreshing naivete. "How does it feel? does it even in the slightest degree affect your mind?"

He turned his back and looked up at the broad, tilt portrait for inspection. "Practically, not at all," he said hollowly. "Of course, one's nerves--that fellow Danton--when one's overtired. You have"--his voice, in spite of every effort, faintly quavered--"you haven't noticed anything--my mind?"

"Me? Oh dear, no! I never was the least bit observant; you know that, Arthur. But apart from that, and I hope you will not think me unsympathetic--but don't you think we must sooner or later be thinking of what's to be done? At present, though I fully agree with Mr. Bethany as to the wisdom of hushing this unhappy business up as long as possible, at least from the gossiping outside world, still we are only standing still. And your malady, dear, I suppose, isn't. You will help me, Arthur? You will try and think? Poor Alice!"

"What about Alice?"

"She mopes, dear, rather. She cannot, of course, quite understand why she must not see her father, and yet his not being, or, for the matter of that, even if he was at death's door."

"At death's door," murmured Lawford under his breath; "who was it was saying that? Have you ever, Sheila, in a dream, or just as one'e thoughts go sometimes, seen that door? . . . its ruinous stone lintel, carved into lichenous stone heads . . . stonily silent in the last thin sunlight, hanging in peace unlatched. Heated, hunted, in agony--in that cold, green-clad, shadowed porch is haven and sanctuary . . . But beyond--O God, beyond!"

Sheila stood listening with startled eyes. "And was all that in Quain?" she inquired rather flutteringly.

Lawford turned a sidelong head, and looked steadily at his wife.

She shook herself, with a slight shiver. "Very well, then," she said and paused in silence.

Her husband yawned, and smiled, and almost as lit with that thin last sunshine seemed the smile that passed for an instant across the reverie of that shadowy face. He drew his hand wearily over his eyes. "What has he been saying now?" he said like a fretful child.

Sheila stood very quiet and still, as if in fear of scaring some rare, wild, timid creature by the least stir. "Who?" she merely breathed.

Lawford paused on the hearth-rug with his comb in his hand. "It's just the last rags of that beastly influenza," he said, and began vigorously combing his hair. And yet, simple and frank though the action was, it moved Sheila, perhaps, more than any other of the congested occurrences of the last

few days. Her forehead grew suddenly cold, the palms of her hands began to ache, she had to hasten out of the room to avoid revealing the sheer physical repulsion she had experienced.

But Lawford, quite unmindful of the shock, continued in a kind of heedless reverie to watch, as it were, the still visionary thoughts that passed in tranced stillness before his eyes. He longed beyond measure for the freedom that until yesterday he had not even dreamed existed outside the covers of some old, impossible romance--the magic of the darkening sky, the invisible, flocking presence of the de3ad, the shock of imaginations that had no words, of quixotic emotions which the stranger had stirred in that low, mocking, furtive talk beside the broken stones of the Huguenot. Was the "change" quite so monstrous, so meaningless? How often, indeed, he remembered curiously had he seemed to be standing outside these fast-shut gates of thought, that now had been freely opened to him.

He opened the door, and leant his ear to listen. From far away came a rich, long-continued chuckle of laughter, followed by a clatter of a falling plate, and then, still more uncontrollable laughter. There was a faint smell of toast on the air. Lawford ventured out on to the landing and into a little room that had once, in years gone by, been Alice's nursery. He stood far back, from the strip of open window that showed beneath the green blind, craning forward to see into the garden--the trees, their knotted trunks, and then, as he stole nearer, a flower-bed, late roses, geraniums, calceolaria, lobelia, the lawn and--yes, three wicker chairs, a footstool, a work-basket, a little table on the smooth, green grass in the honey-coloured sunhine; and Sheila sitting there in the rich sunlight, her hands resting on the arms of her chair, her head bent, evidently deeply engrossed in her thoughts. He crept an inch or two forward, and stooped. There was a hat on the grass--Alice's big garden hat--and beside it lay Flitters, nose on paws, long ears sagging. He had forgotten Flitters. Had Flitters forgotten him? Would he bark at the strange, distasteful scene of a--Dr. Ferguson? The coast was clear, then. He turned even softlier yet, to confront, rapt, still, and hovering betwixt astonishment and dread, the blue, calm eyes of his daughter, looking in at the door. It seemed to Lawford as if they had both been suddenly swept by some unseen power into a still, unearthly silence.

"We thought," he began at last, "we thought just to beckon Mrs. Lawford from the window. He--he is asleep."

Alice nodded. Her whole face was in a moment flooded with red, that ebbed and left her pale. "I will go down and tell mother you want to see her. It was very silly of me. I did not quite recognise at first . . . I suppose, thinking of my father . . ." The words faltered, and the eyes were lifted to his face again with a desolate, incredulous appeal. Lawford turned away heartsick and trembling.

"Certainly, certainly, by no means," he began, listening vaguely to the glib patter that seemed to come from another mouth. "Your father, my dear young lady, I venture to think is really on the road to recovery. Dr. Simon makes excellent progress. But, of course--two heads, we know, are so much better than one when there's the least--the least difficulty. The great thing is quiet, rest, isolation, no possibility of a shock, else----" His voice fell away, his eloquence failed.

For Alice stood gazing stirlessly on and on into this infinitely strange, infinitely familiar, shadowy, phantasmal face. "Oh yes," she replied, "I quite understand, of course; but if I might just peep even,

it would--I should be so much, much happier. Do let me just see him, Dr. Ferguson, if only his head on the pillow! I wouldn't even breathe. Couldn't it, couldn't it possibly help--even a faith-cure?" She leant forward impulsively, her voice trembling, and her eyes still shining beneath their faint, melancholy smile.

"I fear, my dear . . . it cannot be. He longs to see you. But with his mind, you know, in this state, it might----?"

"But mother never told me," broke in the girl desperately, "there was anything wrong with his mind. Oh, but that was quite unfair. You don't mean, you don't mean--that----?"

Lawford scanned swiftly the little square, beloved and memoried room that fate had suddenly converted for him into a cage of unspeakable pain and longing. "Oh no; believe me, no! Not his brain, not that, not even wandering; really; but always thinking, always longing on and on for you, dear, only. Quite, quite master of himself, but----"

"You talk," she broke in again angrily, "only in pretence! You are treating me like a child; and so does mother, and so it has been ever since I came home. Why, if mother can, and you can, why may not I? Why, if he can walk and talk in the night . . ."

"But who--who 'can walk and talk in the night?'" inquired a very low, stealthy voice out of the quietness behind her.

Alice turned quickly. Her mother was standing at a little distance, with all the clam and moveless concentration of a waxwork figure, looking up at her from the staircase.

"I was--I was talking to Dr. Ferguson, mother."

"But as I came up the stairs I understood you to be inquiring something of Dr. Ferguson, 'if,' you were saying, 'he can walk and talk in the night': you surely were not referring to your father, child? That could not possibly be, in his state. Dr. Ferguson, I know, will bear me out in that at least. And besides, I really must insist on following out medical directions to the letter. Dr. Ferguson, I know, will fully concur. Do, pray, Dr. Ferguson," continued Sheila, raising her voice even now scarcely above a rapid murmur--"do pray assure my daughter that she must have patience; that however much even he himself may desire it, it is impossible that she should see her father yet. And now, my dear child, come down, I want to have a moment's talk with Dr. Ferguson. I feared form his beckoning at the window that something was amiss."

Alice turned, dismayed, and looked steadily, almost with hostility, at the stranger, so curiously transfixed and isolated in her small old play-room. And in this scornful yet pleading confrontation her eye fell suddenly on the pin in his scarf--the claw and the pearl she had know all her life. From that her gaze flitted, like some wild, demented thing's, over face, hair, hands, clothes, attitude, expression, and her heart stood still in an awful, inarticulate dread of the unknown. She turned slowly towards her mother, groped forward a few steps, turned once more, stretching out her hands towards the vague, still figure whose eyes had called so piteously to her out of their depths, and fell fainting in the doorway. Lawford stood motionless, vacantly watching Sheila, who knelt, chafing the cold hands. "She has fainted?" he said; "oh, Sheila, tell me--only fainted?"

Sheila made no answer; did not even raise her eyes.

"Some day, Sheila----" he began in a dull voice, and broke off, and without another word, without even another glance at the still face and blue, twitching lids, he went rapidly out, and in another instant Sheila heard the door shut. She got up quickly, and after a glance into the bedroom locked the door; then she hastened upstairs for sal volatile and eau de cologne. Alice was sitting up when she returned, leaning against the empty play-room door, her face hidden in her hands.

It was yet clear daylight when Lawford appeared beneath the portico of his house. With a glance of circumspection, he descended the steps, only to be made aware in so doing that Ada was with a kind of furtive eagerness pointing out the mysterious Dr. Ferguson to a steadily gazing cook. One or two well-known and many a well-remembered face he encountered in the thin stream of City men treading blackly along the pavement. It was a still, high evening, and something very like a forlorn compassion rose in his mind at sight of their grave, rather pretentious, rather dull, respectable faces. He found himself walking with an affectation of effrontery, and smiling with a faint contempt on all alike, as if to keep himself from slinking, and the wolf out of his eyes. He felt restless, and watchful, and suspicious, as if he had suddenly come down in the world. His, then, was a disguise as effectual as a shabby coat and a glazing eye. His heart sickened. Was it even worth while living on a crust of social respectability so thin and so exquisitely treacherous? He challenged no one. One or two actual acquaintances raised and lowered a faintly inquiring eyebrow in his direction. One even recalled in his confusion a smile of recognition just a moment too late. There was a peculiar aura in his presence, a shadow of something in his demeanour that proved him alien.

None the less green Widderstone kept calling him, much as a bell in the imagination tolls on and on, the echo of reality. If the worst should come to the worst, why--there is pasture in the solitary by-ways for the beast that strays. He quickened his pace along lonelier streets, and soon strode freely through the little flagged and cobbled village of shops, past the same small jutting window whose clock had told him the hour on that first dark, hurried night. All was pale and faint with dying colours now; and decay was in the leaf, and the last swallows filled the gold air with their clashing stillness. No one heeded him here. He looked from side to side, exulting in the strangeness. Shops were left behind, the last milestone passed, and in a little while he was walking downhill beneath the elm boughs, which he remembered had stood like a turreted wall against the sunset when first he had wandered down into the churchyard. At the foot of the hill he passed by the green and white Rectory, and there was the parson, a little fat, pursy man with wrists protruding from his jacket sleeves as he stood on tip-toe, tying up a rambling roseshoot on his trim and cedared lawn. The next house barely showed its old red chimney-tops above its bowers; the next was empty, with windows vacantly gazing, its garden peopled with great bearded weeds that stood mutely watching, as it were, the seldom-opened gate. Then came more high grandmotherly elms, a dense hedge of ever leaf that pricks, and then Lawford found himself standing at the small canopied gate of the queer old wooden house that the stranger of his talk had in part described.

It stood square and high and dark in a kind of amphitheatre of verdure. Roses here and there sprang from the grass, and a narrow box-edged path led to a small door in a kind of low, green-mantled wing, with one square window above the porch. And as Lawford stood waiting, as one stands upon the eve of a new experience, not without foreboding, he heard as if at a distance the sound of falling

water. He still paused on the country roadside, scrutinising this strange, still, wooden presence; but at last with an effort he pushed open the gate, followed the winding path, and pulled the old iron hanging bell. There came presently a quiet tread, and Herbert himself opened the door which led into a little square wood-panelled hall, hung with old prints, and portraits in dark frames.

"Ah, yes, come in, Mr. Lawford," he drawled; "I was beginning to be afraid you were not coming."

Lawford laid hat and walking-stick on an old bench, and followed his churchyard companion up a slightly inclined corridor and a staircase, and so into a high room, covered far up the yellowish walls with old books on shelves and in cases, between which hung in little black frames, mezzotints, etchings, and old maps. A large table stood a few paces from the deep alcove of the window, which was surrounded by a low, faded, green seat, and screened from the sunshine by wooden shutters. And here the tranquil surge of falling water shook incessantly on the air, for the three lower casements stood open to the fading sunset. On a smaller table were spread cups, old earthenware dishes of fruit, and a big bowl of damask roses.

"Please sit down; I sha'n't be a moment; I am not sure that my sister is in; but if so, I will tell her we are ready for tea." Left to himself in this quiet, strange old room, Lawford forgot for a while everything else, he was for the moment so taken up with his surroundings.

What seized his fancy most in this quiet old room was this incessant changing roar of falling water. It must be the Widder, he said to himself, quite close to the walls. But not until he had had the boldness to lean head and shoulders out of the nearest window did he fully realise how close indeed the Widder was. It came sweeping, dark and deep, and begreened, full with the early autumnal rains, actually against the lower walls of the house itself, and in the middle suddenly swerved in a black, smooth arch, and tumbled headlong into a great pool, nodding with tall, slender water-weeds, and charged in its bubbled blackness here and there with the last crimson of the setting sun. To the left of the house, where the waters floated free again, stood vast, still trees above the clustering rushes; and in glimpses between their spreading boughs lay the far-stretching countryside, now dimmed with the first mists of approaching evening. So absorbed he became as he stood leaning over the wooden sill above the falling water, that eye and ear became enslaved by the roar and stillness, and in the faint atmosphere of age that seemed like a veil to hang about the odd old house and these prodigious branches, he fell into a kind of waking dream.

When at last he did draw back into the room it was perceptibly darker, and a thin, keen, shaft of recollection struck across his mind--the recollection of what he was, and of how he came to be there, his reasons for coming and of that dark, indefinable presence which, like a raven, had begun to build its dwelling in his mind. He sat on, with eyes restlessly wandering, his face leaning on his hands; and in a while the door opened and Herbert returned, carrying an old crimson and green teapot and a dish of hot cakes.

"They're all out," he said; "sister, Sallie, and boy; but these were in the oven, so we won't wait. I hope you haven't been very much bored."

Lawford dropped his hands from his face and smiled. "I have been looking at the water," he said.

"My sister's favourite occupation; she sits for hourse and hours, with not even a book for an apology, staring down into the black old roaring pot. It has a sort of hypnotic effect after a time. And you'd be surprised how quickly one gets used to the noise. To me it's even less distracting than sheer silence. You don't know, after all, what on earth sheer silence means--even at Widderstone! But one can just realise a water-nymph. They chatter; but, thank Heaven, it's not articulate." He handed Lawford a cup with a certain niceness and self-consciousness, lifting his eyebrows slightly as he turned.

Lawford found himself listening out of a peculiar stillness of mind to the voice of this suave and rather inscrutable acquaintance. "The curious thing is, do you know," he began rather nervously, "that in the last few months, I have never noticed it before, never even caught the sound of the water."

"No, that's the best of it; nobody ever does. We are just buried alive. We have lived her for years, and scarcely know a soul--not even our own, perhaps. Why on earth should one? Acquaintances, after all, are little else than a bad habit."

"But then, what about me?" said Lawford.

"But that's just it," said Herbert. "I said acquaintances; that's just exactly what I'm going to prove--what very old friends we are. You've no idea! It really is rather queer." He took up his cup and sauntered over to the window.

Lawford eyed him vacantly for a moment, and, following rather his own curious thoughts than seeking any light on this somewhat vague explanation, again broke the silence. "It's odd, I suppose, but this house affects me much in the same way as Widderstone does; I'm not particularly fanciful--at least, I used not to be. But sitting here I seem, I hope it isn't a very frantic remark, it seems as though, if only my ears would let me, I should hear--well, voices. It's just what you said about the silence. I suppose it's the age of the place; it is very old?"

"Pretty old, I suppose; it's worm-eaten and rat-eaten and tindery enough in all conscience; and the damp doesn't exactly foster it. It's a queer old shanty. There are two or three accounts of it in some old local stuff I have. And of course there's a ghost."

"A ghost!" echoed Lawford, looking up.

CHAPTER XII

"WHAT'S in a name?" laughed Herbert. "But it really is a queer show-up of human oddity. A fellow comes in here, searching; that's all;" his back was turned, as he stood staring absently out, sipping his tea between his sentences; "he comes in--oh, it's a positive fact, for I've seen him myself, just sitting back in my chair here, you know, watching him as one would a tramp in one's orchard." He cast a candid glance over his shoulder. "First he looks round, like a prying servant. Then he comes cautiously in--a kind of grizzled, fawn-coloured face, middle-size, with big hands; and then, just like some quiet, groping, nocturnal creature, he begins his precious search--shelves, drawers that are not here, cupboards gone years ago, questing and nosing no end, and quite methodically too, until he reaches the window. Then he stops, looks back, narrows his boxy lids,

listens--quite perceptibly, you know, a kind of gingerish blur; then he seems to open this corner bookcase here, as if it were a door and goes out along what I suppose must have at some time been an outside gallery or balcony, unless, as I rather fancy, the house extended once beyond these windows. Anyhow, out he goes quite deliberately, treading the air as lightly as Botticelli's angels, until, however far you lean out of the window, you can't follow him any further. And then--and this is the bit that takes one's fancy--when you have contentedly noddled down again to whatever you may have been doing when the wretch appeared, or are sitting in a cold sweat, with bolting eyes awaiting developments, just according to your school of thought, or of nerves, you know--he comes back--comes back"--he turned round with a delightfully boyish laugh--"comes back, carrying a lighted candle. That really is a thrill, I assure you."

"But you've seen this--you've really seen this yourself?"

"Oh yes, twice," replied Herbert cheerfully. "And my sister, quite by haphazard, once saw him from the garden. She was shelling peas one evening for Sallie, and she distinctly saw him shamble out of the window here, and go shuffling along, mid-air, across the roaring washpot down below, turn sharp round the high corner of the house, sheer against the stars, in a kind of frightened hurry. And then, after five minutes' concentrated watching over the shucks, she saw him come shuffling back again--the same distraction, the same nebulous snuff colour, and a candle trailing its smoke behind him as he whisked in home."

"And then?"

"Ah, then," said Herbert, lagging along the bookshelves, and scanning the book-backs with eyes partially closed: he turned the lifted tea-pot, and refilled his visitor's cup; "then, wherever you are--I mean," he added, cutting up a little cake into six neat slices, "wherever the chance inmate of the room appears to be, he comes straight for you, at a quite alarming velocity, and fades, vanishes, melts, or, as it were, silts inside."

Lawford listened in a curious hush that had suddenly fallen over his mind. "'Fades inside? silts?'--I'm awfully stupid, but what on earth do you mean?" The room had slowly emptied itself of daylight; its own darkness, it seemed, had met that of the narrowing night, and Herbert deliberately lit a cigarette before replying. His clear, pale face, with its smooth outline and thin mouth, and rather long, dark eyes, turned with a kind of serene good-humour towards his questioner.

"Why," he said, "I mean frankly just that. Besides, it's Grisel's own phrase; and an old nurse we used to have said much the same. He comes, or it comes towards you, first just walking, then with a kind of gradually accelerated slide or glide, and sweeps straight into you," he tapped his chest, "me, whoever it may be is here. In a kind of panic, I suppose, to hide, or perhaps simply to get back again."

"Get back where?"

"Be resumed, as it were, via you. You see, I suppose he is compelled to regain his circle, or Purgatory, or Styx, whatever you like to call it, via consciousness. No one present, then no revenant or spook, or astral body, or hallucination; what's in a name? And of course even an hallucination is mind-stuff, and on its own, as it were. What I mean is that the poor devil must have some kind of

human personality to get back through in order to make his exit from our sphere of consciousness into his. And of course, of course to make his entrance too. If like a tenuous smoke he can get in, the probability is that he gets out in precisely the same fashion. For really, if you weren't consciously expecting a quite terrific impact (you actually jerk forward in the act of resistance unresisted), you would not notice his going. I am afraid I must be horribly boring you with all these tangled theories. All I mean is, that if you were really absorbed in what you happened to be doing at the time, the thing might come and go, with your mind for entrance an exit, as it were, without your being conscious of it at all." There was a longish pause, in which Herbert slowly inhaled and softly breathed out his smoke.

"And what--what's the poor wretch searching for? And what--why, what becomes of him when he does go?"

"Ah, there you have me! One merely surmises just as one's temperament or convictions lean. Grisel says it's some poor derelict soul in search of peace--that the poor beggar wants finally to die, in fact, and can't. Sallie smells crime. After all, what is every man?" he talked on; "a horde of ghosts--like a Chinese nest of boxes--oaks that were acorns that were oaks. Death lies behind us, not in front--in our ancestors, back and back, until----"

"'Until?'" Lawford managed to remark.

"Ah, that settles me again. Don't they call it an amoeba? But really I am abjectly ignorant of all that kind of stuff. We are all we are, and all in a sense we care to dream we are. And for that matter, anything outlandish, bizarre, is a godsend in this rather stodgy life. It is after all just what the old boy said--it's only the impossible that's credible; whatever credible may mean. . . ."

It seemed to Lawford as if the last remark had wafted him bodily into the presence of his kind, blinking, intensely anxious old friend, Mr. Bethany. And what leagues asunder the two men were who had happened on much the same words to paint their convictions!

He drew his hand gropingly over his face, half rose, and again seated himself. "Whatever it may be," he said, "the whole thing reminds me, you know--it is in a way so curiously like my own--my own case."

Herbert sat on, a little drawn up in his chair, quietly smoking. The crash of the falling water, after seeming to increase in volume with the fading of evening, had again died down in the darkness to a low, multitudinous tumult as of countless inarticulate, echoing voices.

"'Bizarre,' you said; God knows I am." But Herbert still remained obdurately silent. "You remember, perhaps," Lawford faintly began again, "our talk the other night?"

"Oh, rather," replied the cordial voice out of the dusk.

"I suppose you thought I was insane?"

"Insane!" There was a genuinely amused astonishment in the echo. "You were lucidity itself. Besides--well, honestly, if I may venture, I don't put very much truck in what one calls one's sanity: except, of course, as a bond of respectability and a means of livelihood."

"But did you realise in the least from what I said how I really stand? That I went down into that old shadowy hollow one man, and came back--well--this?"

"I gathered vaguely something like that. I thought at first it was merely affectation--that what you said was an affectation, I mean--until--well, to be quite frank, it was the 'this' that so immensely interested me. Especially," he added almost with a touch of gaiety, "especially the last glimpse. But if it's really not a forbidden question, what precisely was the other? What precise manner of man, I mean, came down into Widderstone?"

"It is my face that is changed, Mr. Herbert. If you'll try to understand me--my face. What you see now is not what I really am, not what I was. Oh, it is all quite different--I know perfectly well how--how absurd it must sound. You won't press me further. But that's the truth: that's what they have done for me."

It seemed to Lawford as if a remote tiny shout of laughter had been suddenly caught back in the silence that had followed his confession. He peered in vain in the direction of his companion. Even his cigarette revealed no sign of him. "I know, I know," he went gropingly on; "I felt it would sound to you like nothing but frantic, incredible nonsense. You can't see it. You can't feel it. You can't here these hooting voices. It's no use at all blinking the fact; I am simply on the verge, if not over it, of insanity."

"As to that, Mr. Lawford, honestly, the very fact of your being able to say so seems to me all but proof positive that you're not. Insanity is on another plane, isn't it? in which one can't compare one's states. As for what you say being credible, take our precious noodle of a spook here! Ninety-nine hundredths of this amiable world of ours would have guffawed the poor creature into imperceptibility ages ago. To such poor credulous creatures as my sister and I he is no more and no less a fact, a personality, a jolly reality than--well, this teacup. Here we are, amazing mysteries both of us in any case; and all round us are scores of books, dealing just with life, pure, candid, and undefiled; and there's not a single one among them but reads like a taradiddle. Yet grope between the lines of any autobiography, it's pretty clear what one has got,--a feeble, timid, creeping attempt to describe the indescribable. As for what you say your case is, the bizarre--that kind very seldom gets into print at all. In all this make-believe, all this pretence, how, honestly, could it? But there, this is all immaterial. The real question is, may I, can I help? What I gather is this: You just trundled down into Widderstone all among the dead men--but one moment, I'll light up." He struck a match, and shading it in his hand from the night air straying through the open window, lit the two candles that stood upon the little chimneypiece behind Lawford's head. Then sauntering over to the window again, almost as if with an affectation of nonchalance, he drew one of the shutters, and sat down. "Nothing much struck me," he went on, leaning back on his hands, "I mean on Sunday evening, until you said good-bye. It was when I caught in the moon a distinct glimpse of your face."

"This," said Lawford, with a sudden horrible sinking of the heart.

Herbert nodded. "The fact is, I have a print of it," he said.

"A print of it?"

"A miserable little dingy engraving."

"Of this?" Herbert nodded, with eyes fixed. "Where?"

"That's the nuisance! I searched high and low for it the instant I got home. For the moment it has been mislaid; but it must be somewhere in the house, and will turn up all in good time. It's the frontispiece of one of a little old French collection of pamphlets, sewn up together quite amateurishly in a marbled paper cover--confessions, travels, trials--all eighteenth century, and all in French."

"And mine?" said Lawford, gazing stonily across the candlelight.

Herbert, from a head slightly stooping, gazed back in an almost birdlike fashion across the room at his visitor.

"Sabathier's," he said.

"Sabathier's!"

"An extraordinary resemblance. Of course, I am speaking only from memory; and perhaps it's not quite so vivid in this light; but still astonishingly clear."

Lawford sat drawn up, staring at his companion's face in an intense and helpless silence. His mouth opened but no words came.

"Of course," began Herbert again, "I don't say there's anything in it--except just the--the coincidence." He paused and glanced out of the open casement besid3e him. "But there's just one obvious question. Do you happen to know of any strain of French blood in your family?"

Lawford shut his eyes, even memory seemed to be forsaking him at last. "No," he said, after a long pause, "there's a little Dutch, I think, on my mother's side, but no French."

"No Sabathier, then?" said Herbert, smiling. "And then there's another question--this change; is it really as complete as you suppose? Has it--please just warn me off if I am in the least intruding--has it been noticed?"

Lawford hesitated. "Oh yes," he said slowly, "it has been noticed--my wife, a few friends."

"Do you mind this infernal clatter?" said Herbert, laying his fingers on the open casement.

"No, no," said Lawford; "and you think?"

"My dear fellow, I don't think anything. It's all craziest conjecture. Stranger things even than this have happened. There are dozens here--in print. What are we human beings after all? Clay in the

hands of the potter. Our bodies are merely an inheritance, packed tight and corded up. We have practically no control over their main functions. And look at the faces of us--what atrocious mockeries most of them are of any kind of image! But we know our bodies change--age, sickness, thought, passion, fatality. It proves they are amazingly plastic. And merely even as a theory it is not in the least untenable that, by force of some violent convulsive effort from outside, one's body might change. . . . It answers with odd voluntariness to friend or foe, smile or snarl. As for what we call the laws of Nature, they are pure assumptions to-day, and may be nothing better than scrap-iron to-morrow. Good Heavens, Lawford, consider man's abysmal impudence!" He smoked on in silence for a moment. "You say you fell asleep down there?"

Lawford nodded. Herbert taped his cigarette on the sill. "Just following up our conjecture," he said musingly, "it wasn't such a bad opportunity for the poor chap."

"But surely," said Lawford, speaking as it were out of a dream of candle-light, and murmurous sound, and clearest darkness, towards this strange, deliberate phantom with the unruffled, clear-cut features--"surely then, in that case, he is here now? And yet, on my word of honour, though every friend I ever had in the world should deny it, I am the same; memory stretches back clear and sound to my childhood; I can see myself with extraordinary lucidity, how I think, my motives and all that; and in spite of these voices that I seem to hear, and this peculiar kind of longing to break away, as it were, just to press on--it is I, I myself, that am speaking to you now out of this--this mask."

Herbert glanced reflectively at his companion. "You mustn't let me tire you," he said; "but even on our theory it would not necessarily follow that you yourself would be much affected. It's true this fellow Sabathier really was something of a personality. He had a most wonderful itch for life, for trying on and on to squeeze something out of experience that isn't there; and he never seemed to weary of a magnificent attempt to find in his fellow-creatures, especially the women he met, what even if they have they cannot give. The little book I wanted to show you is partly autobiographical and really does manage to set the fellow on his feet. Even there he does absolutely take one's imagination. I shall never forget the thrill of picking him up in the Charing Cross Road. You see, I had known the queer old tombstone for years. He's enormously vivid--quite beyond my feebleness to describe, with a kind of French verve and rapture. Unluckily we can't get nearer than two years to his death. I shouldn't mind guessing some last devastating dream swept over him, held him the breath of an instant too long beneath the wave, and he caved in. We know he did kill himself; and, perhaps, died to regret it ever after."

"After all, what is this precious dying we talk so much about?" Herbert continued after a while, his eyes restlessly wandering from shelf to shelf. "You remember our talk in the churchyard? We all know that the body fades quick enough when its occupant is gone. Supposing even in the sleep of the living it lies very feebly guarded. And supposing in that state some infernally potent thing outside it, wandering disembodied, just happens on it--like some hungry sexton beetle on the body of a mouse. Supposing--I know it's the most outrageous theorising--but supposing all these years of sun and dark, Sabathier's emanation, or whatever you like to call it, horribly restless, by some fatality longing on and on just for life, or even for the face, the voice, of some 'impossible she' whom he couldn't get in life, simply loathing all else; supposing he has been lingering in ambush down beside those poor old dusty bones that had poured out for him such marrowy hospitality--oh, I know it; the dead do. And then, just by chance, one quiet autumn evening, a veritable godsend of

a little Miss Muffet comes wandering down under the shade of his immortal cypresses, half asleep, fagged out, depressed mind and body, perhaps; imagine yourself in his place, and he in yours!" Herbert stood up in his eagerness, his sleek hair shining. "The one clinching chance of a century! Wouldn't you have made a fight for it? Wouldn't you have risked the raid? I can just conceive it--the amazing struggle in that darkness within a darkness; like some dazed alien bee bursting through the sentinels of a hive; one mad impetuous clutch at victory; then the appalling stirring on the other side; the groping back to a house dismantled, rearranged, not, mind you, disorganised or disintegrated . . ." He broke off with a smile, as if of apology for this long, fantastic harangue.

Lawford sat listening, his eyes fixed on Herbert's colourless face. There was not a sound else, it seemed, than that slightly drawling, scrupulous voice poking its way amid a maze of enticing, baffling thoughts. Herbert turned away with a shrug. "It's tempting stuff," he said, choosing another cigarette. "But anyhow, the poor beggar failed."

"Failed!"

"Why, surely; if he had succeeded I should not now be talking to a mere imperfect simulacrum, to the outward illusion of a passing likeness to the man, but to Sabathier himself!" His eyes moved slowly round and dwelt for a moment with a dark, quiet scrutiny on his visitor.

"You say a passing likeness; do you mean that?"

Herbert smiled indulgently. "If one can mean what is purely a speculation. I am only trying to look at the thing dispassionately, you see. We are so much the slaves of mere repetition. Here is life--yours and mine--a kind of plenum in vacuo. It is only when we begin to play the eavesdropper; when something goes askew; when one of the sentries on the frontier of the unexpected shouts a hoarse 'Qui vive? that we begin to question; to prick our aldermen and pinch the calves of our kings. Why, who is there can answer to anybody's but his own satisfaction, just that one fundamental question--Are we the prisoners, the slaves, the inheritors, the creatures, or the creators of our bodies? Fallen angels or horrific dust? As for identity, or likeness or personality, we have only our neighbours' nod for them, and just a fading memory. No, the old fairy tales knew better; and witchcraft's witchcraft to the end of the chapter. Honestly, and just of course on that one theory, Lawford, I can't help thinking that Sabathier's raid only just so far succeeded as to leave his impression in the wax. It doesn't, of course, follow that it will necessarily end there. It might--it may be even now just gradually fading away. It may, you know, need driving out--with whips and scorpions. It might, perhaps, work in."

Lawford sat cold and still. "It's no good, no good," he said, "I don't understand; I can't follow you. I was always stupid, always bigoted and cocksure. These things have always seemed nothing but old women's tales to me. And now I must pay for it. And this Nicholas Sabathier; you say he was a blackguard?"

"Well," said Herbert with a faint smile, "that depends on your definition of the word. He wasn't a flunkey, a fool, or a prig, if that's what you mean. He wasn't perhaps on Mrs. Grundy's visiting list. He wasn't exactly gregarious. And yet in a sense that kind of temperament's so rare that Sappho, Nelson, and Shelley shared it. To the stodgy, suety world of course it's little else than sheer moonshine, midsummer madness. Naturally, in its own charming, stodgy way the world kept

flicking cold water in his direction. Naturally it hissed . . . I shall find the book. You shall have the book; oh yes."

"There's only one more question," said Lawford in a dull, slow voice, stooping and covering his face with his hands. "I know it's impossible fo ryou to realise--but to me time seems like that water there, to be heaping up about me. I wait, just as one waits when the conductor of an orchestra lifts his hand and in a moment the whole surge of brass and wood, cymbal and drum will crash out--and sweep me under. I can't tell you, Herbert, how it all is, with just these groping stirrings of that mole in my mind's dark. You say it's just this face--working in. God knows, I find it easy to speak to you--this cold, clear sense, you know. The others feel too much, or are afraid, or--q Let me think--yes, I was going to ask you a question. But no one can answer it." He peered darkly, with white face suddenly revealed between his hands. "What remains now? Where do I come in? What is there left for me to do?"

And at that moment there sounded, even above the gushing of the water beneath, there fell the sound of a light footfall approaching along the corridor.

"Listen," said Herbert; "here's my sister coming; we'll ask her."

CHAPTER XIII

THE door opened. Lawford rose, and into the further rays of the candle-light entered a rather slim figure in a light summer gown.

"Just home?" said Herbert.

"We've been for a walk----"

"My sister always forgets everything," said Herbert, turning to Lawford; "evne tea-time. This is Mr. Lawford, Grisel. We've been arguing no end. And we want you to give a decision. It's just this: Supposing if by some impossible trick you had come in now, not the charming, familiar sister you are, but shorter, fatter, fair and round-faced, quite different, physically, you know--what would you do?"

"What nonsense you talk, Herbert!"

"Yes, but supposing: a complete transmogrification--by some unimaginable ingression or enchantment, by nibbling a bunch of roses, or whatever you like to call it?"

"Only physically?"

"Well, yes, actually; but potentially, why--that's another matter."

The dark eyes passed slowly from her brother's face and rested gravely on their visitor's.

"Is he making fun of me?"

Lawford almost imperceptibly shook his head.

"But what a question! And I've had no tea." She drew her gloves slowly through her hand. "The thing, of course, isn't impossible, I know. But shouldn't I go mad, don't you think?"

Lawford gazed quietly back into her clear, grave, deliberate eyes. "Suppose, suppose, just for the sake of argument--not," he suggested.

She turned her head and reflected, glancing from one to the other of the pure, steady candle-flames.

"And what was your answer?" she said, looking over her shoulder at her brother.

"My dear child, you now what my answers are like!"

"And yours?"

Lawford took a deep breath, gazing mutely, forlornly, into the lovely, untroubled peace of her eyes, and without the least warning tears swept up into his own. With an immense effort he turned, and choking back every sound, beating back every thought, groped his way towards the square, black darkness of the open door.

"I must think, I must think," he managed to whisper, lifting his hand and steadying himself. He caught over his shoulder the glimpse of a curiously distorted vision, a lifted candle, and a still face gazing after him with infinitely grieved eyes, then found himself groping and stumbling down the steep, uneven staircase into the darkness of the queer old wooden and hushed and lonely house. The night air cold on his face calmed his mind. He turned and held out his hand.

"You'll come again," Herbert was saying with a hint of anxiety, even of apology in his voice.

Lawford nodded with eyes fixed blankly on the candle, and turning once more, made his way slowly down the narrow, green-bordered path upon which the stars rained scattered light so feeble it seemed but as a haze that blurred the darkness. He pushed open the little white wicket and turned his face towards the soundless, leaf-crowned hill. He had advanced hardly a score of steps in the thick dust when almost as if its very silence had struck upon his ear he remembered the black, broken grave with its sightless heads that lay beyond the leaves. And fear, vast and menacing, fear such as only children know, broke like a sea of darkness upon his heart. He stopped dead--cold, helpless, and trembling. And in the silence he heard a faint cry behind him and light footsteps pursuing him. He turned again. In the thick, close gloom beneath the enormous elm-boughs the grey eyes shone clearly visible in the face upturned to him. "My brother," she began breathlessly--"the little French book. It was I who mislaid it."

The set, stricken face listened unmoved.

"You are ill. Come back! I am afraid you are very ill."

"It's not that, not that," Lawford muttered; "don't leave me; I am alone. Don't question me," he said with a sob, looking down into her face, clutching her hand; "only understand that I can't, I can't go on." He swept a lean arm towards the unseen churchyard. "I am afraid."

The cold hand clasped his closer. "Hush, don't speak! Come back; come back! I am with you, a friend, you see; come back!"

Lawford clutched her hand as a blind man in sudden peril might clutch the hand of a child. He saw nothing clearly; spoke almost without understanding his words. "Oh, but it's must," he said; "I must go on. You see--why, everything depends on struggling through: the future! But if you only knew---- There!" Again his arm swept out, and the lean, terrified face turned shuddering from the dark.

"I do know; believe me, believe me! I can guess. See, I am coming with you; we will go together. As if, as I did not know what it is to be afraid. Oh, believe me; no one is near; we go on; and see! it gradually, gradually lightens. How glad I am I came!"

She had turned and they were steadily ascending as if pushing their way, battling on through some obstacle of the mind rather than of the senses beneath the star-powdered, callous vault of night. And it seemed to Lawford as if, as they pressed on together, some obscure, detestable presence as slowly, as doggedly had drawn worsted aside. He could see again the peaceful outspread branches of the trees, the lych-gate standing in clear-cut silhouette against the liquid dusk of the sky. A strange calm stole over his mind. The very meaning and memory of his fear faded out and vanished, as the passed-away clouds of a storm that leave a purer, serener sky.

They stopped and stood together on the brow of the little hill, and Lawford, still trembling from head to foot, looked back across the hushed and lightless countryside. "It's all gone now," he said wearily, "and now there's nothing left. You see, I cannot even ask your forgiveness--and a stranger!"

"Please don't say that--unless--unless--'a pligrim' too. I think, surely, you must own we did have the best of it that time. Yes--and I don't care who may be listening!--but we did win through!"

"What can I say? How shall I explain? How shall I make you understand?"

The clear grey eyes showed not the faintest perturbation. "But I do; I do indeed, in part; I do understand, ever so faintly."

"And now I will come back with you."

They paused in the darkness face to face, the silence of the sky, arched in its vastness, above the little hill, the only witness of their triumph.

She turned unquestioningly. And laughing softly--almost as children do, the stalking shadows of a twilight wood behind them--they trod in silence back to the house. They said goodbye at the gate, and Lawford started once more for home. He walked slowly, conscious of an almost intolerable weariness, as if his strength had suddenly been wrested away from him. And at the top of the hill he sat down on the bank beside a nettled ditch, beneath a bush of purple-berried nightshade, and with

his book pressed down upon the wayside grass struck a match, and holding it low in the scented, windless air, turned slowly the cockled pages.

Few of them were alike except for the dinginess of the print and the sinister smudge of the portrait. All were sewn roughly together into a mould-stained, marbled cover. He lit a second match, and as he did so glanced as if inquiringly over his shoulder. And a score or so of pages before the end he came at last upon the name he was seeking, and turned the page.

It was a likeness even more striking in its crudeness of ink and line and paper than the most finished of portraits could have been. It repelled, and yet it fascinated him. He had not for a moment doubted Herbert's calm conviction. And yet as he stooped in the grass, closely scrutinising the blurred, obscure features, he felt the faintest surprise not so much at the significant resemblance but at his own composure, his own steady, unflinching confrontation with this sinister and intangible adversary. The match burned down to his fingers. It hissed faintly on the grass.

He stuffed the book into his pocket, and stared into the pale dial of his watch. It was a few minutes after eleven. Midnight, then, would see him in. He rose stiffly and yawned in sheer exhaustion. Then, hesitating, he turned his head and looked down towards the hollow. But a vague foreboding held him back. A sour and vacuous incredulity swept over him. What was the use of all this struggling and vexation? What gain in living on? Once dead his sluggish spirit at least would find its rest. Dust to dust indeed it would be for him. What else, in sober earnest, had he been all his daily stolid life but half dead, scarce conscious, without a living thought, or desire, in head or heart?

And even while he was still gloomily debating within himself he had turned towards home, and soon was walking in a kind of reverie, even his extreme tiredness in part forgotten, and only a far-away, dogged recollection in his mind that in spite of shame, in spite of all his miserable weakness, the words had been once for all uttered, and in all sincerity, "We did win through!"

Yet a desolate and odd air of strangeness seemed to drape his unlighted house as he stood looking up in a kind of furtive communion with its windows. It affected him with that discomforting air of extreme and meaningless novelty that things very familiar sometimes take upon themselves. In this leaden tiredness no impression could be trustworthy. His lids shut of themselves as he softly mounted the steps. It seemed so needlessly wide a door that soundlessly admitted him. But however hard he pressed the key his bedroom door remained stubbornly shut until he found that it was already unlocked and he had only to turn the handle. A night-light burned in a little basin on the wash-stand. The room was hung, as it were, with the stillness of night. And half lying on the bed in her dressing-gown, her head leaning on the rail at the foot, was Alice, just as sleep had overtaken her.

Lawford returned to the door and listened. It seemed he heard a voice talking downstairs, and yet not talking, for it ran on and on in an incessant slightly argumentative monotony that had neither break nor interruption. He closed the door, and stooping laid his hand softly on Alice's narrow, still childish hand that lay half-folded on her knee. Her eyes opened instantly and gazed widely into his face. A slow, vacant smile of sleep came and went and her fingers tightened gently over his as again he lids drooped down over the drowsy blue eyes.

"At last, at last, dear," she said; "I have been waiting such a time. But we mustn't talk much. Mother is waiting up, reading."

Faintly through the close-shut door came the sound of that distant, expressionless voice monotonously rising and falling.

"Why didn't you tell me, dear?" Alice still sleepily whispered. "Would I have asked a single question? How could I? Oh, if you had only trusted me!"

"But the change--the change, Alice! You must have seen that. You spoke to me, you did think I was only a--a stranger; and even when you knew, it was only fear on your face, dearest, and aversion; and you turned to your mother first. Don't think, Alice, that I am--God only knows--not complaining. But truth is best whatever it is. I do feel that. You mustn't be afraid of hurting me, my dear."

Her very hands seemed to quicken in his as now, with sleep quite gone, the fret of memory returned, and she must reassure both herself and him. "But you see, dear, mother had told me that you--besides, I did know you at once, really; quite inside, you know, deep down. I know I was perplexed; I didn't understand; but that was all. Why, even when you came up in the dark, and we talked--if you only know how miserable I had been--though I knew even then there was something different, still I was not a bit afraid. Was I? And shouldn't I have been afraid, horribly afraid, if you had not been you?" She repressed a little shudder, and clasped his hand more closely. "Don't let us say anything more about it" she implored him; "we are just together again, you and I; that is all that matters." But her words were like brave soldiers who have fought their way through an ambuscade but have left all confidence behind them.

Lawford listened; and that was enough just now--that she still, in spite of doubt, believed in him, and thought and cared for him. He seemed too tired now to have refused the least kindness. He made no answer, but leant his head on the cool, slender fingers in gratitude and peace. And, just as he was, he almost instantly fell asleep. He woke in the darkness to find himself alone. He groped his way heavily to the door and turned the handle. But now it was really locked. Energy failed him. "I suppose--Sheila . . ." he muttered.

CHAPTER XIV

SHEILA, calm, alert, reserved, was sitting at the open window when he woke again. His breakfast tray stood on a little table beside the bed. He raised himself on his elbow and looked at his wife. The morning light shone full on her features as she turned quickly at the sound of his stirring.

"You have slept late," she said, in a low, mellow voice."

"Have I, Sheila? I suppose I was tired out. It is very kind of you to have got everything ready like this."

"I am afraid, Arthur, I was thinking rather of the maids. I like to inconvenience them as little as possible; in their usual routine, I mean. How are you feeling, do you think, this morning?"

"I--I haven't seen the glass, Sheila."

She paused to place a little pencil tick at the foot of the page of her butcher's book. "And did you--did you try?"

"Did I try? Try what?"

"I understood," she said, turning slowly in her chair, "you gave me to understand that you went out with the specific intention of trying to regain . . . But there, forgive me, Arthur; I think I must be getting a little bit hardened to the position, so far at least as any hope is in my mind of rather amateurish experiments being of much help. I may seem unsympathetic in saying frankly what I feel. But amateurish or no, you are curiously erratic. Why, if you really were the Dr. Ferguson whose part you play so admirably you could scarcely spend a more active life."

"All you mean, Sheila, I suppose, is that I have failed."

"'Failed' did not enter my mind. I thought, looking at you just now in your clothes on the bed, one might for the moment be deceived into thinking there was a slight--quite the slightest improvement. There was not quite that"--she hovered for the right word--"that tenseness. Whether or no, whether you desired any such change or didn't, I should have supposed in any case it would have been better to act as far as possible like any ordinary person. You were certainly in an extraordinarily sound sleep. I was almost alarmed; until I remembered that it was a little after two when I looked up from reading aloud to keep myself awake and discovered that you had only just come home. I had no fire. You know how easily late hours bring on my headaches; a little thought might possibly have suggested that I should be anxious to hear. But no; it seems I cannot profit by experience, Arthur. And even now you have not answered surely a very natural question. You do not recollect, perhaps, exactly what did happen last night? Did you go in the direction even of Widderstone?

"Yes, Sheila, I went to Widderstone."

"It was of course absurd to suppose that sitting on a seat beside the broken-down grave of a suicide would have the slightest effect on one's--one's physical condition; though possibly it might affect one's brain. It would mine; I am at least certain of that. It as your own prescription, however; and it merely occurred to me to inquire whether the actual experience has not brought you round to my own opinion."

"Yes, I think it has," Lawford answered calmly. "But I don't quite see what suicide has got to do with it; unless---- You know Widderstone, then, Sheila?"

"I drove there last Saturday afternoon."

"For prayer or praise?" Although Lawford had not actually raised his head, he became conscious rather of the wonderfully adjusted mass of hair than of the pained dignity in the face that was now closely regarding him.

"I went," came the rigidly controlled retort, "simply to test an inconceivable story."

"And returned?"

"Convinced, Arthur, of its inconceivability. But if you would kindly inform me what precise formula you followed at Widderstone last night, I would tell you why I think the explanation, or rather your first account of the matter, is not an explanation of the facts."

Lawford shot a rather doglike glance over his toast. "Danton?" he said.

"Candidly, Arthur, Mr. Danton doubts the whole story. Your very conduct--well, it would serve no useful purpose to go into that. Candidly, on the other hand, Mr. Danton did make some extremely helpful suggestions--basing them, of course, on the truth of your account. He has seen a good deal of life; and certainly very mysterious things do occur even to quite innocent, well-meaning people without the faintest shadow of warning, and as Mr. Bethany himself said, evil birds do come home to roost, and often out of a clear sky, as it were. But there, every fresh solution that occurs to me only makes the thing more preposterous, more, I was going to say, disreputable--I mean, of course, to the outside world. And we have our duties to perform to them too, I suppose. Why, what can we say? What plausible account of ourselves have we? We shall never be able to look anybody in the face again. I can only--I am compelled to believe that God has been pleased to make this precise visitation upon us--an eye for an eye, I suppose, somewhere. And to that conviction I shall hold until actual circumstances convince me that it's false. What, however, and this is all that I have to say now, what I cannot understand are your amazing indiscretions."

"Do you understand your own, Sheila?"

"My indiscretions, Arthur?"

"Well," said Lawford, "wasn't it indiscreet, don't you think, to risk divine retribution by marrying me? Shouldn't you have inquired? Wasn't it indiscreet to allow me to remain here in--in my 'visitation?' Wasn't it indiscreet to risk the moral stigma this unhappy face of mine must cast on its surroundings? I am not sure whether such a change as this constitutes cruelty . . . Oh, what is the use of fretting and babbling on like this?"

"Am I to understand, then, that you refuse positively to discuss this horrible business any more? You are doing your best to drive me away, Arthur; you must see that. Will you be very disappointed if I refuse to go?"

Lawford rose from the bed. "Listen just this once," he said, seating himself on the corner of the dressing-table. "Imagine all this--whatever you like to call it--obliterated. Take this," he nodded towards the glass, "entirely for itself, on its own merits, as it were. Let the dead past bury its dead. Which, now, precisely really do you prefer--him," he jerked his head in the directionof the dispassionate, youthful picture on the wall, "him or me?"

He was so close to her now that he could see the faintest tremor on the face that had suddenly become grey and still in the thin, clear sunshine.

"I own it, I own it," he went on slowly; "the change is more than skin-deep now. One can't go through what I have gone through these last few terrifying days, Sheila, unchanged. They have

played the devil with my body; now begins the tampering with my mind. Not even Danton knows how it will end. But shall I tell you why you won't, why you can't answer me that one question--him or me? Shall I tell you?"

Sheila slowly raised her eyes.

"It is because, my dear, you don't care the ghost of a straw for either. That one--he was worn out long ago, and we never knew it. I know it now. Time and the sheer going-on of day by day, without either of us guessing at it, wore that down till it had no more meaning for you or me than any other faded remembrance of this interminable fooling with truth that we call life. And this one--the whole abject meaning of it lies simply in the fact that it has pierced down and shown us up. I had no courage. I couldn't see how feeble a hold I had on life--just one's friend's opinions. It was all at second hand. What I want to know now is--leave me out; don't think, or care, or regard my living on, one shadow of an iota--all I ask is, What am I to do for you?" He turned away and stood staring down at the grey cinders of the fireplace.

"I answer that mad, wicked outburst with one plain question," said a low, trembling voice; "did you or did you not go to Widderstone yesterday?"

"I did go."

"You sat there, just as you said you sat before; and with all your heart and soul strove to regain--yourself?"

Lawford lifted a still, colourless face into the sunlight. "No," he said; "I spent the evening at the house of a friend."

"Then I say it is infamous. You cast all this on me. You have brought me into contempt and poisoned Alice's whole life. You dream and idle on just as you used to do, without the least care or thought or consideration for others; and go out in this condition--go out absolutely unashamed--to spend the evening at a friend's. Peculiar friends they must be! Why, really, Arthur, you must be mad!"

Lawford paused. Like a flock of sheep streaming helter-skelter before the onset of a wolf were the thoughts that a moment before had seemed so orderly and sober. "Not mad--possessed," he said softly.

"And I add this," cried Sheila, as it were out of a tragic mask, "somewhere in the past, whether of your own life, or of the lives of those who brought you into the world--the world which you pretend so conveniently to despise--somewhere is hidden some miserable secret. God visits all sins. On you has fallen at last the payment. That I believe. You can't run away, any more than a child can run away from the cupboard it has been locked into for a punishment. Who's going to hear you now? You have deliberately refused to make a friend of me. Fight it out alone, then!"

Lawford heard the door close, and the dying away of the sound that had been the unceasing accompaniment of all these later years--the rustling of his wife's skirts, her crisp, authoritative footsteps. And he turned towards the flooding sunlight that streamed in on the upturned surface of

the looking-glass. No clear, decisive thought came into his mind, only a vague recognition that so far as Sheila was concerned this was the end. No regret, no remorse visited him. He was just alone again, that was all--alone, as in reality he had always been alone, without having the sense or power to see or to acknowledge it. All he had sxaid had been th3e mere flotsam of the moment, and now it stood stark and irrevocable between himself and the past.

He sat dazed and stupid. Again and again a struggling recognition tried to obtrude itself; again and again he beat it back. And rather for something to distract his attention than for any real interest or enlightenment he might find in its pages, he took out the grimy dog's-eared book that Herbert had given him, and turned slowly over the leaves till he came to Sabathier once more. Snatches of remembrance of their long talk returned to him, but just as that dark, water-haunted house had seemed to banish remembrance and the reality of the room in which he now sat, and of the old familiar life; so now the house, the faces of yesterday seemed in their turn unreal, almost spectral, and the thick print on the smudgy page no more significant than a story one reads and throws away.

But a moment's comparison in the glass of the two faces side by side suddenly sharpened his attention--the resemblance was so oddly arresting, and yet, and yet, so curiously inconclusive. There was then something of the stolid old Saxon left, he thought. Or had it been regained? Which was it? Not merely the complexity of the question, but a half-conscious distaste of attempting to face it, set him reading very slowly and laboriously, for his French was little more than fragmentary recollection, the first few pages of the life of this buried Sabathier. But with a disinclination almost amounting to aversion he made very slow progress. Many of the words were meaningless to him, and every other moment he found himself listening with intense concentration for the least hint of what Sheila was doing, of what was going on in the house beneath him. He had not very long to wait. He was sitting with his head leaning on his hand, the book unheeded beneath the other on the table, when the door opened again behind him, and Sheila entered. She stood for a moment, calm and dignified, looking down on him through her veil.

"Please understand, Arthur, that I am not taking this step in pique, or even in anger. It would serve no purpose to go on like this--this incessant heedlessness and recrimination. There have been mistakes, misconceptions, perhaps, on both sides. To me naturally yours are most conspicuous. That need not, however, blind me to my own."

She paused in vain for an answer.

"Think the whole thing over candidly and quietly," she began again in a quiet, rapid voice. "Have you really shown the slightest regard, I won't say for me, or even for Alice, but for just the obvious difficulties and--and proprieties of our position? I have given up as far as I can brooding on and on over the same horrible, impossible thoughts. I withdraw unreservedly what I said just now about punishment. It is not even a wife's place to judge like that. You will forgive me that?"

Lawford did not turn his head. "Of course," he said, looking rather vacantly out of the window, "it was only in the heat of the moment, Sheila; though, who knows? it may be true."

"Well," she took hold of the great brass knob at the foot of the bed with one gloved hand--"well, I fell it is my duty to withdraw it. Apart from it, I see only too clearly that even though all that has happened in these last few days was in reality nothing but a horrible nightmare, I see that even then

what you have said about our married life together can never be recalled. You have told me quite deliberately that for years past your life has been nothing but a pretence--a sham. You implied that mine had been too. Honestly, I was not aware of it, Arthur. But supposing all that has happened to you had been merely what might happen at any moment to anybody, some actual defacement (you will forgive me suggesting such a horrible thing)--why, if what you say is true, even in that case my sympathy would have been only a continual fret and annoyance to you. And this--this change, I own, is infinitely harder to bear. It would be an outrage on common sense and on all that we hold seemly and--and sacred in life, even in some trumpery story. You do, you must see all that, Arthur?"

"Oh yes," said Lawford, narrowing his eyes to pierce through the sunlight, "I see all that."

"Then we need not go over it all again. Whatever others may say, or think, I shall still, at least so long as nothing occurs to the contrary, keep firmly to my present convictions. Mr. Bethany has assured me repeatedly that he has no--no misgivings; that he understands. And even if I still doubted, which I don't, Arthur, though it would be rather trying to have to accept one's husband at second-hand, as it were, I should have to be satisfied. I daresay even such an unheard-of thing as what we are discussing now, or something equally ghastly, does occur occasionally. In foreign countries, perhaps. I have not studied such things enough to say. We were all very much restricted in our reading as children, and I honestly think, not unwisely. It is enough for the present to repeat that I do believe, and that whatever may happen--and I know absolutely nothing about the procedure in such cases--but whatever may happen, I shall still be loyal; I shall always have your interests at heart." Her words faltered and she turned her head away. "You did love me once, Arthur, I can't forget that." The contralto voice trembled ever so little, and the gloved hand smoothed gently the brass knob beneath.

"If," said Lawford, resting his face on his hands, and curiously watching the while his moving reflection in the looking-glass before him--"if I said I still loved you, what then?"

"But you have already denied it, Arthur."

"Yes; but if I said that that too was said only in haste, that brooding over the trouble this--this metamorphosis was bringing on us all had driven me almost beyond endurance; supposing that I withdrew all that, and instead said now that I do still love you, just as I----" he turned a little, and turned back again, "like this?"

Sheila paused. "Could any woman answer such a question?" she almost sighed at last.

"Yes, but," Lawford pressed on, in a voice almost as naive and stubborn as a child's, "if I tried to--to make you? I did once, Sheila."

"I can't, I can't conceive such a position. Surely that alone is almost as frantic as it is heartless! Is it, is it even right?"

"Well, I have not actually asked it. I own," he added moodily, almost under his breath, "it would be . . . But there, Sheila, this poor old mask of mine is wearing out. I am somehow convinced of that.

What will be left, God only knows. You were saying----" He rose abruptly. "Please, please sit down," he said; "I did not notice you were standing."

"I shall not keep you a moment," she answered hurriedly; "I will sit here. The truth is, Arthur," she began again almost solemnly, "apart from all sentiment and--and good intentions, my presence here only harasses you and keeps you back. I am not so bound up in myself that I cannot realise that. The consequence is that after calmly--and I hope considerately--thinking the whole thing over, I have come to the conclusion that it would arose very little comment, the least possible perhaps in the circumstances, if I just went away for a few days. You are not in any sense ill. In fact, I have never known you so, so robust, so energetic. You will go out alone: Mr. Bethany, perhaps . . . You could go out and ome in just as you pleased. Possibly," Sheila smiled frankly beneath her veil, "even this Dr. Ferguson you have invented will be a help. It's only the servants that remain to be considered."

"I should prefer to be quite alone."

"Then do not worry about them. I can easily explain. And if you would not mind letting her in, Mrs. Gull can come in every other day or so just to keep things in order. She's entirely trustworthy and discreet. Or perhaps, if you would prefer----"

"Mrs. Gull will do nicely, Sheila. It's very good of you to have given me so much thought." A long, rather arduous pause followed.

"Oh, one other thing, Arthur. You sent out to Mr. Critchett--do you remember?--the night you first came home. I think, too, after the first awful shock, when we were sitting in our bedroom, you actually referred to--to violent measures. You will promise me, I may, perhaps, at least ask that, you will promise me on your word of honour, for Alice's sake, if not for mine, to do nothing rash."

"Yes, yes," said Lawford, sinking lower even than he had supposed possible into the thin and lightless chill of ennui--"nothing rash."

Sheila rose with a sigh only in part suppressed. "I have not seen Mr. Bethany again. I think, however, it would be better to let Harry know; I mean, dear, of your derangement. After all, he is one of the family--at least of mine. He will not interfere. He would, perhaps quite naturally, be hurt if we did not take him into our confidence. Otherwise there is no pressing cause for haste, at least for another week or so. After that, I suppose, something will have to be done. Then there's Mr. Wedderburn; wouldn't it be as well to let him know that at least for the present you are quite unable to think of returning to town? That, too, in time will have to be arranged, I suppose, if nothing happens meanwhile; I mean if things don't come right. And I do hope, Arthur, you will not set your mind too closely on what may only prove false hopes! This is all intensely painful to me; of course, to us both."

Again Lawford, even though he did not turn to confront it, became conscious of the black veil turned towards him tentatively, speculatively, impenetrably.

"Yes," he said, "I'll write to Wedderburn; he's had his ups and downs too."

"I always rather fancied so," said Sheila reflectively, "he looks rather a--a restless man. Oh, and then again," she broke off quickly, "there's the question of money. I suppose--it is only a conjecture--I suppose it would be better to do nothing in that direction just for the present. Ada has now gone to the bank. Fifty pounds, Arthur; it is out of my own private account--do you think that will be enough, just, of course, for your present needs?"

"As a bribe, hush-money, or a thank-offering, Sheila?" murmured her husband wearily.

"I don't follow you," replied the discreet voice from beneath the veil.

He did actually turn this time and glance steadily over his shoulder. "How long are you going for? and where?"

"I proposed to go to my cousin's, Mrs. Lovat's; that is, of course, if you have no objection. It's near; it will be a long-deferred visit; and she need know very little. And, of course, if for the least thing in the world you should want me, there I am within call, as it were. And will you write? We are acting for the best, Arthur?"

"So long as it is your best, Sheila."

Sheila pondered. "You think, you mean, they'll all say I ought to have stayed. Candidly, I can't see it in that light. Surely every experience of life proves that in intimate domestic matters, and especially in those between husband and wife, only the parties concerned have any means of judging what is best for them? It has been our experience at any rate; though I must in fairness confess that, outwardly at least, I haven't had much of that kind of thing to complain of." Sheila paused again for a reply.

"What kind of thing?"

"Domestic experience, dear."

The house was quiet. There was not a sound stirring in the still, sunny road of orchards and discreet and drowsy villas. A long silence followed, immensely active and alert on the one side, almost morbidly lethargic so far as the stooping figure in front of the looking-glass was concerned.

At last the last haunting question came in a kind of croak, as if only by a supreme effort could it be compelled to produce itself for consideration. "And Alice, Sheila?"

"Alice, dear, of course goes with me."

"You realise," he stirred uneasily, "you realise it may be final."

"My dear Arthur," cried Sheila, "it is surely, apart from mere delicacy, a parental obligation to screen the poor child from the shock. Could she be at such a time in any better keeping that her mother's? At present she only vaguely guesses. To know definitely that her father, infinitely worse than death, had--had---- Oh, is it possible to realise anything in this awful cloud? It would kill her outright."

Lawford made no stir. The quietest of raps came at the door. "The money from the Bank, m'm," said a faint voice.

Sheila carefully opened the door a few inches. She laid the blue envelope on the dressing-table at her husband's elbow. "You had better perhaps count it," she said in a low voice--"forty in notes, the rest in gold," and narrowed here eyes beneath her veil upon her husband's very peculiar method of forgetting his reponsibilities.

"French?" she said with anod. "How very quaint!"

Lawford's eyes fell and rested gravely on the dingy page of Herbert's mean-looking bundle of print. A queer feeling of cold crept over him. "Yes," he said vaguely, "French," and hopelessly failed to fill in the silence that seemed like some rather sleek nocturnal creature quietly waiting to be fed.

Sheila swept softly towards the door. "Well, Arthur, I think that is all. The servants will have gone by this evening. I have ordered a carriage for half-past twelve. If you would just write down any thing that occurs to you to be necessary. Perhaps, too, it would be better if Dr. Simon were told that we shall not need him any more, that you are thinking of a complete change of scene, a voyage. He is obviously useless. Besides, Mr. Bethany, I think, is going to discuss a specialist with you. I have written him a little note, just briefly explaining. Shall I write to Dr. Simon too?"

"You remember everything," said Lawford, and it seemed to him it was a remark he had heard ages and ages ago. "It's only this monty, Sheila; will you please take that away?"

"Take it away?"

"I think, Sheila, if I do take a voyage I should almost prefer to work my passage. As for a mere 'change of scene,' that's quite uncostly."

"It is only your face, Arthur," said Sheila solemnly, "that suggests these wicked stabs. Some day you will perhaps repent of every one."

"It is possible, Sheila; we none of us stand still, you know. One rips open a lid sometimes and the wax face rots before one's eyes. Take your blue envelope, Sheila; and thank you for thinking of me. It's always the woman of the house that has the head."

"I wish," said Sheila almost pathetically, and yet with a faint quaver of resignation, "I wish it could be said that the man of the house sometimes has the heart. Think it over, Arthur!"

Sheila, with her husband's luncheon tray, brought also her farewells. Lawford surveyed, not without a faint, shy stirring of incredulity, the superbly restrained presence. He stood before he dry-lipped, inarticulate, a schoolboy caught red-handed in the shabbiest of offences.

"It is your wish that I go, Arthur?" she said pleadingly.

He handed her her money without a word.

"Very well, Arthur; if you won't take it," she said. "I should scarcely have thought this the occasion for mere pride."

"The tenth," she continued, as she squeezed the envelope into her purse, with only the least hardening of voice, "although I daresay you have not troubled to remember it--the tenth will be the eighteenth anniversary of our wedding-day. It makes parting, however advisable, and though only for the few days we should think nothing of in happier circumstances, a little harder to bear. But there, all will come right. You will see things in a different light, perhaps. Words may wound, but time will heal." But even as she looked now closely into his colourless, sunken face some distant memory seemed to well up irresistibly--the memory of eyes just as naïve, just as unassuming, that even in claiming her love had expressed only their own stold unworthiness.

"Did you know it? have you seen it?" she said, stooping forward a little. "I believe in spite of all . . ." He gazed on solemnly, almost owlishly out of his fading mask.

"Wait till Mr. Bethany tells you; you will believe it perhaps from him." He saw the grey-gloved hand a little reluctantly lifted towards him.

"Goodbye, Sheila," he said, and turned dimly back to the window.

She hesitated, listening to a small far-away voice that kept urging her with an almost frog-like pertinacity to do, to say something, and yet as stubbornly would not say what; and she was gone.

CHAPTER XV

RAYING and gleaming in the sunlight the hired landau drove up to the gate. Lawford, peeping between the blinds, looked down on the coachman, with reins hanging loosely from his red, squat-thumbed hand, seated in his tight livery and indescribable hat on the faded cushions. One thing only was in his mind; and it was almost with an audible cry that he turned towards the figure that edged, white and trembling, into the chill and silent room. He took the narrow shoulders in his arms and covered the light-brown hair with kisses. "Don't look at me, don't look at me," he said, "only remember, dearest, I would rather have died down there and been never seen again than have given you pain. Run--run, your mother's calling. Write to me, think of me; goodbye!"

He threw himself on the bed and lay there till evening, till the door had shut gently behind the last rat to leave the sinking ship. All the clearness, the calmness were gone again. Round and round in dizzy sickening flare and clatter his thoughts whirled. Contempt, fear, loathing, blasphemy, laughter, longing: there was no end. There was no meaning, no refuge, no hope, no possible peace. To give up was to go to perdition: to go forward was to go mad. And even madness--he sat up with trembling lips in the twilight--madness itself was only a state, only a state. You might be bereaved, and the pain and hopelessness of that would pass. You might be cast out, betrayed, deserted, and still be you, still find solitude lovely and in a brave face a friend. But madness!--it surged in on him with all the clearness and emptiness of a dream. And he sat quite still, his hand clutching the bedclothes, his head askew, waiting for the sound of footsteps, for the presences and the voices that have their thin-walled dwelling beneath the shallow crust of consciousness. Inky blackness drifted up in wisps, in smoke before his eyes; he was powerless to move, to cry out. There was no room to turn; no air to breathe. And yet there was a low, continuous, never-varying stir as of an enormous

wheel whirling in the gloom. Countless infinitesimal faces arched like glimmering pebbles the huge dim-coloured vault above his head. He heard a voice above the monstrous rustling of the wheel, clamouring, calling him back. He was hastening headlong, muttering to himself his own flat, meaningless name, like a child repeating as he runs his errand. And then as if in a charmed, cold pool he awoke and opened his eyes again on the gathering darkness of the great bedroom, and heard a quick, importunate, long-continued knocking on the door below, as of some one who had already knocked in vain.

Cramped and heavy-limbed, he felt his way across the room and lit a candle. He stood listening awhile, with eyes fixed on the door that stood a little open. All in the room seemed acutely, fantastically still. The flame burned him, enisled in the sluggish air. He stole softly to the door and looked out and again listened. Again the knocking broke out more impetuously and yet still with a certain restraint and caution. Shielding the flame of his candle in the shell of his left hand, Lawford moved slowly, with chin uplifted, to the stairs. He bent forward a little, and stood motionless and drawn up, with pupils slowly contracting and expanding, as he gazed down into the carpeted vacant gloom; past the dim, louring presence that had fallen back before him.

His mouth opened. "Who's there?" at last he called.

"Thank God, thank God!" he heard Mr. Bethany mutter. "I mustn't call, Lawford," came a hurried whisper as if the old gentleman were pressing his lips to speak through the letter-box. "Come down and open the door; there's a good fellow! I've been knocking no end of a time.

"Yes, I am coming," said Lawford. He shut his mouth and held his breath, and stair by stair he descended, driving steadily before him the crouching, gloating, menacing form, darkly lifted up before him against the darkness, contending the way with him.

"Are you ill? Are you hurt? Has anything happened, Lawford?" came the anxious old voice again, striving in vain to be restrained.

"No, no," muttered Lawford, "I am coming; coming slowly." He paused to breathe, his hands trembling, his hair lank with sweat, and still with eyes wide open he descended against the phantom lurking in the darkness--an adversary that, if he should but close his lids, he felt would master sanity and imagination with its evil. "So long as you don't get in," he heard himself muttering, "so long as you don't get in, my friend!"

"What's that you're saying?" came up the muffled, querulous voice; "I can't for the life of me hear, my boy."

"Nothing, nothing," came softly the answer from the foot of the stairs. "I was only speaking to myself."

Quite deliberately, with candle held rigidly on a level with his eyes, Lawford pushed forward a pace or two into the airless, empty drawing-room, and grasped the handle of the door. He gazed in awhile, a black, oblique shadow across his face, his eyes fixed like an animal's, then drew the door steadily towards him. And suddenly some power that had held him tense seemed to fail. He thrust

out his head, and, his face quivering with fear and loathing, spat defiance as it were in a passion of triumph into the gloom.

Still muttering, he shut the door and turned the key. In another moment his candle was gleaming out on the grey, perturbed face and black, narrow shoulders of his visitor.

"You gave me quite a fright," said the old man almost angrily; "have you hurt your foot, or something?"

"It was very dark," said Lawford, "down the stairs."

"What!" said Mr. Bethany still more angrily, blinking out of his unspectacled eyes; "has she cut off the gas, then?"

"You got the note?" said Lawford, unmoved.

"Yes, yes; I got the note. . . . Gone?"

"Oh, yes; all gone. It was my choice. I preferred it so."

Mr. Bethany sat down on one of the hard old wooden chairs that stood on either side the lofty hall, and breathing rather thickly, rested his hands on his knees. "What's happened?" he inquired, looking up into the candle. "I left my glasses, old fool that I am, and can't, my dear chap, see you very plainly. But your voice----"

"I think," said Lawford, "I think it's beginning to come back."

"What, the whole thing! Oh no, my dear fellow; be frank with me; not the whole thing?"

"Yes," said Lawford, "the whole thing--very, very gradually, imperceptibly. I think even Sheila noticed. But I rather feel it than see it; that is all. . . . I'm cornering him."

"Him?"

Lawford jerked his candle as if towards some definite goal. "In time," he said.

The two faces with the candle between them seemed as it were to gain light each from the other.

"Well, well," said Mr. Bethany, "every man for himself, Lawford; it's the only way. But what's going to be done--we must, you know: the others?"

"Oh, that," said Lawford; "she's going to squeeze me out."

"You've squabbled? Oh, but my dear, honest old, honest old idiot, there's scores of families here in this parish, within a stone's throw, that squabble, wrangle, all but politely tear each other's eyes out, every day of their earthly lives. It's perfectly natural. Where should we poor old busybodies be else. Peace on earth we bring, and it's mainly between husband and wife."

"Yes," said Lawford, "but you see, this was not our earthly life. It was between us."

"Listen, listen to the dear mystic!" exclaimed the old creature scoffingly. "What depths we're touching! Here's the first serious break of his lifetime, and he's gone stark, staring transcendental! Ah well!" He paused and glanced quickly about him, with his curious bird-like poise of head. "But you're not alone here?" he inquired suddenly; "not absolutely alone?"

"Yes," said Lawford; "but there's plenty to think about--and read. I haven't thought or read for years."

"No, nor I; after thirty, my dear boy, one merely annotates, and the book's called Life. Bless me, his solemn old voice is grinding epigrams out of even this poor old parochial barrel-organ. You don't suppose, my dear boy, you are the only serious person in the world? What's more, it's only skin deep."

Lawford smiled. "Skin deep. But think quietly over it; you'll see I'm done."

"Come here," said Mr. Bethany. "Where's the whiskey, where's the cigars? You shall smoke and drink, and I'll watch. If it weren't for a pitiful old stomach, I'd join you. Come on!" He led the way into the dining-room. He looked tinier, more wizened, and sinewy that ever as he stooped to open the sideboard. "Where on earth do they keep everything?" he was muttering to himself.

Lawford put the candlestick down on the table. "There's only one thing," he said, watching his visitor's rummaging; "what precisely do you think they will do with me?"

"Look here, Lawford," snapped Mr. Bethany; "I've come round here, hooting through your letter-box to talk sense, not sentiment. Why has your wife deserted you? Without a servant, without a single---- It's perfectly monstrous!"

"On my word of honour, I prefer it so. I couldn't have gone on. Alone I all b forget this--this lupus. We are alone, whether we know it or not; you said it yourself. And it's better to realise it stark and unconfused. Besides, you have no idea what--what odd things . . . there may be; there is something on the other side. I'll win through to that."

Mr. Bethany had been listening attentively. He scrambled up from his knees with a half-empty syphon of soda-water. "Look here, Lawford," he said; "if you really want to know what's your most insidious and most dangerous symptom just now, it is spiritual pride. You've won what you think a domestic victory; and you can scarcely bear the splendour. Oh, you may shrug! Pray, what is this 'other side' which the superior double-faced creature's going to win through to now?" He rapped it out almost bitterly, almost contemptuously.

Lawford hardly heard the question. Before his eyes had suddenly arisen the peace, the friendly, unquestioning stillness, the thunderous lullaby old as the grave. "It's only a fancy. It seemed I could begin again."

"Well, look here," said Mr. Bethany, his whole face suddenly lined and grey with age. "You can't. It's the one solitary thing I've got to say, as I've said to myself morn, noon, and night these scores of

years. You can't begin again; it's all a delusion and a snare. You say we're alone. So we are. The world's a dream, a stage, a mirage, a rack, call it what you will--but you don't change, you're no illusion. There's no crying off for you, no ravelling out, no clean leaves. You've got this--this trouble, this affliction--my dear, dear fellow, what shall I say to tell you how I grieve and groan for you----oh, yes, and actually laughed, I confess it, a vile hysterical laughter, to think of it. You've got this almost intolerable burden to bear; it's come like a thief in the night; but bear it you must, and alone! They say death's a going to bed; I doubt it; but anyhow life's a long undressing. We came in puling and naked, and every stitch must come off before we get out again. We must stand on our feet in all our Rabelaisian nakedness, and watch the world fade. Well then, and not another word of sense shall you worm out of my worn-out old brains after to-day--all I say is, don't give in! Why, if you stood here now, freed from this devilish disguise, the old, fat sluggish fellow that sat and yawned his head off under my eyes in his pew the Sunday before last, if I know anything about human nature I'd say it to your face, and a fig for your vanity and resignation--your last state will be worse than the first. There!" He bunched up a big white handkerchief and mopped it over his head. "That's done," he said, "and we won't go back. What I want to know now is what are you going to do? Where are you sleeping? What are you going to think about? I'll stay--yes, yes, that's what it must be: I must stay. And I detest strange beds. I'll stay, you sha'n't be alone. Do you hear me, Lawford?--you sha'n't be alone!"

Lawford gazed gravely. "There is one little thing I wanted to ask you before you go. I've wormed out an extraordinary old French book; and--just as you say--to pass the time, I've been having a shot at translating it. But I'm frightfully rusty; it's old French; would you mind having a look?"

Mr. Bethany blinked and listened. He tried for the twentieth time to dodge his friend's eyes, to gain as best he could some sustained, unobserved glance at this baffling face. "Where is your precious French book?" he said irritably.

"It's upstairs."

"Fire away, then!" Lawford rose and glanced about the room. "What, no light there either?" snapped Mr. Bethany. "Take this; I don't mind the dark. There'll be plenty of that for me soon."

Lawford hesitated at the door, looking rather strangely back. "No," he said, "there are matches upstairs." He shut the door after him. The darkness seemed cold and still as water. He went slowly up, with eyes fixed wide on the floating, luminous gloom, and out of memory seemed to gather, as faintly as in the darkness which they had exorcised for him, the strange, pitiful eyes of the night before. And as he mounted a chill, terrible, physical peace seemed to steal over him.

Mr. Bethany was sitting as he had left him, looking steadily on the floor, when Lawford returned. He flattened out the book on the table with a sniff of impatience. And dragging the candle nearer, he adjusted his reading-glasses, and began to read.

"Was this in the house?" he inquired presently.

"No," said Lawford; "it was lent to me by a friend--Herbert."

"H'm! don't know him. Anyhow, precious poor stuff this is. This Sabathier, whoever he is, seems to be a kind of clap-trap, eighteenth-century adventurer who thought the world would be better off, apparently, for a long account of all his sentimental amours. Rousseau, with a touch of Don Quixote in his composition, and an echo of that prince of bogies, Poe! What, in the name of wonder, induced you to fix on this for your holiday reading?"

"Sabathier's alive, isn't he?"

"I never said he wasn't. He's a good deal too much alive for my old wits, with his Mam'selle This and Madame The Other; interesting enough, perhaps, for the professional literary nose with a taste for patchouli."

"Yet I suppose even that is not a very rare character?"

Mr. Bethany peered over his glasses at his ingenuous questioner. "I should say decidedly that the fellow was a very rare character, so long as by rare you don't mean good. It's one of the dullest stupidities of the present day, my dear fellow, to dote on a man simply because he's different from the rest of us. Once a man strays out of the common her4d, he's more likely to meet wolves in the thickets than angels. From what I can gather in just these few pages this Sabathier appears to have been an amorous, adventurous, emotional Frenchman, who went to the dogs as easily and as rapidly as his own nature and his period allowed. And I should say, Lawford, that he made precious bad reading for a poor old troubled hermit like yourself at the present moment."

"There's a portrait of him a few pages back."

Mr. Bethany, with some little impatience, turned back to the engraving. "'Nicholas de Sabathier,'" he muttered. "'De,' indeed!" He poked in at the foxy print with narrowed eyes. "I don't deny it's a striking, even perhaps, a rather taking face. I don't deny it." He gazed on with an even more acute concentration, and looked up sharply. "Look here, Lawford, what in the name of wonder--what trick are you playing on me now?"

"Trick?" said Lawford; and the word fell with the tiniest plash in the silence, like a vivid little float upon the surface of a shadowy pool.

The old face flushed. "What conceivable bearing, I say, has this dead and gone old roue on us now?"

"You don't think you see any resemblance--any resemblance at all?"

"Resemblance?" repeated Mr. Bethany in a flat voice, and without raising his face again to meet Lawford's direct scrutiny. "Resemblance to whom?"

"To me? To me, as I am?"

"But even, my dear fellow (forgive my dull old brains!), even if there was just the faintest superficial suggestion of--of that; what then?"

"Why," said Lawford, "he's buried in Widderstone."

"Buried in Widderstone?" The keen, childlike blue eyes looked almost stealthily up across the book; the old man sat without speaking, so still that it might even be supposed he himself was listening for a very distant footfall.

"He is buried in the grave beside which I fell asleep," said Lawford; "all green and still and broken," he added faintly. "You remember," he went on in a repressed voice--"you remember you aske dme if there was anybody else in sight, any eavesdropper? You don't think--him?"

Mr. Bethany pushed the book a few inches away from him. "Who, did you say, who was it you said put the thing into your head? A queer friend surely?" he paused helplessly. "And how, pray, do you know," he began again more firmly, "even if there is a Sabathier buried at Widderstone, how do you know it is this Sabathier? It's not, I think," he added boldly, "a very uncommon name; with two b's at any rate. Whereabouts is the grave?"

"Quite down at the bottom, under the trees. And the little seat I told you of is there, too, where I fell asleep. You see," he explained, "the grave's almost isolated; I suppose because he killed himself."

Mr. Bethany clasped his knuckled fingers on the table-cloth. "It's no good," he concluded after a long pause; "the fellow's got up into my head. I can't think him out. We must thrash it out quietly in the morning with the blessed sun at the window; not this farthing dip. To me the whole idea is as revolting as it is incredible. Why, above a century--no, no! And on the other hand, how easily one's fancy builds! A few straws and there's a nest and squawking fledglings, all complete. Is that why--is that why that good, practical wife of yours and all your faithful household have absconded? Does it"--he threw up his head as if towards the house above them--"does it reek with him?"

Lawford shook his head. "She hasn't seen him. I haven't told her."

Mr. Bethany tossed the hugger-mugger of pamphlets across the table. "Then, for simple sanity's sake, don't. Hide it; burn it; put the thing completely out of your mind. A friend! Who, where is this wonderful friend?"

"Not very far from Widderstone. He lives--practically alone."

"And all that stumbling and muttering on the stairs?" he leant forward almost threateningly. "There isn't anybody here?"

"Oh no," said Lawford. "We are quite alone--with this, you know," he pointed to the book, and smiled frankly, however faintly.

Again Mr. Bethany sank into a fixed yet uneasy reverie, and again shook himself and raised his eyes.

"Well, then," he said, in a voice almost morose in its fretfulness, "what I suggest is that first you keep quiet here; and next, that you rwrite and get your wife back. You say you are better. I think you said she herself noticed a slight improvement. Isn't it just exactly what I foresaw? And yet she's

gone! But that's not our business. Get her back! And don't for a single instant waste a thought on the other; not for a single instant, I implore you, Lawford. And in a week the whole thing will be no more than a dreary, preposterous dream. . . . You don't answer me!" he cried impulsively.

"But can one so easily forget a dream like this?"

"You don't speak out, Lawford; you mean she won't."

"It must at least seem to have been in part of my own seeking, or contriving; or at any rate--she said it--of my own hereditary or unconscious deserving."

"She said that!" Mr. Bethany sat back. "I see, I see," he said. "I'm nothing but a fumbling old meddler. And there was I, not ten minutes ago, preaching for all I was worth on a text I knew nothing about. God bless me, Lawford, how long we take a-learning! To think this--this"--he laid a long, lean hand at arm's length flat upon the table toward his friend--"to think this is our old jog-trot Arthur Lawford! From henceforth I throw you over, you old wolf in sheep's wool! I wash my hands of you. And now where am I going to sleep?"

He covered up his age and weariness for an instant with a small, crooked hand.

Lawford took a deep breath. "You're going, old friend, to sleep at home. And I--I'm going to give you my arm to the Vicarage gate. Here I am, immeasurably relieved, fitter than I've been since I was a dolt of a schoolboy. On my word of honour; I can't say why, but I am. I don't care that, vicar, honestly--puffed up with spiritual pride. If a man can't sleep with pride for a bedfellow, well, he'd better try elsewhere. It's no good; I'm as stubborn as a mule; that's at least a relic of the old man. I care no more," he raised his voice firmly and gravely--"I don't care a jot for solitude, not a jot for all the ghosts of all the catacombs!"

Mr. Bethany listened, grimly pursed up his lips. "Not a jot for all the ghosts of all the catechisms!" he muttered, "nor the devil himself, I suppose!" He turned once more to glance sharply in the direction of the face he could so dimly--and of set purpose--discern; and without a word trotted off into the hall. Lawford followed with the candle.

"'Pon my word, you haven't had a mouthful of supper. Let me forage; just a quarter of an hour, eh?"

"Not me," said Mr. Bethany; "if you won't have me, home I go. I refuse to encourage this miserable grass-widowering. What would they say? What would the busybodies say? Ghouls and graves and shocking mysteries!--Selina! Sister Anne! Come on!"

He suffled on his hat and caught firm hold of his knobbed umbrella. "Better not leave a candle," he said.

Lawford blew out the candle.

"What, what?" called the old man suddenly; but no voice had spoken.

A thin trickle of light from the lamp in the street stuck up through the fanlight as, with a smile that could be described neither as mischievous, saturnine, nor vindictive, and was yet faintly suggestive of all three, Lawford quietly opened the drawing-room door and put down the candlestick on the floor within.

"What on earth, my good man, are you fumbling after now?" came the almost fretful question from under the echoing porch.

"Coming, coming," said Lawford, and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE first faint streaks of dawn were silvering across the stars when Lawford again let himself into his deserted house. He stumbled down to the pantry and cut himself a crust of bread and cheese, and ate it, sitting on the table, watching the leafy eastern sky through the painted bars of the area window. He munched on, hungry and tired. His night walk had cooled head and heart. Having obstinately refused Mr. Bethany's invitation to sleep at the Vicarage, he had sat down on an old low wall, and watched until his light had shone out at his bedroom window. Then he had simply wandered on, past rustling, glimmering gardens, under the great timbers of yellowing elms, hardly thinking, hardly aware of himself except as in a far-away vision of a sluggish, insignificant creature struggling across the tossed-up crust of an old, incomprehensible world. The secret of his content in that long, leisurely ramble had been that ever by a scarcely realised effort it had not lain in the direction of Widderstone. And now, as he sat hungrily devouring his breakfast on the table in the kitchen, with the daybreak comforting his eyes, he thought with a positive mockery of that poor old night-thing he had driven inch by inch into the safe keeping of his pink and white drawing-room. Don Quixote, Poe, and Rousseau--they were familiar but not very significant labels to a mind that had found very poor entertainment in reading. But they were at least representative enough to set him wondering which of their influences it was that had inflated with such a gaseous heroism the Lawford of the night before. He thought of Sheila with a not unkindly smile, and of the rest. "I wonder what they'll do?" had been a question almost as much in his mind during these last few hours as had "What am I to do?" in the first bout of his "visitation." But the "they" was not very precisely visualised. He saw Sheila, and Harry, and dainty pale-blue Mrs. Lovat, and cautious old Wedderburn, and Danton, and Craik, and cheery, gossipy Dr. Sutherland, and the verger, Mr. Dutton, and Critchett, and the gardener, and Ada, and the whole vague populous host that keep one as definitely in one's place in the world's economy as a firm-set pin in the camphored moth. What his place was to be only time could show. Meanwhile there was in this loneliness at least a respite.

Solitude!--he bathed his weary bones in it. He laved his eyelids in it, as in a woodland brook after the heat of noon. He sat on in calmest reverie till his hunger was satisfied. Then, scattering out his last crumbs to the burds from the barred window, he climbed upstairs again, past his usual bedroom, past his detested guest room, up into the narrow sweetness of Alice's, and flinging himself on her bed fell into a long and dreamless sleep.

By ten next morning Lawford had bathed and dressed. And at half-past ten he got up from Sheila's fat little French dictionary and his memoirs to answer Mrs. Gull's summons on the area bell. The little woman stood with arms folded over an empty and capacious bag, with an air of sustained

melancholy on her friendly face. She wished him a very nervous "Good morning," and dived down into the kitchen. The hours dragged slowly by in a silence broken only by an occasional ring at the bell. About three she emerged from the house and climbed the area steps with her bag hooked over her arm. He watched the little black figure out of sight, watched a man in a white canvas hat ascend the steps to push a blue-printed circular through the letter-box. It had begun to rain a little. He returned to the breakfast-room and with the window wide open to the rustling coolness of the leaves, edged his way very slowly across from line to line of the obscure French print.

Sabathier none the less, and in spite of his unintelligible literariness, did begin to take shape and consistency. The man himself, breathing, and thinking, began to live for Lawford even in those few, half-articulate pages, though not in quite so formidable a fashion as Mr. Bethany had summed him up. But, as the west began to lighten with the declining sun, the same old disquietude, the same old friendless and foreboding ennue stole over Lawford's solitude once more. He shut his books, placed a candlestick and two boxes of matches on the hall table, lit a bead of gas, and went out into the rainy-sweet streets again.

At a mean little barber's shop with a pole above his lettered door he went in to be shaved. And a few steps further on he sat down at the crumb-littered counter of a little baker's shop to have some tea. It pleased him almost to childishness to find how easily he could listen and even talk to the oiled and crimpy little barber, and to the pretty, consumptive-looking, print-dressed baker's wife. Whatever his face might now be conniving at, the Arthur Lawford of last week could never have hob-nobbed so affably with his social "inferiors."

For no reason in the world, unless to spend a moment or two longer in the little baker's shop, he bought sixpenny-worth of cakes. He watched them as they were deposited one by one in the bag, and even asked for one sort to be exchanged for another, blushing a little at his excuse--"They were so very delicious."

He climbed out of the shop, and paused on the wooden doorstep. "Do you happen to know Mr. Herbert's?" he said.

The baker's wife looked up at him with clear, reflective eyes. "Mr. Herbert's?--that must be some little way off, sir. I don't know any such name, and I know most, just round about like."

"Well, yes, it is," said Lawford, rather foolishly; "I hardly know why I asked. It's past the churchyard at Widderstone."

"Oh yes, sir," she encouraged him.

"A big, wooden-looking house."

"Really, sir! Wooden!"

Lawford looked at her face, but could find nothing more to say, so he smiled again, rather absently, and ascended into the street.

He sat down outside the churchyard gate on the very bank where he had in the sourness of the nettles first opened Sabathier's memoir. The world lay still beneath the pale sky. Presently the little fat rector walked up the hill, his wrists still showing beneath his sleeves. Lawford meditatively watched him pass by. A little boy with a switch, a tiny nose, and a swinging gallipot, his cheeks lit with the sunset, followed soon aftger. Lawford beckoned him with his finger and held out the bag of tarts. He watched him, half incredulous of his prize, and with many a cautious look over his shoulder, pass out of sight. For a long while he sat alone, only the evening birds ringing out of the greenness and silence of the churchyard. What a haunting, inexplicable riddle life was!

Colour suddenly faded out of the light streaming between the branches. And depression, always lying in ambush of the novelty of his freedom, began like mist to rise above his restless thoughts. It was all so devilish empty--this raft of the world floating under evening's shadow. How many sermons had he listened to, enriched with the simile of the ocean of life. Here it was, come home to roost. He had fallen asleep, ineffectual sailor that he was, and a thief out of the cloudy deep had stolen oar and sail and compass, leaving him adrift amid the riding of the waves.

"Are they worth, do you think, quite a penny?" suddenly inquired a quiet voice in the silence. He looked up into the almost colourless face, the grey eyes beneath the clear narrow brows.

"I was thinking," he said, "what a curious thing life is, and wondering----"

"The first half is well worth the penny--its originality! I can't afford twopence. So you must give me what you were wondering."

Lawford gazed rather blankly across the twilight fields. "I was wondering," he said with an oddly naive candour, "how long it took one to sink."

"They say, you know," Grisel replied solemnly, "drowned sailors float midway, suffering their sea change; purgatory. But what a splendid penny-worth! All pure philosophy!"

"Philosophy!" said Lawford; "I am a perfect fool. Has your brother told you about me?"

She glanced at him quickly. "We had a talk."

"Then you do know----?" He stopped dead, and turned to her. "You really realise it, looking at me now?"

"I realise," she said gravely, "that you look even a little more pale and haggard than when I saw you first the other night. We both, my brother and I, you know, thought for certain you'd come yesterday. In fact, I went into Widderstone in the evening to look for you, knowing your nocturnal habits!" She glanced again at him with a kind of shy anxiety.

"Why--why is your brother so--why does he let me bore him so horribly?"

"Does he? He's tremendously interested; but then, he's pretty easily interested, when he's interested at all. If he can possibly twist anything into the slightest show of a mystery, he will. But, of course,

you won't, you can't take all he says seriously. The tiniest pinch of salt, you know. He's an absolute fanatic at talking in the air. Besides, it doesn't really matter much.

"In the air?"

"I mean if once a theory gets into his head--the more far-fetched, so long as it's original, the better--it flowers out into a positive miracle of incredibilities. And of course you can rout out evidence for anything under the sun from his dingy old folios. Why did he lend you that particular book?"

"Didn't he tell you that, then?"

"He said it was Sabathier." She seemed to think intensely for the merest fraction of a moment, and turned. "Honestly, though, I think he immensely exaggerated the likeness. As for . . ."

He touched her arm, and they stopped again, face to face. "Tell me what difference exactly you see," he said. "I am quite myself again now, honestly; please tell me just the very worst you think."

"I think, to begin with," she began, with exaggerated candour, "his is rather a detestable face."

"And mine?" he said gravely.

"Why--very troubled; oh yes--but his was like some bird of prey. Yours--what mad stuff to talk like this!--not the least symptom, that I can see, of--why, the 'prey,' you know."

They had come to the wicket in the dark, thorny hedge. "Would it be very dreadful to walk on a little--just to finish?"

"Very," she said, turning as gravely at his side.

"What I wanted to say was----" began Lawford, and forgetting altogether the thread by which he hoped to lead up to what he really wanted to say, broke off lamely; "I should have thought you would have absolutely despised a coward."

"It would be rather absurd to despise what one so horribly well understands. Besides, we weren't cowards--we weren't cowards a bit. My childhood was one long, reiterated terror--nights and nights of it. But I never had the pluck to tell any one. No one so much as dreamt of the company I had. Ah, and you didn't see either that my heart was absolutely in my mouth, that I was shrivelled up with fear, even at sight of the fear on your face in the dark. There's absolutely nothing so catching. So, you see, I do know a little what nerves are; and dream too sometimes, though I don't choose charnel houses if I can get a feather bed. A coward! May I really say that to ask my help was one of the bravest things in a man I ever heard of. Bullets--that kind of courage--no real woman cares twopence for bullets! An aunt of mine stared a man right out of the house with the thing in her face. Anyhow, whether I may or not, I do say it. So now we are quits."

"Will you----" began Lawford, and stopped. "What I wanted to say was," he jerked on, "it is sheer horrible hypocrisy to be talking to you like this--though you will never have the faintest idea of what it has meant and done for me. I mean . . . And yet, and yet, I do feel when just for the least

moment I forget what I am, and that isn't very often, when I forget what I have become and what I must go back to--I feel that I haven't any business to be talking with you at all. 'Quits!' And here I am, an outcast from decent society. Ah, you don't know----"

She bent her head and laughed under her breath. "You do really stumble on such delicious compliments. And yet, do you know, I think my brother would be immensely pleased to think you were an outcast from decent society if only he could be thought one too. He has been trying half his life to wither decent society with neglect and disdain--but it doesn't take the least notice. The deaf adder, you know. Besides, besides; what is all this meek talk? I detest meek talk--gods or men. Surely in the first and last resort all we are is ourselves. Something has happened; you are jangled, shaken. But to us, believe me, you are simply one of the fewer friends--and I think, after struggling up Widderstone Lane hand in hand with you in the dark, I have a right to say 'friends'--than I could count on one hand. What are we all if we only realised it? We talk of dignity and propriety, and we are like so many children playing with knucklebones in a giant's scullery. Come along, he will, some supper-time--for us, each in turn--and how many even will so much as look up from theird play to wave us goodbye? that's I mean--the plot of silence we are all in. If only I had my brother's lucidity, how much better I would have said all this! It is only, believe me, that I want ever so much to help you, if I may--even at risk, too," she added rather shakily, "of having that help quite snubbed."

The lane had narrowed. They had climbed the arch of a little stone bridge that spanned the smooth, dark Widder. A few late starlings were winging far above them. Darkness was coming on apace. They stood for awhile looking down into the black, flowing water, with here and there the mild silver of a star dim leagues below. "I am afraid," said Grisel, looking quietly up, "you have led me into talking most pitiless nonsense. How many hours, I wonder, did I lie awake in the dark last night, thinking of you? Honestly, I shall never, never forget that walk. It haunted me, on and on."

"Thinking of me? Do you really mean that? Then it was not all imagination; it wasn't just the drowning man clutching at a straw?"

The grey eyes questioned him. "You see," he explained in a whisper, as if afraid of being overheard, "it--it came back again, and--I don't mind a bit how much you laugh at me! I had been asleep, and had a most awful dream, one of those dreams that seem to hint that some day that will be our real world, that some day we may awake where dreaming then will be of this; and I woke, and there was a tremendous knocking going on downstairs. I knew there was no one else in the house----"

"No one else in the house! And you like this?"

"Yes," said Lawford rather stolidly, "they were all out, as it happened. And, of course," he went on quickly, "there was nothing for me to do but simply to go down and open the door. And yet, do you know, at first I simply couldn't move. I lit a candle, and then--then somehow I got to know that waiting for me was just--but there," he broke off half-ashamed, "I mustn't bother you with all this morbid stuff. Will your brother be in now, do you think?"

"My brother will be in, and, of course, expecting you. But as for 'bother,' believe me--well, did I quite deserve it?" She stooped towards him. "You lit a candle--and then?"

They turned and walked slowly up the hill.

"It came again."

"It?"

"That--that presence, that shadow. I don't mean, of course, it's a real shadow. It comes, doesn't it, from--from within? As if from out of some unheard-of hiding place, where it has been lurking for ages and ages before one's childhood; at least, so it seems to me now. And yet although it does come from within, there it is, too, in front of you, before your eyes, feeding even on your fear, just watching, waiting for---- What nonsense all this must seem to you!"

"Yes, yes; and then?"

"Then, and you must remember the poor old boy had been knocking all this time--my good friend--Mr. Bethany, I mean--knocking and calling through the letter-box, thinking I was in extremis, or something; then--how shall I describe it?--well, you came, your eyes, your face, as clear as when, you know, the night before last, we went up the hill together. And then . . ."

"And then?"

"And then, we--you and I, you know--simply drove him downstairs, and I could hear myself grunting as if it was really a physical effort; we drove him, step by step, downstairs. And----" He laughed outright, and boyishly continued his adventure. "What do you think I did then, without the ghost of a smile, too, at the idiocy of the thing? I locked the poor beggar in the drawing-room. I saw him there, as plainly as I ever saw anything in my life, and the furniture glimmering, though it was pitch dark; I can't describe it. It all seemed so desperately real, absolutely vital then. It all seems so meaningless and impossible now. And yet, although I am utterly played out and done for, and however absurd it may sound, I wouldn't have lost it; I wouldn't go back for any bribe there is. I feel just as if a great bundle had been rolled off my back. Of course, the queerest, the most detestable part of the whole business is that it--the thing on the stairs--was this"--he lifted a grave and haggard face towards her again--"or rather that," he pointed with the stick towards the starry churchyard. "Sabathier," he said.

Again they had stopped together before the white gate, and this time Lawford pushed it open, and followed his companion up the narrow path.

She paused with her hand on the bell. "Was it my brother who actually put that horrible idea into your mind?--about Sabathier?"

"Oh no, not really put it into my head," said Lawford hollowly. "He only found it there; lit it up."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm. "Whether he did or not," she said, with an earnestness that was almost an entreaty, "of course, you must agree that we every one of us have some such experience--that kind of visitor, once, at least, in a lifetime."

"Ah, but," began Lawford, turning forlornly away, "you didn't see, you can't have realised--the change."

She pulled the bell almost as if in some inward triumph. "But don't you think," she suggested, "that that, like the other, might be, as it were, partly imagination too? If now you thought back . . ."

But a little old woman had opened the door, and the sentence, for the moment, was left unfinished.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was no one in the room, and no light, when they entered. For a moment Grisel stood by the open window, looking out. Then she turned impulsively. "My brother, of course, will ask you too," she said; "we had made up our minds to do so if you came again; but I want you to promise me now that you won't dream of going back to-night. That surely would be tempting--well, not Providence. I couldn" rest if I thought you might be alone; like that again."" Her voice died away into the calling of the waters. A light moved across the dingy old rows of books and as his sister turned to go our Herbert appeared in the doorway, carrying a green-shaded lamp, with an old leather quarto under his arm.

"Ah, here you are!" he said. "I guessed you had probably met." He drew up, burdened, before his visitor. But his clear, black glance, instead of wandering off at his first greeting had intensified. And it was almost with an air of absorption that he turned away. He dumped his book on to a chair and it turned over with scattered leaves on to the floor. He put the lamp down and stooped after it, so that his next words came up muffled, and as if the remark had been forced out of him. "You don't feel worse, I hope?" He got up and faced his visitor for the answer. And for the moment Lawford stood considering his symptoms.

"No," he said almost gaily; "I feel enormously better."

But Herbert's long, oval, questioning eyes beneath the sleek black hair were still fixed on his face. "I am afraid, my dear fellow," he said, with something more than his usual curiously indifferent courtesy, "the struggle has frightfully pulled you to pieces."

"The question is," answered Lawford, with a kind of tired yet whimsical melancholy in his voice, "though I am not sure that the answer very much matters--what's going to put me together again? It's the old story of Humpty Dumpty, Herbert. Besides, one thing you said has stuck out in a quite curious way in my memory. I wonder if you will remember?"

"What was that?" said Herbert with unfeigned curiosity.

"Why, you said even though Sabathier had failed, though I was still my own old stodgy self, that you thought the face--the face, you know, might work in. Somehow, sometimes, I think it has. I does really rather haunt me. In that case--well, what then?" Lawford had himself listened to this involved explanation much as one watches the accomplishment of a difficult trick, marvelling more at its completion at all than at the difficulty involved in the doing of it.

"'Work in,'" repeated Herbert, like a rather blase child confronted with a new mechanical toy; "did I really say that? well, honestly, it wasn't bad; it's what one would expect on that hypothesis. You see, we are only different, as it were, in our differences. Once the foot's over the threshold, it's nine points of the law! But I don't remember saying it." He quite boyishly and naively confessed it: "I say such an awful lot of things. And I'm always changing my mind. It's a standing joke against me with my sister. She says the recording angle will have two sides to my account: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; and Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays--diametrically opposite convictions, and both wrong! Sundays I am all things to all men. As for Sabathier, by the way, I do want particularly to have another go at him. I've been thinking him over, and I'm afraid in some ways he won't quite wash. And that reminds me, did you read the poor chap?"

"I just grubbed through a page or two; but most of my French was left at school. What I did do, though, was to show the book to an old friend of ours--my wife's and mine--just to skim--a Mr. Bethany. He's an old clergyman--our vicar, in fact."

Herbert had sat down, and with eyes slightly narrowed was listening with particular attention. He smiled a little magnanimously. "His verdict, I should think, must have been a perfect joy."

"He said," said Lawford, in his rather low, monotonous voice, "he said it was precious poor stuff, that it reminded him of patchouli; and that Sabathier--the print I mean--looked looked a foxy old roue. They were, I think, his exact words. We were alone together, last night."

"You don't mean that he simply didn't see the faintest resemblance?"

Lawford nodded. "But then," he added simply, "whenever he comes to see me now he leaves his spectacles at home."

And at that, as if at some preconcerted signal, they both went off into a simple shout of laughter, unanimous and sustained.

But this first wild bout of laughter over, the first real bursting of the dam, perhaps, for years, Lawford found himself at a lower ebb than ever.

"You see," he said presently, and while still his companion's face was smiling around the remembrance of his laughter, like ripples after the splash of a stone, "Bethany has been absolutely my sheet-anchor right through. And I was--it was--you can't possibly realise what a ghastly change it really was. I don't think any one ever will."

Herbert opened his hand and looked reflectively into the palm before allowing himself to reply. "I wonder, you know; I have been wondering a good deal; simply taking the other point of view for a moment; was it? I don't mean 'ghastly' exactly (like, say, smallpox, G.P.I., elephantiasis), but was it quite so complete, so radical, as in the first sheer gust of astonishment you fancied?"

Lawford thought on a little further. "You know how one sees oneself in a passion--why, how a child looks--the whole face darkened and drawn and possessed? That was the change. That's how it seems to come back to me. And something, somebody, dodging behind the eyes. Yes; more that than even any excessive change of feature, except, of course, that I also seemed---- Shall I ever

forget that first cold, stifling stare into the looking-glass! I certainly was much darker, even hair. But I've told you all this before," he added wearily, "and the scores and scores of times I've thought it! I used to sit up thee in the big spare bedroom my wife put me up in, simply gloating. My flesh seemed nothing more than an hallucination: there I was, haunting my body, an old grinning tenement, and all that I thought I wanted, and couldn't do without, all I valued and prided myself on--stacked up in the drizzling street below. Why, Herbert, our bodies are only glass or cloud. They melt, don't they, like was in the sun once we're out. But those first few days don't make very pleasant thinking. Friday night was the first, when I sat there like a twitching waxwork, soberly debating between Bedlam here and Bedlam hereafter. I even sometimes wonder whether its very repetition has not dulled the memory or distorted it. My wife," he added ingenuously, "seems to think there are signs of a slight improvement--a going back, I mean. But I'm not sure whether she meant it."

Herbert surveyed his visitor critically. "You say 'dark,'" he said; "but surely, Lawford, your hair now is nearly grey; well-flecked at least."

Although the remark carried nothing comparatively of a shock with it, yet it seemed to Lawford as if an electric current had passed over his scalp, coldly stirring every hair upon his head. But somehow or other it was easier to sit quietly on, to express no surprise, to let them do or say what they liked. "Well," he retorted with an odd, crooked smile, "you must remember I am a good deal older than I was last Saturday. I grew grey in the grave, Herbert."

"But it's like this, you know," said Herbert, rising excitedly, and at the next moment, on reflection, quietly reseating himself. "How many of your people actually saw it? How many owned to it as being as bad, as complete, as you made out? I don't want for a moment to cut right across what you said last night--our talk--but there are two sides to every question, and as often as not the less conspicuous has sounder roots. That's all."

"I think really, do you know, I would rather not go over the detestable thing again. Not many; my wife, though, and a man I know called Danton, who--who's prejudiced. After all, I have myself to think about too. And right through, right through--oh, I own that; oh, there wasn't the least doubt of that--they all in their hearts knew it was me. They knew I was behind. I could feel that absolutely always; it's not just eyes and ears we use, there's us ourselves to consider, though God alone knows what that means. But the password was there, as you might say; and they all knew I knew it, all--except"--he looked up as if in bewilderment--"except just one, a poor old lady, a very old friend of my mother's, whom I--I Sabathiered!"

"Whom--you--Sabathiered," repeated Herbert carefully, with infinite relish, looking sidelong at his visitor. "And it is just precisely that . . ." But at that moment his sister appeared in the doorway to say that supper was ready. And it was not until Herbert was actually engaged in carving a cold chicken that he followed up his advantage. "Mr. Lawford, Grisel," he said, "has just enriched our jaded language with a new verb--to Sabathier. And if I may venture to define it in the presence of the distinguished neologist himself, it means, 'To deal with histrionically'; or, rather, that's what it will mean a couple of hundred years hence. For this moment it means, 'To act under the influence of subliminilisation'; 'To perplex, or bemuse or estrange with otherness'. Do tell us, Lawford, more

about the little old lady!" He passed with her plate a little meaningful glance at his sister, and repeated, "Do!"

"But I've been plaguing your sister enough already. You'll wish . . ." he began, and turned his tired-out eyes towards those others awaiting them so frankly they seemed in their perfect friendliness a rest from all this troubles. "You see," he went on, "what I kept on thinking and thinking of was to get a quite unbiased and unprejudiced view. She had known me for years, though we had not actually met more than once or twice since my mother's death. And there she was sitting with me at the other end of just such another little seat as"--he turned to Herbert--"as ours, at Widderstone. It was on Bewley Common: I can see it all now; just before sunset. And I simply turned and asked her in a kind of whining, affected manner if she remembered me; and when after a long time she came round to owning that to all intents and purposes she did not--I professed to have made a mistake in recognising her. I think," he added, glancing up from one to the other of his two strange friends, "I think it was the meanest trick I can remember."

"H'm," said Herbert solemnly; "I wish I had as sensitive a conscience. But as your old friend didn't recognise you, who's the worse? As for her not doing so, just think of the difference a few years makes to a man, and any sever attack. Life wears so infernally badly. Who, for that matter, does not change, even in character; and yet who professes to see it? Mind, I don't say in essence! But then how many of the human ghosts one meets does one know in essence? One doesn't want to. It would be positively cataclysmic. And that's what brings me round to feel, Lawford, if I may venture to say so, that you may have brooded a little too keenly on--on your own. Tell any one you feel ill; he will commiserate with you to positive nausea. Tell any priest your soul is in danger; will he wait for proof? It's misereres and penances world without end. Tell any woman you love her; will she, can she, should she, gainsay you? There you are! The cat's out of the bag, you see. My sister and I sat up half the night talking the thing over. I said I'd take the plunge. I said I'd risk appearing the crassest, contradictoriest wretch that ever drew breath. I don't deny that what I hinted at the other night must seem in part directly contrary to what I'm going to say now." He wheeled his black eyes as if for inspiration, and helped himself to salad. "It's this," he said. "Isn't it possible, isn't it even probable that being ill, and overstrung, moping a little over things more or less out of the common ruck, and sitting there in a kind of trance--isn't it possible that you may have very largely imagined the change? Hypnotised yourself into believing it much worse--more profound, radical, acute--and simply absolutely hypnotising others into thinking so, too? Christendom is just beginning to rediscover that there is such a thing as faith, that it is just possible that, say, megrims or melancholia may be removed at least as easily as mountains. The converse, of course, is obvious on the face of it. A man fails because he thinks himself a failure. It's the men that run away that lose the battle. Supposing then, Lawford"--he leaned forward, keen and suave--"supposing you have been and 'Sabathiered' yourself!"

Lawford had grown accustomed during the last few days to finding himself gazing out like a child into reality, as if from the windows of a dream. He had in a sense followed this long, loosely stitched, preliminary argument; he had at least in part realised that he sat there between two clear friendly minds acting in the friendliest and most obvious collusion; but he was incapable of fixing his attention very closely on any single fragment of Herbert's apology, or of rousing himself into being much more than a dispassionate and not very interested spectator of the little melodrama that Fate, it appeared, had at the last moment decided rather capriciously to twist into a farce. He turned

with a smile to the face so keenly fixed and enthusiastic with the question it had so laboriously led up to: "But surely, I don't quite see . . ."

Herbert lifted his glass as if to his visitor's acumen and set it down again without tasting it. "Why, my dear fellow," he said triumphantly, "even a dream must have a peg. Yours was this unforgetable old suicide. Candidly now, how much of Sabathier was actually yours? In spite of all that that fantastical fellow, Herbert, said last night, dead men don't tell tales. The last place in the world to look for a ghost is where his traitorous bones lie crumbling. Good heavens! think what irrefutable masses of evidence there would be at our finger-tips if every tombstone hid its ghost! No; the fellow just arrested you with his creepy epitaph; an epitaph, mind you, that is in a literary sense distinctly fertilising. It catches one's fancy in its own crude way, as pages and pages of infinitely more complicated stuff take possession of, germinate, and sprout in ones imagination in another way. We are all psychical parasites. Why, given his epitaph, given the surroundings, I wager any sensitive consciousness could have guessed at his face; and guessing, as it were, would have feigned it. What do you think, Grisel?"

"I think, dear, you are talking absolute nonsense; what do they call it--'darkening counsel'? It's 'the hair of the dog,' Mr. Lawford."

"Well, then, you see," said Herbert over a hasty mouthful, and turning again to his victim--"then, you see, when you were just in the pink of condition to credit any idle tale you heard, then I came in. What, with the least impetus, can one not see by moonlight? The howl of a dog turns the midnight into a Brocken; the branch of a tree stoops out at you like Beelzebub crusted with gadflies. I'd, mind you, sipped of the deadly old Huguenot too. I'd listened to your innocent prattle about the child kicking his toes out on death's cupboard door; what more likely thing in the world, then, than that with that moon, in that packed air, I should have swallowed the bait whole, and seen Sabathier in every crevice of your skin? I don't say there wasn't any resemblance; it was for the moment extraordinary; it was even when you were here the other night distinctly arresting. But no (poor old Grisel, I'm nearly done) all I want to say is this: that if we had the 'foxy old roue here now, and Grisel played Paris between the three of us, she'd hand over the apple not to you, but to me."

"I don't quite see where poor Paris comes in," suggested Grisel meekly.

"No, nor do I," said Herbert. "All that I mean, sagacious child, is, that Mr. Lawford no more resembles the poor wretch now than I resemble the Apollo Belvidere. If you had only heard my sister scolding me, railing at me for putting such ideas into your jangled head! They don't affect me one iota. I am, I suppose, what is usually called rather imaginative (not, by all that's miraculous, of course, the creative variety!); and all that that pseudo kind of stuff means is that I can sup with the devil, spoon for spoon, and could sleep in Bluebeard's linen-closet without turning a hair. You, if I am not very much mistaken, are not much troubled with that very unprofitable quality, and so, I suppose, when a crooked and bizarre fancy does edge into your mind it roots there." And that said, not without some little confusion, and a covert glance of inquiry at his sister, Herbert made all the haste he could to catch up the course that his companions had already finished.

If only, Lawford thought, this insufferable weariness would lift awhile he could enjoy the quiet, the easy, headless talk, and this very friendly topsy-turvy effort to ease his mind and soothe his nerves, and even take an interest again in his case.

"You see," he said, turning to Grisel, "I don't think it really very much matters how it all came about. I never could believe it would last. It may perhaps--some of it at least may be fancy. But then, what isn't? What is trustworthy? And now your brother tells me my hair's turning grey. I suppose I have been living too slowly, too sluggishly, and they thought it was high time to stir me up." He saw with extraordinary vividness the low, panelled room; the still, listening face; the white muslin shoulders and dark hair; and the eyes that seemed to recall some far-off desolate longing for home and childhood. It was all a dream. That was the end of the matter. Even now, perhaps, his tired old stupid body was lying hunched up, drenched with dew upon the little old seat under the mist-wreathed branches. Soon it would bestir itself and wake up and go off home--home to Sheila, to the old deadly round that once had seemed so natural and inevitable, to the old dull Lawford--eyes and brain and heart.

They returned up the dark old staircase to Herbert's book-room, and he talked on to very quiet and passive listeners in his own fantastic endless fashion. And ever and again Lawford would find himself intercepting fleeting and anxious glances at his face, glances almost of remorse and pity; and thought he detected beneath this irresponsible contradictory babble an unceasing effort to clear the sky, to lure away too pressing memories, to put his doubts and fears completely to rest.

Herbert even went so far as to plead guilty, when Grisel gave him the clue, of having a little heightened and over-coloured his story of the restless phantasmal old creature that haunted their queer wooden quite hauntable old house. And when they rose, laughing and yawning to take up their candles, it was, after all, after a rather animated discussion, with many a hair-raising ghost story brought in for proof between brother and sister, as to exactly how many times that snuff-coloured spectre had made his appearance; and, with less unanimity still, as to the precise manner in which he was in the habit of making his precipitant exit.

"You do at any rate acknowledge, Grisel, that the old creature does appear, and that you saw him yourself step out into space when you were sitting down there under the willow shelling peas. I've seen him twice for certain, once rather hazily; Sallie saw him so plainly she asked his business: that's five. I resign."

"Acknowledge!" said Grisel; "of course I do. I'd acknowledge anything in the world to save argument. Why, I don't know what I should do without him. If only, now, Mr. Lawford would give him a fair chance to show himself; reading quietly here about ten minutes to one, or shelling peas even, if he prefers it. If only he'd stay long enough for that! Wouldn't it be the very thing for both of them!"

"Of course," said Herbert cordially, "the very thing."

Lawford rather mournfully shook his head.

But he needed little persuasion to stay at least one night. The prospect of that long, solitary walk, of that tired, stupid stooping figure dragging itself along the interminable country roads with only a

house more hateful to him than a cage to a rat at the end of it, had made at least going home an impossibility. "It is not--it isn't, I swear it--the other that keeps me back," he had solemnly assured the friend that smiled her real relief at his acceptance, "but--if you only knew how empty it's all got now; all reason gone even to go on at all."

"But doesn't it follow!" she had cried almost gaily. "After two such terrific splendid exorcisms! Swept and garnished, you know. And don't I just envy you the looking round for new lodgers again! What a vivid seven it will be!"

He said good-night; shut-to the latched door of his long, low room, ceilinged with rafters close under the steep roof, its brown walls hung with quiet, dark, pondering and beautiful faces looking gravely across at him. And with his candle in his hand he sat down on the bedside. All speculation was gone. The noisy clock of his brain had quite run down again. He turned towards the old oval looking-glass on the dressing-table without the faintest stirring of interest, suspense, or anxiety. What did it matter what a man looked like?--a now familiar but how enfeebled and deprecating voice seemed to say. He knew assuredly that a change had come. Even Sheila had noticed it. And since then what had he not gone through! But terror, and strife, and rage, had died down and away. What now was here instead seemed of little moment, so far at least as this world was concerned. At last he rose with an effort, crossed the uneven floor, and looked in unmovedly on what was his own poor face come back to him: changed, indeed, almost beyond belief from the sleek, self-satisfied, genial yet languid Arthur Lawford of the past years, and haunted yet with some faint trace of the set and icy sharpness, and challenge, and affront of the dark Adventurer, but faded! He had expected to find it so. Would it--the thought vanished across his mind--would it have been as unmistakably there had he come hot-foot, fearing, expecting to find the other?

He hardly knew how long he stood there, leaning on his hands, surveying almost listlessly in the candle-light that lined, bedraggled, grey and hopeless countenance, those dark-socketed, smouldering eyes, whose pupils even now were so dilated that a casual glance would have failed to detect the least hint of any iris. "It must have been something pretty bad you were, you know, or something pretty bad you did," they seemed to be trying to say to him, "to drag us down to this."

He knelt down by force of habit to say his prayers; but no words came. Well, between earthly friends a betrayal such as this would have caused a livelong estrangement and hostility. The God the old Lawford used to pray to would forgive him, he thought wearily, if just for the present he was a little too sore at heart to play the hypocrite. But if, while kneeling, he said nothing, he saw a good many things, in such tranquillity and clearness as the mere eyes of the body can share but rarely with their sisters of the imagination. And now it was Alice who looked mournfully out of the dark at him; and now the little old charwoman, Mrs. Gull, with her bag hooked over her arm, climbed painfully up the area steps; and now it was the lean, vexed face of a friend, nursing some restless and anxious grievance against him--Mr. Bethany; and then and ever again it was the face of one who seemed pure dream and fantasy and yet . . . he listened intently and fancied even now he could hear the voices of brother and sister talking quietly and circumspectly together in the room beneath.

CHAPTER XVIII

A QUIET knocking on the door aroused him in the long, tranquil bedroom; and Herbert's head was poked into the room. "There's a bath behind that door over there," he whispered, "or if you like I'm off for a bathe in the Widder. It's a luscious day. Shall I wait? All right," and the head was withdrawn. "Don't put much on," came the voice at the panel; "we'll be home again in twenty minutes."

The green and glory of the morning, it seemed, must have been seized overnight by spiders and the dew. Everywhere the gleaming nets were hung, and everywhere there rose a tiny splendour from the dewdrops, so clear and pure and changeable it seemed with their fire and colour they shook a tiny crystal music in the air. Herbert led the way along a clayey downward path beneath hazels tossing softly together their twigs of nuts, until they came out into a rounded hollow that, mounded with thyme, sloped gently down to the green banks of the Widder. The water poured like clearest glass beneath a rain of misty sunbeams.

"My sister always says that this is the very dell Boccaccio had in his mind's eye when he wrote the 'Decameron.' There really is something almost classic in those pines. And I'd sometimes swear with my eyes just out of the water I've seen Dryads half in hiding peeping between those beeches. Good Lord, Lawford, what a world we wretched moderns have missed!"

The water was marvellously cold, and seemed to Lawford, as it rilled tingling over his shoulders, and as he plunged his night-distorted eyes beneath its blazing surface, as if indeed it was charged with some strange unearthly enchantment to wash away in its icy clearness even the memory of the dull and tarnished days behind him. If one could but tie up anyhow that stained bundle of inconsequent memories called life, and fling it into a cupboard remoter even than Bluebeard's, and lock the door, and drop the quickly-rusting key into these living waters! He dressed himself with window thrown open to the blackbirds and thrushes, and the occasional shrill, solitary whistling of a robin. But, like the sour-sweet fragrance of the brier, its wandering, desolate burst of music had power to waken memory, and carried him instantly back to that first aimless descent into the evening gloom of Widderstone again. Surely never such a ghoulish face looked out on its man before as that which confronted him as borrowed razor he stood shaving those sunken chaps, that angular chin! And even now beneath the lantern of broad daylight, just as within that other face had lurked the undeniable ghost and presence of himself, so now beneath these sunken features seemed to float, tenuous as smoke, scarcely less elusive than a dream, between eye and object, the sinister darkness of the face that in those two bouts with fear he had b some strange miracle managed to repel. "Work in," the chance phrase came back. It had worked in in sober earnest; and so far as the living of the next few weeks went, surely it might prove an ally without which he could not simply conceive himself as struggling on at all.

But quite as dexterous minds as even restless Sabathier's had him just now in safe and kindly keeping. All the quiet October morning Herbert kept him talking and stooping over his extraordinary collection of books.

"You see," he explained to Lawford, standing amid a positive archipelago of precious "finds," with his foot hoisted on to a chair and a patched-up, sea-stained folio on his knee, "I honestly detest the mere give and take of what we are fools enough to call Life. I don't deny Life's there," he swept his hand towards the open window--"in that frantic Tophet we call London; but there's not focus, no

point of vantage. Even a scribbler only gets it piecemeal and through a dulled medium. We learn to read before we know how to see; we swallow our tastes, convictions, and emotions whole; so that nine-tenths of the world's nectar is merely honeydew." He smiled pleasantly into the fixed vacancy of his visitor's face. "And so I've just gone on," he continued amiably, "collecting just this particular kind of stuff--what you might call riff-raff. There's not a book here, Lawford, that hasn't at least a glimmer of the real thing in it--just Life, seen through a living eye, and felt. As for literature, and style, and all that gallimaufry, don't fear for them if your author has the ghost of a hint of genius in his making."

"But surely," said Lawford, trying for the twentieth time to pretend to himself that these endless books carried the faintest savour of the delight to him which they must, he rather forlornly supposed, shower upon Herbert, "surely genius is a very rare thing!"

"Rare! the world simply swarms with it. But before you can bottle it up in a book it's got to be articulate. Just for a single instant imagine yourself Falstaff, and if there weren't hundreds of Falstaffs in every generation, to be ensamples of his ungodly life, he'd be as dead as a doornail to-morrow--imagine yourself Falstaff, and being so, sitting down to write 'Henry IV.' or 'The Merry Wives'! It's simply preposterous. You wouldn't be such a fool as to waste the time. A mere Elizabethan scribbler comes along with a gift of expression and an observant eye, lifts the bloated old tippler clean out of life, and swims down the ages as the greatest genius the world has ever seen. Whereas, surely, though you mustn't let me bore you with all this piffle, it's Falstaff is the genius, and W. S. merely a talented reporter. (Of course, mind you, when we come to the Sonnets, that's a very different cry.) But Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Mercutio--they live on their own, as it were. The newspapers are full of them, if we were only the Shakespeares to see it. You jostle them at every street corner. There's a Polonius in every first-class railway carriage, and as many Juliets as there are boarding-schools. What the devil are you, my dear chap, but genius itself, with all the world brand new upon your shoulders? And who'd have thought it of you ten days ago? It's simply and solely because we're all, poor wretches, dumb--dumb as butts of Rhenish; dumb as drummerless drums. Here am I, my dear fellow, trickling out this--this whey that no more expresses me than Tupper does Sappho. But that's what I want to mean. How jolly rich everything is, if you only stick to life! Here it is packed away behind these rotting covers, just the real thing, no respectable stodge; no mere parasitic stuff; not more than a dozen poets; scores of outcasts and vagabonds--and the real thing in vagabonds is pretty rare in print, I can tell you. We're all sodden with facts, drugged with the second-hand, and barnacled with respectability until--until the touch comes. Goodness knows where from; but there's no mistaking it; oh no!"

"But what," said Lawford uneasily, "what on earth do you mean by the touch?"

"I mean when you cease to be a puppet only and sit up in the gallery too. When you squeeze through to the other side. When you get a living inkling. When you become articulate to yourself."

"I am awfully stupid," Lawford murmured, "but even now I don't really follow you a bit. But when, as you say, you do become articulate to yourself, what happens then?"

"Why, then," said Herbert with a shrug almost of despair, "then begins the weary tramp back. One by one drop off the truisms, and the Grundyisms, and all the stillborn claptrap of the marketplace sloughs off. Then one can seriously begin to think about saving one's soul."

"Saving one's soul," groaned Lawford; "why, I am not even sure of my own body yet." He walked slowly over to the window and with every thought in his head as quiet as doves on a sunny wall, stgared out into the garden of green things growing, leaves fading and falling water. "I tell you what," he said, turning irresolutely, "I wonder if you could possibly find time to write me out a translation of Sabathier. My French is much too hazy to let me really get at the chap. He's gone now; but I really should like to know what kind of stuff exactly he has left behind."

"Oh, Sabathier!" said Herbert, laughing. "What do you think of that, Grisel?" he asked, turning to his sister, who at that moment had looked in at the door. "Here's Mr. Lawford asking me to make a translation of Sabathier! Lunch, Lawford."

Lawford sighed. And not until he had slowly descended half the narrow, uneven stairs that led down to the dining-room did he fully realise the guile of a sister that could induce a hopeless book-worm to waste a whole morning over the stupidest of companions, simply to keep his tired-out mind from rankling, and give his Sabathier a chance to go to roost.

"I think, do you know," he managed to blurt out at last--"I think I ought to be thinking of getting home again. The house is empty--and----"

"You shall go this evening," said Herbert, "if you really must insist on it. But honestly, Lawford, we both think that after what the last few days must have been, it is merely common sense to take a rest. How can you possibly rest with a dozen empty rooms echoing every thought you think? There's nothing more to worry about; you agree to that. Send your people a note saying that you are here, safe and sound. Give them a chance of lighting a fire, and driving in the fatted calf. Stay on with us just the week out!"

Lawford turned from one to the other of the two friendly faces. But what was dimly in his mind refused to express itself. "I think, you know, I----" he began falteringly.

"But it's just this thinking that's the deuce--this prepostgerous habit of having continually to make up one's mind. Off with his head, Grisel! My sister's going to take you for a picnic; we go every other fine afternoon; and you can argue it out with her."

Once alone again with Grisel, however, Lawford found talking quite unnecessary. Silence seemed to fall between them as quietly and restfully as evening flows into night. They walked on slowly through the fading woods, and when they had reached the top of the hill that sloped down to the dark and foamless Widder, they sat down in the honey-scented sunshine on a knoll of heather and bracken, and Grisel lighted the little spirit-kettle she had brought with her, and busied herself very methodically over making tea.

That done, she clasped her hands round her knees, and sat now gossiping, now silent in the pale autumnal beauty. There was a bird wistfully twittering in the branches overhead, and ever and

again a withered leaf would circle down from the motionless beech boughs arched in their stillness beneath the thin blue sky.

"Men, you know," she began again suddenly, starting out of reverie, "really are absurdly blind; and just a little bit absurdly kindly stupid. How many times have I been at the point of laughing out at my brother's deliciously naive subtleties! But you do, you will understand, Mr. Lawford, that he was, that we are both 'doing our best'--to make amends?"

"I understand--I do indeed--a tenth part of all your kindness."

"Yes, but that's just it--that horrible word 'kindness'! If ever there were two utterly self-absorbed people, without a trace, with an absolute horror of kindness, it is just my brother and I. It's most of it false and most of it useless. We all surely must take what comes in this topsy-turvy world. I believe in saying out:--that the more one thinks about life the worse it becomes. There are only two kinds of happiness in this world--a wooden post's and Prometheus's. And who ever heard of any one having the impudence to be kind to Prometheus? As for a miserable 'medium' like me, not quite a post and leagues and leagues from even envying a Prometheus, she's better for the powder without the jam. But that's all nothing. What I can't help thinking--and it's not a big giving my brother away, because we both think it--that it was partly our thoughtlessness that added at least something to--to the rest. It was perfectly absurd. He saw you were ill; he saw--he must have seen even in that first Sunday talk--that your nerves were all askew. And who doesn't know what 'nerves' means nowadays! And yet he deliberately chattered. He loves it--just at large, you know, like me. I told him before I came out that I intended, if I could, to say all this. And now it's said you'll please forgive me for going back to it."

"Please don't talk about forgiveness. But when you say he chattered, you mean about Sabathier, of course. And that, you know, I don't care a fig for now. We can settle all that between ourselves--him and me, I mean. And now tell me candidly again--Is there any 'prey' in my face now?"

She looked up fleetingly into his eyes, leant back her head and laughed. "'Prey!' there never was a glimpse."

"And 'change'?" Their eyes met again in an infinitely brief, infinitely bewildering argument.

"Really, really, scarcely perceptible," she assured him, "except, of course, how horribly, horribly ill you look. And that only seems to prove to me you must be hiding something else. No illusion on earth could--could have done that to your face."

"You think, I know," he persisted, "that I must be persuaded and cosseted and humoured. Yes, you do; it's my poor old sanity that's really in both your minds. Perhaps I am--not absolutely sound. Anyhow, I've been watching it in your looks at each other all the time. And I can never, never say, never tell you what you have done for me. But you see, after all, we did win through; I keep on telling myself that. So that now it's purely from the most selfish, practical motives that I want you to be perfectly frank with me. I have to go back, you know; and some of them, one or two of my friends I mean, are not all on my side. Think of me as I was when you came into the room, three centuries ago, and you turned and looked, frowning at me in the candlelight; remember that and look at me now! What is the difference? Does it shock you? Does it make the whole world seem a

trick, a sham? Does it simply sour your life to think such a thing possible? Oh, the hours I've spent gloating on Widderstone's miserable mask of skin and bone, as I was saying to your brother only last night, and never knew until they shuffled me that the old self too was nothing better than a stifling suffocating mask."

"But don't you see," she argued softly, turning her face away a little, "you were a stranger then (though I certainly didn't mean to frown). And then a little while after we were, well, just human beings, shoulder to shoulder, and if friendship does not mean that, I don't know what it does mean. And now, you are--well, just you: the you, you know, of three centuries ago! And if you mean to ask me whether at any precise moment I have been conscious that this you I am now speaking to was not the you of last night, or of that dark climb up the hill, why, it is simply frantic to think it could ever be necessary to say over and over again, No. But if you mean, Have you changed else? All I could answer is, Don't we all change as we grow to know one another? What were just features, what just dingily represents one, as it were, are forgotten, or rather get remembered. Of course, the first glimpse is the landscape under lightning as it were. But afterwards isn't it surely like the alphabet to a child; what was first a queer angular scrawl becomes A, and is always ever after A, undistinguished, half-forgotten, yet standing at last for goodness knows what real wonderful things--or for just the dry bones of soulless words? Is that it?" She stole a sidelong glance into his brooding face, leaning her head on her hand.

"Yes, yes," came the rather dissatisfied reply. "I do agree; perfectly. But then, you see--I told you I was going to talk of nothing but myself--what did at first happen to me was something much worse, and, I suppose, something quite different from that."

"And yet, didn't you tell us, that of all your friends not one really denied in their hearts your--what they would call, I suppose--your identity; except that poor little offended old lady. And even she, if my intuition is worth a penny piece, even she when you go soon and talk to her will own that she did know you, and that it was not because you were a stranger that she was offended, but because you so ungenerously pretended to be one. That was a little mad, now, if you like!"

"Oh, yes," said Lawford, "I am going to ask her forgiveness. I don't know what I didn't vow to take her for a peace-offering if the chance should ever come--and the courage--to make my peace with her. But now that the chance has come, and I think the courage, it is the desire that's gone. I don't seem to care either way. I feel as if I had got past making my peace with any one."

But this time no answer helped him out.

"After all," he went plodding on, "there is more than just the mere day to day to consider. And one doesn't realise that one's face actually is one's fortune without a shock. And that that gone, one is, as your brother said, just like a bee come back to the wrong hive. It undermines," he smiled rather bitterly, "one's views rather. And it certainly sifts one's friends. If it hadn't been just for my old"--he stopped dead, and again pushed slowly on--"if it hadn't been for our old friend, Mr. Bethany, I doubt if we should now have had a soul on our side. I once read somewhere that wolves always chase the old and the wounded out of the pack. And after all, what do we do? Where do we keep the homeless and the insane? And yet, you know," he added ruminatingly, "it is not as if mine was

ever a particularly lovely or lovable face; while as for the poor wretch behind it, well, I really cannot see what meaning, or life even, he had before----"

"Before?"

Lawford met bravely the clear whimsical eyes. "Before, I was Sabathiered."

Grisel laughed outright.

"You think," he retorted almost bitterly, "you think I am talking like a child."

"Yes," she sighed cheerfully, "I was quite envying you."

"Well, there I am," said Lawford inconsequently. "And now; well, now, I suppose, the whole thing's to begin again. I can't help beginning to wonder what the meaning of it all is; why one's duty should always seem so very stupid a thing. And then, too, what can there be on earth that even a buried Sabathier could desire?" He glanced up in a really animated perplexity at the still, dark face turned in the evening light towards the darkening valley. And perplexity deepened into a disquieted frown--like that of a child who is roused suddenly from a daydream by the half-forgotten question of a stranger. He turned his eyes almost furtively away as if afraid of disturbing her; and for awhile they sat in silence. . . . At last he turned again almost shyly. "I hope some day you will let me bring my daughter to see you."

"Yes, yes," said Grisel eagerly; "we should both love it, of course. Isn't it curious?--I simply knew you had a daughter. Sheer intuition!"

"Wait! just wait!" replied the quiet, confident voice, "that will come too. One thing at a time, my dear friend. You've won your old self back again; you'll win your old love of life back again in a little while; never fear. Oh, don't I know that awful Land's End after illness; and that longing, too, that gnawing longing, too, for Ultima Thule! So, it's a bargain between us that you bring your daughter soon." She busied herself over the tea-things. "And, of course," she added, as if it were an afterthought, looking across at him in the pale green sunlight as she knelt, "you simply won't think of going back to-night. . . . Solitude, I really do think, solitude just now would be absolute madness. You'll write to-day and go, perhaps, to-morrow?"

Lawford looked across in his mind at his square ungainly house, full-fronting the afternoon sun. He tried to repress a shudder. "I think, do you know, I ought to go to-day."

"Well, why not? Why not? Just to reassure yourself that all's well. And come back here to sleep. If you'd really promise that I'd drive you in. I'd love it. There's the jolliest little governess-cart we sometimes hire for our picnics. May I? You've no idea how much easier in our minds my brother and I would be if you would. And then to-morrow, or at any rate the next day, you shall be surrendered, whole and in your right mind. There, that's a bargain, too! Now we must hurry."

CHAPTER XIX

HERBERT himself went down to order the governess-cart, and packed them in with a rug. And in the dusk Grisel set Lawford down at the corner of his road and drove on to an old bookseller's with a commission from her brother, promising to return for him in an hour. Dust and a few straws lay at rest as if in some abstruse arrangement on the stones of the porch just as the last faint whirling gust of sunset had left them. Shut lids of sightless indifference seemed to greet the wanderer from the curtained windows. He opened the door and went in. For a moment he stood in the vacant hall; then he peeped first into the blind-drawn dining-room, faintly, dingily sweet, like some old empty wine-bottle. He went softly on a few aces and just opening the door looked in on the faintly glittering twilight of the drawing-room. But the congealed stump of candle that he had set in the corner as a final rancorous challenge to the beaten Shade was gone. He slowly and deliberately ascended the stairs, conscious of a peculiar sense of ownership of what in even so brief an absence had taken on so queer a look of strangeness. It was almost as if he might be some lone heir come in the rather mournful dusk to view what melancholy fate had almost unexpectedly bestowed on him.

"Work in"--what on earth else could this chill sense of strangeness mean? Would he ever free his memory from that one haphazard, haunting hint? And as he stood in the doorway of the big, calm room, which seemed even now to be stirring with the restless shadow of these last few far-away days; now pacing sullenly to and fro; now sitting hunched-up to think; and now lying impotent in a vain, hopeless endeavour only for the breath of a moment to forget--he awoke out of reverie to find himself smiling at the thought that a changed face was practically at the mercy of an incredulous world, whereas a changed heart was no one's deadly dull affair but its owner's. The merest breath of pity even stole over him for the Sabathier who after all had dared; and had needed, perhaps, nothing like so arrogant and merciless a coup de grace to realise that he had so ignominiously failed.

"But there, that's done!" he exclaimed out loud, not without a tinge of regret that theories, however brilliant and bizarre, could never now be anything else--that now, indeed, that the symptoms had gone, the "malady," for all who had not been actually admitted into the shocked circle, was become anything more than an inanely "tall" story; stuffing not even savoury enough for a goose. How wide exactly, he wondered, would Sheila's discreet, shocked circle prove? He stood once more before the looking-glass, hearing again Grisel's words in the still, green shadow of the beech-tree, "Except of course, horribly, horribly ill." "What a fool, what a coward she thinks I am!"

There was still nearly an hour to be spent in this great barn of faded interests. He lit his candle and descended into the kitchen. A mouse went scampering to its hole as he pushed open the door. The memory of that ravenous morning meal nauseated him. It was sour and very still here; he stood erect; the air smelt faint of earth. In the breakfast-room the bookcase still swung open. Late evening mantled the garden; and in sheer ennui again he sat down at the table, and turned for a last not unfriendly hob-a-nob with his poor old friend Sabathier. He would take the thing back. Herbert, of course, was going to translate it for him. Now if the patient old Frenchman had stormed Herbert instead--that surely would have been something like a coup! Those frenzied books! The absurd talk of the man! Herbert was perfectly right--he could have entertained fifty old Huguenots without turning a hair. "I'm such an awful stodge."

He turned the woolly leaves over very slowly. He frowned impatiently, and from the end backwards turned them over again. Then he lay the book softly down on the table and sat back. He stared with narrowed lids into the flame of his quiet, friendly candle. Every trace, every shred of

portrait and memoir were gone. Once more, slowly, punctiliously, he examined page by page the blurred and unfamiliar French, the sooty heads, the long, lean noses, the baggy eyes passing like figures in a peepshow one by one under his hand, to the last fragmentary and dexterously mended leaf. Yes, Sabathier was gone. Quite the old slow Lawford smile crept over his face at the discovery. And yet it was a smile a little sheepish too, as he thought of Sheila's quiet vigilance.

And the next instant he had looked up sharply, with a sudden peculiar shrug, and a kind of cry, like the first thin cry of an awakened child, in his mind. Without a moment's hesitation he climbed swiftly upstairs again to the big sepulchral bedroom. He pressed with his finger-nail the tiny spring in the looking-glass. The empty drawer flew open. There were even finger-marks in the dust.

Yet, strangely enough, beneath all the clashing thoughts that came flocking into his mind as he stood with the empty drawer in his hand, was a wounding yet still a little amused pity for his old friend Mr. Bethany. So far as he himself was concerned the discovery--well, he would have plenty of time to consider everything that could possibly now concern himself. Anyhow, it could only simplify matters. He remembered waking to that old wave of sickening horror on that first unhappy morning; he remembered the keen yet owlish old face blinking its deathless friendliness at him, and the steady pressure of the cold, skinny hand. As for Sheila, she had never done anything by halves; certainly not when it came to throwing over a friend no longer necessary to one's social satisfaction. But she would edge out cleverly, magnanimously, triumphantly enough, no doubt, when the day of reckoning should come, the day when, her nets wide spread, her bait prepared, he must stand up before her outraged circle and prove himself her clear and lawful husband, perhaps even to the very imprint of his thumb.

"Poor old thing!" he said again; and this time his pity was shared almost equally between both witnesses to Mr. Bethany's ingenuous little document, the loss of which had fallen so softly and pathetically that he felt only ashamed of having discovered it so soon.

He shut back the tell-tale drawer, and after trying to collect his thoughts in case anything should have been forgotten, he turned with a deep, trembling sigh to descend the stairs. But on the landing he drew back at the sound of voices, and then a footstep. Soon came the sound of a key in the lock. He blew out his candle and leant listening over the balusters.

"Who's there?" he called quietly.

"Me, sir," came the feeble reply out of the darkness.

"What is it, Ada? What have you come for?"

"Only, sir, to see that all was safe, and you were in, sir."

"Yes," he said. "All's safe; and I am in. What if I had been out?" It was like dropping tiny pebbles into a deep well--so long after came the answering feeble splash.

"Then I was to go back, sir." And a moment after the discreet voice floated up with the faintest tinge of effrontery out of the hush. "Is that Dr. Ferguson, sir?"

"No, Ada; and please tell your mistress from me that Dr. Ferguson will not be in till late." A keen but rather forlorn smile passed over his face. "He's dining with friends at Holloway. But of course if she should want to see him he will call to-morrow at any hour at Mrs. Lovat's. And--Ada!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Say that I'm a little better; your mistress will be relieved to hear that I'm a little better; still not quite myself say, but, I think, a little better."

"Yes, sir; and I'm sure I'm very glad to hear it," came fainter still.

"What voice was that I heard just now?"

"Miss Alice's, sir; but she came quite against my wishes, and I hope you won't repeat it, sir. She promised if she came that mistress shouldn't know. I was only afraid she might disturb you, or--or Dr. Ferguson. And did you say, sir, that I was to tell mistress that he was coming back?"

"Ah, that I don't know; so perhaps it would be as well not to mention him at all. Is Miss Alice there?"

"I said I would tell her if you were alone. But I hope you'll understand that it was only because she begged so. Mistress has gone to St. Peter's bazaar; and that's how it was."

"I quite understand. Beckon to her!"

There came a hasty step in the hall and a hurried murmur of explanation. Lawford heard her call as she ran up the stairs; and the next moment he had Alice's hand in his and they were groping together through the gloaming back into the solitude of the empty room again.

"You won't cry out, dear," he heard himself imploring, "you'll just hold tight to that clear common sense, my dear; and above all you won't tell. It must be our secret; a dead, dead secret from every one, even from your mother, for just a little while; just a mere two days or so--in case. I'm--I'm better, dear."

He fumbled with the little box of matches, dropped one, broke another; but at last the candle-flame dipped, brightened, and with door shut and the last paleness of dusk at the window Lawford turned and looked at his daughter. She stood with eyes wide open, like the eyes of a child walking it its sleep; then twisted her fingers more tightly within his. "Oh, dearest, how ill, how ill you look!" she whispered; "but there, never mind--never mind! It was all a miserable dream, then; it won't, it can't come back? I don't think I could bear its coming back. And mother told me such curious things; as if I were a child and understood nothing. And even after I knew that you were you--I mean before I sat up here in the dark to see you--she said that you were gone and would never come back; that a terrible thing had happened--a disgrace which we must never speak of; and that all the other was only a pretence to keep people from talking. But I did not believe then, and how could I believe afterwards?"

"There, never mind now, dear, what she said. It was all meant for the best, perhaps. But here I am; and not so nearly ill as I look, Alice; and there's nothing more to trouble ourselves about; not even if it should be necessary for me to go away for a time. And this is our secret, mind; she doesn't dream; just a dead secret between you and me."

They sat for awhile without speaking or stirring. And faintly along the hushed road Lawford heard in the silence a leisurely, indolent beat of little hoofs approaching, and the sound of wheels. A sudden wave of feeling swept over him. He took Alice's quiet, loving face in his hands and kissed her passionately. "Do not so much as think of me yet, or doubt, or question; only love me, dearest, and soon--and soon----"

"We'll just begin again, just begin again, won't we? all three of us together, just as we used to be. I didn't mean to have said all those horrid things about mother. She was only dreadfully anxious and meant everything for the best. You'll let me tell her soon?"

The haggard face turned slowly, listening. "I hear, I understand, but I can't think very clearly now, Alice; I can't, dear; my miserable old tangled nerves. I just stumble along as best I can. You'll understand better when you get to be a poor old thing like me. We must do the best we can. And of course you'll see, Dillie, how awfully important it is not to raise false hopes. You understand? I mustn't risk the least thing in the world, must I? And now goodbye; only for a few hours now! And not a word, not a word to a single living soul."

He extinguished the candle again, and led the way to the top of the stairs. "Are you there, Ada?"

"Yes, sir," answered the same quiet, imperturbable voice from under the black straw brim. Alice went slowly down, but at the foot of the stairs, looking out into the cold, blue, lamplit street she paused as if at a sudden recollection, and ran hastily up again.

"There was nothing more, dear?" she said, leaning back to peer up.

"'Nothing more,' dear? what?"

She stood panting a little in the darkness, listening to some cautious yet uneasy thought that seemed to haunt her mind. "I thought--it seemed there was something we had not said,k something I could not understand. But there, it is nothing! You know what a fanciful old silly I am. You do love me? Quite as much as ever?"

"More, sweetheart, more!"

"Good-night again, then; and God bless you, dear!"

The outer door closed softly, the footsteps died away. Lawford still hesitated. He took hold of the stairs above his head as he stood on the landing, and leaned his head upon his hands, striving calmly to disentangle the perplexity of his thoughts. His pulses were beating in his ear with a low, muffled roar. He looked down between the blinds to where against the blue of the road beneath the straggling yellow beams of the lamp stood the little cart and drooping, shaggy pony, and Grisel sitting quietly there awaiting him. He shut his eyes as if in hope by some convulsive effort of mind

to break through this subtle glass-like atmosphere of dream that had stolen over consciousness, and blotted out the significance, almost the meaning of the past. He turned abruptly. Empty as the empty rooms around him, unanswering were mind and heart. Life was a tale told by and idiot . . . signifying nothing.

He went slowly downstairs. And even then the doubt came: Would he ever come back? Who knows? he thought; and again stood pondering, arguing, denying. At last he seemed to have come to a decision. He made his way downstairs, opened and left ajar a long, narrow window in a passage to the garden beyond the kitchen. He turned on his heel as he reached the gate and waved his hand as if in a kind of forlorn mockery towards the darkly glittering windows. The drowsy pony woke at touch of the whip.

Grisel lifted the rug and squeezed a little closer into the corner. She had drawn a veil over her face, so that to Lawford her eyes seemed to be dreaming in a little darkness of their own as he laid his hand on the side of the cart. "It's a most curious thing," he said, "but peeping down at you just now when the sound of the wheels came, a memory came clearly back to me of years and years ago--of my mother. She used to come to fetch me at school in a little cart just like this, and a little pony just like this, with a thick dusty coat. And once I remember I was simply sick of everything, a failure, and fagged out, and all that, and was looking out in the twilight; I fancy even it was autumn too. It was a little side staircase window; I was horribly homesick. And she came quite unexpectedly. I shall never forget it--the misery, and then, her coming." He lifted his eyes, cowed with the incessant struggle, and watched her face for some time in silence. "Ought I to stay?"

"I see no 'ought,'" she said. "No one is there?"

"Only a miserable broken voice out of a broken cage--called Conscience."

"Don't you think, perhaps, that even that has a good many disguises--convention, cowardice, weakness, ennui; they all take their turn at hooting in its feathers? You must, you really must have rest. You don't know; you don't see; I do. Just a little snap, some one last exquisite thread gives way, and then it is all over. You see, I have even to try to frighten you, for I can't tell you how you distress me!"

"Why do I distress you?--my face, my story, you mean?"

"No; I mean you: your trouble, that horrible empty house, and--oh, dear me, yes; your courage too!"

"Listen!" said Lawford, stooping forward. He could scarcely see the pale, veiled face through this mist that had risen up over his eyes. "I have no courage apart from you; no courage and no hope. Ask me to come!--a stranger with no history, no mockery, no miserable rant of a grave and darkness and fear behind me. Are we not all haunted--every one! That forgotten, and the fool I was, and the vacillating, and the pretence--oh, how it all sweeps clear before me; without a will, without a hope or glimpse or whisper of courage! Be just the memory of my mother, the face, the friend I've never seen; the voice that every dream leaves echoing. Ask me to come!"

She sat unstirring; and then as if by some uncontrollable impulse stooped a little closer to him and laid her gloved hand on his.

"I hear, you know; I hear too," she whispered. "But oh, dear friend, we mustn't listen. Come now. It grows so late."

The little village echoed back from its stone walls the clatter of the pony's hoofs. Night had darkened to its deepest when their lamp shone white on the wicket in the hedge. They had scarcely spoken. Lawford had simply watched pass by, almost without a thought, the arching trees, the darkening fields; had watched rise up in a mist of primrose light the harvest moon to shine in saffron on the faces and shoulders of the few wayfarers they met, or who passed them by. The still, grave face beneath the shadow of its veil had never turned, through the moon poured all her flood of brilliance upon the dark profile. And once when as if in sudden alarm he had lifted his head and looked at her, a sudden doubt had assailed him so instantly that he had half put out his hand to touch her, and had as quickly withdrawn it, lest her beauty and stillness should be, even as the moment's fancy had suggested, only a far-gone memory returned in dream.

Herbert hailed them from the darkness of an open window. He came down, and they talked a little in the coolness of the garden. He lit a cigarette, and climbed languidly into the cart, and drove the drowsy little pony off into the moonlight.

CHAPTER XX

IT WAS a quiet supper the three friends sat down to. Herbert sat quietly narrowing his eyes over his thoughts, which, when the fancy took him, he scattered out upon the others' silence. Lawford apparently had not yet shaken himself free from the sorcery of the moonlight. His eyes shone dark and full like those of a child who has trespassed beyond its hour for bed, and sit marvelling at reality in a waking dream.

Long after they had bidden each other good-night, long after Herbert had trodden on tiptoe with his candle past his closed door, Lawford sat leaning on his arms at the open window, staring out across the motionless, moonlit trees that seemed to stand like draped and dreaming pilgrims, come to the peace of their Nirvana at last beside the crashing music of the waters. And he himself, the self that never sleeps beneath the tides and waves of consciousness, was listening, too, almost as unmovedly and unheedingly to the thoughts that clashed in conflict through his brain. Why, in this strange, transitory life was one the slave of these small cares? What if even in that dark pit beneath, which seemed to whisper Lethe to the tumultuous, swirling waters--what if there, too, were merely a beginning again, and to seek a slumbering refuge there merely a blind, reiterated plunge into the heat and tumult of another day? Who was that poor, dark, homeless ghoul, Sabathier? Who was this Helen of an impossible dream? Her face with its strange smile, her eyes with their still pity and rapt courage had taken hope away. "Here's not your rest," cried one insistent voice; "she is the mystery that haunts day and night, past all the changing of the restless hours. Chance has given you back eyes to see, a heart that can be broken. Chance and the stirrings of a long-gone life have torn down the veil age spins so thick and fast. Pride and ambition; what dull fools men are! Effort and duty, what dull fools men are!" He listened on and on to these phantom pleadings and to the rather coarse old Lawford conscience grunting them mercilessly down, too weary even to try to rest.

Rooks at dawn came sweeping beneath the turquoise of the sky. He saw their sharp-beaked heads turn this way, that way, as they floated on outspread wings across the misty world. Except for the hoarse roar of the water under the huge thin-leafed trees, not a sound was stirring. "One thing," he seemed to hear himself mutter as he turned with a shiver from the morning air, "it won't be for long. You can, at least, poor devil, wait the last act out." If anywhere and anywhen for the one poor dubious wage of a penny--if it was only his own small dull part to carry a mock spear, and shout huzza! with the rest--there was nothing for it, he grunted obstinately to himself, should he would with the loudest.

He threw himself on to the bed with eyes so wearied with want of sleep it seemed they had lost their livelong skill in finding it. Not the echo of triumph nor even a sigh of relief stirred the torpor of his mind. He knew vaguely that what had been the misery and madness of the last few days was gone. But the thought had no power to move him now. Sheila's good sense, and Mr. Bethany's stubborn loyalty were alike old stories that had lost their savour and meaning. Gone, too, was the need for that portentous family gathering that had sat so often in his fancy during these last few days, around his dining-room table, discussing with futile decorum the problem of how to hush him up, to muffle him down. Half dreaming, half awake, he saw the familiar door slowly open and, like the timely hero in a melodrama, his own figure appear before the stricken and astonished company. His eyes opened half-fearfully, and glanced up in the morning twilight. Their perplexity gave place to a quiet, almost vacant smile; the lids slowly closed again, and at last the lean hands twitched awhile in sleep.

Next morning he spent rummaging among the old books, dipping listlessly here and there as the tasteless fancy took him, while Herbert sat writing with serene face and lifted eyebrows at his open window. But the unfamiliar long S's, the close type, and the spelling of the musty old books wearied eye and mind. What he read, too, however far-fetched, or lively, or sententious, or gross seemed either as if it really were of the same texture as what had become his everyday experience, and so baffled him with its nearness, or else was only the meaningless ramblings of an idle pen. And this, he thought to himself, looking covertly up at the spruce, clear-cut profile at the window, this was what Herbert had called Life!

"Am I interrupting you, Herbert; are your very busy?" he asked at last, taking refuge on a chair in the far corner.

"Bless me, no; not a bit--not a bit," said Herbert amiably, laying down his pen. "I'm afraid the old leather-jackets have been boring you. It's a habit this beastly reading; this gorge and glint and fever all at second-hand--purely a bad habit, like morphia, or laudanum. But once in, you know there's no recovery. Anyhow, I'm neck-deep, and to struggle would be simply to drown."

"I was only going to say how sorry I am for having left Sabathier at home."

"My dear fellow----" began Herbert reassuringly.

"It was only because I wanted so very much to have your translation. I get muddled up with other things groping through the dictionary."

Herbert surveyed him critically. "What exactly is your interest now, Lawford? You don't mean that my old theory has left any sting now?"

"No sting; oh no! I was only curious. But you yourself still think it really, don't you?"

Herbert turned for a moment to the open window.

"I was simply trying then to find a theory to fit the facts as you experienced them. But now that the facts have gone--and they have, haven't they?--exit, of course, my theory!"

"I see," was the cryptic answer. "And yet, Herbert," he solemnly began again, "it has changed me; even in my way of thinking. When I shut my eyes now--I only discovered if by chance--I see immediately faces quite strange to me; or places, sometimes thronged with people; and once an old well with some one sitting in the shadow. I can't tell you how clearly, and yet it is all altogether different from a dream. Even when I sit with my eyes open, I am conscious, as it were, of a kind of faint, colourless mirage. In the old days, I mean before Widderstone, what I saw was only what I'd seen. Nothing came uncalled for, unexplained. This makes the old life seem so blank; I really did not know what extraordinarily real things I was doing without. And whether for that reason or another, I can't quite make out what really I did want then, and was always fretting and striving for. I can see no wisdom or purpose in anything now but to get to one's journey's end as quickly and bravely as one can. And even then, even if we do call life a journey, and death the inn we shall reach at last in the evening at the end of it; that, too, I feel will be only as brief a stopping-place as any other inn would be. Our experience here is so scanty and shallow--nothing more than the moment of the continual present. Surely that must go on, even if one does call it eternity. And so we shall all have to begin again. Probably Sabathier himself . . . But there, what on earth are we, Herbert, when all is said? Who is it has--has done all this for us--what kind of self? And to what possible end? Is it that the clockwsork has been wound up and must still jolt on awhile with jarring wheels? Will it never run down, do you think?"

Herbert smiled faintly, but made no answer.

"You see," continued Lawford, in the same quiet, dispassionate undertone, "I wouldn't mind if it was only myself. But there are so many of us, so many selves, I mean; and they all seem to have a voice in the matter. What is the reality to this infernal dream?"

"The reality is, Lawford, that you are fretting your life out over this rotten illusion. To go back into the ravages of just your ordinary routine in this state would simply be sheer midsummer madness. Do be guided by me just this once! We'll go, all three of us, a good ten-mile walk to-day, and thoroughly tire you out. And to-night you shall sleep here--a really sound, refreshing sleep. Then to-morrow, whole and hale, back you shall go; honestly. Here's Grisel. Now, do be persuaded! It's only professional strong men should ask questions. Babes like you and me must keep to slops."

So, though Lawford made no answer, it was agreed. Before noon they had set out on their walk across the fields. And after rambling on just as caprice took them, past reddening blackberry bushes and copses of hazel, and flaming beech, they sat down to spread out their meal on the slope of a hill, overlooking quiet ploughed fields and grazing cattle. Herbert stretched himself with his back to

the earth, and his placid face to the pale, cloudless sky, while Lawford, even more dispirited after his walk, wandered up to the crest of the hill.

At the foot of the hill, upon the other side, lay a farm and its out-buildings, and a pool of water beneath a group of elms. It was vacant in the sunlight, and the water vividly green with a scum of weed. And about half a mile beyond stood a cluster of cottages and an old towered church. He gazed idly down, listening vaguely to the wailing of a curlew flitting anxiously to and fro above the broken solitude of its green hill. And it seemed as if a thin, dark cloud began to be quietly withdrawn from over his eyes. Hill, and wailing cry, and barn, and water faded out. And he was staring, as it were, in an endless stillness at an open window against which the sun was beating in a bristling torrent of gold, while out of the garden beyond came the voice of some evening bird singing with such an unspeakable ecstasy of grief it seemed it must be perched upon the confines of another world. The light gathered to a radiance almost intolerable, driving back with its raining beams some memory, forlorn, remorseless, remote. His body stood dark and senseless, rocking in the air on the hillside as if bereft of its spirit. Then his hands were drawn over his eyes. He turned unsteadily and made his way, as if through a thick, drizzling haze, slowly back.

"What is that--there?" he said almost menacingly, standing with bloodshot eyes looking down upon Herbert.

"'That!'--what?" said Herbert, glancing up startled from his book. "Why, what's wrong, Lawford?"

"That," said Lawford sullenly, yet with a faintly mournful cadence in his voice; "those fields and that old empty farm--that village over there? Why did you bring me here?"

Grisel had not stirred. "The village . . ."

"Ssh!" she said, catching her brother's sleeve; "that's Detcham, yes, Detcham."

Lawford turned wide, vacant eyes on her. He shook his head and shuddered. "No, no; not Detcham. I know it; indeed I do, but it has gone out of my mind. Not Detcham; I've been there before; don't look at me! Horrible, horrible! It takes me back--I can't think. I stood there, trying, trying; it's all in a blur. Don't ask me--a dream."

Grisel leaned forward and touched his hand. "Don't think; don't try! Why should you? We can't; we mustn't go back."

Lawford, still gazing fixedly, turned again irresolutely towards the steep of the hill. "I think, you know," he said, stooping and whispering, "he would know--the window and the sun and the singing. And, of, of course it was too late. You understand--too late! And once . . . you can't go back; oh no! You won't leave me? You see, if you go, it would only be all . . . I could not be quite so alone. But Detcham--Detcham? perhaps y--tell me? perhaps you will not trust me--tell me? That was not the name." He shuddered violently and turned dog-like, beseeching eyes. "To-morrow--yes, to-morrow," he said, "I will promise anything if you will not leave me now. Once----" But again the thread running so faintly through that inextricable maze of memory eluded him. "So long as you won't leave me now!" he implored her.

She was vainly trying to win back her composure, and could not answer him at once.

In the evening after supper Grisel sat her guest down in front of a big wood fire in the old book-room, where, staring into the playing flames, he could fall at peace into the almost motionless reverie which he seemed merely to harass and weary himself by trying to disperse. She opened the little piano at the far end of the room and played on and on as fancy led--Chopin and Beethoven, a fugue from Bach, and lovely, forlorn old English airs, till the music seemed not only a voice persuading, pondering, and lamenting, but gathered about itself the hollow surge of the water and the darkness; wistful and clear, as the thoughts of a solitary child. Ever and again a log burnt through its strength, and falling amid sparks, stirred, like a restless animal, the stillness; or Herbert in his corner lifted his head to glance towards his visitor, and to turn another page. At last the music, too, fell silent, and Lawford stood up with his candle in his hand and eyed almost timidly brother and sister. His glance wandered slowly round the quiet, flame-lit room.

"You won't," he said, stooping towards them as if in extreme confidence, "you won't much notice? They come and go. I try not to--to speak. It's the only way through. It is not that I don't know they're only dreams. But if once the--the others thought there had been any tampering"--he tapped his forehead meaningly--"here: if once they thought that, it would, you know, be quite over then. How could I prove . . .?" He turned cautiously towards the door, and with laborious significance nodded his head at them.

Herbert bent down and held out his long hands to the fire. "Tampering, my dear chap: That's what the lump said to the leaven!"

"Yes, yes," said Lawford, touching his arm, "but you know what I mean, Herbert. Anything I tried to do then would be quite, quite hopeless. That would be poisoning the wells."

They watched him out of the room, and listened till quite distinctly in the still night-shaded house they heard his door gently close. Then, as if by consent, they turned and looked long and questioningly into each other's faces.

"Then you are not--afraid?" Herbert said quietly.

Grisel gazed steadily on, and almost imperceptibly shook her head.

"You mean?" he questioned her; but still he had again to read her answer in her eyes.

"Oh, very well, Grisel," he said quietly, "you know best," and returned once more to his writing.

For an hour or two Lawford slept heavily, so heavily that when a little after midnight he woke, with his face towards the uncurtained window, though for many minutes he lay brightly confronting all Orion, that from blazing helm to flaming dog at heel filled high the glimmering square, he could not lift or stir his cold and leaden limbs. He rose at last and threw off the burden of his bedclothes, and rested awhile, as if freed from the heaviness of an unrememberable nightmare. But so clear was his mind and so extraordinarily refreshed he seemed in body that sleep for many hours would not return again. And he spent almost all the remainder of the lagging darkness pacing softly to and fro; one face only before his eyes, the one sure thing, the one thing unattainable in a world of phantoms.

Herbert waited on in vain for his guest next morning, and after wandering up and down the mossy lawn at the back of the house, went off cheerfully at last alone for his dip. When he returned Lawford was in his place at the breakfast-table. He sat on, moody and constrained, until even Herbert's haphazard talk trickled low.

"I fancy my sister is nursing a headache," he said at last, "but she'll be down soon. And I'm afraid from the looks of you, Lawford, your night was not particularly restful." He felt his way very heedfully. "Perhaps we walked you a little too far yesterday. We are so used to tramping that----" Lawford kept thoughtful eyes fixed on the deprecating face.

"I see what it is, Herbert--you are humouring me again. I have been wracking my brains in vain to remember what exactly did happen yesterday. I feel as if it was all sunk oceans deep in sleep. I get so far--and then I'm done. It won't give up a hint. But you really mustn't think I'm an invalid, or--or in my second childhood. The truth is," he added naively, "it's my first, come back again. But now that I've got so far, now that I'm really better, I----" He broke off rather vacantly, as if afraid of his own confidence. "I must be getting on," he summed up with an effort, "and that's the solemn fact. I keep forgetting I'm--I'm a ratepayer!"

Herbert sat round in his chair. "You see, Lawford, the very term is little else than Double-dutch to me. As a matter of fact Grisel sends all my hush-money to the horrible people that do the cleaning up, as it were. I can't catch their drift. Government to me is merely the spectacle of the clever, or the specious, managing the dull. It deals merely with the physical, and just the fringe of consciousness. I am not joking. I think I follow you. All I mean is that the obligations--mainly tepid, I take it--that are luring you back to the fold would be the very ones that would scare me quickest off. The imagination, the appeal faded: we're dead."

Lawford opened his mouth; "Temporarily tepid," he at last all but coughed out.

"Oh yes, of course," said Herbert intelligently. "Only temporarily. It's this beastly gregariousness that's the devil. The very thought of it undoes me--with an absolute shock of sheepishness. I suddenly realise my human nakedness; that here we are, little better than naked animals, bleating behind our illusory wattles on the slopes of--of infinity. And nakedness, after all, is a wholesome thing to realise only when one thinks too much of one's clothes. I peer sometimes, feebly enough, out of my wool, and it seems to me that all these busybodies, all these fact-devourers, all this news-reading rabble, are nothing brighter than very dull-witted children trying to play an imaginative game, much too deep for their poor reasons. Even then we have left the fanatics and the Mammonites out. The others, the 'happy mediums,' daren't wink, daren't so much as look at one another. Their principles are like some old savage chief's top-hat: it clinches his unpresentableness. I don't mean, of course, my dear fellow, that your wanting to go home is anything gregarious, but I do think their insisting on your coming at once might be. Still, I know you won't visit this stuff on me as anything more than just my 'scum,' as Grisel calls the fine flower of my maiden meditations. All that I really want to say, all that I hope, my dear chap, there's not by this time the least need for me to say, is that we should both be more than delighted if you'd stay just as long as it will not be a bore for you to stay. Stay till you're heartily tired of us! Go back, now, if you must; tell them how much better you are. Bolt off to a nerve specialist. He'll say complete rest--a change of scene, and

all that. They all do. Instinct via intellect. And why not take your rest here? We are such miserably dull company to one another it would be a greater pleasure to have you with us than I can say. Do!"

Lawford listened. "I wish----," he began, and stopped dead again. "Anyhow, I'll go back. I am afraid, Herbert, I've been playing truant. It was all very well while---- To tell you the truth I can't think quite straight yet. But it won't last for ever. Besides--well, anyhow, I'll go back."

"Right you are," said Herbert, pretending to be cheerful. "You can't expect, your really can't, everything to come right straight away. Just have patience. And now, let's go out and sit in the sun. They've mixed September up with May."

And about half an hour afterwards he glanced up from his book to find his visitor fast asleep in his garden chair.

Grisel had taken her brother's place, with a little pile of needlework beside her on the grass, when Lawford again opened his eyes under the rosy shade of a parasol. He watched her for a while, without speaking.

"How long have I been asleep?" he said at last.

She started and looked up from her needle.

"That depends on how long you have been awake," she said, smiling. "My brother tells me," she went on, beginning to stitch, "that you have made up your mind to leave us to-day. Perhaps we are only flattering ourselves that it has been a rest. But if it has--is that, do you think, quite wise?"

He leant forward and hid his face in his hands. "It's because--it's because it's the only 'must' I can see."

"But even 'musts'--well, we have to be sure even of 'musts,' haven't we? Are you?" She glanced up and for an instant their eyes met, and the falling water seemed to be sounding out of a distance so remote it might be but the echo of a dream. She stooped once more over her work.

"Supposing," he said very slowly, and almost as if speaking to himself, "supposing Sabathier--and you know he's only just like a friend now one mustn't be seen talking to--supposing he came back; what then?"

"Oh, but Sabathier's gone: he never really came. It was only a fancy--a mood. It was only you--another you."

"Who was that yesterday, then?"

She glanced at him swiftly and knew the question was but a venture.

"Yesterday?"

"Oh, very well," he said fretfully, "you too! But if he did, if he did, come really back: 'prey' and all?"

"What is the riddle?" she said, taking a deep breath and facing him brightly.

"Would my 'must' still be his?" The face he raised to her, as he leaned forward under the direct light of the sun, was so lined and haggard, the thought crossed her mind that it did indeed seem little more than a shadowy mask that just one hour of darkness might dispel.

"You said, you know, we did win through. Why then should we be even thinking of defeat now?"

"'We'!"

"Oh no, you!" she cried triumphantly.

"You do not answer my question."

"Nor you mine! It was a glorious victory. Is there the ghost of a reason why you should cast your mind back? Is there, now?"

"Only," said Lawford, looking patiently up into her face, "only because I love you:" and listened in the silence to the words as one may watch a bird that has escaped out of its cage steadily flying on and on till lost to sight.

For an instant the grey eyes faltered. "But that, surely," she began in a low voice, still steadily sewing, "that was our compact last night--that you should let me help, that you should trust me just as you trusted the mother years ago who came in the little cart with the shaggy pony to the homesick boy watching at the window. Perhaps," she added almost mischievously, "in this odd shuffle of souls and faces, I am that mother, and most frightfully anxious you should not give in. Why, even because of the tiredness, even because the cause seems vain, you must still fight on--wouldn't she have said it? Surely there are prizes, a daughter, a career, no end! And even they gone--still the self undimmed, undaunted, that took its dubbing like a man."

"I know you know I'm all but crazed; you see this wretched mind all littered and broken down; look at me like that, then! Forget even you have befriended me and pretend---- Why must I blunder on and on like this! Oh, Grisel, my friend, my friend, if only you loved me!"

Tears clouded her eyes. She turned vaguely as if for a hiding-place. "We can't talk here. How mad the whole day is! Listen, listen! I do--I do love you--mother and woman and friend--from the very moment you came. It's all so clear, so clear: that, and your miserable 'must,' my friend. Come, we will go away by ourselves a little, and talk. That way! I'll meet you by the gate."

CHAPTER XXI

SHE came out into the sunlight, and they went through the little gate together. She walked quickly, without speaking, over the bridge, past a little cottage whose hollyhocks leaned fading above its low flint wall. Skirting a field of stubble, she struck into a wood by a path that ran steeply up the

hillside. And by and by they came to a glen where the woodmen of a score of years ago had felled the trees, leaving a green hollow of saplings in the midst of their towering neighbours. "There," she said, holding out her hand to him, "now we are alone. Just six hours or so--and then the sun will be there," she pointed to the tree-tops to the west, "and then you will have to go; for good, for good--you your way, and I mine. What a tangle--a tangle is this life of ours! Could I have dreamt we should ever be talking like this, you and I? Friends of an hour! What will you think of me? Does it matter? Don't speak! Say nothing--poor face, poor hands! If only there were something to look to--to pray to!" She bent over his hand and pressed it to her breast. "What worlds we've seen together, you and I. And then--another parting."

They wandered on a little way, and came back, and listened to the first few birds that flew up into the higher branches, noonday being past, to sing.

They talked, and were silent, and talked again; without question, or sadness, or regret, or reproach; she mocking even at themselves, mocking at this "change"--"Why, and yet without it, would you ever even have dreamed once a poor fool of a Frenchman went to his restless grave for me--for me! Need we understand! Were we told to pry? Who made us human must be human too. Why must we take such care, and make such a fret--this soul! I know it, I know it; it is all we have--'to save,' they say, poor creatures. No, never to spend, and so they daren't for a solitary instant lift in on the finger from its cage. Well, we have; and now, soon, back it must go, back it must go, and try its best to whistle the day out. And yet, do you know, perhaps the very freedom does a little shake its--its monotony. It's true, you see, they have lived a long time; these Worldly Wisefolk; they were wise before they were swaddled. . . ."

"There, and you are hungry?" she asked him, laughing in his eyes. "Of course, of course you are--scarcely a mouthful since that first still wonderful supper. And you haven't slept a wink, except like a tired-out child after its first party, in that old garden chair. I sat and watched, and yes, almost hoped you'd never wake in case--in case! Come along, see, down there. I can't go home just yet. There's a little old inn--we'll go and sit down there--as if we were really trying to be romantic! I know the woman quite well; we can talk there--just the day out."

They sat at a little table in the garden of "The Cherry Trees," its thick green branches burdened with ripened fruit. And Grisel tried to persuade him to eat and drink, "for to-morrow we die," she said, her hands trembling, her face as it were veiled with a faint, mysterious light.

"There are dozens and dozens of old stories, you know," she said, leaning on her elbows, "dozens and dozens, meaning only us. You must, you must eat; look, just an apple. We've got to say goodbye. And faintness will double the difficulty." She lightly touched his hand as if to compel him to smile with her. "There, I'll peel it; and this is Eden; and soon it will be the cool of the evening. And then, oh yes, the voice will come! What nonsense I am talking! Never mind!" They sat on in the quiet sunshine, and a spider slid softly through the air and with busy claws set to its nets; and those small ghosts the robins went whistling restlessly among the heavy boughs.

A little child came out of the porch of the inn into the garden, and stood with its battered doll in its arms, softly watching them awhile. But when Grisel smiled and tried to coax her over, she burst out laughing and ran in again.

Lawford stooped forward on his chair with a groan. "You see," he said, "the whole world mocks me. You say 'this evening;' need it be, must it be this evening? If you only knew how far they have driven me! If you only knew what we should only detest each other for saying and for listening to! The whole thing's dulled and staled. Who wants a changeling? Who wants a painted bird? Who does not loathe the converted?--and I--I'm converted to Sabathier's God. Should we be sitting here talking like this if I were not so? I can't, I can't go back."

She rose and stood with her hand pressed over her mouth, watching him.

"Won't you understand?" he continued. "I am an outcast--a felon caught red-handed, come in the flesh to a hideous and righteous judgment. I hear myself saying all these things; and yet, Grisel, I do, I do love you with all the dull best I ever had. Not now, then; I don't ask now, even. I can, I would begin again. God knows my face has changed enough even as it is. Think of me as that poor wandering ghost of yours; how easily I could hide away--in your memory; and just wait, wait for you. In time, dear, even this wild futile madness too would fade away. Then I could come back. May I try?"

"I can't answer you. I can't reason. Only, still, I do know, talk, put off, forget as I may, must is must. Right and wrong, who knows what they mean, exce3pt that ones' to be done and one's to be forsworn; or--forgive, my friend, the truest thing I ever said--or else we lose the savour of both. Oh, then, and I know, too, you'd weary of me. I know you, M. Nicholas, better than you can ever know yourself, though you have risen from your grave. You follow a dream, no voice or face or flesh and blood; and not to do what one old raven within you cries you must, would bge in time to hate the very sound of my footstep. You shall go back, poor turncoat, and face the clearness, the utterly more difficult, bald, and heartless clearness, as together we faced the dark. Life is a little while. And though I have no words to tell what always are and must be foolish reasons because they are not reasons at all but ghosts of memory, I know in my heart that to face the worst is your only hope of peace. And should I have staked so much on your finding that, and now throw up the game! Don't let us talk any more. I'll walk half the way, perhaps. Perhaps I will walk all the way. I think my brother guesses--at least my madness. I've talked and talked him nearly past his patience. And then, when you are quite safely, oh yes, quite safely and soundly gone, then I shall go away for a little, so that we can't even hear each other speak, except in dreams. Life!--well, I always thought it was much too plain a tale to have as dull an ending. And with us the powers beyond have played a newer trick, that's all. Another hour, and we will go. Till then there's just the solitary walk home and only the dull old haunted house that hoards as many ghosts as we ourselves to watch our coming."

Evening began to shine between the trees; they seemed to stand aflame, with a melancholy rapture in their uplifted boughs above their fading coats. The fields of the garnered harvest shone with a golden stillness, awhir with shimmering flocks of starlings. And the old birds that had sung in the spring sang now amid the same leaves, grown older too to give them harbourage.

Herbert was sitting in his room when they returned, nursing his teacup on his knee while he pretended to be reading, with elbow propped on the table.

"Here's Nicholas Sabathier, my dear, come to say goodbye awhile," said Grisel. She stood for a moment in her white gown, her face turned towards the clear green twilight of the open window. "I have promised to walk part of the way with him. But I think first we must have some tea. No; he flatly refuses to be driven. We are going to walk."

The two friends were left alone, face to face with a rather difficult silence, only the least degree of nervousness apparent, so far as Herbert was concerned, in that odd aloof, sustained air of impersonality that had so baffled his companion in their first queer talk together.

"Your sister said just now, Herbert," blurted Lawford at last, "'Here's Nicholas Sabatheir come to say goodbye': well, I--what I want you to understand is that it is Sabathier, the worst he ever was, but also that it is 'goodbye.'"

Herbert slowly turned. "I don't quite see why 'goodbye,' Lawford. And--frankly, there is nothing to explain. We have chosen to live such a very out-of-the-way life," he went on, as if following up a train of through. . . . "The truth is, if one wants to live at all--one's own life, I mean--there's no time for many friends. And just steadfastly regarding your neighbour's bill as you follow it down into the Nowhere--it's that that seems to me the deadliest form of hypnotism. One must simply go on one's own way, doing one's best to free one's mind of cant--and I dare say clearing some excellent stuff out with the rubbish. One runs that risk. And the consequence is that I don't think, however foolhardy it may be to say so, I don't think I care a groat for any opinion as human as my own, good or bad. My sister's a million times a better woman than I am a man. What possibly could there be, then, for me to say?" He turned with a nervous smile that yet seemed to be the very flower of candour. "Why should it be goodbye?"

Lawford glanced involuntarily towards the door that stood in shadow duskily ajar. "Well," he said, "we have talked, and we think if must be that, until, at least," he smiled faintly, "I can come as quietly as your old ghost you told me of; and in that case it may not be so very long to wait." Their eyes met fleetingly across the still, listening room. "The more I think of it," Lawford pushed slowly on, "the less I understand the frantic purposelessness of all that has happened to me. Until I went down, as you said, 'a godsend of a little Miss Muffet,' and the inconceivable farce came off, I was fairly happy, fairly contented to dance my little wooden dance and to wait till the showman should put me down into his box again. And now--well, here I am. The whole thing has gone by and scarcely left a trace of its visit. Here I am for all my friends to swear to; and yet, Herbert, if you'll forgive me troubling you with all this stuff about myself, not a single belief, or thought, or desire remains unchanged. You will think of all that, I hope. It's not, of course, the ghost of an apology, only the mere facts."

Herbert rose and paced slowly across to the window. "The longer I live, Lawford, the more I curse this futile gift of speech. Here am I, wanting to tell you, to say out frankly what, if mind could appeal directly to mind, would be merely as the wind passing through the leaves of a tree with just one--one multitudinous rustle, but which, if I tried now to put into words--well, daybreak would find us still groping on. Personally, I have grown tired of facing enigmas no mortal man has ever answered to his own or to any one else's satisfaction. His merciful contemporaries did not scrawl it on poor old Sabathier's tombstone, but there is no peace for the wicked, and we're all, I suppose, pretty much that, if what wicked means is to be sick to death of one's limitations and sick to death

of trying to scramble over them. I've worn boots out at the game, I can tell you. Who hasn't? Say no more, my dear fellow. Explanation wasn't a bit needed. We're just where we were; that's all."

"Well," said Lawford, as if with an almost hopeless effort to turn thought into such primitive speech, "that's where we stand, then." He got up suddenly like a man awakened in the midst of unforeseen danger. "Where is your sister?" he cried, looking into the darkness. And as if in actual answer to his entreaty, they heard the clinking of the cups on the little, old, green lacquer tray she was at that moment carrying into the room. She sat down on the window seat and put the tray down beside her. "It will be before dark even now," she said, glancing out at the faintly burning skies.

They had trudged on together with almost as deep a sense of physical exhaustion as peasants have who have been labouring in the fields since daybreak. And a little beyond the village, before the last, long road began that led in presently to the housed and scrupulous suburb, she stopped with a sob beside an old scarred milestone by the wayside. "This, my dear friend, is as far as I can go," she said. She stooped, and laid her hand on the cold, moss-grown surface of the stone. "Even now it's wet with dew." She rose again and looked strangely into his face. "Yes, yes, here it is," she said, "oh, and worse than any fear. But nothing now can trouble you again of that. We're both at least past that."

"Grisel," he said, "forgive me, but I can't--I can't go on."

"Don't think, don't think," she said, taking his hands, and lifting them to her bosom. "It's only how the day goes; and it has all, my dear, happened scores and scores of times before--mother and child and friend--and lovers that are all these too, like us. We mustn't cry out. Perhaps it was all before even we could speak--this sorrow came. Take all the hope and all the future: and then may come our chance."

"What's life to me now! You said the desire would come back; that I should shake myself free. I could if you would help me. I don't know what you are or what your meaning is, only that I love you; care for nothing, wish for nothing but to see you and think of you. A flat, dull voice keeps saying that I have no right telling you all this. You will know best. I know I am nothing. I ask nothing. If we love another, what is there else to say?"

"Nothing, nothing to say, except only goodbye. What could you tell me that I have not told myself over and over again? Reason's gone. Thinking's gone. Now I am only sure." She smiled shadowily. "What peace did he find who couldn't, perhaps, like you, face the last goodbye?"

They stood in utter solitude awhile in the evening gloom. The air was as still and cold as some grey, unfathomable, untraversed sea. Above them uncountable clouds drifted slowly across space.

"Why do they all keep whispering together?" he said in a low voice, with cowering face. "Oh if you knew, Grisel, how they have hemmed me in; how they have come pressing in through the narrow gate I left ajar. Only to mockand mislead. It's all dark and unintelligible." He touched her hand, peering out of the shadows that seemed to him to be gathering between their faces. He drew her closer and touched her lips with his fingers. Her beauty seemed to his distorted senses to fill earth and sky. This, then, was the presence, the grave and lovely overshadowing dream whose surrender made life a torment, and death the nearer field of an immortal, starry veil. She broke from him with

a faint cry. And he found himself running and running, just as he had run that other night, with death instead of life for inspiration, towards his earthly home.

CHAPTER XXII

HE WAS utterly wearied, but he walked on for a long while with a dogged, unglancing pertinacity without looking behind him. And then he rested under the dew-sodden hedgeside and buried his face in his hands. Once, indeed, he did turn and walk back with hard, uplifted face for many minutes, but at the meeting with an old woman who, in the late dusk passed him unheeded on the road, he stopped again, and after standing awhile looking down in the dust, trying to gather up the tangled threads of his thoughts, he once more set off homewards.

It was clear, starry, and quite dark when he reached the house. The lamp at the roadside obscurely lit its breadth and height. Lamp-light within, too, was showing yellow between the Venetian blinds; a cold gas-jet gleamed out of the basement window. He seemed bereft now of all desire or emotion, simply the passive witness of things external in a calm which, though he scarcely realised its cause, was an exquisite solace and relief. His senses were intensely sharpened with sleeplessness. The faintest sound struck clear and keen on his ear. The thinnest beam of light besprinkled his eyes with curious brilliance.

As quietly as some nocturnal creature he ascended the steps to the porch, and leaning between stone pilaster and wall, listened intently for any rumour of those within. He heard a clear, rather languid and delicate voice quietly speak on until it broke into a little peal of laughter, followed, when it fell silent, by Sheila's, rapid, rich, and low. The first speaker seemed to be standing. Probably, then, his evening visitors had only just come it, or were preparing to depart. He inserted his latchkey and gently pushed at the cumbersome door. It was locked against him. With not the faintest thought of resentment or surprise, he turned back, stooped over the balustrade and looked down into the kitchen. Nothing there was visible but a narrow strip of the white table, on which lay a black cotton glove, and beyond, the glint of a copper pan. What made all these mute, inanimate things suddenly so coldly hostile?

An extreme, almost nauseous distaste filled him at the thought of knocking for admission, of confronting Ada, possibly even Sheila, in the cold, echoing gloom of the detestable porch; of meeting the first wild, almost metallic, flash of recognition. He stepped softly down again, and paused at the open gate. Once before the voices of the night had called him: they would not summon him for ever in vain. He raised his eyes again towards the window. Who were these visitors met together to drum the alien out? He narrowed his lids and smiled up at the vacuous, unfriendly house. Then wheeling, on a sudden impulse he groped his way down the gravel path that led into the garden. As he had left it, the long, white window was ajar.

With extreme caution he pushed it noiselessly up, climbed in, and stood listening again in the black passage on the other side. When he had fully recovered his breath, and the knocking of his heart was stilled, he trod on softly, till turning the corner he came in sight of the kitchen door. It was now narrowly open, just enough, perhaps, to admit a cat; and as he softly approached, looking steadily in, he could see Ada sitting at the empty table, beneath the single whistling chandelier, in her black dress and black straw hat. She was reading, apparently; but her back was turned to him, and he

could not distinguish her arm beyond the elbow. But almost in an instant he discovered, as, drawn up and unstirring he gazed on, that she was not reading, but had covertly, instantaneously raised her eyes from the print on the table beneath, and was transfixedly listening too. He turned his eyes away and waited. When again he peered in she had apparently bent once more over her magazine, and he stole on.

One by one, with a thin, remote exultation in his progress, he mounted the kitchen stairs, and with each deliberate and groping step the voices above him became more clearly audible. And at last, in the darkness of the hall, but faintly stirred by the gleam of lamplight from the chink of the dining-room door, he stood on the threshold of the drawing-room, and could hear with varying distinctness what these friendly voices were so absorbedly discussing. His ear seemed as exquisite as some contrivance of science, registering passively the least sound, the faintest syllable, and like it, in no sense meddling with the thought that speech conveyed. He simply stood hearkening, fixed and motionless, like some uncouth statue in the leafy hollow of a garden stonily unspeculating.

"Oh, but you either refuse to believe, Bettie, or you won't understand that it's far worse than that." Sheila seemed to be upbraiding, or at least reasoning with, the last speaker. "Ask Mr. Danton--he actually saw him."

"'Saw him,'" repeated the thick, still voice. "He stood there, in that very doorway, Mrs. Lovat, and positively railed at me. He stood there and streamed out all the names he could lay his tongue to. I wasn't unfriendly to the poor beggar. When Bethany let me into it I thought it was simply--I did indeed, Mrs. Lawford--A monstrous exaggeration. Flatly, I didn't believe it; shall I say that? But when I stood face to face with him, I could have taken my oath that that was no more poor old Arthur Lawford than--well, I won't repeat what particular word occurred to me. But there!" the corpulent shrug was almost audible, "we all know what old Bethany is. A sterling old chap, mind you, so far as mere character is concerned; the right man in the right place; but as gullible and as soft-hearted as a tom-tit. I've said all this before, I know, Mrs. Lawford, and been properly snubbed for my pains. But if I had been Bethany I'd have sifted the whole story at the beginning, the moment he put his foot into the house. Look at that Tichborne fellow--went for months and months, just picking up one day what he floored old Hawkins--wasn't it?--with the next. But of course," he added gloomily, "now that's all too late. He's wormed himself into a tolerably tight corner. I'd just like to see, though, a British jury comparing the claimant with his photograph, 'pon my word I would. Where would he be then, do you think?"

"But, my dear Mr. Danton," went on the clear, languid voice Lawford had heard break so light-heartedly into laughter, "you don't mean to tell me that a woman doesn't know her own husband when she sees him--or, for the matter of that, when she doesn't see him? If Tom came home from a ramble as handsome as Apollo to-morrow, I'd recognize him at the very first blush--literally! He'd go nuzzling off to get his slippers, or complain that the lamps had been smoking, or hunt the house down for last week's paper. Oh, besides, Tom's Tom--and there's an end of it."

"That's precisely what I think, Mrs. Lovat; one is saturated with one's personality, as it were."

"You see, that's just it! That's just exactly every woman's husband all over; he's saturated with his personality. Bravo, Mr. Craik!"

"Good Lord!" said Danton softly. "I don't deny it!"

"But that," broke in Sheila crisply--"that's just precisely what I asked you all to come in for. It's because I know now, apart altogether from the mere evidence, that--that he is Arthur. Mind, I don't say I ever really doubted. I was only so utterly shocked, I suppose. I positively put posers to him; but his memory was perfect in spite of the shock which would have killed a--a more sensitive nature." She had risen, it seemed, and was moving with all her splendid impressiveness of silk and presence across the general line of vision. But the hall was dark and still; her eyes were dimmed with light. Lawford could dimly survey her there unmoved. "Are you there, Ada?" she called discreetly.

"Yes, m'm," answered the faint voice from below.

"You have not heard anything--no knock?"

"No, m'm, no knock."

"The door is open if you should call."

"Yes, m'm."

"The girl's scared out of her wits," said Sheila, returning to her audience. "I've told you all that miserable Ferguson story--a piece of calm, callous presence of mind I should never have dreamed my husband capable of. And the curious thing is--at least, it is not longer curious in the light of the ghastly facts I am only waiting for Mr. Bethany to tell you--from the very first she instinctively detested the very mention of his name."

"I believe, you know," said Mr. Craik with some decision, "that servants must have the same wonderful instinct as dogs and children; they are natural, intuitive judges of character."

"Yes," said Sheila gravely, "and it's only through that that I got to hear of the--the mysterious friend in the little pony-carriage. Ada's magnificently loyal--I will say that."

"I don't want to suggest anything, Mrs. Lawford," began Mr. Craik rather hurriedly, "but wouldn't it perhaps be wiser not to wait for Mr. Bethany? It is not at all unusual for him to be kept a considerable time in the vestry after service, and to-day is the Feast of St. Michael's and all Angels, you know. Mightn't your husband be returning, don't you think?"

"Craik's right, Mrs. Lawford; it's not a bit of good waiting. Bethany would stick there till midnight of any old woman's spiritual state could keep her going so long. Here we all are, and at any moment we may be interrupted. Mind you, I promise nothing--only that there shall be no scene. But here I am, and if he does come knocking and ringing and lunging out in the disgusting manner--well, all I ask is permission to speak for you. 'Pon my word, to think what you must have gone through! It isn't the place for ladies just now--honestly it ain't."

"Besides, supposing the romantic lady of the pony-carriage has friends? Are you a pugilist, Mr. Craik?"

"I hope I could give some little account of myself, Mrs. Lovat; but you need have no anxiety about that."

"There, Mr. Danton! So as there is not the least cause for anxiety even if poor Arthur should return to his earthly home, may we share your dreadful story at once, Sheila; and then, perhaps, hear Mr. Bethany's exposition of it when he does arrive? We are amply guarded."

"Honestly, you know, you are a big of a sceptic, Mrs. Lovat," pleaded Danton playfully. "I've seen him."

"And seeing is disbelieving, I suppose. Now then, Sheila."

"I don't think there's the least chance of Arthur returning to-night," said Sheila solemnly. "I am perfectly well aware it's best to be as cheerful as one can--and as resolved; but I think, Bettie, when even you know the whole horrible secret, you won't think Mr. Danton was--was horrified for nothing. The ghastly, the awful truth is that my husband--there is no other word for it--is possessed!"

"Possessed, Sheila! What in the name of all that creeps is that?"

"Well, I dare say Mr. Craik will explain it much better than I can. By a devil, dear." The voice was perfectly poised and restrained, and Mr. Craik did not see fit for the moment to embellish the definition.

Lawford, with an almost wooden immobility, listened on.

"But the devil, or a devil? Isn't there some distinction?" inquired Mrs. Lovat.

"It's in the Bible, Bettie, over and over again. It was quite a common thing in the Middle Ages; I think I'm right in saying that, am I not, Mr. Craik?" Mr. Craik must have solemnly nodded or abundantly looked his unwilling affirmation. "And what has been," continued Sheila temperately, "I suppose may be again."

"When the fellow began raving at me the other night," began Danton huskily, as if out of an unfathomable pit of reflection, "among other things he said that I haven't any wish to remember was that I was a sceptic. And Bethany said ditto to it. I don't mind being called a sceptic: why, I said myself Mrs. Lovat was a sceptic just now! But when it comes to 'devils,' Mrs. Lawford--I may be convinced about the other, but 'devils'! Well, I've been in the City nearly twenty-five years, and it's my impression human nature can raise all the devils we shall ever need. And another thing," he added, as if inspired, and with an immensely intelligent blink, "is it just precisely that word in the Revised Version--eh, Craik?"

"I'll certainly look it up, Danton. But I take it that Mrs. Lawford is not so much insisting on the word, as on the--the manifestation. And I'm bound to confess that the Psychical Research Society, which has among its members quite eminent and entirely trustworthy men of science--I am boutd to admit they have become curiously stories to tell. The old idea was, you know, that there are seventy-two princely devils, and as many as seven million--er--commoners. It may very well sound

quaint to our ears, Mrs. Lovat; but there it is. But whether that has any bearing on--on what you were saying, Danton, I can't say. Perhaps Mrs. Lawford will throw a little more light on the subject when she tells us on what precise facts her--her distressing theory is based."

Lawford had soundlessly stolen a pace or two nearer, and by stooping forward a little he could, each in tourn, scrutinise the little intent company sitting over his story around the lamp at the farther end of the table; squatting like little children with their twigs and pins, fishing for wonders on the brink of the unknown.

"Yes," Mrs. Lovat was saying, "I quite agree, Mr. Craik. Seventy-two princes, and no princesses! But do throw a little modern light on the subject, Sheila."

"I mean this," said Sheila firmly. "When I went in for the last time to say goodbye--and of course it was at his own wish that I did leave him; and precisely why he wished it is now only too apparent--I had brought him some money from the bank--fifty pounds, I think; yes, fifty pounds. And quite by the merest chance I glanced down, in passing, at a book he had apparently been reading, which he seemed very anxious to conceal with his hand. Arthur is not a great reader, though I believe he studied a little before we were married, and--well, I detest anything like subterfuge, and I said it out without thinking, 'Why, you're reading French, Arthur!' He turned deathly white but made no answer."

"And can't you even confide to us the title, Sheila?" said Mrs. Lovat reproachfully.

"Wait a minute," said Sheila; "you shall make as much fun of the thing as you like, Bettie, when I've finished. I don't know why, but that peculiar, stealthy book haunted me. 'Why French?' I kept asking myself. Arthur hasn't opened a French book for years. He doesn't even approve of the entente. His argument was that we ought to be friends with the Germans because they are more hostile. Never mind. When Ada came back the next evening and said he was out, I came the following morning by myself and knocked. No one answered, and I let myself in. His bed had not been slept in. There were candles and matches all over the house--one even burnt nearly to the stick on the floor in the corner of the drawing-room. I suppose it was foolish, but I was alone, and just that, somehow, horrified me. It seemed to point to such a peculiar state of mind. I hesitated; what was the use of looking further? Yet something seemed to say to me--and it was surely providential--'Go downstairs!' And there in the breakfast-room the first thing I saw on the table was this book--a dingy, ragged, bleared, patched-up, oh, a horrible, a loathsome little book (and I have read bits too here and there); and beside3 it was by own little school dictionary, my own child's----" She looked up sharply. "What was that? Did anybody call?"

"Nobody I heard," said Danton, staring stonily round.

"It may have been the passing of the wind," suggested Mr. Craik, after a pause.

"Peep between the blinds, Mr. Craik; it may be poor Mr. Bethany confronting Pneumonia on the porch."

"There's no one there," said the curate, returning softly from his errand. "Please continue your--your narrative, Mrs. Lawford."

"They are panting for the 'devil,' my dear."

"Well, I sat down and, very much against my inclination, turned over the pages. It was full of the most revolting confessions and trials, so far as I could see. In fact, I think the book was merely an amateur collection of--of horrors. And the faces, the portraits! Well, then, can you imagine my feelings when towards the end of the book, about thirty pages from the end, I came upon this--gloating up at me from the table in my own house before my very eyes!"

She cast one rapid glance over her shoulder, and gathering up her silk skirt, drew out from the pocket beneath the few poor crumpled pages, and passed them without a word to Danton. Lawford kept him plainly in view, as, lowering his great face, he slowly stooped, and holding the loose leaves with both fat hands between his knees, stared into the portrait. Then he truculently lifted his cropped head.

"What did I say?" he said. "What did I say? What did I tell old Bethany in this very room? What d'ye think of that, Mrs. Lovat, for a portrait of Arthur Lawford? What d'ye make of that, Craik--eh?"

Mrs. Lovat glanced with arched eyebrows, and with her finger-tips handed the sheet son to her neighbour, who gazed with a settled and mournful frown and returned them to Sheila.

She took the pages, folded them and replaced them carefully in her pocket. She swept her hands over her skirts, and turned to Danton.

"You agree," she inquired softly, "it's like?"

"Like! It's the livin' image. The livin' image," he repeated, stretching out his arm, "as he stood there that very night."

"What will you say, then," said Sheila, quietly, "what will you say if I tell you that that man, Nicholas de Sabathier, has been in his grave for over a hundred years?"

Danton's little eyes seemed, if anything, to draw back even further into his head. "I'd say, Mrs. Lawford, if you'll excuse the word, that it might be a dam horrible coincidence--I'd go farther, an almost incredible coincidence. But if you want the sober truth, I'd say it was nothing more than a crafty, clever, abominable piece of trickery. That's what I'd say. Oh, don't you know, Mrs. Lovat. When a scamp's a scamp, he'll stop at nothing. I could tell you some tales."

"Ah, but that's not all," said Sheila, eyeing them steadfastly one by one. "We all of us know that my husband's story was that he had gone down to Widderstone--into the churchyard, for his convalescent ramble; that story's true. We all know that he said he had had a fit, a heart attack, and that a kind of--of stupor had come over him. I believe on my honour that's true too. But no one knows but he himself and Mr. Bethany and I, that it was an old broken grave, quite at the bottom of the hill, that he chose for his resting place, and--I can't get the scene out of my head--that the name on that one solitary tombstone down there was--was . . . this!"

Danton rolled his eyes. "I don't begin to follow," he said stubbornly.

"You don't mean," said Mr. Craik, who had not removed his gaze from Sheila's face, "I am not to take it that you mean, Mrs. Lawford, the--the other?"

"Yes," said Sheila, "his"--she patted her skirts--"Sabathier's."

"You mean," said Mrs. Lovat crisply, "that the man in the grave is the man in the book, and the man in the book is--is poor Arthur's changed face?"

Sheila nodded.

Danton rose cumbrously from his chair, looking beadily down on his three friends.

"Oh, but you know, it isn't--it isn't right," he began. "Lord! I can see him now. Glassy--yes, that's the very word I said--glassy! It won't do, Mrs. Lawford; on my solemn honour, it won't do. I don't deny it, call it what you like; yes, devils, if you like. But what I say as a practical man is that it's just rank--that's what it is! Bethany's had too much rope. The time's gone by for sentiment and all that foolery. Mercy's all very well, but after all it's justice that clinches the bargain. There's only one way: we must catch him; we must lay the poor wretch by the heels before it's too late. No publicity. God bless me, no! We'd have all the rags in London on us! They'd pillory us nine days on end. We'd never live it down. No, we must just hush it up--a home or something; an asylum. For my part," he turned like a huge toad, his chin low on his collar--"and I'd say the same if it was my own brother, and, after all, he is your husband Mrs. Lawford--I'd sooner he was in his grave. To lay himself open! I can't stand it--honestly, I can't stand it. And yet," he jerked his chin over the peak of his collar towards the ladies, "and yet you say he's being fetched! comes creeping home, and is fetched at dark by a lady in a pony-carriage. God bless me! It's rank. What," he broke out violently again, "what was he doing there in a cemetery after dark? Do you think that beastly Frenchman would have played such a trick on Craik here? Would he have tried his little game on me? Deviltry be it, if you prefer the word, and all deference to you, Mrs. Lawford. But I know this, a couple of hundred years ago they would have burnt a man at the stake for less than a tenth of this. Ask Craik here! I don't know how, and I don't know when: his mother, I've always heard say, was a little eccentric; but the truth is he's managed by some unholy legerdemain to get the thing at his finger's ends; that's what it is! Think of that unspeakable book! Left open on the table! Look at his Ferguson game! It's our solemn duty to keep him for good and all out of mischief. It reflects all round. There's no getting out of it; we're all in it. And tar sticks. And then there's poor little Alice to consider, and--and yourself, Mrs. Lawford; I wouldn't give the fellow--friend though he was, in a way--it isn't safe to give him five minutes' freedom. We've simply got to save you from yourself, Mrs. Lawford; that's what it is--and from old-fashioned sentiment. And I only wish Bethany was here now to dispute it!"

He stirred himself down, as it were, into his clothes, and stood in the middle of the hearthrug, gently oscillating, with his hands behind his back. But at some faint rumour out of the silent house his posture suddenly stiffened, and he lifted a little, with heavy, steady lids, his head.

"What is the matter, Danton?" said Mr. Craik uneasily; "why are you listening?"

"I wasn't listening," said Danton stoutly, "I was thinking."

At the same moment, at the creak of a footstep on the kitchen stairs, Lawford also had drawn soundlessly back into the darkness of the empty drawing-room.

"While Mr. Danton 'is thinking,' Sheila," Mrs. Lovat was softly interposing, "do please listen a moment to me! Do you mean really that that Frenchman--the one you've pocketed--is the poor creature in the grave?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lawford," said Mr. Craik, putting out his face a little, "are we to take it that you mean that?"

"It's the same date, dear, the same name even to the spelling; what possibly else could I think?"

"And that the poor creature in the grave actually climbed up out of the darkness and--well, what?"

"I know no more than you now, Bettie. But the two faces--you must remember you haven't seen my husband since."

"And Mr. Bethany?" said Mr. Craik, feeling his way.

"Pah! Bethany, Craik! He'd back Old Nick himself if he came with a good tale. We've got to act; we've got to settle his hash before he does any mischief."

"Well," began Mrs. Lovat, smiling a little remorsefully beneath the arch of her raised eyebrows, "I sincerely hope you'll all forgive me; but I really am, heart and soul, with Old Nick, as Mr. Danton seems on intimate terms enough to call him. Dead, he is really immensely alluring; and alive, I think, awfully pitiful and--and pathetic. But if I know anything of Arthur he won't be beaten by a Frenchman. As for just the face, I think, do you know, I almost prefer dark men""qshe glanced up at the face immediately in front of the clock--"at least," she added softly, "when they are not looking very vindictive. I suppose people often are possessed, Mr. Craik? How many 'deadly sins' are there?"

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Lovat, there are seven. But I think in this case Mrs. Lawford intends to suggest not so much that--that her husband is in that condition; habitual sin, you know--grave enough, of course, I own--but that he is actually being compelled, even to the extent of a more or less complete change of physiognomy, to follow the biddings of some atrocious spiritual influence. It is no breach of confidence to say that I have myself been present at a death-bed where the struggle against what I may call the end was perfectgly awful to witness. I don't profess to follow all the ramifications of the affair, but though possibly Mr. Danton may seem a little harsh, such harshness, if I may venture to intercede, is not necessarily 'vindictive.' And--and personal security is a consideration."

"If you only knew the awful fear, the awful uncertainty I have been in, Bettie! Oh, it is worse, infinitely worse, than you can possibly imagine. I have myself heard the voice speak out of him--a high, hard, nasal voice. I've seen what Mr. Danton calls the 'glassiness' come into his face, and an expression so wild and so appallingly depraved, as it were, that I have had to hurry downstairs to hide myself from the thought. I'm willing to sacrifice everything for my own husband and for

Alice; but can it be expected of me to go on harbouring. . . ." Lawford listened on in vain for a moment; poor Sheila, it seemed, had all but broken down.

"Look here, Mrs. Lawford," began Danton huskily, "you really mustn't give way; you really mustn't. It's awful, unspeakably awful, I admit. But here were are; friends, in the midst of friends. And there's absolutely nothing. . . . What's this? Eh? Who is it? Oh, the maid."

Ada stood in the doorway looking in. "All I've come to ask, ma'am," she said in a low voice, "is, Am I to stay downstairs any longer? And are you aware there's somebody in the house?"

"What's that? What's that you're sayhing?" broke out the husky voice again. "Control yourself! Speak gently! What's that?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, I'm perfectly under control. And all I say is that I can't stay any longer alone downstairs there. There's somebody in the house."

A concentrated hush seemed to have fallen on the little assembly.

"'Somebody'--but who?" said Sheila out of the silence. "You come up here, Ada, with these idle fancies. Who's in the house? There has been no knock--no footstep."

"No knock, no footstep, m'm, that I've heard. It's Dr. Ferguson, m'm. He was here that first night; and he's been here ever since. He was here when I cam on Tuesday; and he was here last night. And he's here now. I can't be deceived by my own feelings. It's not right, it's not outspoken to keep me in the dark like this. And if you have no objection, m'm, I would like to go home."

Lawford in his utter weariness had nearly closed the door and now sat bent up on a chair, wondering vaguely when this poor play was coming to an end, longing with an intensity almost beyond endurance for the keen night air, the open sky. But still his ears drank in every tiniest sound or stir. He heard Danton's lowered voice muttering his arguments. He heard Ada quietly sniffing in the darkness of the hall. And this was his world! This was his life's panorama, creaking on at every step. This was the 'must' Grisel had sent him back to--these poor fools packed together in a panic at an old stale tale! Well, they would all come out presently, and cluster; and the crested, cackling fellow would lead them safely away out of the haunted farmyard.

He started out of his reverie at Danton's voice close at hand.

"Look here, my good girl, we haven't the least intention of keeping you in the dark. If you want to leave your mistress like this in the midst of her anxieties she says you can go and welcome. But it's not a bit of good in the world coming up with these cock-and-bull stories. The truth is your master's mad, that's the sober truth of it--hopelessly insane, you understand; and we've got to find him. But nothing's to be said, d'ye see? It's got to be done without fuss or scandal. But if there's any witness wanted, or anything of that kind, why, here you are; and," he dropped his voice to an almost inaudible hoot, "and well worth your while! You did see him, eh? Step into the trap, and all that?"

Ada stood silent a moment. "I don't know, sir," she began quietly, "by what right you speak to me about what you call my cock-and-bull stories. If the master is mad, all I can say to anybody is I'm

very sorry to hear it. I came to my mistress, sir, if you please; and I prefer to take my orders from who has a right to give them. Did I understand you to say, m'm, that you wouldn't want me any more this evening?"

Sheila had swept solemnly to the door. "Mr. Danton meant all that he said quite kindly, Ada. I can perfectly understand your feelings--perfectly. And I'm very much obliged to you for all your kindness to me in very trying circumstances. We are all agreed--we are forced to the terrible conclusion which--which Mr. Danton has just--expressed. And I know I can rely on your discretion. Don't stay on a moment if you really are afraid. But when you say 'some one,' Ada, do you mean--some one like you or me; or do you mean--the other?"

"I've been sitting in the kitchen, m'm, unable to move. I'm watched everywhere. The other evening I went into the drawing-room--I was alone in the house--and . . . I can't describe it. It wasn't dark; and yet it was all still and black, like the ruins after a fire. I don't mean I saw it, only that it was like a scene. And then the watching--I am quite aware to some it may sound all fancy. But I'm not superstitious, never was. I only mean, m'm, that I can't sit long alone. Else I'm quite myself. So if so be you don't want me any more; if I can't be of any further use to you or to--to master, I'd prefer to go home."

"Very well, Ada; thank you. You can go out this way." The door was unchained and unbolted, and "Good-night" said. And Sheila swept back in sombre pomp to her absorbed friends.

"She's quite a good creature at heart," she explained frankly, as if to disclaim any finesse, "and almost quixotically loyal. But what really did she mean, do you think? She is so obstinate. That maddening 'some one'! How they do repeat themselves! It can't be my husband; not Dr. Ferguson, I mean. You don't suppose--oh surely, not some one else!" Again the dark silence of the house seemed to drift in on the little company.

Mr. Craik cleared his throat. "I failed to catch quite all that the maid said," he murmured apologetically; "but I certainly did gather it was to some kind of--of emanation she was referring. And the 'ruin,' you know. I'm not a mystic; and yet do you know, that somehow seemed to me almost offensively suggestive of--of demonic influence. You don't suppose, Mrs. Lawford--and of course I wouldn't for a moment venture on such a conjecture unsupported--but even if this restless spirit (let us call it) did succeed in making a footing, it might possibly be rather in the nature of a lodging than a permanent residence. Moreover we are, I think, bound to remember that probably in all spheres of existence like attracts like; even the Gadarene episode seems to suggest a possible multiplication!" he peered largely. "You don't suppose, Mrs. Lawford. . . ?"

"I think Mr. Craik doesn't quite relish having to break the news, Sheila dear," explained Mrs. Lovat soothingly, "that perhaps Sabathier's out. Which really is quite a heavenly suggestion, for in that case your husband would b in, wouldn't he? Just our old stolid Arthur again, you know. And next Mr. Craik is suggesting, and it certainly does seem rather fascinating, that poor Ada's got mixed up with the Frenchman's friends, or perhaps, even, with one of the seventy-two princes royal. I know women can't, or mustn't reason, Mr. Danton, but you do, I hope, just catch the drift?"

Danton started. "I wasn't really listening to the girl," he explained nonchalantly, shrugging his black shoulders and pursing up his eyes. "Personally, Mrs. Lovat, I'd pack the baggage off to-night, box and all. But it's not my business."

"You mustn't be depressed--must he, Mr. Craik? After all, my dear man, the business, as you call it, is not exactly entailed. But really, Sheila, I think it must be getting very late. Mr. Bethany won't come now. And the dear old thing ought certainly to have his say, before we go any further; oughtn't he, Mr. Danton? So what's the use of worriting poor Ada's ghost any longer. And as for poor Arthur--I haven't the faintest desire in the world to hear the little cart drive up, simply in case it should be to leave your unfortunate husband behind it, Sheila. What it must be to be alone all night in this house with a dead and buried Frenchman's face--well, I shudder, dear!"

"And yet, Mrs. Lovat," said Mr. Craik, with some little show of returning gaiety, "as we make our bed, you know."

"But in this case, you see," she replied reflectively, "if all accounts are true, Mr. Craik, it's manifestly the wicked Frenchman who has made the bed, and Sheila who refu---- But look! Mr. Danton is fretting to get home."

"If you'll all go to the door," said Danton, seizing a fleeting opportunity to raise his eyebrows more expressively even than if he had again shrugged his shoulders at Sheila, "I'll put out the light."

The night air flowed into the dark house as Danton slowly felt his way out of the dining-room. "There's only one thing," said Sheila slowly. "When I last saw my husband, you know, he was, I think, the least bit better. He was always stubbornly convinced it would all come right in time. That's why, I think, he's been spending all his evenings away from home. But supposing it did?"

"For my part," said Mrs. Lovat, breathing the faint wind that was rising out of the west, "I'd sigh; I'd rub my eyes; I'd thank God for such an exciting dream; and I'd turn comfortably over and go to sleep again. I'm all for Arthur, back against the wall."

"For my part," said Danton, looming in the dusk, "friend or no friend, I'd cut the--I'd cut him dead. But don't fret, Mrs. Lawford, devil or no devil, he's gone for good."

"And for my part----" began Mr. Craik; but the door at that moment slammed.

Voices, however, broke out almost immediately in the porch. And after a hurried consultation, Lawford in his stagnant retreat heard the door softly reopened, and the striking of a match. And Mr. Craik, followed closely by Danton's great body, stole circumspectly across his dim chink, and the first adventurer went stumbling down the kitchen staircase.

"I suppose," muttered Lawford, turning his head to the darkness, "they have come back to put out the kitchen gas."

Danton began a busy, tuneless whistle between his teeth.

"Coming, Craik?" he called thickly, after a long pause.

Apparently no answer had been returned to his inquiry; he waited a little longer, with legs apart, and eyeballs enveloped in brooding darkness. "I'll just go and tell the ladies you're coming," he suddenly bawled down the hollow. "Do you hear, Craik? They're alone, you know." And with that he resolutely wheeled and rapidly made his way down the steps into the garden. Some few moments afterwards Mr. Craik shook himself free of the basement, hastened at a gentle trot to rejoin his companions, and in his absence of mind omitted to shut the front door.

CHAPTER XXIII

LAWFORD sat on in the darkness, and now one sentence and now another of their talk would repeat itself in his memory, in much the same way as one listlessly turns over an antiquated diary, to read here and there a faded, almost meaningless sentiment. Sometimes a footstep passed echoing along the path under the trees, then his thoughts would leave him, and he would listen and listen till it had quite died out. It was all so very far away. And they too--these talkers--so very far away; as remote and yet as clear as the characters that have made their final bow, and have left the curtained stage, and one is standing uncompanioned and nearly the last of the spectators, and the lights that have summoned back reality again are being extinguished. It was only by a painful effort of mind that he kept recalling himself to himself--why he was here; what it all meant; that this was indeed reality.

Yet, after all, this by now was his customary loneliness: there was little else he desired for the present than the hospitality of the dark. Here and there, it seemed, a humped or spindled form held against all corners its passive place. Here and there a tiny faintness of light played. Night after night these chairs and tables kept their blank vigil. Why, he thought, pleased as an over-tired child with the fancy, in a sense they were always alone, shut up in a kind of senselessness--just like us all. But what--what, he had suddenly risen from his chair to ask himself--what on earth are they alone with? No precise answer had been forthcoming to that question. But as in turning in the doorway, he looked out into the night, flashing here and there in dark spaces of the sky above the withering apple leaves, the long dark wall, and quiet, untrodden road, with the tumultuous beating of the stars--one thing at least he was conscious of having learned in these last few days: he knew what kind of a place he was alone in.

It seemed to weave a spell over him, to call up a nostalgia he had lost all remembrance of since childhood. And that queer homesickness, at any rate, was all Sabathier's doing, he thought, smiling in his rather careworn fashion. Sabathier! It was this mystery, bereft now of all fear, and this beauty together, that made life the endless, changing and yet changeless thing it was. And yet mystery and loveliness alike were only really appreciable with one's legs, as it were, dangling over into one's grave.

Just with one's lantern lit, on the edge of the whispering unknown, and a reiterated going back out of the solitude into the light and warmth, to the voices and glancing of eyes, to say goodbye:--that after all was this life on earth for those who watched as well as acted. What if one's earthly home were empty?--still the restless fretted traveller must tarry; "for the horrible worst of it is, my friend," he said, as if to some silent companion listening behind him, "the worst of it is, your way was just simply, solely suicide." What was it Herbert had called it? Yes, a cul-de-sac--black, lofty, immensely still and old and picturesque, but none the less merely a contemptible cul-de-sac; no

abiding place, scarcely even sufficing with its flagstones for a groan from the fugitive and deluded refugees. There was no peace for the wicked. The question of course then came in--Was there any peace anywhere, for anybody?

He smiled at a sudden odd remembrance of a quiet, sardonic old aunt whom he used to stay with as a child. "Children should be seen and not heard," she would say, peering at him over his favourite pudding.

His eyes rested vacantly on the darkling street. He fell again into reverie, gigantically brooded over by shapes only imagination dimly conceived of: the remote alleys of his mind astir with a shadowy and ceaseless traffic which it wasn't at least this life's business to hearken after, or regard. And as he stood there in a mysteriously, yet thronging peaceful solitude such as he had never known before, faintly out of the silence broke the sound of approaching hoofs. His heart seemed to gather itself close; a momentary blindness veiled his eyes, so wildly had his blood surged up into cheek and brain. He remained, caught up, with head slightly inclined, listening, as with an interminable tardiness, measureless, anguished hope died down into nothingness. Cold and heavy, his heart began to beat again, as if to catch up those laggard moments. He turned with an infinite revulsion of feeling to look out on the lamps of the old fly that had drawn up at his gate.

He watched incuriously a little old lady rather arduously alight, pause, and look up at his darkened windows, and after a momentary hesitation, and a word over her shoulder to the cabman, stoop and fumble at the iron latch. He watched her with a kind of wondering aversion, still scarcely tinged with curiosity. She had succeeded in lifting the latch and in pushing her way through, and was even now steadily advancing towards him along the tiled path. And a minute after he recognised with the warmest of reactions the quiet old figure that had shared a sunset with him ages and ages ago--his mother's old schoolfellow, Miss Sinnet.

He was already ransacking the still faintly-perfumed dining-room for matches, and had just succeeded in relighting the still-warm lamp, when he heard her quiet step in the porch, even felt her peering in, in the gloom, with all her years' trickling customariness behind her, a little dubious of knocking on a wide-open door.

But the lamp lit, Lawford went out again and welcomed his visitor. "I am alone," he was explaining gravely, "my wife's away and the whole house topsy-turvy. How very, very kind of you!"

The old lady was breathing a little heavily after her ascent of the steep steps, and seemed not to have noticed his outstretched hand. None the less she followed him in, and when she was well advanced into the lighted room, she sighed deeply, raised her veil over the front of her bonnet, and leisurely took out her spectacles.

"I suppose," she was explaining in a little quiet voice, "you are Mr. Arthur Lawford, but as I did not catch sight of a light in any of the windows I began to fear that the cabman might have set me down at the wrong house."

She raised her head, and first through, and then over her spectacles she deliberately and steadfastly regarded him.

"Yes," she said to herself, and turned, not as it seemed entirely with satisfaction, to look for a chair. He wheeled the most comfortable up to the table.

"I have been visiting my old friend Miss Tucker--Rev. W. Tucker's daughter--she, I knew, could give me your address; and sure enough she did. Your road, d'ye see, was on my way home. And I determined in spite of the hour, just to inquire. You must understand, Mr. Lawford, there was something that I rather particularly wanted to say to you. But there!--you're looking sadly, sadly ill; and," she glanced round a little inquisitively, "I think my story had better wait for a more convenient occasion."

"Not at all, Miss Sinnet; please not," Lawford assured her, "really. I have been ill, but I'm not practically quite myself again. My wife and daughter have gone away for a few days; and I follow to-morrow, so if you'll forgive such a very poor welcome, it may be my--my only chance. Do please let me hear."

The old lady leant back in her chair, placed her hands on the arms and softly panted, while out of the rather broad serenity of her face she sat blinking up at her companion as if, after a long talk instead of at the beginning of one. "No," she repeated reflectively, "I don't like your looks at all; yet here we are now, enjoying beautiful autumn weather; why not make use of it?"

"Oh yes," said Lawford, "I do. I have been making tremendous use of it."

Her eyelid flickered at his candid glance. "And does your business permit of much walking, sir?"

"Well, I've been malingering these last few days--idling at home; but I am always more or less my own man, Miss Sinnet. I walk a little."

"H'm, but not much in my direction, Mr. Lawford?" she quizzed him.

"All horrible indolence, Miss Sinnet. But I often--often think of you; and especially just lately."

"Well, now," she wriggled round her head to get a better view of him wheeling up his chair, "that's very peculiar; because, Mr. Lawford, I've been thinking lately a very great deal of you. And yet--I fancy I shall succeed in mystifying you presently--not precisely of you, but of somebody else!"

"You do mystify me--horribly," he replied gallantly. "And that is the story, I suppose?"

"That's the story," repeated Miss Sinnet with some little triumph. "Now let me see; it was on Saturday last--yes, Saturday evening; a wonderful sunset; Bewley Heath, Mr. Lawford."

"Oh yes; my daughter's favourite walk."

"And your daughter's age now?"

"She's nearly sixteen; Alice, you know."

"Ah, yes, Alice; to be sure. It is a beautiful walk, and if fine, I generally take mine there too. It's near; there's shade; it's very little frequented; and I can wander and muse undisturbed. And that I think is pretty well all that an old woman like me is fit for, Mr. Lawford. 'Nearly sixteen!' Is it possible? Dear, dear me? But let me get on. On my way home from the Heath, you may be aware, before one reaches the road again, there's a somewhat steep ascent. I haven't the strength I had, and whether I'm fatigued of not, I have always made it a rule to rest awhile on a most convenient little seat at the summit, admire the view--what I can see of it--and then make my way quietly, quietly home. On Saturday, however, and it most rarely occurs--once, I remember, when a very civil nursemaid was sitting with two charmingly behaved little children in the sunshine, and I heard they were my old friend Major Loder's own children--on Saturday, as I was saying, my own particular little haunt was already occupied." She glanced back to him from out of her thoughts, as it were. "By a gentleman. I say, gentleman; though I must confess that his conduct, perhaps, too, a little something even in his appearance, somewhat belied the term. Anyhow, gentleman let us call him."

Lawford, all attention, nodded, and encouragingly smiled.

"I'm not one of those tiresome, suspicious people, Mr. Lawford, who distrust all strangers. I have never once been molested; and I have enjoyed many and many a most interesting, and sometimes instructive, talk with an individual whom I've never seen in my life before, and this side of the grave perhaps, am never likely to see again." She lifted her head with pursed lips, and gravely yet still flickeringly regarded him once more. "Well, I made some trifling remark--the weather, the view, whatever," she explained with a little jerk of her shoulder--"and to my extreme astonishment he turned and addressed me by name--Miss Sinnet. Unmistakably--Sinnet. Now, perhaps, and very rightly, you won't consider that a very peculiar thing to do? But you will recollect, Mr. Lawford, that I had been sitting there a considerable time. Surely, now, if you had recognised my face you would have addressed me at once?"

"Was he, do you think, Miss Sinnet, a little uncertain, perhaps?"

"Never mind, never mind; let me get on with my story first. The next thing my gentleman does is more mysterious still. His whole manner was a little peculiar, perhaps--a certain restlessness, what, in fact, one might be almost tempted to call a certain furtiveness of behaviour. Never mind. What he does next is to ask me a riddle! Perhaps you won't think that was peculiar either?"

"What was the riddle?" smiled Lawford.

"Why, to be sure, to guess his name! Simply guided, so I surmised, by some very faint resemblance in his face to his mother, who was, he assured me, an old schoolfellow of mine at Brighton. I thought and thought. I confess the adventure was beginning to be extremely entertaining. But of course, very, very few of my old schoolfellows remain distinctly in my memory now; and I fear that grows more treacherous the longer I live. Their faces as girls are clear enough. But later in life most of them drifted out of sight--many alas! are dead; and, well, at last I narrowed my man down to one. And who now, do you suppose that was?"

Lawford sustained an expression of abysmal mystification. "Do tell me--who?"

"Your own poor dear mother, Mr. Lawford."

"He said so?"

"No, no," said the old lady, with some vexation, closing her eyes. "I said so. He asked me to guess. And I guessed Mary Lawford; now do you see?"

"Yes, yes. But was he like her, Miss Sinnet? That was really very, very extraordinary. Did you see any likeness in his face?"

Miss Sinnet very deliberately took her spectacles out of their case again. "Now, see here, sir; this is being practical, isn't it? I'm just going to take a leisurely glance at yours. But you mustn't let me forget the time. You must look after the time for me."

"It's just a quarter to ten," said Lawford, having glanced first at the stopped clock on the chimney-piece and then at his watch; and then sat quite still, and endeavoured to sit at ease, while the old lady lifted her bonneted head, and ever so gravely and benignly surveyed him.

"H'm," she said at last. "There's no mistaking you. It's Mary's chin, and Mary's brow--with just a little something, perhaps, of her dreamy eye. But you haven't all her looks, Mr. Lawford, by any manner of means. She was a very beautiful girl, and so vivacious, and so fanciful--it was, I suppose the foreign strain showing itself--even marriage did not quite succeed in spoiling her."

"The foreign strain?" Lawford glanced with a kind of fleeting fixity at the quiet old figure; "the foreign strain?"

"Your mother's maiden name, my dear Mr. Lawford, surely memory does not deceive me in that, was Van der Gucht. That, I believe, is a foreign name."

"Ah, yes," said Lawford, his rising thoughts sinking quietly to rest again. "Van der Gucht, of course. How stupid of me!"

"As a matter of fact, your mother was very proud of her Dutch blood. But there," she flung out little fin-like sleeves, "if you don't let me keep to my story I shall go back as uneasy as I came. And you didn't," she added even more fretfully, "you didn't tell me the time!"

Lawford stared at his watch again for some few moments without replying. "It's a few minutes to ten," he said at last.

"Dear me! And I'm keeping the cabman! I must hurry on. Well, now, I put it to you, you shall be my father confessor--though I detest the idea in real life--was I wrong? Was I justified in professing to the poor fellow that I detected a likeness when there wasn't any likeness there?"

"What! None at all!" cried Lawford; "not the faintest trace?"

"My dear, good Mr. Lawford," she expostulated, patting her lap, "there's very little more than a trace of my dear beautiful Mary in you, her own son. How could there be--how could you expect it in him, a complete stranger? No, it was nothing but my own foolish kindliness. It might have been Mary's son for all that I could recollect. I haven't for years, please remember, had the pleasure of

receiving a visit from you. I am firmly of the opinion that I was justified. My motive was entirely benevolent. And then--to my positive amazement--well, I won't say hard things of the absent; but he suddenly turns round on me with a 'Thank you, Miss Bennett.' Bennett, hark ye! Perhaps you won't agree that I had any justification in being vexed and--and affronted at that!"

"I think, Miss Sinnet," said Lawford solemnly, "that you were perfectly justified. Oh, perfectly! I wonder even you had the patience to give the real Arthur Lawford a chance to ask you forgiveness for--for the stranger."

"Well, candidly, sir," said Miss Sinnet severely, "I was very much scandalised; and I shouldn't be here now telling you my story if it hadn't been for your mother."

"My mother!"

The old lady rather grimly enjoyed his confusion. "Yes, Mr. Lawford, your mother. I don't know why--something in his manner, something in his face--so dejected, so unhappy, so--if it is not uncharitable to say it--so wild: it has haunted me: I haven't been able to get the matter out of my head. I have lain awake in my bed thinking of him. Why did he speak to me? I keep asking myself. Why did he play me so very aimless a trick? How had he learned my name? Why was he sitting there so solitary and so dejected? And worse even than that, what has become of him? A little more patience, perhaps, a little more charity, perhaps! What might I not have done for him! The whole thing has harassed and distressed me more than I can say. Would you believe it, I have actually twice, and on one occasion, three times in a day made my way to the seat--hoping to see him there. And I am not so young as I was. And then, as I say, to crown all, I had a most remarkable dream about your mother. But that's my own affair. Elderly people like me are used--well, perhaps I won't say used--we're not surprised or disturbed by visits from those who have gone before. We live, in a sense, among the tombs; though I would not have you fancy it's in any way a morbid or unhappy life to lead. We don't talk about it--certainly not to young people. Let them enjoy their Eden while they can; though there's plenty of apples, I fear, on that tree yet, Mr. Lawford."

She leant forward and whispered it with a big, simple smile:--"We don't even discuss it much among ourselves. But as one gets nearer and nearer to the wicket-gate there's other company around one than you'll find in--in the directory. And that is why I have just come on here to-night. Very, very likely my errand may seem to have no meaning for you. You look ill, sir, but you don't appear to be in any great trouble or adversity, as I feared in my--well, there--as I feared you might be. I must say, though, it seems a terribly empty house, and no lights, too!"

She slowly, with a little trembling nodding of her bonnet, turned her head and glanced quietly but unflinchingly out of the half-open door. "But that's not my affair." And again she looked at him for a little while.

Then she stooped forward and touched him kindly and trustingly on the knee. "Trouble or no trouble," she said, "it's never too late to remind a man of his mother. And I'm sure, Mr. Lawford, I'm very glad to hear you are struggling up out of your illness again. We must keep a brave heart, forty or seventy, whichever we may be: 'While the evil days come not nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them,' though they have not come to me even yet; and I trust from the bottom of my heart, not to you."

She looked at him without a trace of emotion or constraint in her large, quiet face, and their eyes met for a moment in that brief, fixed, baffling fashion that seems to prove that mankind is after all but a dumb masked creature saddled with the vain illusion of speech.

"And now that I've eased my conscience," said the old lady, pulling down her veil, "I must beg pardon for intruding at such an hour of the evening. And may I have your arm down those dreadful steps? Really, Mr. Lawford, judging from the houses they erect for us, the builders must have a very peculiar notion of mankind. Is the fly still there? I expressly told the man to wait, and what I am going to do if----!"

"He's there," Lawford reassured her, craning his neck in their slow progress to catch a peep into the quiet road. And like a flock of birds scared by a chance comer at their feeding in some deserted field, a whirring cloud of memories swept softly up in his mind--memories whose import he made no effort to discover. None the less, the leisurely descent became in their company something of a real experience even in such a brimming week.

"I hope, some day, you will really tell me your dream?" he said, pushing the old lady's silk skirts in after her as she slowly climbed into the carriage.

"Ah, my dear man, when you're my age," she called back to him, groping her way into the rather musty gloom, "you'll dream such dreams for yourself. Life's not what's just the fashion. And there are queerer things to be seen and heard just quietly in one's solitude than this busy life gives us time to discover. But as for my mystifying Bewley acquaintance--I confess I cannot make head or tail of him."

"Was he," said Lawford rather vaguely, looking up into the dim white face that with its plumes filled nearly the whole carriage window, "was his face very unpleasing?"

She raised a gloved hand. "It has haunted me, haunted me, Mr. Lawford; its--its conflict! Poor fellow; I hope, I do hope, he faced his trouble out. But I shall never see him again."

He squeezed the trembling, kindly old hand. "I bet, Miss Sinnet," he said earnestly, "even your having thought kindly of the poor beggar eases his mind--whoever he may be. It would have eased mine."

"Ay, but I did more than think," replied the old lady with a chuckle, that might have seemed even a little derisive if it had not been so profoundly magnanimous.

He watched the old black fly roll slowly off, and still smiling at Miss Sinnet's inscrutable finesse went back into the house. "And now, my friend," he said, addressing peacefully the thronging darkness, "the time's nearly up for me to go too."

He had made up his mind. Or, rather, it seemed as if in the unregarded silences of this last long talk his mind had made up itself. Only among impossibilities had he the shadow of a choice. In this old haunted house, amid this shallow turmoil no practicable clue could shew itself of a way out. He would go away for a while.

He left the door ajar bind him for the moments still left, and stood for a while thinking. Then, lamp in hand, he descended into the breakfast-room for pen, ink, and paper. He sat for some time in that underground calm, nibbling his pen like a harassed and self-conscious schoolboy. At last he began:--

"MY DEAR SHEILA,--I must tell you to begin with that the change has now all passed away. I am completely myself again. And next: that I overheard all that was said to-night in the dining-room. I'm sorry for listening; but it's no good going over all that now. Here I am, and, as you said, for Alice's sake we must make the best of it. I am going away for a while, to get, if I can, a chance to quiet down. I suppose every one comes sooner or later to a time in life when there is nothing else to be done but just to shut one's eyes and blunder on. And that's all I can do now--blunder on. . . ."

He paused, and suddenly, at the echo of the words in his mind, a revulsion of feeling--shame and hatred of himself surged up, and he tore his letter into tiny pieces. Once more he began, "My dear Sheila," dropped his pen, and sat on for a long time, cold and inert, harbouring almost unendurably a pitiful, hopeless longing. . . . He would write to Grisel another day.

He leant back in his chair, his fingers pressed against his eyelids. And clearer than those which myriad-hued reality can ever present, pictures of the imagination swam up before his eyes. It seemed, indeed, that even now some ghost, some revenant of himself was sitting there, in the old green churchyard, roofed only with a thousand thousand stars. The breath of darkness stirred softly on his cheek. Some little scampering shape slipped by. A bird on high cried weirdly, solemnly, over the globe. He shuddered faintly, and looked out again into the small lamplit room. Here, too, was quite as inexplicable a coming and going. A fly was walking on the table beneath his eyes, with the uneasy gait of one that has outlived his hour and most of his companions.

Mice were scampering and shrieking in the empty kitchen. And all about him, in the viewless air, the phantoms of another life passed by, unmindful of his motionless body. He fell into a lethargy of the senses, and only gradually became aware, after a while, of the strange, long-drawn sigh of rain at the window. He rose and opened it. The night-air flowed in, chilled with the rain and faintly fragrant of the dust. It soothed away all thought for a while. He turned back to his chair. He would wait until the rain had a little lulled before starting.

A little before twelve the door was softly, and with extreme care, pushed open, and Mr. Bethany's old face, with an intense and sharpened scrutiny, looked in on the lamplit room. And as if still intent on the least sound within the empty walls around him, he came near, and stooping across the table, stared through his spectacles at the sidelong face of his friend, so still, with hands so lightly laid on the arms of his chair that he had need to watch closely to detect in his heavy slumber the slow, measured rise and fall of his breast.

He turned wearily away muttering a little, between an immeasurable relief and a now almost intolerable medley of vexations. What was this monstrous web of Craik's? What had the creature been nodding and ducketing about?--those whisperings, that tattling? And what in the end, when you were old and sour and out-strategied, what was the end to be of this urgent dream called Life?

He sat quietly down and drew his hands over his face, pushed his lean, knotted fingers up under his spectacles, then sat blinking softly, slowly deciphering the solitary "My dear Sheila" on Lawford's

note-paper. "H'm," he muttered, and looked up again at the dark, still eyelids that in the strange torpor of sleep might yet be dimly conveying to the dreaming brain behind them some hint of his presence. "I wish to goodness, you wonderful old creature," he muttered, wagging his head, "I wish to goodness you'd wake up."

For some time he sat on, listening to the still soft downpour on the fading leaves. "They don't come to me!" he said softly again; with a tiny smile on his old face. "It's that old mediaeval Craik: with a face like last year's rookery!" And again he sat, with head a little sidelong, listening now to the infinitesimal sounds of life without, now to the thoughts within, and ever and again gazed steadfastly on Lawford.

At last it seemed in the haunted quietness other thoughts came to him. A cloud, as it were of youth, drew over the wrinkled skin, composed the birdlike keenness; his head nodded. Once, like Lawford in the darkness at Widderstone, he glanced up sharply across the lamplight at his phantasmagorical shadowy companion, heard the steady surge of multitudinous rain-drops, like the roar of Time's winged chariot hurrying near; then he too, with spectacles awry, bobbed on in his chair, a weary old sentinel on the outskirts of his friends denuded battlefield.