

“Out of the Deep” by Walter de la Mare

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NOTE: double-click (or patiently mouseover) underlined words and phrases for explanatory notes.

A LITERARY GOTHIC etext.

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THE steely light of daybreak, increasing in volume and intensity as the East grew larger with the day, showed clearly at length that the prodigious yet elegant Arabian bed was empty. What might tenderly have cradled the slumbers of some exquisite Fair of romance now contained no human occupant at all. The whole immense room—its air dry and thin as if burnt—was quiet as a sepulchre.

To the right of the bed towered a vast and heavily carved wardrobe. To the left, a lofty fireplace of stone flanked by its grinning frigid dogs. A few cumbrous and obscure oil paintings hung on the walls. And, like the draperies of a proscenium, the fringed and valanced damask curtains on either side the two high windows, poured down their motionless cataract of crimson.

They had been left undrawn over night, and yet gave the scene a slight theatricality, a theatricality which the painted nymphs disporting themselves on the ceiling scarcely helped to dispel.

Not that these coy and ogling faces suggested any vestige of chagrin at the absence of the young man who for some weeks past had shared the long nights with them. They merely smiled on. For, after all, Jimmie's restless head upon the pillow had never really been in harmony with his pompous inanimate surroundings—the thin high nose, like the beak of a small ship, between the fast-sealed lids and narrow cheekbones, the narrow bird-like brow, the shell of the ear slightly pointed. If, inspired by the distant music of the spheres, the painted creatures had with this daybreak broken into song, it would certainly not have been to the tune of "Oh where, and oh where is my little dog gone?" There was even less likelihood of Jimmie's voice now taking up their strains from out of the distance.

And yet, to judge from appearances, the tongue within that head might have been that of an extremely vivacious talker—even though, apart from Mrs. Thripps, its talk these last few days had been for the most part with himself. Indeed, as one of his friends had remarked: "Don't you believe it: Jimmie has pots and pots [sic] to say, though he don't say it. That's what makes him such a dam good loser." Whether or not; if Jimmie *had* been in the habit of conversing with himself, he must have had odd company at times.

Night after night he had lain there, flat on his back, his hands crossed on his breast—a pose that never failed to amuse him. A smooth eminence in the dark rich quilt about sixty inches from his chin indicated to his attentive eye the points of his toes. The hours had been heavy, the hours had been long—still there are only twelve or so of utter darkness in the most tedious of nights, and matins tinkles at length. Excepting the last of them—a night, which was now apparently for ever over, he had occupied this majestic bad for about six weeks, though on no single occasion could he have confessed to being really at home in it.

He had chosen it, not from any characteristic whim or caprice, and certainly not because it dominated the room in which his Uncle Timothy himself used to sleep, yes, and for forty years on end, only at last to expire in it. He had chosen it because, when its Venetian blinds were pulled high up under the fringed cornice, it was as light as a London April sky could make it; and because—well, just one single glance in from the high narrow doorway upstairs had convinced him that the attic in which he was wont to sleep as a small boy was simply out of the question. A black heavy flood of rage swept over him at sight of it—he had never before positively realised the abominations of that early past. To a waif and stray any kind of shelter, is, of course, a godsend, but even though this huge sumptuous barrack of a house had been left to him (or, rather, abandoned to him) by his Uncle Timothy's relict, Aunt Charlotte, Jimmie could not—even at his loosest—have been described as homeless. Friendless rather—but that of his own deliberate choice. Not so very long ago, in fact, he had made a clean sweep of every single living being, male or female, to whom the term friend could, with some little elasticity, be applied. A little official affair, to put it politely, eased their exit. And then, this vacant hostel. The house, in fact (occupied only by a care-taker in the service of his Aunt's lawyers) had been his for the asking at any time during the last two or three years. But he had steadily delayed taking possession of it until there was practically no alternative. Circumstances accustom even a young man to a good many inconveniences. Still it would have been a little too quixotic to sleep in the street, even though his Uncle Timothy's house, as mere "property," was little better than a white and unpleasing elephant. He could not sell it, that is, not *en masse*. It was more than dubious if he was legally entitled to make away with its contents.

But, quite apart from an extreme aversion to your Uncle Timothy's valuables in themselves, you cannot eat, even if you can subsist on, articles of *virtu*. Sir Richard Grenville—a hero for whom Jimmie had every respect—may have been accustomed to chewing up his wine-glass after swigging off its contents. But this must have been on the spur of an impulse, hardly in obedience to the instinct of self-preservation. Jimmie would have much preferred to balance a chair at the foot of his Uncle's Arabian bed and salute the smiling lips of the painted nymphs on the ceiling. Though even that experiment would probably have a rather gritty flavour. Still, possession is nine points of the law, and necessity is the deadly enemy of convention. Jimmie was unconscious of the faintest scruples on that score.

His scruples, indeed, were in another direction. Only a few days ago—the day, in fact, before his first indulgence in the queer experience of pulling the bell—he had sallied out with his Aunt Charlotte's black leather dressing bag positively bulging with a pair of Bow candlesticks, an illuminated missal, mutely exquisite, with its blues and golds and crimsons, and a tiny old silver-gilt bijouterie box. He was a young man of absurdly impulsive aversions, and the dealer to whom he carried this further consignment of loot was one of them.

After a rapid and contemptuous examination, this gentleman spread out his palms, shrugged his shoulders, and suggested a sum that would have caused even a more phlegmatic connoisseur than his customer's Uncle Timothy to turn in his grave.

And Jimmie replied, nicely slurring his r's, "Really Mr. So-and-so, it is impossible. No doubt the things have an artificial value, but not for me. I must ask you to oblige me by giving me only half the sum you have kindly mentioned. Rather than accept *your* figure, you know, I would—well, perhaps it would be impolite to tell you what I would prefer to do. *Dies irae, dies ila*, and so on."

The dealer flushed, though he had been apparently content to leave it at that. He was not the man to be easily insulted by a good customer. And Jimmie's depredations were methodical. With the fastidiousness of an expert he selected from the rare and costly contents of the house only what was light and portable and became

inconspicuous by its absence. The supply he realised, though without any perceptible animation, however recklessly it might be squandered, would easily last out his lifetime.

Certainly *not*. After having once made up his mind to accept his Uncle Timothy's posthumous hospitality, the real difficulty was unlikely to be a conscientious one. It was the attempt merely to accustom himself to the house—the hated house—that grew more and more arduous. It falsified his hope that, like other experiences, this one would prove only the more piquant for being so precarious. Days and moments quickly flying—just his one funny old charwoman, Mrs. Thripps, himself, and the Past.

After pausing awhile under the dingy and dusty portico, Jimmie had entered into his inheritance on the last afternoon in March. The wind was fallen; the day was beginning to narrow; a chill crystal light hung over the unshuttered staircase. By sheer force of a forgotten habit he at once ascended to the attic in which he had slept as a child. Pausing on the threshold, he looked in, conscious not so much of the few familiar sticks of furniture—the trucklebed, the worn strip of Brussels carpet, the chipped blue-banded ewer and basin, the framed illuminated texts on the walls—as of a perfect hive of abhorrent memories.

That high cupboard in the corner from which certain bodiless shapes had been wont to issue and stoop at him cowering out of his dreams; the crab-patterned paper that came alive as you stared; the window cold with menacing stars; the mouseholes, the rusty grate—trumpet of every wind that blows—these objects at once lustily shouted at him in their own original tongues.

Quite apart from themselves, they reminded him of incidents and experiences which at the time could scarcely have been so nauseous as they now seemed in retrospect. He found himself suffocatingly resentful even of what must have been kindly intentions. He remembered how his Aunt Charlotte used to read to him—with her puffy cheeks, plump ringed hands, and the moving orbs of her eyes showing under her spectacles.

He wasn't exactly accusing the past. Even in his first breeches he was never what could be called a nice little boy. He had never ordered himself lowly and reverently to any of his betters—at least in their absence. Nevertheless, what stirred in his bosom as he gazed in on this discarded scene was certainly not remorse. He remembered how gingerly and with what peculiar breathings, his Uncle Timothy used to lift his microscope out of its wooden case; and how, after the necessary manipulation of the instrument, he himself would be bidden mount a footstool and fix his dazzled eye on the slides of sluggish or darting horrors of minute magnified "life." And how, after a steady um-aw-ing drawl of inapprehensible instruction, his uncle would suddenly flick out a huge silk pocket handkerchief as a signal that little tongue-tied nervous boys were themselves nothing but miserable sluggish or darting reptiles, and that his nephew was the most deplorable kind of little boy.

Jimmie remembered, too, once asking the loose bow-shaped old gentleman in his chair if he might himself twist the wheel; and his Uncle Timothy had replied in a loud ringing voice, and almost as if he were addressing a public meeting: "Um, ah, my boy, I say No to that!" He said No to most things, and just like that, if he vouchsafed speech at all.

And then there was Church on Sundays; and his hoop on weekdays in the Crescent; and days when, with nothing to do, little Jimmie had been wont to sit watching the cold silvery rain on the window, the body he was in slowly congealing the while into a species of rancid suet pudding. Mornings too, when his Aunt Charlotte would talk nasally to him about Christianity; or when he was allowed to help his Uncle and a tall scared parlourmaid dust and re-arrange the contents of a cabinet or bureau. The smell of the air, the check duster, the odious *objets d'art* and the ageing old man snorting and looking like a superannuated Silenus beside the neat and

frightened parlourmaid—it was a curious thing; though Death with his luring grin had beckoned him off: there he was—alive as ever.

And when amid these ruminations, Jimmie's eyes had at last fixed themselves on the frayed dangling cord that hung from the ceiling over the trucklebed, it was because he had already explored all that the name Soames had stood for. Soames the butler—a black-clothed, tub-bellied, pompous man that might have been his Uncle Timothy's impoverished first cousin or illegitimate step-brother: Soames: Soames.

Soames used frequently to wring Jimmie's then protuberant ears. Soames sneaked habitually; and with a sort of gloating piety on his drooping face, was invariably present at the subsequent castigation. Soames had been wont to pile up his plate with lumps of fat that even Destiny had never intended should consort with any single leg of mutton or even sirloin of beef—jelly-like, rapidly cooling *nuggets* of fat. And Soames invariably brought him cold rice pudding when there was hot ginger roll.

Jimmie remembered the lines that drooped down from his pale long nose. The sleek set of his whiskers as he stood there in his coat-tails reflected in the glass of the sideboard, carving the Sunday joint.

But that slack green bell-cord!—his very first glimpse of it had set wagging *score*, of peculiar remembrances. First, and not so very peculiarly, perhaps, it recalled an occasion when, as he stood before his Aunt's footstool to bid her Good-night, her aggrieved pupils had visibly swum down from beneath their lids out of a nap, to fix themselves and look at him at last as if neither he nor she, either in this or in any other world, had ever so much as seen one another before. Perhaps his own face, if not so puffy, appeared that evening to be unusually pasty and pallid—with those dark rings which even to this day added vivacity and lustre to his extremely clear eyes. And his Aunt Charlotte had asked him why he was such a cowardly boy and so wickedly frightened of the dark.

"You know very well your dear Uncle will not permit gas in the attic, so there's no use asking for it. You have nothing on your conscience, I trust? You have not been talking to the servants?"

Infallible liar, he had shaken his head. And his Aunt Charlotte in return wagged hers at him. "It's no good staring in that rebellious sullen way at me. I have told you repeatedly that if you are really in need of anything, just ring the bell for Soames. A good little boy with nothing on his conscience *knows* that God watches over him. I hope you are at least trying to, be a good little boy. There is a limit even to your Uncle's forbearance."

It was perfectly true. Even bad little boys might be "watched over" in the dead of night, and as for his Uncle Timothy's forbearance, he had discovered the limitations of that fairly early in life.

Well, it was a pity, he smiled to himself, that his Aunt Charlotte could not be present to see his Uncle Timothy's bedroom on that first celebration of their prodigal nephew's return. Jimmie's first foray had been to range the house from attic to cellar (where he had paused to rest) for candlesticks. And that night something like six dozen of the "best wax" watched over his heavy and galvanic slumbers in the Arabian bed. Aunt Charlotte, now rather more accustomed to the dark even than Jimmie himself, would have opened her eyes at *that*.

Gamblers are naturally superstitious folk, he supposed; but that was the queerest feature of the whole thing. He had not then been conscious of even the slightest apprehension or speculation. It was far rather a kind of ribaldry than any sort of foreboding that had lit up positive constellations of candles as if for a Prince's—as if for a princely Cardinal's—lying-in-state.

It had taken a devil of a time too. His Uncle Timothy's port was not the less potent for a long spell of obscure mellowing, and the hand that held the taper had been a shaky one. Yet it had proved an amusing process too. Almost childish. Jimmie hadn't laughed like that for years. Certainly until then he had been unconscious of the feeblest squeamish inkling of anything—apart from old remembrances—peculiar in the house. And yet—well, no doubt even the first absurd impulsive experiment that followed *had* shaken him up.

Its result would have been less unexpected if he hadn't made a point and almost a duty of continually patrolling the horrible old vacant London mansion. Hardly a day had lately passed—and there was nothing better to do—but it found him on his rounds. He was not waiting for anything (except for the hour, maybe, when he would have to wait no more). Nevertheless, faithful as the sentinel on Elsinore's hoary ramparts, he would find himself day after day treading almost catlike on from room to room, surveying his paradoxical inheritance, jotting down a list in a nice order of the next "sacrifices," grimacing at the Ming divinities, and pirouetting an occasional long nose at the portraits on the walls.

He had sometimes had a few words—animated ones, too—with Mrs. Thripps, and perhaps if he could have persuaded himself to talk "sensibly," and not to gesticulate, not to laugh himself so easily into a fit of coughing, she would have proved better company. She was amazingly honest and punctual and quiet; and why to Heaven a woman with such excellent qualities should customarily wear so scared a gleam in her still, colourless eyes, and be so idiotically timid and nervous in his company, he could not imagine.

She was being paid handsome wages anyhow; and, naturally, he was aware of no rooted objection to other people helping themselves; at least if they managed it as skilfully as he did himself. But Mrs. Thripps, it seemed, had never been able in any sense at all to help herself. She was simply a crape-bonneted "motherly" creature, if not excessively intelligent, if a little slow in seeing "points." It was, indeed, her alarm when he asked her if she had happened to notice any young man about the house that had irritated him—though, of course, it was hardly fair not to explain what had given rise to the question. That was perfectly simple. It was like this.—

For years—for centuries, in fact—Jimmie had been, except in certain unusual circumstances, an exceedingly bad sleeper. He still hated sleeping in the dark. But a multitude of candles at various degrees of exhaustion make rather lively company when you are sick of your Uncle Timothy's cellar. And even the best of vintage wines may prove an ineffectual soporific. His, too, was a wretchedly active mind.

Even as a boy he had thought a good deal about his Uncle and Aunt, and Soames, and the house, and the Rev. Mr. Grayson, and spectres, and schoolmasters, and painted nymphs, and running away to sea, and curios, and dead silence, and his early childhood. And though, since then, other enigmas had engaged his attention, this purely automatic and tiresome activity of mind still persisted.

On his oath he had been in some respects and in secret rather a goody-goody little boy; though his piety had been rather the off-spring of fear than of love. Had he not been expelled from Mellish's almost solely for that reason? What on earth was the good of repeatedly thrashing a boy when you positively knew that he has lied merely from terror of your roaring voice and horrible white face?

But there it was; if there had been someone to talk to, he would not have talked so much to himself. He would not have lain awake thinking, night after night, like a rat in a trap. Thinking was like a fountain. Once it gets going at a certain pressure, well, it is almost impossible to turn it off. And, my hat! what odd things come up with the water!

On the particular night in question, in spite of the candles and the mice and the moon, he badly wanted company. In a moment of pining yet listless jocosity, then, he had merely taken his Aunt Charlotte's advice. True, the sumptuous crimson pleated silk bell-pull, dangling like a serpent with a huge tassel for skull over his Uncle Timothy's pillow, was a more formidable instrument than the yard or two of frayed green cord in the attic. Yet they shared the same purpose. Many a time must his Uncle Timothy have stretched up a large loose hand in that direction when in need of Soames's nocturnal ministrations. And now, alas, both master and man were long since gone the way of all flesh. You couldn't, it appeared, pull bells in your coffin.

But Jimmie was not as yet in his coffin, and as soon as his fingers slipped down from the smooth pull, the problem, in the abstract, as it were, began to fascinate him. With cold froggy hands crossed over his beautiful puce-patterned pyjamas, he lay staring at the crimson tassel till he had actually seen the hidden fangs flickeringly jet out at him.

The effort, then, must have needed some little courage. It *might* almost have needed a tinge of inspiration. It was in no sense intended as a challenge. He would, in fact, rather remain alone than chance summoning—well, *any* (once animate) relic of the distant past. But obviously the most practical way of proving—if only to yourself—that you can be content with your own reconnaissances in the very dead of night, was to demonstrate to that self that, even if you should ask for it, assistance would not be forthcoming.

He had been as fantastic as that. At the prolonged, pulsating, faint, distant tintinnabulation he had fallen back on to his pillow with an absurd little quicket of laughter, like that of a naughty boy up to mischief. But instant sobriety followed. Poor sleepers should endeavour to compose themselves. Tampering with empty space, stirring up echoes in pitch-black pits of darkness is scarcely sedative. And then, as he lay striving with extraordinary fervour not to listen, but to concentrate his mind on the wardrobe, and to keep his eyes from the door, that door must gently have opened.

It must have opened, and as noiselessly closed again. For a more or less decent-looking young man, seemingly not a day older than himself was now apparent in the room. It might almost be said that he had insinuated himself into the room. But well-trained domestics are accustomed to move their limbs and bodies with a becoming unobtrusiveness. There was also that familiar slight inclination of the apologetic in this young man's pose, as he stood there solitary in his black, in that terrific blaze of candle light. And for a sheer solid minute the occupant of the Arabian bed had really stopped thinking.

When indeed you positively press your face, so to speak, against the crystalline window of your eyes, your mind is apt to become a perfect vacuum. And Jimmie's first rapid and instinctive "Who the devil. . .?" had remained inaudible.

In the course of the next few days Jimmie was to become familiar (at least in memory) with the looks of this new young butler or valet. But first impressions are usually the lividest. The dark blue-grey eyes, the high nose, the scarcely perceptible smile, the slight stoop of the shoulders—there was no doubt of it. There was just a flavour, a flicker, there, of resemblance to himself. Not that he himself could ever have cut as respectful and respectable a figure as that. And the smile!—the fellow seemed to be ruminating over a thousand dubious, long-interred secrets, secrets such as one may be a little cautious of digging up even to share with one's self.

His face turned sidelong on his pillow, and through air as visibly transparent as a sheet of glass, Jimmie had steadily regarded this strange bell-answerer; and the bell-answerer had never so much as stirred his frigid glittering eyes in response. The silence that hung between them produced eventually a peculiar effect on Jimmie.

Menials as a general rule should be less emphatic personally. Their unobtrusiveness should surely not emphasise their immanence. It had been Jimmie who was the first to withdraw his eyes, only once more to find them settling as if spellbound on those of his visitor.

Yet, after all, there was nothing to take offence at in the young man's countenance or attitude. He did not seem even to be thinking-back at the bell-puller; but merely to be awaiting instructions. Yet Jimmie's heart at once rapidly began to beat again beneath his icy hands. And at last he made a perfectly idiotic response.

Wagging his head on his pillow, he turned abruptly away. "It was only to tell you that I shall need nothing more to-night," he had said.

Good Heavens. The fatuity of it! He wanted, thirsted for, scores upon scores of things. Aladdin's was the cupidity of a simpleton by comparison. Time, and the past, for instance, and the ability to breathe again as easily as if it were natural—as natural as the processes of digestion. Why, if you were intent only on a little innocent companionship, one or two of those nymphs up there would be far more amusing company than Mrs. Thripps. If, that is, apart from yearning to their harps and viols, they could have been persuaded to scrub and sweep. Jimmie wanted no other kind of help. There is a beauty that is but skin-deep.

Altogether it had been a far from satisfactory experience. Jimmie was nettled. His mincing tones echoed on in his mind. They must have suggested that he was unaccustomed to menservants and bell-pulls and opulent surroundings. And the fellow had instantly taken him at his word. A solemn little rather agreeable and unservile inclination of the not unfriendly head and he was gone.

And there was Jimmie, absolutely exhausted, coughing his lungs out, and entirely incapable of concluding whether the new butler was a creature of actuality or of dream. Well, well, well: that was nothing new. That's just how things do take one in one's weak moments, in the dead of night. Nevertheless, the experience had apparently proved sedative. He had slept like an infant.

The morning found him vivacious with curiosity. He had paused to make only an exceedingly negligent toilet before beginning his usual wanderings about the house. Calm cold daylight reflection may dismiss almost any nocturnal experience as a dream, if, at any rate, one's temperature in the night hours is habitually above the norm. But Jimmie could not, or would not, absolutely make up his mind. So clear a picture had his visitant imprinted on his memory that he even found himself (just like a specialist sounding a patient in search of the secret ravages of phthisis)—he had even found himself stealthily tapping over the basement walls—as if in search of a concealed pantry! A foolish proceeding if one has not the least desire in the world to attract the attention of one's neighbours.

Having at length satisfied himself in a rather confused fashion that whatever understudy of Soames might share the house with him in the small hours, he must be a butler of the migratory order. Jimmie then began experimenting with the bells. Mounted on a kitchen chair, cornice brush in hand, he had been surprised by Mrs. Thripps, in her quiet boots, as he stood gently knocking one by one the full eighteen of the long greened crooked jingle row which hung open-mouthed above the immense dresser.

She had caught him in the act, and Jimmie had once more exercised his customary glib presence of mind.

"They ought to be hung in a scale, you know. Oughtn't they, Mrs. Thripps? Then we could have 'Home, sweet Home!' and a hunting up and a hunting down, grandsires and treble bobs, and a grand maximus, even on

week days. And if we were in danger of any kind of fire—which *you* will never be, we could ring them backwards. *Couldn't* we, Mrs. Thripps? Not that there's much quality in them—no medieval monkish tone or timbre in *them*. They're a bit mouldy, too, and one can't tell t'other from which. Not like St. Faiths's! One would recognise that old danker in one's shroud, wouldn't one, Mrs. Thripps? Has it ever occurred to you that the first campanologist's real intention was not so much to call the congregation, as to summon—well—what the congregation's after?"

"Yes, sir," Mrs. Thripps had agreed, her watery grey eyes fixed largely on the elevated young man. "But it don't matter which of them you ring; I'll answer *hany*—at least while I'm in the house. I don't think, sir, you rest your mind enough. My. own boy, now: *he's* in the Navy. . . ."

But with one graceful flourish Jimmie had run his long-handled brush clean East to West along the clanging row. "You mustn't," he shouted, "you shouldn't. Once aboard the lugger, they are free! It's you *mothers*. . . ." He gently shook his peculiar wand at the flat-looking little old woman. "No, Mrs. Thripps; what I'm after is he who is here, *here!* couchant, perdu, laired, in these same subterranean vaults when you and I are snug in our nightcaps. A most nice-spoken young man! *Not* in the Navy, Mrs. Thripps!"

And before the old lady had had time to seize any one of these seductive threads of conversation, Jimmie had flashed his usual brilliant smile or grimace at her, and soon afterwards sallied out of the house to purchase a further gross or two of candles.

Gently and furtively pushing across the counter half a sovereign—not as a *douceur*, but merely as from friend to friend—he had similarly smiled back at the secretive-looking old assistant in the staid West End family-grocer's.

"No, I didn't suppose you *could* remember me. One alters. One ages. One deals elsewhere. But anyhow, a Happy New Year to you—if the next ever comes, you know."

"You see, sir," the straight-aproned old man had retorted with equal confidentiality, "it is not so much the alterations. They are what you might call uncircumventible, sir. It's the stream, sir. Behind the counter here, we are like rocks in it. But even if I can't for the moment put a thought to your face—though it's already stirring in me in a manner of speaking, I shall in the future, sir. You may rely upon that. And the same, sir, to you; and many *of* them, I'm sure."

Somehow or other Jimmie's vanity had been mollified by this pleasing little ceremoniousness; and that even before he had smiled yet once again at the saffron young lady in the Pay Box.

"The truth is, my dear," he had assured himself, as he once more ascended into the dingy porch, "the truth *is* when once you begin to tamper, you won't know where you are. You won't, really."

And that night he had lain soberly on, in a peculiar state of physical quiescence and self-satisfaction, his dark bright eyes wandering from nymph to nymph, his hands folded over his breast under the bedclothes, his heart persisting in its usual habits. Nevertheless, the fountain of his thoughts had continued softly to plash on in its worn basin. With ears a-cock, he had frankly enjoyed inhaling the parched, spent, brilliant air.

And when his fingers had at last manifested the faintest possible itch to experiment once more with the bell-pull, he had slipped out of bed, and hastily searching through a little privy case of his uncle's bedside books, had presently slipped back again, armed with a fat little copy of "The Mysteries of Paris," in its original French.

The next day a horrible lassitude descended upon him. For the better part of an hour he had stood staring out of the drawing-room window into the London street. At last, with a yawn that was almost a groan, and with an absurdly disproportionate effort, he turned himself about. Heavily hung the gilded chandeliers in the long vista of the room; heavily gloomed the gilded furniture. Scarcely distinguishable in the obscurity of the further wall stood watching him from a mirror what might have appeared to be the shadowy reflection of himself. With a still, yet extreme aversion he kept his eyes fixed on this distant nonentity, hardly realising his own fantastic resolve that if he did catch the least faint independent movement there, he would give Soames Junior a caustic piece of his mind. . . .

He must have been abominably fast asleep for hours when, a night or two afterwards, he had suddenly awakened, sweat streaming along his body, his mouth stretch to a long narrow O, and his right hand clutching the bell-rope, as might a drowning man at a straw.

The room was adrowse with light. All was still. The flitting horrors between dream and wake in his mind were already thinning into air. Through their transparency he looked out once more on the substantial, the familiar. His breath came heavily, like puffs of wind over a stormy sea, and yet a profound peace and tranquillity was swathing him in. The relaxed mouth was now faintly smiling. Not a sound, not the feeblest distant unintended tinkling was trembling up from the abyss. And for a moment or two the young man refrained even from turning his head at the soundless opening and closing of the door.

He lay fully conscious that he was not alone; that quiet eyes had him steadily in regard. But, like rats, his wits were beginning to busy themselves again. Sheer relief from the terrors of sleep, shame of his extremity and weakness, a festering sense of humiliation—yes, he must save his face at all costs. He must put this preposterous spying valet in his place. Oddly enough, too, out of the deeps a peculiar little vision of recollection had inexplicably obtruded itself into consciousness. It would be a witticism of the first water.

"They are dreadfully out of season, you know," he began murmuring affectedly into the hush, "dreadfully. But what I'm really pining for is a bunch of primroses. . . . A primrose by the river's brim. . . . must be a little conservative." His voice was once more trailing off into a maudlin drowsiness. With an effort he roused himself, and now with an extremely sharp twist of his head, he turned to confront his visitor.

But the room was already vacant, the door ajar, and Jimmie's lids were on the point of closing again, sliding down over his tired eyes like leaden shutters which no power on earth could hinder or restrain, when at the faintest far whisper of sound they swept back suddenly—and almost incredibly wide—to drink in all they could of the spectacle of a small odd-looking child who at that moment had embodied her-self in the doorway.

She seemed to have not the least intention of re-turning the compliment. Her whole gaze, from out of her fair flaxen-pigtailed face, was fixed on the coarse blue-banded kitchen bowl which she was carrying with extreme care and caution in her two narrow hands. The idiots down below had evidently filled it too full of water, for the pale wide-petalled flowers and thick crinkled leaves it contained were floating buoyantly nid-nod to and fro as she moved—pushing on each slippered foot in turn in front of the other, her whole mind concentrated on her task.

A plain child, but extraordinarily fair, as fair as the primroses themselves in the congregation of candle-light that motionlessly flooded the room—a narrow-chested long-chinned little creature who had evidently outgrown her strength. Jimmie was well accustomed to take things as they come; and his brief sojourn in his

uncle's house in his present state of health had already enlarged the confines of the term "things." Anyhow, she was a relief from the Valet.

He found himself, then, watching this new visitor without the least trace of astonishment or even of surprise. And as his dark eyes coursed over the child; he simply couldn't decide whether she most closely "took after" Soames Junior or Mrs. Thripps. All he could positively assure himself of was just the look, "the family likeness." And that in itself was a queerish coincidence, since whatever your views might be regarding Soames Junior, Mrs. Thripps was real enough—as real, at any rate, as her scrubbing-brush and her wholesome evil-smelling soap.

As a matter of fact, Jimmie was taking a very tight hold of himself. His mind might fancifully be compared to a quiet green swarming valley between steep rock-bound hills in which a violent battle was proceeding—standards and horsemen and smoke and terror and violence—but no sound.

Deep down somewhere he really wanted to be "nice" to the child. She meant no ill; she was a demure far-away harmless looking creature. Ages ago. . . On the other hand he wished to heaven they would leave him alone. They were pestering him. He knew perfectly well how far he was gone, and bitterly resented this renewed interference. And if there was one thing he detested, it was being made to look silly—"I hope you are trying to be a good little boy? . . . You haven't been talking to the servants?" That kind of thing.

It was, therefore, with mixed feelings and with a tinge of shame-facedness that he heard his own sneering toneless voice insinuate itself into the silence; "And what, missikins, can I do for you? . . . *What*, you will understand; not *How?*" The sneer had degenerated into a snarl.

The child at this had not perceptibly faltered. Her face had seemed to lengthen a little, but that might have been due solely to her efforts to deliver her bowl without spilling its contents. Indeed she actually succeeded in so doing, almost before Jimmie had time to withdraw abruptly from the little gilt-railed table on which she deposited the clumsy pot. Frock, pigtail, red hands—she seemed to be as "real" a fellow creature as you might wish to see. But Jimmie stared quizzically on. Unfortunately primroses have no scent, so that he could not call on his nose to bear witness to his eyes. And the congested conflict in the green valley was still proceeding.

The child had paused. Her hands hung down now as if they were accustomed to service; and her pale blue eyes were fixed on his face in that exasperating manner which suggests that the owner of them is otherwise engaged. Not that she was looking *through* him. Even the sharpest of his "female friends" had never been able to boast of that little accomplishment. She was looking into him; and as if he occupied time rather than space. Or was she, sneered that weary inward voice again, was she merely waiting for a tip?

"Look here," said Jimmie, dexterously raising himself to his elbow on the immense lace-fringed pillow, "it's all very well; you have managed things quite admirably, considering your age and the season, and so on. But I didn't ask for primroses, I asked for violets. That's very old trick—very old trick."

For one further instant, dark and fair, crafty and simpleton face communed, each with each. But the smile on the one had faded into a profound childlike contemplation. And then, so swift and imperceptible had been his visitant's envanishment out of the room, that the very space she had occupied seemed to remain for a while outlined in the air—a nebulous shell of vacancy. She must, apparently, have, glided *backwards* through the doorway, for Jimmie had assuredly not been conscious of the remotest glimpse of her pigtail from behind.

Instantly on that, the stony hillside within had resounded with a furious clangour—cries and shouts and screamings—and Jimmie, his face bloodless with rage, his eyes almost blind with it, had leapt out of the great bed as if in murderous pursuit. There must, however, have been an unusual degree or so of fever in his veins that night so swift was his reaction. For the moment he was on his feet an almost unendurable self-pity had swept into possession of him. To take a poor devil as literally as that! To catch him off his guard; not to give him the mere fleck of an opportunity to get his balance, to explain, to answer back! Curse the primroses.

But there was no time to lose.

With one hand clutching his pyjamas, the other carrying the bowl, he poked forward out of the flare of the room into the cold lightlessness of the wide stone staircase.

"Look here," he called down in a low argumentative voice, "look here, You! You can cheat and you can cheat, but to half strangle a fellow in his sleep, and then send him up the snuffling caretaker's daughter—No, No Next time, you old makebelieve, we'd prefer company a little more—a little more *congenial*."

He swayed slightly, grimacing vacantly into the darkness and listening to his speech as dimly as might a somnambulist to the distant roar of falling water. And then, poor benighted creature, Jimmie tried to spit, but his lips and tongue were dry and that particular insult was spared him.

He had stooped laboriously, had put down the earthenware bowl on the Persian mat at the head of the staircase, and was self-congratulatorily re-welcoming himself into the scene of still lustre he had dared for that protracted minute to abandon, when he heard as if from beneath and behind him a kind of lolloping disquietude and the sound as of a clumsy-clawed, but persistent animal pushing its uncustomary awkward way up the soap-polished marble staircase.

It was to be tit for tat, then. The miserable ménage had let loose its menagerie. That. They were going to experiment with the mouse-cupboard-and-keyhole trickery of his childhood. Jimmie was violently shivering; his very toes were clinging to the mat on which he stood.

Swaying a little, and casting at the same time a strained whitened glance round the room in which every object rested in the light as if so it had rested from all eternity, he stood mutely and ghastly listening. Even a large bedroom, five times the size of a small boy's attic, affords little scope for a fugitive, and shutting your eyes, darkening your outward face, is no escape. It had been a silly boast, he agreed—that challenge, that "dare" on the staircase; the boast of an idiot. For the "congenial company" that had now managed to hoof and scabble its way up the slippery marble staircase was already on the threshold.

All was utterly silent now. There was no obvious manifestation of danger. What was peering steadily in upon him out of the obscurity beyond the door, was merely a blurred whitish beast-like shape with still, passive, almost stagnant eyes in its immense fixed face. A perfectly ludicrous object—on paper. Yet a creature so nauseous to soul and body, and with so obscene a greed in its motionless piglike grin that with one vertiginous swirl Jimmie's candles had swept up in his hand like a lateral race of streaming planets into outer darkness.

If his wet groping fingers had not then encountered one of the carved pedestals of his uncle's bedstead, Jimmie would have fallen; Jimmie would have found, in fact, the thing's physical level.

Try as he might, he had never in the days that followed made quite clear in his mind why for the third time he had not made a desperate plunging clutch at the bell rope. The thing *must* have been Soames Junior's emissary, even if the bird-faced scullery maid with the primroses had not also been one of the "staff."

That he had desisted simply in case she should herself have answered his summons and so have encountered the spurious animal as she mounted the dark staircase seemed literally too "good" to be true. Not only was Jimmie no sentimentalist, but that particular kind of goodness, even in a state of mind perfectly calm and collected, was not one of his pleasanter characteristics.

Yet facts are facts—even comforting ones. And unless his memory was utterly untrustworthy, he had somehow—somehow contrived to regain his physical balance. Candelabrum in hand, he had actually, indeed, at last emerged from the room, and stooped his dark head over the balusters in search of what unaccountably had *not* awaited his nearer acquaintance. And he had—he must have—flung the substantial little blue-banded slop-basin, primroses and all, clean straight down in the direction of any kind of sentient target that happened to be in its way.

"You must understand, Mrs. Thripps," he had afterwards solemnly explained, "I don't care to be disturbed, and particularly at night. All litter should, of course, be immediately cleared away. That's merely as things go in a well-regulated household, as, in fact, they *do* go. And I see you have replaced the one or two little specimens I was looking over out of the cabinet on the staircase. Pretty things, too; though you hadn't the advantage of being in the service of their late owner—my uncle. As *I* was. Of course, too, breakages cannot be avoided. There, I assure you, you are absolutely free. Moth and rust, Mrs. Thripps. No; all that I was merely enquiring about at the moment is that particular pot. There was an accident last night—primroses and so on. And one might have expected, one might almost have sworn, Mrs. Thripps, that at least a shard or two, as the Psalmist says, would have been pretty conspicuous even if the water *had* completely dried away. Not that I heard the smash, mind. I don't go so far as that. Nor am I making any insinuations *whatever*. You are the best of good creatures, you are indeed—and it's no good looking at me like Patience on a monument; because at present life is real and life is earnest. All I mean is that if one for a single moment ceases to guide one's conduct on reasonable lines—well, one comes a perfectly indescribable cropper, Mrs. Thripps. Like the pot."

Mrs. Thripps's grey untidy head had remained oddly stuck out from her body throughout this harangue. "No, sir," she repeated once more. "High and low I've searched the house down, and there isn't a shadder of what you might be referring to, not a shadder. And once more, I ask you, sir; let me call in Dr. Stokes. He's a very nice gentleman; and one as keeps what should be kept as close to himself as it being his duty he sees right and proper to do. Chasing and racketing of yourself up and down these runs of naked stairs—in the dead of night—is no proper place for you, sir, in *your* state. And I don't like to take the responsibility. It's first the candles, then the bells, and then the kitching, and then the bason; I know what I'm talking about, sir, having lost two, and one at sea."

"And suppose, my dear," Jimmie had almost as brilliantly as ever smiled; "suppose we are all of us at sea. What then?"

"Why then, sir," Mrs. Thripps had courageously retorted, "I'd as lief be at the bottom of it. There's been as much worry and trouble and making two ends meet in *my* life not to make the getting out of it what you'd stand on no ceremony for. I say it with all decent respect for what's respectful and proper, sir; but there isn't a

morning I step down those area steps but my heart's in my mouth for fear there won't be anything in the house but what can't answer back. It's been a struggle to keep on, sir; and you as generous a gentleman as need be, if only you'd remain warm and natural in your bed when once there."

A little inward trickle of laughter had entertained Jimmie as he watched the shapeless patient old mouth utter these last few words.

"That's just it, Mrs. Thripps," he had replied softly. "You've done for me far more effectively than anyone I care to remember in my insignificant little lifetime. You have indeed." Jimmie had even touched the hand bent like the claw of a bird around the broom-handle. "In fact, you know—and I'm bound to confess it as gratefully as need be—they are *all* of them doing for me as fast as they can. I don't complain, not the least little bit in the world. All that I might be asking is, How the devil—to put it politely—how the goodness gracious is one to tell which is which? In my particular case, it seems to be the miller that sets the wind: not, of course, that he's got any particular grain to grind. Not even wild oats, you funny old mother of a youthful mariner. No, no, no. Even the fact that there wasn't perhaps any pot after all, you will understand, doesn't positively prove that neither could there have been any primroses. And before next January's four months old we shall be at the end of yet another April. At least—" and a sort of almost bluish pallor had spread like a shadow over his face—"at least you will be. All of which is only to say, dear Madam, as Beaconsfield remarked to Old Vic., that I am thanking you *now*."

At which Mrs. Thripps immediately fell upon her knees on her housemaid's pad and plunged her hands into her zinc pail—only instantly after to sit back on her heels, skinny hands on canvas apron. "All I says, sir, is, we go as we go; and a nicer gentleman, taking things on the surface, I never worked for. But one don't want to move too much in the Public Heye, sir. Of all the houses below stairs I've worked for and all alone in I don't want to charnst on a more private in a manner of speaking than this. All that I was saying, sir, and I wouldn't to none but you, is the life's getting on my nerves. When that door there closes after me, and every day drawing out steady as you can see without so much as glancing at the clock—I say, to myself, Well, better that pore young gentleman alone up there at night, cough and all, than *me*. I wouldn't sleep in this house, sir, not if you was to offer me a plateful of sovereigns. . . Unless, sir, you *wanted* me."

On reflection Jimmie decided that he had cut almost a gallant figure as he had retorted gaily—yet with extraordinary sobriety:—"You shall have a whole dishful before I'm done, Mrs. Thripps—with a big scoop in it for the gravy. But on my oath, I assure you there's absolutely nothing or nobody in this old barn of a museum except you and me. No body, unless, of course, you will understand, one happens to pull the bell. And that we're not likely to do in broad daylight. Are we, Mrs. Thripps?" Upon which he had hastily caught up his aunt's handbag and had emerged into a daylight a good deal bleaker if not broader than he could gratefully stomach.

For a while Jimmie had let well alone. Indeed, if it had been a mere matter of choice, he would far rather have engaged in a friendly and jocular conversation of this description with his old charwoman than in the endless monologues in which he found himself submerged on other occasions. One later afternoon, for instance, at half-past three by his watch, sitting there by a small fire in the large muffled drawing room, he at length came definitely to the conclusion that some kind of finality should be reached in his relations with the Night Staff in his Uncle Timothy's.

It was pretty certain that *his* visit would soon be drawing to a close. Staying out at night until he was almost too exhausted to climb down to the pavement from his hansom—the first April silver of dawn wanning the stark and empty chimney-pots—had proved a dull and tedious alternative. The mere spectator of gaiety, he concluded, as he stared at the immense picture of the Colosseum on his Uncle Timothy's wall, may have as boring a time as must the slaves who cleaned out the cages of the lions that ate the Christians. And snapping out insults at former old cronies who couldn't help their faces being as tiresome as a whitewashed pigsty had soon grown wearisome.

Jimmie, of course, was accustomed to taking no interest in things which did not interest him; but quite respectable people could manage that equally well. What fretted him almost beyond endurance was an increasing inability to keep his attention fixed on what was really *there*, what at least all such respectable people, one might suppose, would unanimously agree was there.

A moment's fixturing of the eyes—and he would find himself steadily, steadily listening, now in a creeping dread that somewhere, down below, there was a good deal that needed an almost constant attention, and now in sudden alarm that, after all, there was absolutely nothing. Again and again in recollection he had hung over the unlighted staircase listening in an extremity of foreboding for the outbreak of a rabbit-like childish squeal of terror which would have proved—well, what would it have proved? My God, what a world! You can prove nothing.

The fact that he was all but certain that any such intolerably helpless squeal never *had* wailed up to him out of its pit of blackness could be only a partial consolation. He hadn't meant to be a beast. It was only his facetious little way. And you would have to be something pretty piggish in pigs to betray a child—however insubstantial—into the nausea and vertigo he had experienced in the presence of that unspeakable abortion. The whole thing had become a fatuous obsession. If, it appeared, you only remained solitary and secluded enough, and let your mind wander on in its own sweet way, the problem was almost bound to become, if not your one and only, at least your chief concern. Unless you were preternaturally busy and preoccupied, you simply couldn't live on and on in a haunted house without being occasionally reminded of its ghosts.

To dismiss the matter as pure illusion—the spectral picturing of life's fitful fever—might be all very well; that is if you had the blood of a fish. But who on earth had ever found the world the pleasanter and sweeter a place to bid good-bye to simply because it was obviously "substantial," whatever *that* might mean? Simply because it did nothing you wanted it to do unless you paid for it pretty handsomely; or unless you accepted what it proffered with as open a hospitality as Jimmie had bestowed on his pilgrims of the night. Not that he much wanted—however pressing the invitation—to wander off out of his body into a better world, or, for that matter, into a worse.

Upstairs under the roof years ago Jimmie as a small boy would rather have died of terror than meddle with the cord above his bed-rail—simply because he knew that Soames Senior was at the other end of it. He had hated Soames; he had merely feared the nothings of his night hours. But, suppose Soames had been a different kind of butler. There must be almost as many kinds as there are human beings. Suppose his Uncle Timothy and Aunt Charlotte had chosen theirs a little less idiosyncratically; what then?

Well, anyhow, in a sense, he was not sorry life had been a little exciting these last few weeks.. How odd that what all but jellied your soul in your body at night or in a dream, might merely amuse you like a shilling shocker in the safety of day. The safety of day—at the very cadence of the words in his mind, as he sat there in his aunt's "salon," his limbs huddled over Mrs. Thripps's fire, Jimmie's eyes had fixed themselves again. Again he

was listening. Was it that, if you saw "in your mind" *any* distant room of place, that place must actually at the moment contain you—some self, some "astral body?" If so, wouldn't, of course, you *hear* yourself moving about in it?

There was a slight whining wind in the street outside the rainy window that afternoon, and once more the bright idea crossed Jimmie's mind that he should steal upstairs before it was dark, mount up on to the Arabian bed and just cut the bell-pull—once for all. But would that necessarily dismiss the Staff? Necessarily? His eye wandered to the discreet S of yet another bell-pull—that which graced the wall beneath the expansive white marble chimney-piece.

He hesitated. There was no doubt his mind was now hopelessly jaundiced against all bell-ropes—whether they failed to summon one to church or persisted in summoning one to a six-foot hole in a cemetery. His Uncle Timothy lay in a Mausoleum. On the other hand he was properly convinced that a gentleman is as a gentleman does, and that it was really "up to you" to treat *all* bell-answerers with decent courtesy. No matter who, when, where. A universal rule like that is a sheer godsend. If they didn't answer, well, you couldn't help yourself. Or rather, you would have to.

This shivering was merely physical. When a fellow is so thin that he can almost hear his ribs grind one against the other when he stoops to pick up a poker, such symptoms must be expected. There was still an hour or two of daylight—even though clouds admitted only a greyish light upon the world, and his Uncle Timothy's house was by nature friendly to gloom. That house at this moment seemed to hang domed upon his shoulders like an immense imponderable shell. The flames in the chimney whispered, fluttered, hovered, like fitfully-playing, once-happy birds.

Supposing if, even against his better judgment, he leaned forward now in his chair and—what was infinitely more conventional and in a sense more proper than summoning unforeseen entities to one's bedside—supposing he gave just one discreet little tug at that small porcelain knob; what would he ask for? He need ask nothing. He could act. Yes, if he could be perfectly sure that some monstrous porcine caco-demon akin to the shapes of childish nightmare would come hoofing up out of the deeps at his behest—well, he would chance it. He would have it out with the brute. It was still day.

It was still day. But, maybe, the ear of pleasanter visitors might catch the muffled tinkle? In the young man's mind there was now no vestige of jocularly. In an instant's lightness of heart he had once thought of purchasing from the stiff-aproned old assistant at his Aunt Charlotte's family grocer's, a thumping big box of Chocolates. Why, just that one small bowl in *famille rose* up there could be bartered for the prettiest little necklet of seed pearls. She had done her best—with her skimpy shoulders, skimpier pigtail and soda-reddened hands. Pigtail! But no; you might pull real bells: to pull dubiously genuine pigtails seemed now a feeble jest. The old Jimmie of that kind of facetiousness was a thing of the past.

Apart from pigs and tweeny-maids, what other peculiar emanations might in the future respond to his summonings, Jimmie's exhausted imagination could only faintly prefigure. For a few minutes a modern St. Anthony sat there in solitude in the vast half-blinded London drawing-room; while shapes and images and apparitions of memory-and fantasy sprang into thin being and passed away in his mind. No, no.

"Do to the Book; quench the candles;
Ring the bell. Amen, Amen."

—he was done with all that. Maledictions and anathemas; they only tangled the hank.

So when at last—his meagre stooping body mutely played on by the flamelight—he jerked round his dark narrow head to glance at the distant mirror, it must have been on the mere after-image, so to speak, of the once quite substantial-looking tweeny-maid that his exhausted eyes thirstily fixed themselves.

She was there—over there, where Soames Junior had more than once taken up his obsequious station. She was smiling—if the dusk of the room could be trusted that far; and not through, but really *at* Jimmie. She was fairer than ever, fairer than the flaxenest of nymphs on his uncle's ceiling, fairer than the saffronest of young ladies in the respectablest of family grocers, fairer even then—

Jimmie hung on this simple vision as did Dives on the spectacle of Lazarus in bliss. At once, of course, after his very first sigh of relief and welcome, he had turned back on his lips a glib little speech suggesting forgiveness—Let auld acquaintance be forgot; that kind of thing. He was too tired even to be clever now. And the oddest of convictions had at once come into his mind—seemed almost to fill his body even—that she was waiting for something else. Yes, she was smiling as if in hope. She was waiting to be told to go. Jimmie was no father. He didn't want to be considerate to the raw little creature, to cling to her company for but a few minutes longer, with a view to returns in kind. No, nothing of all that. "Oh, my God; my God!" a voice groaned within him, but not at any unprecedented jag or stab of pain.

The child was still waiting. Quite quietly there—as if a shadow, as if a secret and obscure ray of light. And it seemed to Jimmie that in its patient face hung veil upon veil of uncountable faces of the past—in paint, stone, actuality, dream—that he had glanced at or brooded on in the enormous history of his life. That he may have coveted, too. And as well as his rebellious features could and would, he smiled back at her.

"I understand, my dear," he drew back his dry lips to explain. "Perfectly. And it was courtesy itself of you to look in when I didn't ring. I *didn't*. I absolutely put my tongue out at the grinning old knob. . . . But no more of that. One mustn't talk for talking's sake. Else, why all those old Trappists. . . . though none of 'em such a bag-of-bones as me, I bet. But without jesting, you know. . . ."

Once more a distant voice within spoke in Jimmie's ear. "It's important"; it said. "You really must hold your tongue—until, well, it holds itself." But Jimmie's face continued to smile.

And then suddenly, every vestige of amusement abandoned it. He stared baldly almost emptily at the faint inmate of his solitude. "All that I have to say," he muttered, "is just this:—I have Mrs. Thripps. I haven't absolutely cut the wire. I wish to be alone. But *if* I ring, I'm not *asking*, do you see? In time I may be able to know what I want. But what is important now is that no more than that accursed Pig were your primroses 'real,' my dear. You see things *must* be real. And now, I suppose," he had begun shivering again, "you must go to—you must go. But listen! listen! we part friends!"

The coals in the grate, with a scarcely audible shuffling, recomposed themselves to their consuming.

When there hasn't been anything there, nothing can be said to have vanished from the place where it has not been. Still, Jimmie had felt infinitely colder, and immeasurably lonelier when his mouth had thus fallen to silence; and he was so empty and completely exhausted that his one apprehension had been lest he should be unable to ascend the staircase to get to bed. There was no doubt of it: his ultimatum had been instantly effective.

The whole house was now preternaturally empty. It was needless even to listen to prove that. So absolute was its pervasive quietude that when at last he gathered his bones together in the effort to rise, to judge from the withering colour of the cinders and ashes in the fireplace, he must have been for some hours asleep; and daybreak must be near.

He managed the feat at last, gathered up the tartan travelling shawl that had tented in his scarecrow knees, and lit the only candle in its crystal stick in his Aunt Charlotte's drawing-room. And it was an almost quixotically peaceful though forebodeful Jimmie who, step by step, the fountain of his thoughts completely stilled, his night-mind as clear and sparkling as a cavern bedangled with stalagmites and stalactites, climbed laboriously on and up, from wide shallow marble stair to stair.

He paused in the corridor above. But the nymphs within—Muses, Graces, Fates, what not—piped in vain their mute decoy. His Uncle Timothy's Arabian bed in vain summoned him to its downy embraces. At the wide-open door he brandished his guttering candle in a last smiling gesture of farewell: and held on.

That is why when, next morning, out of a sounding slanting shower of rain Mrs. Thripps admitted herself into the house at the area door, she found the young man, still in his clothes, lying very fast asleep indeed on the trucklebed in the attic. His hands were not only crossed but convulsively clenched in that position on his breast. And it appeared from certain distressing indications that he must have experienced a severe struggle to refrain from a wild blind tug at the looped-up length of knotted whipcord over his head.

As a matter of fact it did not occur to the littered old charwoman's mind to speculate whether or not Jimmie had actually made such a last attempt. Or whether he had been content merely to wait on a Soames who might, perhaps, like all good servants, come when he was wanted rather than when he was called. All her own small knowledge of Soameses, though not without comfort, had been acquired at second-hand.

Nor did Mrs. Thripps waste time in surmising how Jimmie could ever have persuaded himself to loop up the cord like that out of his reach, unless he had first become abysmally ill-content with his small, primitive, and belated knowledge of campanology.

She merely looked at what was left of him; her old face almost comically transfixed in its appearance of pity, horror, astonishment, and curiosity.

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