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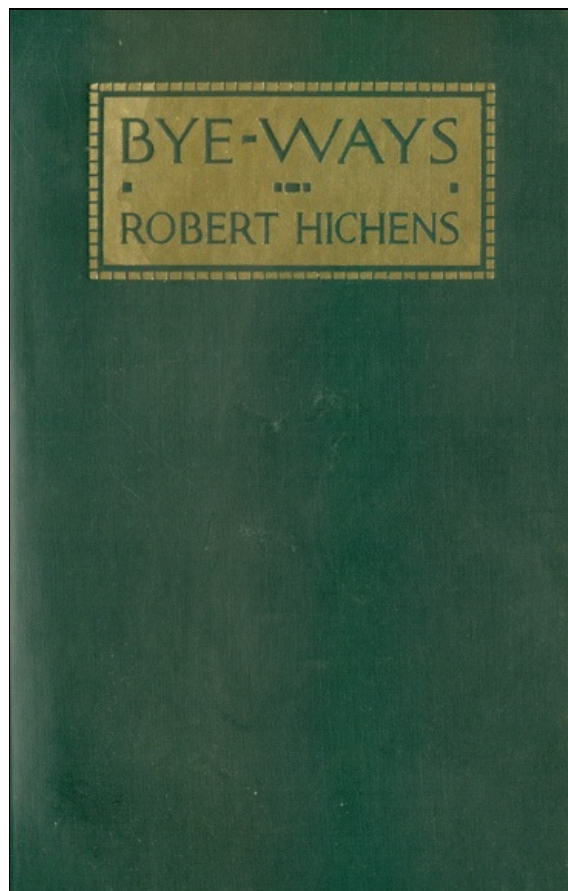
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BYE-WAYS

BY
ROBERT HICHENS

Author of "The Garden of Allah,"
"Bella Donna," etc.

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[3]

BYE-WAYS

THE CHARMER OF SNAKES

I

THE petulant whining of the jackals prevented Renfrew from sleeping. At first he lay still on his camp bed, staring at the orifice of the bell tent, which was only partially covered by the canvas flap let down by Mohammed, after he had bidden his master good-night. Behind the tent the fettered mules stamped on the rough, dry ground, and now and then the heavy rustling of a wild boar could be heard, as it shuffled through the scrub towards the water that lay in the hollow beyond the camp. The wayward songs of the Moorish attendants had died into silence. They slept, huddled together and shrouded in their djelabes. But their wailing rapture of those old triumphant days when on the heights above Granada, beneath the eternal snows, their brethren walked as conquerors, had been succeeded by the cries of the uneasy beasts that throng the mountains between Tangier and Tetuan. And Renfrew said to himself that the jackals kept him

from sleeping. He lay still and wondered if Claire were awake in her tent close by. If so, if her dark eyes were unclouded, what journeys must her imagination be making! She was so sensitive to sound of any kind. A cry moved her sometimes with a swift violence that alarmed those around her. The message of a note of music shut one door on her soul, opened another, and let her in to strange regions in which she chose to be lonely. [4]

How amazing it was to think that Claire, with all her serpentine beauty, all her celebrity, all the legends that clung to her fame, all the wild caprices of which two worlds had talked for years,—that Claire was hidden away three feet off, beneath the canvas shield that looked like a moderate-sized mushroom from the Kasbar on the hill. How amazing to think she was no longer Claire Duvigne, but Claire Renfrew. Her cheated audiences sighed in London in which a week ago she was acting. And while they sighed, she slept in this wild valley of Morocco, or lay awake and heard the jackals whining among the dwarf palms. And she was his. She belonged to him. He had the right to hold her—this thin, pale wonder of night and of fame—in his arms, and to kiss the lips from which came at will the coo of a dove or the snarl of a tigress. Although Renfrew could not sleep, he fell into a dream. Indeed, ever since he had married Claire, a week ago, his life had been a dream. When the goddess suddenly bends down to the worshipper, and says: "Don't pray to me any more—sit on my throne by my side!"—the worshipper exchanges one form of devotion for another, so deep and so different that for a while his ordinary faculties seem frozen, his life goes in shadowy places. Renfrew was not a man of deep imagination, but he had enough of the dangerous and dear quality to make him full of interest in Claire's bonfires of the mind. He sunned himself in the sparks which flew from her, even as the phlegmatic man in the pit bathes in the fury of some queen of the stage. He adored partly because he scarcely understood. [5]

And then, at this moment, he was in the throes of a most unexpected honeymoon. Claire, after refusing to have anything to do with him for two years or more, had suddenly married him in such a hurry that, though London gasped, Renfrew gasped still more. She had sent for him one night, from her dressing-room, between the third act and the fourth of an angry drama of passion. He came in and found her sitting in an arm-chair by a table, on which lay a note containing his last proposal, and a dagger with which she was about to commit a stage murder that had carried her glory to the four quarters of the universe. Her face was covered with powder, and in her long white dress she looked like a phantom. As she spoke to him, she ran her thin fingers mechanically up and down the blade of the dagger. When Renfrew was in the room, and the door shut, she looked up at him and said:— [6]

"Desmond, I'm going to frighten you more than I shall frighten the audience out there."

And she pointed towards the hidden stage.

"How?" he said, looking at her hand and at the dagger.

"I'm going to marry you."

Renfrew turned paler than she was.

"Ah!" she cried. "You go white?"

"No, no," he murmured. "But—but I can't believe it."

"I will marry you when you like, to-morrow, whenever you can get a licence."

"Oh, Claire!"

Suddenly she got up.

"Take me away from here," she said. "From this heat and noise. Take me to some place where it is wild and desolate. I want to be in starlight, with people who know nothing of me, and my trumpery talent. O God, Desmond, you don't know how a woman can get to hate being famous! I should like to act to-night to a circle of savages who had never heard of me and of my glory."

"Curtain's up!" sang a shrill voice outside.

Claire picked up the dagger.

"Well?" she said. "Shall it be—?"

"Ah, yes—yes!" Renfrew answered in a choked voice.

She smiled and glided out, like a white snake, he thought. [7]

And now—yes, those were really jackals whining, and Claire slept, surrounded by a circle of Moors under the stars of Morocco.

Renfrew trembled at the astounding surprises of life. Now the devil of the night—thought—had filled his veins with fever. He got up softly, drew on his clothes, unfastened the canvas flap, and emerged, like a shadow, from the mouth of the tent. The night was dewy and cool. All the heaven was full of eyes. The line of tethered mules looked like a black hedge in whose shelter the group of tents was pitched. A low fire, held in a cup of earth, was dying down in the distance, and as Renfrew came out a lanky dog slunk off among the bushes that clothed the low hills on every side.

Renfrew stood quite still. He was bare-headed, and the breeze caught at his thick brown hair,

and seemed to tug it like a rough child at play with a kindly elder. His eyes were turned towards the tiny peaked tent which shrouded Claire. A small moon half way up the sky sent out a beam which faintly illuminated this home of a wanderer, and Renfrew thought the beam was like a silver finger pointing at this wonderful creature whom glory had so long attended. Such beings must walk in light. Nature herself protests against their endeavours to shroud themselves even for a moment in darkness. He drew close to the tent, and listened for Claire's low breathing. But he could not hear it. Perhaps she was awake then. [8]

"Claire!" he called, in a low voice.

There was no answer. Renfrew hesitated and glanced round the little camp. It was just then that he noticed the absence of two figures which had been standing like statues near his tent when he went to bed. These were soldiers sent from the nearest village to guard the camp from marauders during the night. Clad in earth-coloured rags, shrouded in loose robes that looked like musty dressing-gowns, with fez on head, and musket in hand, they had seemed devoutly intent on doing their duty then. But now—where were they? Renfrew strolled among the tents, expecting to find them squatting near the fire smoking cigarettes, or playing some Spanish game of cards. But they had vanished. He returned, and posted himself again by the door of Claire's rude bedroom, saying to himself that he would be her guard. Those Moorish vagabonds had deserted her. They cared nothing for the safety of this jewel, whom the whole civilised world cherished. But in his heart glowed a passion of protection for her. And then he gazed again at the impenetrable canvas wall that divided him from her. Only two hours ago he had held her in his arms and kissed her lips, yet already he felt as if a river of years flowed between them. He began to torture himself deliberately, as lovers will, by the imagination of non-existent evils. Suppose Claire [9] possessed the power of a fairy, and could evaporate at will into the spaces of the air, leaving no trace behind. She might then have departed, have faded into the scented silence and darkness of this land so strange and desolate. Renfrew supposed the departure an actual fact. What a loneliness would fill his night then; if that little tent stood empty, if that slim sleeper were removed from the camp round which the jackals sat on their tiny haunches, whining like peevish spirits. He trembled beneath the weight of this absurd supposition, revelling in the intolerable with the folly of worship. Gradually he forced himself on step by step along the fanciful path till he had assured his imagination that Claire was really gone, and that he was just such a travelling Englishman as may come alone across the Straits, take out a camp, and spend his days in stalking wild boar, or shooting duck, his nights in the heavy slumber of complete weariness. And, at length, having gained a ghastly summit of imaginative despair, he suddenly stretched forth his hand, unhooked the canvas that shrouded Claire's tent door, and peeped cautiously in, courting the delicious revulsion of feeling which he would secure when he saw her half defined form in the shadow of the leaning roof that hid her from the stars.

He bent forward with greedy anxiety. But the pale and tragic face he looked for, did not greet his eyes. The tent was empty.

Renfrew stood for a moment holding back the canvas flap with one hand. This denial calmly [10] offered to his expectation bewildered him. He was confused, and for a moment scarcely thought at all. Then his mind broke away with the violence of a dog unleashed, and ran a wild course of surmises. He thought first of rousing the camp and organising an immediate search. Then he remembered the absence of the two soldiers who ought to be guarding the tents and the mules. Claire gone, those soldiers absent! He linked the two facts together, and turned white and sick. But he did not rouse the camp. Indeed, he thanked God that all the men were sleeping. He sprang softly back from the tent, turned on his heel, and stole out of the camp so silently that he scarcely seemed a living thing. The ground towards the water was boggy and spongy, and the scent of the thickly growing myrtles was heavy in the air. Renfrew brushed through them swiftly. He heard the harsh snuffling of a boar, and the tread of its feet in the mud at the water-side. And these sounds filled the night with a sense of unknown dangers. Darkness, a wild country, wild men, wild beasts, and his beautiful Claire out somewhere alone, near him, perhaps, yet hidden behind the impenetrable veil of darkness. He saw her fainting, struggling, crying out for him. He saw her silent and dead, and frenzy seized him. She was not here by the water. And with a [11] gesture of despair he turned back. Low and rounded hills faced him on all sides, covered with a dense undergrowth of palms and close-growing shrubs that looked almost like black velvet in the night. On one, the highest, was perched the native village from which the soldiers had come. Dogs were barking in it incessantly. It seemed to Renfrew that Claire might have been conveyed there by these ruffians; and he began hastily to ascend in the direction of the dogs' acute voices. He stumbled among the palms at first; but, mounting higher, he came into the eye of the moon, and was swallowed up in a shrouded silver radiance. The camp faded away below him, and he felt the breeze with greater force. Yet its breath was warm. Could Claire feel it? Did she see the moon? Now the dogs were evidently close by. The village must be behind that big clump of trees. Renfrew sprang upward, passed through them, suddenly drew a great breath and stood still.

Beyond the trees there was a small clearing that almost corresponded to our English notion of a village green. On the near side of it was the clump of trees in whose shadow Renfrew now stood. On the far side of it was the Moorish village, a minute collection of low huts like hovels, featureless and filthy. The moon streamed over the clearing and lit up faintly a cluster of seated figures that formed a good-sized circle. The figures looked broad and almost shapeless, for they [12] were all smothered in long, voluminous robes, and over all the heads great hoods were drawn which hid the faces of the wearers. They were absolutely motionless, and differed little from the more distant clumps of dwarf palms that grew everywhere among the huts. Only they possessed

the curiously sullen aspect of things alive but entirely motionless. It was not this living Stonehenge of Morocco, however, which caused Renfrew to catch his breath and rooted him in the shadow. In the centre of the circle, lit up by the moon, there stood something that might have been a phantom, it was so thin, so tall, so white-faced, so strange in its movements. It was a woman, and long black hair flowed down to its waist,—night standing back from that moon, vague and spectral, the face. In this human night and moon, great sombre eyes gleamed with a sort of fatigued beauty. This spectre stretched out its long arms in weird gesticulations and sometimes swayed its body as if it moved to music. And from its lips came a soft and liquid stream of golden words that mingled with the acid barking of the dogs, some of which crept furtively about on the outskirts of the serene hooded circle of the listeners. This murmuring spectre was Claire. She was girt about with silently staring Moors. And she was in the act of delivering one of her most famous recitations, which she had last given at a monster morning performance before Royalties in London, on a sultry day of the season. As this fact broke upon Renfrew's mind, he seemed for a moment to be back in the hot dressing-room in which Claire had said: "I will marry you." He seemed to hear her passionate exclamation: "I should like to act to-night to a circle of savages!" The hill men of this part of Morocco may not be savages, but they are fierce and wild and ruthless. And now they hung upon the lips that had spoken to London, Paris, Vienna, New York—but never before to such an audience as this. The recitation was a description of the performance of a snake-charmer, his harangue to his reptiles and to the crowd watching him, and his departure into the solitude of the great desert, there to obtain, in communion with its spirit, the power to work greater miracles, and to charm not alone the serpents that dwell among the rocks and in the forests, but also men, women, little children,—the power to thrust a human world into a kennel of plaited straw, to take it out in sections at pleasure, and to make it dance, pose, and posture, like a viper tamed into a species of ballet-dancer. In this recitation the peculiar and almost serpentine fascination of Claire had full liberty. She represented the snake-charmer as a being who through long and intimate association with snakes had become like them, lithe, fantastic, and unexpected, soft and deadly, by turns sleepy and violent, a coil of glistening velvet and a length of cast-iron, tipped with a poisoned fang and the music of a hiss. His fanaticism, his greed for money, the passionate prayer to Sidi Mahomet that flowed from his lips while his terrible eyes searched an imaginary crowd in search of the richest man or the most excited woman in it, his bursts of dancing humour, his deadly stillness, his playful familiarity with his dangerous captives, his mesmeric anger when they were sullen and recalcitrant, his relapse into the savage churchwarden with the collecting box when his "show" was at an end,—every side, every subtlety of such a creature Claire could give with the certainty of genius. As you watched her, you beheld the snakes, you beheld their master. Even at the end you almost saw the vast and trackless desert open its haggard arms to receive its child, who passed from the crowd to the silence in which alone he could learn to fascinate the crowd. At the great morning performance in London, a prince who knew the East had said to Claire, "Miss Duvigne, you must have lived with snake-charmers. You must have studied them for months."

[13]

[14]

"I never saw one in my life," she answered truthfully.

And now she gave her performance to those who, in the dingy market squares of their white-walled cities, had seen the snakes dance and had heard the prayer to Sidi Mahomet. And they squatted in the moonbeams, immobile as goblins carved in dusky oak. Yet they inspired Claire. From his hiding place Renfrew could note this. She had let her genius loose upon them, as she had let her cloud of hair loose upon her shoulders. The frosty touch of smart conventionality bewilders and half paralyses the utterly unconventional. Often Renfrew had heard Claire curse the smiling and self-contented Londoners who thronged the stalls of her theatre. She felt, with the swiftness of genius, the retarding hand they laid upon her winged talents. She had no inclination to curse these hooded figures gathered round her in the night, staring upon her with the fixed concentration of children who behold, rather than hear, a fairy tale, they paid her the fine compliment of an undivided attention. It was a curious scene and one that stirred in Renfrew a deep excitement. He watched it with a double sense, of living keenly and of dreaming deeply. Claire gave to him the first sense, the moon and the motionless Moors the second. But presently one of the hooded statues stirred and swayed, and there mingled with the voice of Claire a twisted melody, so thin and wandering that it was like a thread binding a bundle of gold. It pierced the night, and enclosed the words of the reciter, one sound prisoned by another lighter and less than itself. The dogs had ceased to bark now, and only the voice that told of the snake-charmer's journey into the desert, and this whispering Moorish tune, plucked by dark fingers from the strings of a rough lute, moved in the night, till Claire ceased. The lute continued for a few bars, like the symphony that closes a song, and then it too ceased abruptly on a note that brought no feeling of finale to modern ears. For an instant Claire stood motionless in the centre of the human circle. Then her arms fell to her sides. She moved swiftly towards the trees in whose shadow Renfrew was watching. The Moors made a gap, and as she passed out all the shapeless figures were suddenly elongated and crowded together upon her footsteps. As Claire came into the blackness of the trees, Renfrew stretched out his hand and clasped her arm. She stopped with no tremor, and faced him.

[15]

[16]

"Claire!"

"What, it is you, Desmond! I thought you were asleep."

"When you were awake? You have given me a fright. I came to your tent; I found it empty. The soldiers were gone."

"They were guarding me up the hill. I could not sleep. I wandered out. How hot your hand is!"

Renfrew released her. All the Moors had gathered round them like enormous shadows.

"My audience has come to the stage door!" Claire said.

Her eyes were gleaming with excitement.

"They are a beautiful audience," she added; "and the orchestra, the soft music—that was better than London fiddles." [17]

"Come back to the camp, Claire."

"Very well."

He drew her arm through his, and led her out into the moonlight and down the hill. Two shadows detached themselves from the silent assembly and followed them, barefooted, over the dewy grass. They were the soldiers. Claire looked back and saw them.

"I shall give those men a handful of pesetas, to-morrow," she said.

They reached the camp and sat down on two folding chairs in the shadow of Claire's tent. The soldiers stood near, gazing intently at them. Claire sat in a curved attitude. She had drawn a dark veil over her hair, and her enormous and tragic eyes were turned sombrely on Renfrew. She looked fatigued, as she often did after acting a long and passionate part. To Renfrew she seemed more wonderful than ever. He could scarcely believe that he was her husband.

"You have had your circle of savages," he said.

"Yes."

"And you liked them?"

"Do you think they liked me? I wonder if there was a snake-charmer among them. When I came to Sidi Mahomet I thought perhaps they would kill me. That thought made me pray better than I can in London."

"You could charm snakes more certainly than any Arab," Renfrew said. [18]

"I daresay. Perhaps I shall try at Tetuan. Good-night, Desmond."

She vanished into the tent. It seemed that she evaporated as Sarah Bernhardt evaporates in the fourth act of "La Tosca."

II

On the following day they rode across the mountain to Tetuan. They started in the dawn. Claire's eyes were heavy. She came languidly out from the tent door to mount her horse, and when she touched Renfrew he felt that her hand was cold like an icicle. He looked at her anxiously.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

"No, Desmond."

He lifted her into the saddle.

"You haven't slept," he said.

She looked down at him as she slowly gathered up her reins.

"Unfortunately, I have," she replied.

Before Renfrew had time to express surprise at this unexpected rejoinder, she had struck her horse with the whip, and trotted off over the grass in the direction of the white Kasbar that gleamed on the hill under the kiss of the rising sun. He leaped into the saddle, and followed her. The path into which they came was narrow, winding through wild fig-trees and olives, and constantly ascending. Claire did not turn her head, and Renfrew could not ride by her side. He watched her thin and sinuous figure swaying slightly in obedience to the motion of her horse, which scrambled over the rough path with the activity of a wild cat. In front of her their personal attendant, Mohammed, rode on a huge grey mule, and sang to himself incessantly in a deep and murmuring voice. Once or twice Renfrew spoke to Claire, but she did not seem to hear him. He resolved to ask about her sleep when they gained some plateau on which they could rest for a moment. At present it was necessary to concentrate his attention on his horse and on the dangers of the road. [19]

When the sun was high in the heavens, and they were high on the mountain, above a gorge in which the scrub grew densely, and great bushes starred with yellow and white flowers hid the rocks and made a home for birds, Mohammed called a halt. Renfrew lifted Claire to the ground. The men passed on towards Tetuan with their camp, and Claire sank down on a gay rug beneath the shade of a huge white umbrella, which was pitched on a square of level ground and circled with luxuriant vegetation. Renfrew lay at her feet and lit his pipe, while Mohammed, the dragoman, and one of the porters squatted at a little distance, and began to play cards in a cloud of keef. Claire was fanning herself slowly with an enormous Spanish fan in which all gay colours [20]

met. She still looked very tired. The shuffle of the descending mules died away down the mountain, and a silence, through which the butterflies flitted, fell round them.

"Is this journey too much for you, Claire?" Renfrew asked.

"No. I can rehearse for six hours in London, surely I can ride for six here."

"But you look tired."

"Because, as I told you, I slept too much last night."

"What does that mean?"

She stretched herself on the rug with the easy grace of a woman who has trained her body to carry to the eyes of others, as a message, all the moods of passion and of peace. Then she leaned her cheek on her hand.

"In the darkness of the tent, Desmond, I slept and did not know it. I believed that I lay awake. I thought I still could hear the jackals, and the stamping of the mules. But, really, I slept."

"How do you know that?"

"Because of what I am going to tell you. The wind blew about the canvas door, and when it bulged outwards I could see on each side of it a tiny section of the night outside, a bit of a bush, blades of short grass moving, a ray of the moon, the slinking shadow of one of the dogs from the village."

"Yes."

[21]

"Presently there came, I thought, a stronger gust than usual. It tore the canvas flap from the pegs, and the whole thing blew up, leaving the entrance quite open. Then it blew down again. It was only up for a minute. During that minute I had seen that a very tall man was standing outside the tent."

"One of the soldiers."

"If I had been awake it might have been."

"You mean that all this was a dream?"

"I mean that I slept last night, and that I wish I hadn't."

She turned her great eyes on Renfrew, holding the red, green, and yellow fan so that it concealed the lower part of her face. And he looked at her, staring at him like some tragic stranger above the rampart of an unknown city, and wondered whether she was acting to him in the sun. On the forefinger of the hand that held up the fan a huge black pearl perched in a circle of gold. Renfrew had often noticed it on the stage, when Claire lifted the silver dagger to kill the man who loved her in the play.

"The door of your tent was securely closed when I got up and came out this morning," he said.

"Oh, yes."

She spoke with the utmost indifference. Then she added more sharply:—

"Desmond, has it ever occurred to you that I am serpentine?"

[22]

He was startled and made no answer.

"Well—has it?"

"Yes," he said truthfully.

"Why?"

"Every one thinks so. You are so thin. You move so silently. Your body is so elastic and controlled. You always look as if you could glide into places where other women could never go, and be at home in attitudes they could never assume."

"But I'm an actress—my body is trained, you know, to lie, to fall, as I choose."

"Other actresses don't give one the same impression."

"No," she said thoughtfully. "My peculiar physique has a great deal to do with it."

"Of course, and there's something more than that, something mental."

Claire's heavy eyes grew more thoughtful. The white lids fluttered lower over them till they looked like the eyes of one half asleep. She lay in silence, plunged in a reverie that was deep and dark. In this reverie she forgot to move her fan, which dropped from her hand and fell softly upon the rug. Renfrew did not interrupt her. His worship had learned to wait upon her moods. A huge dragon-fly passed on its journey towards the far blue range of the Atlas Mountains. It whirred in its haste, and its burnished body shone in the sunshine between its gleaming wings. Claire snatched at it with her hand, but missed it.

[23]

"I should like to wear it as a jewel," she said.

Then she turned slowly again towards Renfrew, and continued her nocturne as if it had never been broken off.

"The canvas flap fell down again over the doorway, Desmond, and it seemed that just then the breeze died away, expiring in that angry gust. I could not see anything but the interior of the tent, and only that very dimly. But this man outside. I wanted to see him."

"Did you recognise that he was not one of the soldiers, then?"

"Perfectly. He was not dressed as they are. They were entirely muffled up with hoods drawn forward above their faces. And in their hands one could see their guns. This man was bareheaded, and looked half naked. And in his hands—"

She stopped meditatively.

"Was there anything in his hands?"

"Well—yes, there was."

"What?"

"I wanted to know what it was. But at first I only lay quite still and wished the wind would come again and blow the flap up so that I could see out. But it had quite gone down. The canvas did not even quiver."

"Was it near dawn?"

"I haven't an idea. Does the breeze sink then?"

[24]

"Very often."

"Ah! Perhaps it was then. Oh, but you'll see in a minute what nonsense it is to think about that. I lay still, as I said, for some time, waiting for the breeze. And when it wouldn't come, I made up my mind that I must arrive at a decision either to turn my face on the pillow and go to sleep, or else to get up, go to the tent door, and look out."

"To see this man?"

"Exactly."

"Which did you do?"

"Turned my face on the pillow."

"And went off to sleep?"

"No, grew most intensely awake—as I supposed. The pillow was like fire against my cheek. It burnt me. With the departure of the breeze the night had become suddenly most intolerably hot. I turned over on my back and lay like that. Then I felt as if there was sand on the sheets."

"Sand! Impossible! We aren't in the desert."

"No. But it seemed as if I lay in hot sand. I shifted my position, but it made no difference. I sat up. The tent door was still closed. I listened. All those dogs had ceased to bark. There wasn't a sound. Even the jackals had left off whining. Then I slipped out of bed and threw that rose-coloured Moorish cloak over me. It rustled just like a thing rustles in grass, Desmond."

[25]

She looked at him with a sort of peculiar significance, and as if she expected him to gather something definite from the remark.

"A thing in grass," he repeated, wondering. "What sort of thing?"

But Claire avoided the question. She had taken up the fan again, and was opening and shutting it with a quiet and careful sort of precision, as she went on in a low and even voice:—

"I disliked this rustling, and held the cloak tightly together with my hands. I felt as if the man outside the tent had been waiting to hear that very little noise."

"The rustling?"

"Yes. And that when he heard it he smiled to himself. I didn't intend he should hear it again though, and as I glided towards the tent door, I held the cloak very tight and away from my body. And I don't think I can have made any noise. You know how softly I can move when I choose?"

"Yes."

"When I got to the door, I waited. I couldn't hear the man; but I felt that he was still there, just on the other side of the flap."

Renfrew leaned forward on the rug. He felt deeply interested, perhaps only because Claire was the narrator. She held him much as she could hold an audience in a theatre, by her pose, her hands, her pale, almost weary face, her heavy sombre eyes, even more than by any words she chanced to be uttering. She could make anything seem vitally important if she chose, simply by her manner. Renfrew's pipe had gone out; but he did not know it, and still kept it between his lips.

[26]

"I waited for some time by the flap," Claire continued calmly. "I was going to lift it presently, I knew; but I could not do it at once. The man and I were standing, I suppose, for full five minutes only divided by that strip of canvas. I tried not to breathe audibly, and I could not hear him breathe. At last I resolved to see him, and considered how I should do so. If I remained standing and looked out, I should have to push the flap quite away and my eyes would be nearly on a level with his. He would certainly see me. I didn't wish that. I didn't intend at all that he should see me. Therefore I resolved to lie down."

"On the ground?"

"Yes, quite flat, and to raise the bottom of the flap gently an inch or two. This would enable me to see him without being seen, if I did it without noise. I dropped down quite softly. Do you remember my death in 'Camille'?"

Renfrew nodded.

"Almost like that. But the rose-coloured stuff rustled again. I wished I hadn't put it on. I raised the flap very slightly and peeped out. Do you know what I felt like just then, Desmond?" [27]

"What?"

"Just like a snake in ambush. When my cloak rustled, it was the grass against my body. I lay in cover, and could see my enemy like a creature in a forest, or a reptile in scrub."

She glanced round at the bushes and the densely growing palms.

"Yes, I lay there like a snake in the grass."

She stretched herself out on the rug as she spoke, with her head towards Renfrew and her eyes fastened on his.

"I saw first the feet of the man close to my eyes. His feet were almost black and bare. His legs were bare. My glance travelled up him, and I saw that his chest and his arms were bare too. He was clothed in a sort of loose rough garment, the colour of sacking, that fell into a kind of hood behind; and he looked enormously powerful. That struck me very much—his power."

"Did you see his face?"

"Quite well. It was the face of a man watching and listening with the closest attention. He was smiling slightly, too, as if something that had just happened had satisfied him. I knew he had heard the rustle of my robe as I slipped to the ground."

"But why should that please him?"

"It told him that I was there, that I was attentive too."

Renfrew's face slightly darkened.

"As I looked, I saw what he was holding in his hands."

"What was it—a dagger—a staff?"

"A serpent."

Renfrew could not repress an exclamation.

"Very large and striped. Its skin was like shot silk in the moonlight. It writhed softly between his hands, and turned its flat head from side to side. It seemed to be trying to bend down towards where I lay. Its tongue shot out like a length of riband out of one of those wooden winders that you buy in cheap shops. I should think its body was quite five feet long, and its colour seemed to change as it turned about. Sometimes it was pink, then it looked dull green and almost black. Once it wriggled down so near to the ground that I could see two fangs in its open mouth like hooks, and the roof of its mouth was flesh colour."

"How abominable!" said Renfrew, softly.

"I didn't feel it so at all," Claire said. "I wanted it to come to me,—back into the grass where such things are safe. But the man wouldn't let it go. He thrust it into his breast. He wanted to have his hands free."

"Good God, Claire—what for? Did he—?"

She smiled at his sudden violence, which showed his interest.

"When the snake was safe, he drew out, still smiling and listening, a little pipe that looked as if it were made of straw, very common and dirty. He held it up to his black lips, and began to play very softly and sleepily. Desmond, the tune he played was charmed. It was a tune composed—for—for—" [29]

She broke off.

"You know the Pied Piper had his tune," she said; "the rats had to follow it. Well, this tune was for the serpents."

"To charm them you mean?"

"Wisely—dangerously—almost irresistibly, perhaps in time, Desmond, quite, quite irresistibly. There is a music for all creatures, all reptiles, birds,—everything that lives; this was for the snakes."

"Well, but, Claire, how did you know that?"

She looked at him with a sort of dull amusement and pity in her half-shut eyes.

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes."

"I knew it, because the tune charmed me, Desmond."

"Ah, you are acting! I half suspected it from the first," Renfrew exclaimed almost roughly.

He sat up as a man who has been lying under a spell stirs when the spell is broken. Now he knew that his pipe was out, and he felt for his match-box. But Claire still kept her eyes fixed on him, and laid her hand on his arm gently.

"No, I am not acting," she said. "The tune charmed me. You see I am a woman; and there are many women who feel at moments that what attracts some special creature, thing, of the so-called world without a soul, attracts them too. Some men can whistle a woman as they would a dog, can't they?" [30]

"Perhaps."

"Yes, and some men can charm a woman as they could charm a serpent."

"I don't understand you, Claire."

"You don't choose to. The animal is in us all, hidden deftly by Nature, the artful dodger of the scheme of creation, Desmond; and we know it when the right tune is played to summon it from its slumber in the nest of the human body. Only the right tune can waken it."

"The animal! But—"

"Or the reptile, perhaps. What does it matter? This was the right tune for me. I lay there like a snake in the grass and it thrilled me! And all the time the black man smiled and listened for the rustling at his feet. You look black, Desmond! How absurd of you to be angry!"

And she closed her fingers over his hand till the frown died out of his face.

"The tune seemed to draw me to the man. I understood just how he had captured the serpent that lay hidden in his bosom. It had once lain in ambush as I lay now, long ago perhaps, in the desert among the rocks, on the sand, Desmond."

"Ah, the sand!" he said, remembering suddenly the strange feeling Claire had described as coming upon her when she was trying to sleep. [31]

"Yes. And he had drawn it from the sand to the oasis among the palms where he stood playing, till he heard its rustling in the grass about his feet, as it glided nearer to him, and nearer, and nearer, till at last it reared up its body, and wound up him and round him, and laid its flat head between his great hands. Yes, that was how it came."

"You fancy."

"I know. But I would not go. I determined that I would not, and I lay perfectly still. But all the time I longed to go. I had an almost irresistible passion for movement towards that tune. It seemed to me a stream of music into which I yearned to plunge, and drown and die. And it flowed up there at the man's lips! The longing increased as he piped the tune, over and over and over again, almost under his breath. I was sick with it, and it hurt me because I resisted it. And at last I knew that resisting it would kill me. I must either go, or not go, and die. There was no alternative. That music simply claimed me. It had the right to. And if I denied that right I should cease. I did deny it."

She shuddered in the sun, then added, almost harshly:—

"Like a fool."

"And then, Claire, then—?"

"It seemed to me that I died in most horrible pain. I lived once more when you said, outside my tent, 'Claire, time to get up.' You see, I slept too much last night." [32]

And again she shuddered. A look of relief shot into Renfrew's face.

"All this came from your mad performance to those Moors," he said. "You impersonate so vividly that even sleep cannot release your genius, and bring it out from the world which you have deliberately forced it to enter."

"But, Desmond, I impersonated the charmer of the snake, not the snake itself."

"Oh, in a dream the mind always wanders a little from the event that has caused the dream. It is like a faulty mimic who strives to reproduce with exactitude and slightly fails. Time to go,

Absalem?"

The dragoman had come up.

As they rode down the mountain a strange thing occurred, strange at least in connection with Claire's narrative of the night. Mohammed, who was riding just in front of them, pulled up his mule beside a thicket at the wayside, and, turning his head, signed to them to be silent. Then, pursing his lips, he whistled a shrill little tune. In a moment an answer came from the thicket; Claire glanced at Renfrew with a slight smile. Here was a sort of side light of reality thrown upon her dream and upon their conversation. Mohammed whistled again. The echo followed. And then suddenly a bird flew out, almost into his face, and, startled, swerved and darted away across the gorge into the dense woods beyond.

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"A charm of birds," Claire murmured to Renfrew, as they rode on. "The summoning tune—what can resist it?"

"Claire," he said, almost reproachfully, "you speak like a fatalist."

"And I believe I am one," she answered. "Destiny is not only a phantom but also a fact. Mine is marked out for me and known—"

"To whom? Not to yourself?"

"Oh, no!"

"To whom then?"

"To the hidden force that directs all things."

"I am your destiny."

"Ah, Desmond—or Morocco. I feel to-day as if I shall never see England again, or a civilised audience such as I have known."

And then she seemed to fall into a waking dream. Even Renfrew felt drowsy, the air was so intensely hot and the motion of the horses so monotonous. And Mohammed's deep voice was never silent. It buzzed like a bourdon in the glare of the noontide, till, far away on the hill-side, they saw white Tetuan facing the plain, the river moving stagnantly towards the sea, the great fields of corn in which strange flowers grew, and the giant range of shaggy mountains, swimming in a mist of gold that looked like spangled tissue.

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III

The camp was pitched beyond the city in the green plain that lies between Tetuan and the sea. From the tents Renfrew and Claire saw the trains of camels and donkeys passing slowly along the high road towards the steep and stony hill that leads up to the lower city gate, the white-washed summer palaces of the wealthy Moors, nestling in gardens, among green fields and groves of acacias, olives and almond trees, the far-off line of blue water on the one hand and the fairy-like and ivory town upon the other. Clouds of brown dust flew up in the air, and the hoarse cry of "Balak! Balak!" made a perpetual and distant music. Far more strange and barbarous was this city than Tangier. All traces of Europe had faded away. Thousands of years seemed now to stand like a wall between the Continents, and the hordes of dark and fanatical Moslems gazed upon the great actress and her husband as we gaze at wild animals whose aspects and whose habits are strange to us.

"I know now what it is to feel like an unclean dog," Claire said, as they sat at dinner under the stars that night, after their halting progress through the filthy alleys of the white fairyland on the hill-side. "It is a grand sensation. I suppose children enjoy it, too. That must be why they like making mud-pies."

"To-morrow is market-day, Absalem tells me," Renfrew said. "We will spend it in the town, and you can feel unclean to your heart's content—you!"

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He looked at her and laughed low, with the pride of a lover in a beautiful woman who is his own.

"They ought to fall down and worship you," he said.

"Moors worship a woman! Desmond, you are mad!"

"No, they are—they are. See, Claire, the moon is coming up already. Can it be shining on Piccadilly too, and on the façade of the theatre?"

"The theatre! I can't believe I shall ever see it again."

"Nonsense!"

"Is it? This wild country seems to have swallowed me up, and I don't feel as if it will ever disgorge me again. Desmond, perhaps there are some lands that certain people ought never to visit. For those lands love them, and, once they have seized their prey, they will never yield it up again. Poor men must often feel that when they are dying in foreign places. It is the land which

has taken them to itself as an octopus takes a drifting boat in a lonely sea. Africa!"

She had risen from her seat and moved out into the vague plain. Renfrew followed her.

"I wonder in which direction the desert lies nearest," she said. "All the strange people come in from the desert, as the strange things of life come in from the future, only one so seldom hears the tinkling bells of those deadly silent caravans in which they travel. If we could hear and see them coming, what emotions we should have!" [36]

"There are premonitions, some men say," Renfrew answered.

"The faint bells of the caravans ringing,—do you ever hear them?"

"No, Claire—never. And you?"

"I half thought I did once."

"When was that?"

"Last night. Hark! The men have finished supper and are beginning to sing. That's a song about dancing."

"To-morrow we are going to feast the soldiers, and have an African fire."

"Splendid! I think I will leap through the flames."

Renfrew put his arm round her.

"No, no. They might singe your beauty. And yet, you are a flame too. You have burnt your name, yourself, like a brand upon my heart."

The dancing song rang up in the moonlight like the wailing of dead masqueraders. All Moorish songs are sad and thrilling, fateful and pregnant with unrest and with forebodings.

With the daylight the Jews came, in their long and morose garments and black skull-caps, bearing bales of embroideries, slippers, and uncut jewels. When they saw the wonderful black pearl upon Claire's finger their huge eyes flamed with an avarice so fierce and open that Renfrew instinctively moved between them and Claire, as if to guard her from assault. [37]

But the wonderful pearl was not for them.

The sun blazed furiously when they got upon their horses to ride to the Soko. Each day the season was growing hotter, and Absalem told them that there were no English in Tetuan. Nor did they set eyes on a European woman until that day when Renfrew rode back, crouching along his horse, to the villas of Tangier.

Tetuan has more than one open mouth, and when it swallows you the contemplation of a fairyland is immediately exchanged for a desperate reality of populous filth, stentorian uproar, uneven boulders, beggars, bazaars like rabbit hutches, men and children pitted with small-pox till they appear scarcely human, lepers, Jews, pirates from the Riff Mountains, fanatics from the Ape's Hill, water-carriers, veiled, waddling women, dogs like sharp shadows, and monkeys that appear and vanish in sinister doorways with the rapidity and gestures of demons. On a market-day the city is so full that it seems as if the circling and irregular white walls must burst and disgorge the clamouring and gesticulating inhabitants into the tranquil plain below. Claire surveyed this blanched hell with a still serenity, as she had often surveyed an applauding audience at the close of her evening's task, ere she thanked them with the curious gesture, that was almost a salaam, in which humility and a remote pride mingled. Noise generally gave her calm; and when passion broke from her she taught the world to be intensely silent. These alleys became like a dream to her, and the tiny interiors of the bazaars were little histories of visionary lives, some, but only a few, mysteriously beautiful. One, in a very dark place where, for some unknown cause, all voices died away till the hot air was full of a whispering stillness, brought slow tears to Claire's eyes. In the Street of the Slippers she passed a cupboard of wood raised high from the pavement, with low roof, leaning walls, and, in front, a little bar like that which fences an English baby in its chair before the fire. In this cupboard squatted two tiny Moorish infants, sole occupants of the cupboard, with solemn faces, bending to ply their trade of pricking patterns upon rose-coloured Morocco leather. There was no beauty in the cupboard, sweetness of light, or ease. And the faces of the little boys were sad and elderly. But, placed carefully between them, was an ugly three-legged stool, on which stood two dwarf earthen jars containing two sprigs of orange flower, and, as Claire looked, one of the babes laid down his leather, lifted his jar, sniffed, with a sort of gentle resignation, at his flower, and then resumed his diligent labours, refreshed perhaps, and strengthened. In the action Claire seemed to catch sight of a little pallid soul striving to exist feebly among the slippers. [38]

"Did you see?" she cried to Renfrew, when the baby shoemakers were lost to sight. [39]

He nodded.

"I wish I were a Moorish woman, Desmond."

"Good Heaven! Why!"

"So that I could kiss the infant who smelt the orange flower in his own language. Little artist!"

Her sudden blaze of enthusiasm was checked by the infernal Soko into which they now entered. In this unpaved square, upon which the pitiless sun beat, the earth seemed to have come alive, to have formed itself into a thousand vague semblances of human figures, and to be shrieking, moving, twisting, gesticulating, as if striving to impart a thousand abominable secrets till now hidden from the world that walks upon its surface. As snow-men resemble the snow, so did these bargainers, these buyers, sellers, barterers, pedlars, resemble the baked earth on which they squatted. Shrouded in earth-coloured garments, they shrieked, strove, rang their bells, kicked their donkeys, elbowed their rivals, pommelled their camels, recited the Koran, or testified with frenzy, the terrific honesty of all their dealings. Here and there tents made of mud-coloured rags cast a grotesque shadow, in which broad women, hidden by veils like sacks, and dominated by straw hats a yard wide, sat huddled together and pecked at by wandering fowls. Jew boys, with long and expressive faces, their black hair plastered upon their foreheads in fringes that touched their eyes, strolled through the mob in batches, some of them reading in little books. Soudanese slave girls carried bouquets of orange flowers. In a corner some Hawadji were leaping monotonously to the thunder of a Moorish drum made of baked earth and of parchment. A sheep, escaped from the slaughterer, tumbled with piteous bleatings into a group of half breeds, Spanish Moors, who were playing cards near a stall covered with raw meat and great lumps of some substance that looked like lard. On a huge heap of rotten oranges and decaying fish, over which millions of flies swarmed, a number of children in close white caps were moving in some mysterious game in which two prowling cats occasionally took an unintentional part. Some Riff Arabs, fierce as tigers, tall and half-naked, stalked feverishly towards a water-carrier whose lean form, tottering with age, was almost eclipsed beneath the monstrous bladder he bore incessantly through the multitude. The horses of Renfrew and of Claire could scarcely plant their hoofs on anything that was not moving, crying, panting, or cursing; and they pulled up, and prepared to descend into this human ocean of which all the waves roared in their deafened ears. As Claire leant to Renfrew, who stretched his arms to help her, she said to him:—

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“Can you swim? If not, you will certainly be drowned.”

“You must not be. Cling to my arm.”

They sank together to their necks in the sea. In whatever direction they looked, they saw a mass of heads, an infinite expanse of shouting mouths. But suddenly the pressure became extraordinary, the uproar ear-splitting. And with the voices there mingled a piercing music like a continuous screech. People began to run, to trample in one direction. The drum of the leaping Hawadji was drowned by a louder drumming that came from the centre of the square. Children squeaked with excitement. The Riffians forgot to drink, and slid forward with the cushioned feet of animals in a jungle. A tempest arose, and in it a whirlpool formed. It seemed that Renfrew and Claire must be torn in pieces.

“What on earth is happening?” Renfrew exclaimed to Absalem, with the English anger our countrymen always display when trodden by a foreign element.

Absalem smiled with airy dignity, and moved forward, beckoning them to follow.

“Miracle man, all want see him,” he remarked. “Great miracle man.”

With consummate adroitness he drew them with him to the edge of the whirlpool. As they reached it, Renfrew felt that Claire's hand suddenly tightened upon his arm until his flesh puckered between her fingers as the flesh of a rabbit puckers in a trap. He glanced at her in astonishment. Her eyes were fixed on something, or some one, beyond them, even beyond Absalem, who was forcing people out of their way with his powerful arms and back. Renfrew followed her eyes, and saw the centre of the whirlpool.

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This mass of humanity had now assumed the form of a rough circus, the ring of which was kept clear. And in this ring a strange figure had just appeared with upraised arms, and a manner of wild, even of frantic, authority. This was a gigantic man, almost black, half-naked, with long arms, furious eyes, and legs which, though muscular, tapered at the ankles like the legs of a finely bred race-horse. His head was shaved in front; but at the back the black hair grew in a long and waving lock, and his features, magnificently cut, might have been those of a grand European of some headstrong and high-couraged race. Upon this man Claire's eyes were fixed, with an expression so strange and knowing that Renfrew turned on her with a sharp exclamation.

“Claire! Claire!”

She slowly withdrew her eyes.

“Yes, Desmond.”

A question stammered on his lips; but as she smiled at him, he felt the mad absurdity of it, and was silent.

“Well, Desmond, what is it?”

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“Nothing,” he answered.

Absalem now claimed their attention. He was determined that they should be in the front of the crowd, and ruthlessly pushed away the Moors who had obtained the best places, pointing at Claire and Renfrew, and wildly vociferating their mighty rank and enormous wealth. The staring mob gave way; and in a moment Claire and the miracle man stood face to face. His frenzied eyes

had no sooner seen her than he too fell upon the surrounding natives, thrusting them violently to one side, and cursing them for daring to draw near to the great English gentleman and lady. In the whole mighty mob these two were the only Europeans, and they attracted as universal an attention as two Aztecs would in a Bank Holiday gathering at the Crystal Palace. Renfrew could now see that the screeching music came from one side of the ring, where a couple of men, clothed in filthy rags, were sitting on the ground, one playing a long pipe of straw, the other beating an enormous drum. Immediately behind them a very old man, evidently a maniac, swayed his body violently backwards and forwards, and at regular intervals uttered a loud and chuckling cry that might have been the ejaculation of a tipsy school-boy, and came strangely from withered lips hanging loose with weakness and with age. This dancing Methuselah caught Renfrew's attention; and, for the moment, he forgot to look at the miracle man. A general outcry from the multitude made him turn his head. He saw then that the miracle man held in his huge hands a sort of kennel of straw, the mouth of which was closed with a movable flap. Lifting this aloft, he sprang wildly round the ring, vociferating some words at the top of his voice; then, suddenly casting it down, he flung himself upon the ground, which he beat with his forehead, while he shrieked out a prayer to his patron saint for protection in the great miracle which he was about to perform.

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"What is he doing?" Renfrew asked of Absalem.

"Don't you know?" Claire said.

Her eyes were gleaming with excitement as they stared at the salaaming figure that grovelled at their feet.

"No. How should I?"

"He is praying to Sidi Mahomet," she said.

And then she looked at Renfrew. He understood. At that moment, despite the excessive heat engendered by the blazing sun and the pressure of the crowd, he turned very cold, as if his body was plunged in glacier water. He thought of the tall figure that had stood before Claire's tent door in the moonbeams, the lips that had coaxed from the pipe the tune that charmed all serpents,—that right tune that they must follow, which drew them from the desert sands to the grass of the oasis, till they wound up the body of this gaunt and tremendous savage, and hid themselves in his hairy bosom. This miracle man, then, was a snake-charmer, and Claire had divined it at once. How? Renfrew put the question quickly.

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"How did I know? He is the man who played outside my tent in the night, Desmond."

"The very man! Impossible."

"The very man."

"Then you were not asleep, not dreaming?"

"How can one tell? Hush!"

She spoke in the low voice of one whose attention is becoming concentrated, and who cannot endure the interruption. The charmer had now finished his petition to his god, and, standing up, thrust into his mouth a handful of some green herb, which he chewed and swallowed. Then his whole manner abruptly changed. The frenzy died out of his eyes. A calm suffused his tall and muscular body till it became strangely statuesque. His lips slowly smiled, and he raised his hands towards the glaring sky with a sublime gesture of gratitude.

"What an actor!" Renfrew heard Claire murmur softly.

He, too, had become intensely engrossed by this man in whom he, from this moment, began to see Claire: the exquisite woman whom the civilised world worshipped in the mighty savage who came from the remote depths of Morocco; the white being who played with the minds of the capitals of Europe, in the black being who played with the reptiles of the desert and of the jungle. For Claire, guided by the spirit that ever goes before genius bearing the torch, had instinctively divined what she had never known. In London it seemed that she had entered into the very soul of this man who now stood before her. She had caught the wild graces of his bearing. She had reproduced his smile, so full of secrets and of power. She had moved as he did. She had been motionless as now he was motionless. In the sun she stood at this moment and beheld the reality of which she had been the magnificent reflection. And Renfrew felt his heart oppressed, as if clouds were closing round him.

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Now the snake-charmer looked slowly all round the great circle of watching faces until his eyes rested on Claire. He had taken the straw kennel into his hands, and he softly lifted the flap, and turned it flat upon the top of the kennel, leaving the mouth open. Then he thrust one hand into this mouth, and withdrew it, holding a writhing snake whose striped satin skin changed colour in the sunshine, turning from pink to green, from green to black.

"It is the snake I saw," Claire whispered to Renfrew.

He did not reply. He seemed fascinated by the savage and the serpent. Holding the snake at arm's length, the charmer walked softly round the circle, collecting money from the crowd. He stopped in front of Claire. The snake thrust out its flat head towards her. She did not shrink from it; and the charmer cried aloud some words that seemed like praise of her beauty and of her

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composure. She gave him a piece of gold. Renfrew gave him nothing.

Then, standing once more in the centre of the circle, he burst into a frantic incantation, while the musicians redoubled their efforts, and the old maniac in the corner gave forth his chuckling cry with greater force, and swayed his trembling body more vehemently to and fro. The snake, suddenly brought from the darkness of the kennel to the light of day, was torpid and weary. It drooped between the charmer's hands. He shook it, called on it, caught up a stick and struck it. Then, forcing its mouth wide open, he barred its pink throat with the stick, on which he made it fix its two fangs, which were like two sharp hooks. Holding the end of the stick, he came again to Claire, to whom his whole performance was now exclusively devoted; and, approaching the hanging reptile close to her eyes, he jumped it up and down to the sound of the drum and pipe.

"You see," Claire said to Renfrew, "the roof of its mouth is flesh-colour."

He did not answer. Why did all this mean so much to him? Why did the clouds grow darker? The music and the cries of the old maniac perturbed him and bewildered his brain. And he wanted to be calm, and to watch Claire and this savage with a cool and undivided attention. By this time the snake was growing irritated. It agitated its long body furiously; and when the charmer unhooked its fangs from the stick, it turned its head towards him and made a sudden dart at his face. He opened his mouth wide, thrust the snake into it, and let the creature fasten on his tongue, from which blood began to flow. Still bleeding, and with the snake fixed on his tongue, he danced and sprang into the air. His eyes grew wild. Foam ran from his mouth, and his whole appearance became demoniacal. Yet his eyes still fastened themselves upon Claire. In his most frantic moments his attention was never entirely distracted from the spot where she was standing. He tore the snake from his tongue and buried its fangs in the flesh of his left wrist. Cries broke from the crowd. The sight of the blood had excited them, for these people love blood as the toper loves wine. They urged the charmer on to fresh exertions with furious screams of encouragement. The maniac bent his body like a dervish in the last exercises of his religion, and the ragged musicians forced a more extreme uproar from their instruments. The charmer caught the snake by the tail, and strove to pull it backwards off his wrist. But the reptile's fangs were firmly fastened. It held on with a terrible tenacity, and a struggle ensued between it and its master. When at length it gave way, it was streaked with blood, and now at last thoroughly aroused. The charmer scraped his tongue with a straw; then, casting himself again upon the earth, he prayed once more with fury to Sidi Mahomet. Claire watched him always, with that pale and exquisite attention which one genius gives to the performance of another. Her face was white and still. Her body never moved. But her eyes blazed with life, and with the fires of a violent soul completely awake. Having finished his prayer, which ended in a cry so poignant that it might have burst from the lips of that world on which the flood came, the charmer remained upon the ground in a sitting posture, laid the snake in his lap, and drew from the inside of his ragged robe a Moorish lute made of a bladder, bamboo, and two strings, and coloured a pale yellowish-green. He plucked the strings gently, and played the fragment of a wild tune. Then, suddenly catching up the snake, and thrusting his tongue far out of his mouth, he poised the snake upon it, rose to his feet and stood at his full height in front of Claire, fixing his eyes upon her with a glance that seemed to claim from her both wonder and worship. The snake reared itself up higher and higher upon the quivering tongue; and the charmer, extending his long arms, whirled slowly round as if poised upon a movable platform, while a terrific clamour broke from the Moors, who seemed to be roused by this feat to the highest pitch of excitement. Still turning and turning, the charmer drew from his bosom a second snake that was black and larger than the first, and coiled it round his sinewy neck like a gigantic necklace, the darting head in front, resting, a sort of monstrous pendant, upon his uncovered chest. To Renfrew he looked like some hateful grotesque in a nightmare, inhuman, endowed with attributes of a devil. The serpents were part of him, growths of his body, visible signs of some terrible disease in which he gloried and of which he made a show. The creature was intolerable. His exhibition had suddenly become to Renfrew unfit for the eyes of any woman; and, without a word, he took hold of Claire and pulled her almost violently away from the circle on which the fascinated mob was beginning to encroach. She resisted him.

"Desmond!" she exclaimed, "what are you doing?"

"Claire—come. I insist upon it!"

Already the Moors had thronged the place which they had left vacant. She turned a white face on him. There was in her eyes the hideous expression of a sleep-walker suddenly awakened, and she trembled in every limb. She swung round from Renfrew, and, above the intercepting Moors, high in the air, she saw the snake, which seemed climbing to heaven. While she looked, a huge hand closed upon it and took it out of sight. The charmer, observing the departure of his distinguished patrons, had abruptly stopped his performance. Claire made no further resistance. Without a word, she permitted Renfrew to lead her to the horses and help her into the saddle. They rode down the hill to the camp without exchanging a word.

When Claire had dismounted, she stood for a moment twisting her whip in her hands. Then she said:—

"Desmond, I must ask you never to startle me again as you did to-day, by sudden action. You can't understand how such an interruption hurts a nature like mine. I would rather you had struck me. That would only have wounded my body."

She turned and went into her tent, leaving Renfrew in an agony of penitence and self-reproach. All the rest of the afternoon she was very cold and silent, rather dreamy than sullen, but

obviously disinclined for conversation, and still more obviously unwilling to endure even the slightest demonstration of affection on the part of Renfrew. When the sheep which were to be slaughtered for the soldiers' feast were driven bleating into the camp, she retired into her tent, and remained there, resting, until the sun was low in the heavens, and the porters and mule-drivers went gaily out to search for the materials of the African fire with which the night was to be celebrated. They returned, singing the Moorish conquest of Granada, with their strong arms full of canes, dry and brittle branches of trees, logs that looked like whole trunks, and huge shrubs, green and sweet-smelling. Hearing their song, Claire came out of her tent. The sky was red, and, in the southwest, turrets of vapour rose and streamed out, assuming mysterious and thin shapes in the gathering dimness. A great flock of birds, flying very high, and forming a definite and beautiful pattern, passed slowly on the wing towards the kingdom of the storks, that lies near the sand banks of Ceuta. They moved in silence, and faded away in the twilight stealthily, like things full of quiet intention and governed by some furtive, but inexorable, desire. Renfrew, who was wandering rather miserably near the camp, watching descending pilgrims from the city melt into the vast bosom of the plain, saw Claire's white figure in the tent door, half hidden in a soft rosy mist which stole from the lips of evening as scent steals from the lips of a flower. He felt afraid to go to her. He possessed her; and yet it seemed to him now that he scarcely knew her. He was only an ordinary man. She was a strange woman; not merely because of her womanhood, as all women are to all men, but strange in that which lay beyond and beneath her womanhood, in her genius, and in the dull or ardent moods that stood round it, one, and yet not one, with it. In the tent door she leaned like a spirit born of the evening, a child of fading things, dying lights, fainting colours, retreating sounds,—a spirit waiting for the coming of the stars, and the rising of the moon, and the mysteries of the night, and the subtle odours that the winds of Northern Africa bring with them over the mountains and down the lonely valleys, when the sun descends. And as a spirit may listen to the songs of men, with the melancholy of a thing apart, she listened to the songs of the Moors, until at length they seemed to be in her own heart that evening, as if they were songs of her own country. And these dark men with wild eyes who sang them, while they flung upon the grass their burdens from the thickets, and from the hedgeless and wide fields, were no longer alien to her. She stood in the tent door, and, without any conscious effort of the imagination, became their fancied mate,—a woman sprung from the same soil, or come in—like the strange people—from the deserts of their country. Only she was not as one of their women, mindless, patient, and concealed; but as their women should be, strong, hot-blooded, brave, serene, and looked upon by a world without reproach.

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Absalem came up to her to tell her some details of the night's festivity. Before he spoke she said to him:—

“Where does the desert lie?”

He told her.

“Does the miracle man come from there?”

Absalem answered that no one knew. He had been much in Wasan, the sacred city of Morocco; but none knew his birthplace, his tribe, his name. Often he disappeared, no man could tell whither. But, doubtless, he made vast journeys. Some said that he had exhibited his snakes on the banks of the Nile, that he had gone with the pilgrim trains to Mecca, that he knew Khartoum as he knew Marakesh, and that he never ceased from wandering.

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“What is his age?” Claire asked.

Absalem answered that he must be old, but that Time had no power over him.

“He miracle man; he live long as he wish.”

Last she asked when he would leave Tetuan.

“Perhaps this night. Perhaps to-morrow night, perhaps never. Perhaps he go already.”

“Already!”

Suddenly Claire moved out from the tent, and joined Renfrew, who was still watching her, and weaving lover's fancies about her white figure.

“Have you been here long, Desmond?” she asked.

“Very long, dearest. Are you rested?”

“Quite. From here you can see all the people travelling away from the city towards the sea?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been watching them?”

“Yes, indeed; for half the afternoon.”

She turned her great eyes on him searchingly, and seemed as if she checked a question which was almost on her lips.

“They must have been a strange multitude,” she said at length. “I wonder where they are all going?”

"Some to the villages in the plain, some to the coast. I saw the Riffs who were in the Soko pass by. I suppose they were returning to the caverns from which they plunder becalmed vessels, Spanish and Portuguese."

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"The Riffs—yes?"

Her intonation suggested that she was waiting for some further information. Renfrew's curiosity was aroused.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked. "What do you want to know?"

"Nothing, Desmond. How dark it is getting! There is Mohammed ringing the bell. And look, those must be the soldiers. They are just marching in from the city."

With the coming of night a wind arose, blowing towards the sea from the mountains; and with it came up a troop of clouds which blotted out stars and moon, and plunged the plain into a gulf of darkness. Tetuan does not gleam with lamps at night like a European city, and all the distant villas of the Moors were closely shuttered. So the wind, warm and scented and strong, swept over a black land, deserted and vacant. Only in the camp was there movement, music, and an illumination that strove up in the night, as if it would climb to the clouds. Scarcely had Claire and Renfrew finished dinner, when Absalem and Mohammed ceremoniously appeared to conduct them out to the bare space before the tents on which the African fire had been carefully built.

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Absalem carried a lamp which swung in the wind, and, behind, there appeared from the kitchen tent some of the porters, bearing burning brands, the flames of which were at right angles to the wood from which they sprung. The guard of soldiers, one dozen in all, armed with immense guns and wrapped in hooded cloaks, were already crouched in a silent mass before the lifeless and portentous erection which came out of the darkness, as Absalem swung forward the lamp, like the skeleton of a monster. They turned their shadowy faces on Claire, and stared with eyes intent and unself-conscious as those of an animal. The porters flung their brands on to the mountain of twigs, and instantaneously a huge sheet of livid gold sprang up against the black background of the night, as if it had been shaken out on the wind by invisible hands. This sheet expanded, swayed, fluttered in ragged edges, and cast forth a cloud of sparks which were carried away into the air and vanished in the sky. The shrubs caught fire and crackled furiously, and finally the foundation of gigantic logs began to glow steadily, and to fill the wind with a scorching heat. The camp was gradually defined, at first vaguely and in sections,—the peak of a tent, the head of a mule, a startled pariah dog, a Moor set in the eye of the flames; then clearly, as the buildings one may see in a furnace, complete and glowing. The faces of the soldiers were barred with flickering orange, and red lights played in their huge and staring eyeballs. The horses and mules could be counted. Before the kitchen tent the sacrifice of sheep was visible, stewing in enormous pans upon red embers in a trench of earth. And the grave cook, who was distinguished by a white turban, shone like a pantomime magician at the mouth of an enchanted cave. Warmth, light, life poured upon the night, and the voices of men began to mingle with the continuous voice of this superb fire. The Moors, soldiers, servants, porters, kindled into furious gaiety with the swiftness of the canes and olive boughs. They sprang up from the ground, pulled the shrouding hoods from their faces, tossed away their djelabas, and began, with shouts and ejaculations, to dance up and down before the golden sheet, spreading their hands to it with the glee of children. A sudden joy beamed in the dusky and solemn faces, twinkled in the sombre eyes. One man flung away his fez, another dashed his turban to the ground. Round, shaven heads, bare arms, brown legs, half concealed by fluttering linen knickerbockers, lithe bodies emerged with eager haste into the light. Shadows became abruptly men, formless humps athletes. Mutes sent out great voices to startle the sweeping bats. Mourners turned into maniacs. It was a fantasia that exploded into life like a rocket, shedding a stream of vivid human fire. Mohammed drew away from the flames, taking a dozen swift footsteps to the rear. Then, with a shout, he dashed forward, bounded into the golden sheet, and disappeared as a clown disappears through a paper hoop. Only the paper closed up behind him. He leaped through light to darkness, pursued by a thousand eager sparks. One soldier followed him, then another, and another. The porters, linking hands, leaped in twos and threes. Even the cook, old, and serious with a weight of savoury knowledge, tottered to the edge of the fire, which was now becoming a furnace, and took it as an Irish horse takes a stone wall, striking the topmost branches with his bare feet amid a chorus of yells.

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Claire watched the darting figures with a silent gravity. She did not seem to be stirred by the fantasia of the firelight, or to catch any gaiety or life from the boisterous activity of those about her. The flames lit up the whiteness of her face, and showed Renfrew that she was looking gloomy and even despairing.

"Is anything the matter, Claire?" he asked anxiously.

"No. How could there be?"

The wind, which was increasing in violence, blew her thin dress forward, and she shivered. Absalem noticed it.

"Wear djelabe, lady," he said.

And in a moment he had taken his off, and was carefully wrapping Claire in it. She seemed glad of it, thanked him, and, with a quick gesture that hurt Renfrew, pulled the big brown hood up over her head, so that her face was entirely concealed from view. She now looked exactly like a Moor, and might have been mistaken for one of the soldiers before the fire was lit and all impeding garments were thrown aside.

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Renfrew, uneasy, and wondering what conduct on his part would best suit her mysterious mood, after one or two remarks to which she barely replied, drew away a little, and gave his attention to the antics of the soldiers. Some of them were already resuming their djelabes, in preparation for the feast, which they sniffed even through the odour of burning wood and leaves. The cook, after his emotional and acrobatic outburst, had returned to his pans, which he was stirring tenderly with a stick. When Renfrew again looked towards Claire, he found it impossible to tell which cloak shrouded her from his sight. Four or five hooded figures stood near the fire. She must be one of them. He approached the group, but found, to his surprise, that all the members of it were soldiers. Claire had moved away. Renfrew stood for a few minutes with the men, till they were summoned to their feast, which, strangely enough, was to take place away from the fire in the dense darkness behind the tents. Then he was left alone by the huge mass of flame, which roared hoarsely in the wind. Where could Claire be? On any ordinary occasion Renfrew would certainly have sought for her, but to-night something held him back. He knew very well that she wished to be alone, that something was closely occupying her mind. Whether she was still brooding over the event of the afternoon, when he had forcibly led her away in the very crisis of the snake-charmer's performance, he could not tell. To an ordinary woman such a matter would have been a trifle; but Renfrew understood that Claire felt it more deeply. Her mind appeared to be mysteriously moved and awakened by this savage from the depths of Morocco. Various circumstances combined to render him more interesting to her than he could possibly be to any ordinary traveller. Renfrew recognised that fully and quietly. The genius of Claire had enabled her to realise in London all the wildly picturesque idiosyncrasies of a man whom she had never seen or heard of. Suddenly fate had led her to him, and she had beheld her own performance, the original of her imitation. As Renfrew stood by the fire, he began to feel the folly of his proceeding of the afternoon, and to imagine more clearly than before the condition into which it had thrown Claire. It is a sin to disturb the contemplations of genius. It is sacrilege. And then Renfrew had been moved to his act by a preposterous access of jealousy. He acknowledged this to himself. He had been jealous of Claire's interest in this man's performance, jealous perhaps even of her dream among the hills in the midnight camp, where the man stood before her sleeping eyes, and played with his visionary serpent. How mad can a lover be? He resolved to go to Claire, and ask her pardon. This resolve thrilled him. To carry it out, he would have to draw very near to Claire, to unpack his heart to her. After all, she had given herself to him. But he had appreciated the wonder of his rôle as possessor so keenly, that he had waited upon her moods with an almost trembling awe. Now, in asking pardon, he would show that in his passion he could be strong. Women want to see the man in the lover, as well as the devotee. Renfrew, in acknowledging his jealousy of a black savage, meant to clasp Claire with the arms of a whirlwind.

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Meanwhile she was hidden from him. The wind blew strongly. The sparks leaped away in clouds toward the sea. From the dense darkness behind him came a sound of music. The soldiers were feasting. The porters were striking the lute, and singing songs of the dance and of love and of victory. It was a night of comradeship and of rejoicing. Yet he stood alone; and the turmoil of his heart was unheeded. He tried to explore the blackness of the night which stood round the golden fire with his eyes. Claire must be in that blackness close to him. Doubtless she saw him, a red and yellow creature, painted into fictitious brilliance by the illumination which was shed upon him. She saw him and kept from him. Renfrew resolved to be patient. When her mood of reserve died she would come to him, in her dress of a Moor, and he would kiss the white face beneath the hood, and put his arms round the thin figure that was lost in the djelabe of brawny Absalem, and tell her the true story of his heart, never fully told to her yet. He squatted down before the fire, lit his pipe, shrugged his shoulders against the tempest from the mountains, and waited, listening to the weird music that swept by him like a hidden bird on the wind.

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And Claire—where was she? When Absalem wrapped her in the huge djelabe it seemed to Claire that he had divined her secret longing to be in hiding. She disappeared into the mighty hood of the garment as into a cave. Its shadow concealed her from the watching eyes of Renfrew. There was warmth in it and a beautiful darkness. She desired both. She saw Renfrew turn to watch the leaping soldiers, and stole away out of the illuminated circle formed by the glow from the fire, into the night beyond. She did not go far, only into the nearest shadow. And there she sat down on the short dry grass, and forgot Renfrew, the roaring flames, the wind that felt incessantly at her robe, the shouting guard, the radiant and dancing attendants. She forgot them all as completely as if they had never been in her life; for the strangeness of certain incidents preoccupied her, to the exclusion of everything else. In the double existence of a really great actress there are many moments in which the truths of the imagination seem more important than the truths of physical phenomena of things seen by the eye, of sounds received and appreciated by the ear. In these moments, genius usurps the throne of reason, and the mind beholds fancies as sunlit gods, facts as timid and scarcely defined shadows. So it was with Claire now. Even the snake-charmer, as he gave his performance in the Soko, was a shadow in comparison with that man who summoned her to the tent door in the solitary encampment. And behind and beyond both these figures of truth and dreaming stood a third, created for herself by Claire in London, that figure into whom she had poured her soul as into a mould, when she charmed imaginary serpents, and prayed to the god in whom, for a moment, she believed with the passion of the perfect mime. This trio Claire placed in line, and reviewed: charmer of her imagination, of her dream, of the Soko.

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They were the same, and yet not the same. For the first was dominated, even was created by her. The second stood above her, like some magician, and summoned her as one possessing a right. The third—what of him? He was a wild creature of blood and foam, crafty, a player like herself, a maker of money, a savage in sacking, and almost nothing to her now. Out of the desert he came.

Into the desert he was, perhaps, even now, returning, with his snakes sleeping in his bosom, and the money of the Tetuan Moors jingling in his pouch. [64]

Yes, she saw him, travelling like a shadow in the night, one of those grotesques which leap on bedroom walls when a lamp flares in the wind that sighs through an open casement. He was going; but the man of the dream remained. The dream man had come up out of the world that is vaguer to us than the desert when we wake, and clearer to us than the desert when we sleep. Claire saw him still, and, while the wonderful mountebank of the Soko passed, he stood in the tent door like a statue of ebony, a rooted reality. And the snake was in his bosom; and the pipe was at his lips; and the power was in his heart. And as he played, Claire thought beneath the djelabe of Absalem, there came to him, with the faltering steps of a thing irresistibly charmed, that third man whose soul she had seen in London, like approaching like, with the manner of a slave and the glance of the conquered. And her soul was still within that charmed figure. She could not rescue it now from the place where she had put it. And the statue at the tent door played the irresistible melody until his wild and cringing double stole to his very feet, and nearer and nearer, till they melted together, and where two men had been, there was only one. He smiled with a subtle triumph, laid down his pipe, stretched out his arms and vanished. But within him now was the soul of Claire, borne wherever he should go, his captive, his possession for all eternity. [65]

Behind her, in the cloudy darkness, Claire heard a movement, and the gliding of soft feet on grass. She did not turn her head, supposing that one of the soldiers was keeping his guard. The movement ceased. But the little noise had broken the thread on which her fancies were strung. They were scattered like beads. She found herself feeling quite ordinary, and listening with an urging attention for a renewal of the trifling noise behind her. In the distance she could see Renfrew, now crouching before the fire, which poured colour and a piercing vitality upon him. She heard also, and for the first time, the sound of the porters' music, which had been audible in the night all through her reverie, though she was entirely unaware of the fact. She realised that the soldiers were devouring the stew of mutton, and that she was in a gay camp, full of human beings in a state of unusual satisfaction. One of these human beings must be close to her. She turned her head. But she was sitting in the darkness beyond the illumination of the fire, and beyond her the night was like a black wall. Whatever had moved there was invisible to her. She had not heard the gliding step go away, and she felt that she was not alone. This feeling began to render her uneasy. She got up, with the intention of returning to the firelight and to Renfrew. Indeed she had taken a step or two in his direction, when she was checked by an unreasonable desire to see who had come so close to her, who had broken her reverie. Acting upon the sudden impulse, she turned swiftly and came on into the darkness. Almost instantly she stood before the dim outline of a man, and paused. Here in the night it was very lonely, even though the illuminated camp was so near. Claire hesitated to approach this man who seemed to be on watch and who was perfectly motionless. She waited a moment, wishing that he would come to her in order that she might see what he was like, whether he carried a gun and was a soldier. But it was soon evident that he did not mean to move. Then Claire went up so close to him that his coarse garment rubbed against her djelabe and his eyes stared right down into hers. And she saw that it was the snake-charmer from the Soko, who was looking into her face with the very smile of the man in her dream. Round his bare throat one of his snakes was twined, and he held its neck between the fingers of his left hand. The wind tossed his short and ragged cloak wildly to and fro, and whirled the long lock of hair at the back of his shaven head about, and made it dance like a living thing. When Claire came up to him, he never said a word, or moved at all. It seemed to her that his face was that of some dark and triumphant being, waiting immovably for something that was certain to come to him, and to come so close that he need not even stretch out his hand to take it as his possession. What was the thing he waited for? She looked at his black face and at the snake which moved slowly, trying to thrust its way downward into the warmth of his bosom, out of the reach of the wind and of the night. And, when the man's fingers unclosed to release it, and it slid away and softly disappeared beneath his garment, Claire shuddered under the influence of a sensation that was surely mad. For she felt that she envied the snake, and that the charmer was waiting there in the darkness for her. As the snake vanished, Claire recoiled towards the fire. The charmer did not attempt to follow her, and his huge and watchful figure quickly faded from Claire's eyes till his blackness had become one with the blackness of the night. [66] [67]

IV

Renfrew, as he crouched before the fire, felt a light touch on his shoulder. He looked up, saw Claire's white face peering down on him, and sprang to his feet.

"I thought you were never coming, that you had deserted me altogether, and left me lonely in the midst of the fantasia," he cried, seizing her hands.

"I am cold," she said; "horribly cold. Let me sit beside you, close to the fire."

She sat down on the ground, almost touching the roaring flames. [68]

"Where have you been?"

"Sitting in the dark. The soldiers are feasting?"

"Yes, and the camp fellows are all singing and playing. Don't you hear them? We are quite alone. That's all I want, all I care for. Claire, when you go away like this, and leave me, even for a few minutes, Morocco is the most desolate place in all the world, and I'm the most desolate vagabond in it."

He put his arm round her. The terrific glow from the fire played over her face, danced in the deep folds of her djelabe, shone in her eyes, showered a cloud of gold and red about her hair. For she had let her hood fall down on her shoulders. She attained to that fine and almost demoniacal picturesqueness which glorifies even the most commonplace smith when you see him in his forge by night. Her cheeks were suffused with scarlet, as if she had suddenly painted them to go on the stage. Yet she shivered again as Renfrew spoke.

"You should not have left the fire," he said. "And yet the wind is warm."

"It can't be. But it's not the wind, it's the darkness that has chilled me."

"Or is it the loneliness?" he asked, tenderly. "For you have been alone as well as I, and nothing on earth makes one so cold as solitude."

"I scarcely ever feel alone, Desmond," she said.

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And, as she spoke, she cast a glance behind her into the darkness from which she had just come. Renfrew noticed it.

"You have been alone?" he asked hastily. Then he checked himself with an ashamed laugh.

"What a fool I am," he exclaimed.

He clasped her more closely.

"A fool, because I'm so desperately in love with you, Claire," he said, rushing on his confession with the swiftness of alarmed bravery. "Look here, I want to tell you something. You must put everything I do, everything I am, down to the account of my love,—shyness, anger, abruptness, violence,—everything, Claire. My love's responsible. It does play the devil with an ordinary man when he's given his very soul to—to a woman like you, to a great woman. It keeps him back when he ought to go on, and sends him on when he ought to stay quiet, and makes him jealous of stones and—and savages."

"Savages, Desmond?"

Renfrew's face was scarlet. He put up his hand before it and muttered:—

"This fire's scorching. Yes, Claire, of savages. Didn't you find that out this afternoon, when we were in Tetuan? But of course you couldn't. You couldn't know you'd married such an infernal lunatic."

He broke off. She was watching him with a close attention, and her body had ceased to tremble under his arm.

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"Go on, Desmond."

"You want me to tell you the sort of man you've married?"

"I want you to tell me what you mean."

"Then I will. Claire, this afternoon I took you away from that snake-charming chap because—well, because you watched him as if he fascinated you."

"Oh!"

"Of course I knew why. His performance was clever, and he was picturesque in his way, although, to be sure, it was all put on, as far as that goes."

"Like my stage performances, Desmond."

"Claire," he said hotly. "How can you?"

"That man acts far better than I do—if he acts at all."

"Was that why he interested you so much?"

"In what other way could he interest me?"

Renfrew kicked at one of the blazing logs and sent up a shower of red-hot flakes.

"Well, there was your dream, Claire."

"Yes, there was that."

"It was curious, coming just before we saw the fellow. And you say the two men were alike."

"I did not say alike. I said the same."

"How could that be?"

"How can a thousand things be? Yet we cannot deny them when they are, any more than we can

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deny that we feel an earthly immortality within us and yet crumble into dust. In sleep I saw that man. I saw his snake. I heard him play."

"Yes, Claire, I know. It's damned strange."

Renfrew's forehead was wrinkled in a meditative frown.

"But, after all, what's a dream?" he exclaimed. "A vagary of a sleeping brain. And in your dream you wouldn't go to that beggar, Claire."

"No. I wouldn't go, and so I died."

"It all means nothing—nothing at all."

She looked at him gravely.

"I wonder whether there are things in life that we are compelled to do, Desmond," she said. "I sometimes think there must be. How otherwise can a thousand strange events be accounted for, especially things that women do?"

"I don't know," he muttered, staring at her anxiously in the firelight.

"Every one acknowledges the irresistible power of physical force over physical weakness. Some day, perhaps, when the world has grown a little older, we shall all understand that the power of mental force is precisely similar, and can as little be resisted. What's that?"

Renfrew felt that she was suddenly alert. Her thin form grew hard and quivering, like the body of a greyhound about to be let loose on a hare. He heard nothing except a sound of music from the darkness, and the gentle rustle of the wind. [72]

"I hear nothing," he said. "What was it—a cry?"

"No, no!"

"What then?"

"Oh, Desmond—hush!"

He was obedient, and strained his ears, wondering what Claire had heard. The fire was at last beginning to die down, for the flames had devoured the masses of dry twigs, and had now nothing to feed upon except the heavy logs. So the darkness drew a little closer round the camp, as if the night expanded noiselessly. One of the porters, or, perhaps, one of the soldiers, was playing a queer little air upon a pipe over and over again. It was plaintive and very soft. But the tone of the instrument was strangely penetrating, and the wind carried it along over the plain, as if anxious to bear it to the sea, that the cave men might hear it, and the sailors bearing up for the Spanish coast. Was Claire listening to this odd little tune? Renfrew wondered. There seemed no other sound. She was moving uneasily now, as if an intense restlessness had taken hold of her. And she turned her head away from him and gazed into the night.

Presently she put her hand on Renfrew's arm, which was still round her waist, and tried to remove it. But he would not yield to her desire. He only held her closer, and again—he could not tell why—the smouldering jealousy began to flare up in his heart. [73]

"No, Claire," he said, in answer to her movement, "you are mine. You have given yourself to me. I alone have the right to keep you, to hold you close—close to my heart."

"Can you keep me always, Desmond?" she said, suddenly turning on him with a sort of fierce excitement.

She looked into his eyes as if she would search the very depths of his soul for strength, for power.

"You have the right. Yes; but that is nothing—nothing."

"Nothing, Claire?"

"You must have the strength, Desmond. That is everything."

There was a look almost of despair in her face. She threw herself against him as if moved by a sudden yearning for protection, and put her arms round his shoulders.

The hidden Moor was still playing the same monotonous little tune, an African aria, as wild as a bird that flies over the desert, or a cloud that is driven across the sky above a dangerous sea. It was imaginative, and, as all tunes seem to have a shape, this melody was misshapen and yet delicious, like a twisted tangled creature that has the smile of a sweet woman, or the eyes of an alluring child. In its plaintiveness there was the atmosphere of solitary places. And there was a sound of love in it, too, but of a love so uncivilised as to be almost monstrous. Some earth man of a dead age might have sung it to his mate in a land where the sun looked down on things primeval. It might have caught the heart of maidens very long ago, before they learned to think of passion as the twin of law, and to regard a kiss as the seal set upon the tape of matrimony. The queer sorrow of it could hardly have moved any eyes to tears. Yet few women could have heard it without a sense of desolation. It ran through the darkness as cold water runs in the black shadow of a forest, a trickle of sound as thin and persistent as the cry of a wild creature in the night. [74]

Renfrew thrilled under the touch of Claire's hand.

"You can give me the strength every woman seeks in the man she yields herself up to," he said.

"How?"

"By loving me."

"Ah, yes. But the strength must not come, however subtly, from the woman. No—no."

Again she leaned away from him, with her face turned towards the darkness. Tremors ran through her, and her hands dropped almost feebly from Renfrew's shoulders, as the hands of an invalid fall away, and down, after an embrace.

"Oh, no," she reiterated, and her voice was almost a wail. "It must be there, in the man, part of him, whether he is with the woman in the night, or alone—far off—in the jungle, or in the—the desert. He must have the strange strength that comes from solitude. Where can the men of our country find that now?"

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"They find strength in the clash of wills, Claire, and in the battles of love."

"Most of them never find it at all," she said, with a sort of sullen resignation. "And most of the women do not want it, or ask for it, or know what it is. The danger is when some accident or some fate teaches them what it is. Then—then—"

She stopped, and glanced at Renfrew suspiciously, as if she had so nearly betrayed a secret that he might, nay, must have guessed it.

"What do you mean? Then they seek it away from—?"

"Where they know they will find it," she said, almost defiantly.

Renfrew's face grew cold and rigid.

"What are you saying to me, Claire?"

"What is true of some women, Desmond."

He was silent. Pain and fear invaded his heart; and, by degrees, the little tune played by the Moor seemed to approach him, very quietly, and to become one with this slow agony. Music, among its many and terrible powers, numbers one that is scarcely possessed as forcibly by any other art. It can glide into a man and direct his emotions as irresistibly as science can direct the flow of a stream. It can penetrate as a thing seen cannot penetrate. For that which is invisible is that which is invincible. And this tune of the Moor, while it added to Renfrew's distress, touched his distress with confusion and bewilderment. At first he did not realise that the music had anything to do with his state of mind, or with the growing turmoil of his heart and brain; but he felt that something was becoming intolerable to him, and pushing him on in a dangerous path. He thought it was the statement of Claire; and, for the first time in his life, he was stirred by an anger against her that was horrible to him. He released her from his arm.

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"How dare you say that to me?" he asked. "Do you understand what your words imply, that—Good God!—that women are like animals, creatures without souls, running to the feet of the master who has the whip with the longest, the most stinging lash? Why, such a creed as yours would keep men savages, and kill all gentleness out of the world. Curse that chap! That hideous music of his—"

He had suddenly become aware that the Moor's melody added something to his torment. At his last exclamation, the sullen look in Claire's pale face gave way to an expression of fear and of startling solicitude.

"Desmond, you are putting a wrong interpretation on what I said," she began hastily.

But he was excited, and could not endure any interruption.

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"And you imply a degrading immorality as a prevailing characteristic of women too," he went on, "that they should leave their homes, deny their obligations, because they find elsewhere—away, out in some dark place with a blackguard—a powerful will to curb them and keep them down, like—why, like these wretched women all round us here in this country,—the women we saw in Tetuan only to-day, veiled, hidden, loaded with burdens, worse off than animals, because their masters doubt them, and would not dream of trusting them. Claire, there's something barbarous about you."

He spoke the words with the intonation of one who thinks he is uttering an insult. But she smiled.

"It's the something barbarous about me that has placed me where I am," she said, with a cold pride. "It is that which civilisation worships in me, that which has set me above the other women of my time. It is even that which has made you love me, Desmond, whether you know it or not."

He looked at her like a man half dazed.

"I frighten the dove-cotes. I can make men tremble by my outbursts of passion, and women faint because I am sad; and even the stony-hearted sob when I die. And I can make you love me, Desmond. Yes, perhaps I am more barbarous than other women. But do you think I am sorry for it? No."

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"Some day you may be, Claire."

He spoke more gently. The wonder and worship he had for this woman stirred in him again. While she had been speaking, she had instinctively risen to her feet, and she stood in the dull red glow of the waning fire, looking down at him as if he were a creature in a lower world than the one in which she could walk at will.

"I shall never choose to be sorry," she said, "whatever my fate may be. To be sorry is to be feeble, and to be feeble is to be unfit to live, and unfit to die. Never, never think of me as being sorry for anything I have done, or may do. Never deceive yourself about me."

A great log, eaten through by a flame at its heart, broke gently asunder on the summit of the heaped wood. One half of it, red-hot, and alive with multitudes of flickering fires, gold, primrose, steel-blue, and deep purple, dropped and fell at Claire's feet. She glanced down at it, and at Renfrew.

"My deeds may burn me up," she said, "as those coloured fires burn up that wood, until it is no longer wood but fire itself. They shall never drench me with wretched, contemptible tears."

He got up; and, when he was on his feet, he seemed to hear the incessant music more clearly, blending with the words of Claire. The notes were like hot sparks falling on him. He winced under them, and looked round almost wildly. Then, without speaking, he hurried away in the darkness to the place where the soldiers were feasting, and the men of the camp were holding their fantasia. Claire divined why he went. She started a step forward as if to try and stop him; but his movement had been so abrupt that she was too late. She had to let him go. Her hands fell at her sides, and she waited by the dying fire in the attitude of one who listens intently. The soft melody of that hidden and persistent musician wailed in her ears, on and on. It came again and again, never ceasing, never altering in time. And its influence upon Claire was terrible as the influence of the dream music in the valley beneath the Kasbar. She longed to go to it. She seemed to belong to it,—to be its possession, and to have erred when she separated herself from it. In the darkness it was awaiting her, and it sent out its crying voice in the night as a message, as a summons soft, clear, and quietly determined. She clenched her hands as she stood by the fire. She strove to root her feet in the ground. If there had been anything to cling to just then, she would have stretched forth her arms and clung to it, resisting what she loved from fear of the future. But there was nothing. And she thought of the children and of the Pied Piper. But they were legendary beings of a fable long ago. And she thought of Renfrew and of his love. But that seemed nothing. That could not keep her. He was a pale phantom, and her career was a handful of dust, and her name was as the name graven upon a tomb, and her life was but as a gift to be offered to an unknown destiny,—while that melody called to her. Had any one seen her then in the glow of the firelight, she would have seemed to him terrible. For suddenly she let the djelabe of Absalem slip from her shoulders to the ground. And, in the fiercely flickering light, that makes all things and people assume unearthly aspects, her thin figure in its white robe looked like the white body of a serpent, erect and trembling, under the influence of the charmer. But the melody grew softer and softer, more faint, more dreamy in the darkness. Presently it ceased. As it did so, Claire drew a deep breath, lifted her head like one released from a thralldom, and turned her face towards the camp.

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Almost directly she saw Renfrew returning towards her. He looked puzzled.

"It wasn't any of the men playing," he said to her.

"No?"

Claire bent, caught up the djelabe and drew it over her.

"I went to them, and found them listening to some story Absalem was telling. They were all gathered close round him, huddled up together in the dark. And the piping came from quite another direction—not from the soldiers either. It must have been some vagabond out of Tetuan. I was just going to make a search for him, when the noise stopped. He must have heard me coming."

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He still looked disturbed and angry, and this break in their conversation was final. It seemed impossible to take up the thread of it again. They stood together watching the fire fade away till it was a faint glow almost level with the ground. Then at last Renfrew spoke, in a voice that was almost timid.

"Claire," he said.

"Yes," she answered out of the dull twilight that would soon be darkness.

"If I have said anything to-night to hurt you, don't think of it, don't remember it. I don't know—I don't seem to have been like myself to-night. I believe that cursed music irritated me, so ugly, and so monotonous; it got right on my nerves, I think."

"Did it?"

"Without my knowing it."

He felt for one of her hands and clasped it.

"Yes, dear. We both said more than we meant. Didn't we?"

Claire did not assent; but she let her hand lie in his. That satisfied him then, although afterwards he remembered her silence. Soon the fire was dead; and they said good-night in the wind, which seemed colder because there was no more light.

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Renfrew went to his tent, undressed, and got into bed. The wind roared against the canvas. But the pegs had been driven stoutly into the ground by the porters, and held the cords fast. He felt very tired and depressed, and thought he would not fall asleep quickly. But he soon began to be drowsy, and to have a sense of dropping into the very arms of the tempest, lulled by its noise. He slept for a time. Presently, however, and while it was still quite dark, he woke up. He heard the wind as before, but was troubled by an idea that some other sound was mingling with it, some murmur so indistinct that he could not decide what it was, although he was aware of it. He sat up and strained his ears, and wished the wind would lull, if only for a moment, or that this other sound—which had surely been the cause of his waking—would increase, and stand out distinctly in the night. And, at last, by dint of listening with all his force, Renfrew seemed to himself to compel the sound to greater clearness. Then he knew that somewhere, far off perhaps in the wind, the player on the pipe reiterated his soft and stealthy music. It was swept on the tempest like a drowning thing caught in a whirlpool. It was so faint as to be almost inaudible. But in all its weakness it retained most completely its character, and made the same impression upon Renfrew as when it was near and distinct. It irritated and it repelled him. And, with an angry exclamation, he flung himself down and buried his head in the pillow, stopping his ears with his hands.

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With daylight the camp was in a turmoil. Claire was gone. Her bed had not been slept in. She had not undressed. She had not even taken off Absalem's djelabe. At least it could not be found. Renfrew, frantic, almost mad with anxiety, explored the plain, rode at a gallop to the gate of the city, called upon the Governor of Tetuan to help him in his search, and summoned the Consul to his aid in his despair. Every effort was made to find the missing woman; but no success crowned the quest, either at that time, or afterwards, when weeks became months, and months grew into years. A great actress was lost to the world. His world was lost to Renfrew. He rode back at last one day to the villas of Tangier, bent down upon his horse, broken, alone. In his despair he cursed himself. He accused himself of cruelty to Claire that night beside the African fire, when he had been roused to a momentary anger against her. He even told himself that he had driven her away from him. But other men, who had known Claire and the strangeness of her caprices, said to each other that she had got tired of Renfrew and given him the slip, wandering away disguised in the djelabe of a Moor, and that some fine day she would turn up again, and re-appear upon the stage that had seen her glory.

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Later on, when Renfrew at last, after long searching, came hopelessly back to England, so changed that his friends scarcely recognised him, he was sometimes seized with strange and terrible thoughts as he sat brooding over the wreck of his love. He seemed to see, as in a pale vision of flame and darkness, a little dusky Moorish boy bending to smell at a withered sprig of orange flower, and to remember that once—how long ago it seemed—Claire had wished to kiss that boy as a Moorish woman might have kissed him. And then he saw a veiled figure, that he seemed to know even in its deceitful robe, bend down to the boy. And the vision faded. At another time he would hear the little tune that had persecuted him in the night. And then he recalled the music of Claire's dream, and the melody that charmed the snakes; and he shuddered. For the miracle man had never been seen in Tetuan since the day when Claire had watched him in the Soko. Nor could Renfrew ever find out whither he had wandered.

Very long afterwards, however,—although this fact was never known to Renfrew,—two Russian travellers in the Great Sahara desert witnessed one evening, as they sat in their tent door, the performance of a savage charmer of snakes who carried upon his body three serpents,—one striped, one black, one white. And the younger of them noticed, and remarked to the other, that the charmer wore half-way up the little finger of his left hand a thin gold circle in which there was set a magnificent black pearl.

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A TRIBUTE OF SOULS

PRELUDE

THE matter of Carlounie, the village of Perthshire in Scotland, is become notorious in the world. The name of its late owner, his remarkable transformation, his fortunate career, his married life,

the brooding darkness that fell latterly upon his mind, the flaming deed that he consummated, its appalling outcome, and the finding of him by Mr Mackenzie, the minister of the parish of Carlounie, sunk in a pool of the burn that runs through a "den" close to his house—all these things are fresh in the minds of many men. It has been supposed that he had discovered a common intrigue between his wife, Kate, formerly an hospital nurse, and his tenant, Hugh Fraser of Piccadilly, London. It has been universally thought that this discovery led to the last action of his life. The following pages, found among his papers, seem to put a very different complexion on the affair, although they suggest a mediæval legend rather than a history of modern days. It may be added that careful enquiries have been made among the inhabitants of Carlounie, and that no man, woman, or child has been discovered who ever saw, or heard of, the grey traveller mentioned in Alistair Ralston's narrative.

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I THE STRANGER BY THE BURN

CAN a fever change a man's whole nature, giving him powers that he never had before? Can he go into it impotent, starved, naked, emerge from it potent, satisfied, clothed with possibilities that are wonders, that are miracles to him? It must be so; it is so. And yet—I must go back to that sad autumn day when I walked beside the burn. Can I write down my moods, my feelings of that day and of the following days? And if I can, does that power of pinning the butterfly of my soul down upon the board—does that power, too, bud, blossom from a soil mysteriously fertilised by illness? Formerly, I could as easily have flown in the air to the summit of cloud-capped Schiehallion as have set on paper even the smallest fragment of my mind. Now—well, let me see, let me still further know my new, my marvellous self.

Yes, that first day! It was Autumn, but only early Autumn. The leaves were changing colour upon the birch trees, upon the rowans. At dawn, mists stood round to shield the toilet of the rising sun. At evening, they thronged together like a pale troop of shadowy mutes to assist at his departure to the under world. It was a misty season, through which the bracken upon the hillsides of my Carlounie glowed furtively in tints of brown and of orange; and my mind, my whole being, seemed to move in mists. I was just twenty-two, an orphan, master of my estate of Carlounie, a Scotch laird, and my own governor. And some idiots envied me then, as many begin to envy me now. I even remember one ghastly old man who clapped me on the shoulder, and, with the addition of an unnecessary oath, swore that I was "a lucky youngster." I, with my thin, chétif body, my burning, weakly, starved, and yet ambitious soul—lucky! I remember that I broke into a harsh laugh, and longed to kill the babbling beast.

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And it was the next day, in the afternoon, that I took that book—my Bible—and went forth alone to the long den in which the burn hides and cries its presence. Yes, I took Goethe's "Faust," and my own complaining spirit, and went out into the mist with my misty, clouded mind. My cousin Gavin wanted me to go out shooting. He laughed and rallied me upon my ill-luck on the previous day, when I had gone out and been the joke of my own keepers because I had missed every bird; and I turned and railed at him, and told him to leave me to myself. And, as I went, I heard him muttering, "That wretched little fellow! To think that he should be owner of Carlounie!" Now, he sings another tune.

With "Faust" in my hand, and hatred in my heart, I went out into the delicately chilly air, down the winding ways of the garden, through the creaking iron gateway. I emerged on to the wilder land, irregular, grass-covered ground, strewn with grey granite boulders, among which coarse, wiry ferns grew sturdily. The blackfaced sheep whisked their broad tails at me as I passed, then stooped their ever-greedy mouths to their damp and eternal meal again. I heard the thin and distant cry of a hawk, poised somewhere up in the mist. The hills, clothed in the death-like glory of the bracken, loomed around me, like some phantom, tricked-out procession passing through desolate places. And then I heard the voice of the burn—that voice which is even now for ever in my ears. To me that day it was the voice of one alive; and it is the voice of one alive to me now. I descended the sloping hill with my lounging, weak-kneed gait, at which the creatures who called me master had so often looked contemptuously askance. (I was often tired at that time.) I descended, I say, until I reached the edge of the tree-fringed den, and the burn was noisy in my ears. I could see it now, leaping here and there out of its hiding-place—ivory foam among the dripping larches, and the birches with their silver stems; ivory foam among the deep brown and flaming orange of the bracken, and in that foam a voice calling—calling me to come down into its hiding-place, presided over by the mists—to come down into its hiding-place, away from men: away from the living creatures whom I hated because I envied them, because they were stronger than I, because they could do what I could not do, say what I could not say. Gavin, Dr Wedderburn, my tenants, the smallest farm boy, the grooms, the little leaping peasants—I hated, I hated them all. And then I obeyed the voice of the ivory foam, and I went down into the hiding-place of the burn.

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It ran through strange and secret places where the soft mists hung in wet wreaths. I seemed to be in another world when I was in its lair. On the sharply rising banks stood the sentinel trees like shadows, some of them with tortured and tormented shapes. As I turned and looked straight up the hill of the burn's descending course, the mountain from which it came closed in the prospect inexorably. A soft gloom hemmed us in—me and the burn which talked to me. We two were out of the world which I hated and longed to have at my feet. Yes, we were in another

world, full of murmuring and of restful unrest; and now that I was right down at the water-side, the ivory face of my friend, the ivory lips that spoke to me, the ivory heart that beat against my heart—so sick and so weary—were varied and were changed. As thoughts streak a mind, the clear amber of the pools among the rocks streaked the continuous foam that marked the incessant leaps taken by the water towards the valley. The silence of those pools was brilliant, like the pauses for contemplation in a great career of action; and their silence spoke to me, mingling mysteriously with the voice of the foam. The course of the burn is broken up, and attended by rocks that have been modelled by the action of the running water into a hundred shapes. Some are dressed in mosses, yellow and green, like velvet to the touch, and all covered with drops of moisture; some are gaunt and naked and deplorable, with sharp edges and dry faces. The burn avoids some with a cunning and almost coquettish grace, dashes brutally against others, as if impelled by an internal violence of emotion. Others, again, it caresses quite gently, and would be glad to linger by, if Nature would allow the dalliance. And this army of rocks helps to give to the burn its charm of infinite variety, and to fill its voice with a whole gamut of expression; for the differing shape of each boulder, against which it rushes in its long career, gives it a different note. It flickers across the small and round stone with the purling cry of a child. From the stone curved inwards, and with a hollow bosom it gains a crooning, liquid melody. The pointed and narrow colony of rocks which break it into an intricate network of small water threads, toss it, chattering frivolously, towards the dark pool under the birches, where the trout play like sinister shadows and the insects dance in the sombre pomp of Autumn; and when it gains a great slab that serves it for a spring-board, from which it takes a mighty leap, its voice is loud and defiant, and shrieks with a banshee of triumph—in which, too, there is surely an undercurrent of wailing woe. Oh, the burn has many voices among the rocks, under the ferns and the birch trees, in the brooding darkness of the mists and shadows, between the steep walls of the green banks that hem it in! Many voices which can sing, when they choose, one song, again and again and—monotonously—again!

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So—now on this sad Autumn day—I was with the burn in its hiding-place, cool, damp, fretful. Carlounie sank from my sight. My garden, the wilder land beyond, the moors on which yesterday my incompetence as a shot had roused the contempt of my cousin and of my hirelings—all were lost to view. I was away from all men in this narrow, tree-shrouded cleft of a world. I sat down on a rock, and, stretching out my legs, rested my heels on another rock. Beneath my legs the clear brown water glided swiftly. I sat and listened to its murmur. And, just then, it did not occur to me that water can utter words like men. The murmur was suggestive but definitely inarticulate. I had come down here to be away and to think. The murmur of my mind spoke to the murmur of the burn; and, as ever, in those days, it lamented and cursed and bitterly complained.

Why, why was I pursued by a malady of incompetence that clung to both mind and body? (So ran my thoughts.) Why was I bruised and beaten by Providence? Why had I been given a soul that could not express itself in the frame of a coward, a weakling, a thin, nervous, dwarfish, almost a deformed, creature? If my soul had corresponded exactly to my body, then all might have been well enough. I should have been more complete, although less, in some way, than I now was. For such a soul would have accepted cowardice, weakness, inferiority to others as suitable to it, as a right fate. Such a soul would never have known the meaning of the word rebellion, would never have been able to understand its own cancer of disease, to diagnose the symptoms of its villainous and creeping malady. It would never have aspired like a flame, and longed in vain to burn clearly and grandly or to flicker out for ever. Rather would such a soul have guttered on like some cheap and ill-smelling candle, shedding shadows rather than any light, ignorant of its own obscurity, regardless of the possibilities that teem like waking children in the wondrous womb of life, oblivious of the contempt of the souls around it, heedless of ambition, of the trumpet call of success, of the lust to be something, to do something, of the magic, of the stinging magic of achievement. With such a soul in my hateful, pinched, meagre, pallid body—I thought, sitting thus by the burn—I might have been content, an utterly low, and perhaps an utterly satisfied product of the fiend creation.

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But my soul was not of this kind, and so I was the most bitterly miserable of men. God—or the Devil—had made me ill-shaped, physically despicable, with the malign sort of countenance that so often accompanies and illustrates a bad poor body. My limbs, without being actually twisted, were shrunken and incompetent—they would not obey my desires as do the limbs of other men. My legs would not grip a horse. When I rode I was a laughing-stock. My arms had no swiftness, no agility, no delicate and subtle certainty. When I tried to box, to fence, I was one whirling, jiggling incapacity. I had feeble sight, and objects presented themselves to my vision so strangely that I could not shoot straight. I, Alistair Ralston the young Laird of Carlounie! When I walked my limbs moved heavily and awkwardly. I had no grace, no lightness, no ordinary, quite usual competence of bodily power. And this was bitter, yet as nothing to the Marah that lay beyond. For my body was in a way complete. It was a wretch. But when you came to the mind you had the real tragedy. In many decrepit flesh temples there dwells a commanding spirit, as a great God might dwell—of mysterious choice—in a ruinous and decaying lodge in a wilderness. And such a spirit rules, disposes, presides, develops, has its own full and superb existence, triumphing not merely over, but actually through the contemptible body in which it resides, so that men even are led to worship the very ugliness and poverty of this body, to adore it for its power to retain such a mighty spirit within it. Such a spirit was not mine. Had it been, I might have been happy by the burn that Autumn day. Had it been, I might never—But I am anticipating, and I must not anticipate. I must sit with the brown water rushing beneath the arch of my limbs, and recall the horror of my musing.

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In a manner, then, my soul matched my body. It was feeble and incompetent too. My brain was dull and clouded. My intellect was sluggish and inert. But—and this was the terror for me!—within the rank nest of my soul—my spirit—lay coiled two vipers that never ceased from biting me with their poisoned fangs—Self-consciousness and Ambition. I knew myself, and I longed to be other than I was. I watched my own incompetence as one who watches from a tower. I divined how others regarded me—precisely. The blatant and comfortable egoism of a dwarf mind in a dwarf body was never for one moment mine. I was that terrible anomaly, an utterly incomplete and incompetent thing that adored, with a curious wildness of passion, completeness, competence. Nor had I a soul that could ever be satisfied with a one-sided perfection. My desires were Gargantuan. When I was with my cousin Gavin, a fine all-round sportsman, I longed with fury to be a good shot, to throw a fly as he did, to have a perfect seat on a horse. I felt that I would give up years of life to beat him once in any of his pursuits. When I was with Dr Wedderburn, my desires, equally intense, were utterly different. He represented in my neighbourhood Intellect—with a capital I. A man of about fifty, minister of the parish of Carlounie, he was astonishingly adroit as a controversialist, astonishingly eloquent as a divine. His voice was full of music. His eyes were full of light and of the most superb self-confidence. He rested upon his intellect as a man may rest upon a rock. The power of his personality was calm and immense. I felt it vehemently. I shook and trembled under it. I hated and loathed the man for it, because I wanted and could never possess it. So, too, I hated my cousin Gavin for his possessions, his long and sure-sighted eyes, great and strong arms, broad chest, lithe legs, bright agility. My body could do nothing. My soul could do nothing—except one great thing. It could fully observe and comprehend its own impotence. It could fully and desperately envy and pine to be what it could never be. Could never be, do I say? Wait! Remember that is only what I thought then as I sat upon the rock, and, with haggard young eyes, watched the clear brown water slipping furtively past between my knees.

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My disease seemed to culminate that day, I remember. I was a sick invalid alone in the mist. Something—it might have been vitriol—was eating into me, eating, eating its way to my very heart, to the core of me. Oh, to be stunted and desire to be straight and tall, to be dwarf and wish to be giant, to be stupid and long to be a genius, to be ugly and yearn to be in face as one of the shining gods, to have no power over men, and to pine to fascinate, hold, dominate a world of men—this indeed is to be in hell! I was in hell that Autumn day. I clenched my thin, weak hands together. I clenched my teeth from which the pale lips were drawn back in a grin; and I realised all the spectral crowd of my shortcomings. They stood before me like demons of the Brocken—yes, yes, of the Brocken!—and I cursed God with the sound of the burn ringing and chattering in my ears. And I devoted Gavin, Doctor Wedderburn, every man highly placed, every lowest peasant, who could do even one of all the things I could not do, to damnation. The paroxysm that took hold of me was like a fit, a convulsion. I came out of it white and feeble. And, suddenly, the voice of the burn seemed to come from a long way off. I put out my hand, and took up from the rock on which I had laid it, "Faust." And, scarcely knowing what I did, I began mechanically to read—to the dim rapture of the burn—

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"*Scene III.—The Study. Faust (entering, with the poodle).*" I began to read, do I say, mechanically? Yes, it is true, but soon, very soon, the spell of Goethe was laid upon me. I was in the lofty-arched, narrow Gothic chamber, with that living symbol of the weariness, broken ambition, learned despair of all the ages. I was engrossed. I heard the poodle snarling by the stove. I heard the spirits whispering in the corridor. Vapour rose—or was it indeed the mist from the mountains among the birch trees?—and out of the vapour came Mephistopheles in the garb of a travelling scholar. And then—and then the great bargain was struck. I heard—yes, I did, I actually, and most distinctly, heard a voice—Faust's—say, "*Let us the sensual deeps explore... Plunge we in Time's tumultuous dance, In the rush and roll of circumstance.*" A pause; then the Student's grave and astonished tones came to me: *Eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum.* The cloak was spread, and on the burning air Faust was wafted to his new life—nay, not to his new life merely, but to life itself. He vanished with his guide in a coloured, flower-like mist. I dropped my hand holding the book down upon the cold rock by which the cold water splashed. It felt burning hot to my touch. My head fell upon my breast, and I had my dreams—dreams of the life of Faust and of its glories, gained by this bargain that he made. And then—yes, then it was!—the voice of the burn, as from leagues away in the bosom of this very mist, began to sing like a fairy voice, or a voice in dreams, and in visions of the night, "*If it was so then, it might be so now.*" At first I scarcely heeded it, for I was enrapt. But the song grew louder, more insistent. It was travelling to me from a far country. I heard it coming: "*If it was so then, it might be so now*"—"If it was so then, it might be so now." How near it was at last, how loud in my ears! And yet always there was something vague, visionary about it, something of the mist, I think. At length I heard it with the attention that is of earth. I came to myself, out of the narrow Gothic chamber in which the genius of Goethe had prisoned me, and I stared into the mist, which was gathering thicker as the night began to fall. It seemed flower-like, and full of strange and mysterious colour. I trembled. I got up. Still I heard the voice of the burn singing that monotonous legend, on, and on, and on. Slowly I turned. I climbed the bank of the den. The sheep scattered lethargically at my approach. I passed through the creaking iron gate into the garden. Carlounie was before me. There was something altered, something triumphant about its aspect. The voice of the burn faded in a long diminuendo. Yet, even as I gained the door of my house, and, before entering it, paused in an attentive attitude, I heard the water chanting faintly from the den—"If it was so then, it might be so now." ... As I came into the hall, in which Gavin and Dr Wedderburn stood together talking earnestly, I remember that I shivered. Yet my cheeks were glowing.

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From that moment not a day passed without my visiting the burn. It summoned me. Always it sang those words persistently. The sound of the water can be very faintly heard from the windows of Carlounie. Each day, at dawn, I pushed open the lattice of my bedroom and hearkened to hear if the song had changed. Each night, at moon-rise, or in the darkness through which the soft and small rain fell quietly, I leaned over the sill and listened. Sometimes the wind was loud among the mountains. Sometimes the silence was intense and awful. But in storm or in stillness the burn sang on, ever and ever the same words. At moments I fancied that the voice was as the voice of a man demented, repeating with mirthless frenzy through all his years one hollow sentence. At moments I deemed it the cry of a fair woman, a siren, a Lorelei among my rocks in my valley. Then again I said, "It is a spirit voice, a voice from the inner chamber of my own heart." And—why I know not—at that last fantasy I shuddered. Even in the midnight from my window ledge I leaned while the world slept and I heard the mystic message of the burn. My visits to its bed were not unobserved. One morning my cousin Gavin said to me roughly, "Why the devil are you always stealing off to that ditch"—so he called the den that was the home of my voice—"when you ought to be practising to conquer your infernal deficiencies? Why, the children of your own keepers laugh at you. Try to shoot straight, man, and be a real man instead of dreaming and idling." I stared at him and answered, "You don't understand everything." Once Dr Wedderburn, who had been my tutor, said to me more kindly, "Alistair, action is better for you than thought. Leave the burn alone. You go there to brood. Try to work, for work is the best man-maker after all."

And to him I said, "Yes, I know!" and flew with a strong wing in the face of his advice. For the voice of the burn was more to me than the voice of Gavin, or of Wedderburn; and the mind of the burn meant more to me than the mind of any man. And so the Autumn died slowly, with a lingering decadence, and shrouded perpetually in mist. I often felt ill, even then. My body was dressed in weakness. Perhaps already the fever was upon me. I wish I could know. Was it crawling in my veins? Was it nestling about my heart and in my brain? Could it be that?...

Certainly during this period life seemed alien to me, and I moved as one apart in a remote world, full of the music of the burn, and full, too, of vague clouds. That is so. Looking back, I know it. Still, I cannot be sure what is the truth. In the late Autumn I paid my last visit to the burn before my illness seized me. The cold of early Winter was in the air and a great stillness. It was afternoon when I left the house walking slowly with my awkward gait. My face, I know, was white and drawn, and I felt that my lips were twitching. I did not carry my volume of Goethe in my hand; but, in its place, held an old book on transcendental magic. The voice of the burn—yes, that alone—had led me to study this book. So now I took it down to the burn. Why? Had I the foolish fancy of introducing my live thing of the den to this strange writing on the black art? Who knows? Perhaps the fever in my veins put the book into my hand. I shivered in the damp cold as I descended the steep ground that lay about the water, which that day seemed to roar in my ears the sentence I had heard so many days and nights. And this time, as I hearkened, my heart and my brain echoed the last words—"It might be so now." Gaining the edge of the burn, then in heavy spate, I watched for a while the passage of the foam from rock to rock. I peered into the pools, clouded with flood water from the hills, and with whirling or sinking dead leaves. And all my meagre body seemed pulsing with those everlasting words: "Why not now?" I murmured to myself, with a sort of silent sneer, too, at my own absurdity. I remember I glanced furtively around as I spoke. Grey emptiness, grey loneliness, dripping bare trees through whose branches the mist curled silently, cold rocks, the cold flood of the swollen burn—such was the blank prospect that met my eyes.

There was no man near me. There was no one to look at me. I was remote, hidden in a secret place, and the early twilight was already beginning to fall. No one could see me. I opened my old and ragged book, or, rather, let it fall open at a certain page. Upon it I looked for the hundredth time, and read that he who would evoke the Devil must choose a solitary and condemned spot. The burn was solitary. The burn was condemned surely by the despair and by the endless incapacities of the wretched being who owned it. I had taken off my shoes and placed them upon a rock. My feet were bare. My head was covered. I now furtively proceeded to gather together a small heap of sticks and leaves, and to these I set fire, after several attempts. As the flames at last crept up, the mist gathered more closely round me and my fire, as if striving to warm itself at the blaze. The voice of the burn mingled with the uneasy crackle of the twigs, and a murmur of its words seemed to emanate also from the flames, two elements uniting to imitate the utterance of man to my brain, already surely tormented with fever. And now, with my eyes upon my book, I proceeded to trace with the sharp point of a stick in some sandy soil between two rocks a rough Goetic Circle of Black evocations and pacts. From time to time I paused in my work and glanced uneasily about me, but I saw only the mists and the waters.

At length my task was finished, and the time had arrived for the supreme effort of my insane and childish folly. Standing at Amasarac in the Circle, I said aloud the formula of Evocation of the Grand Grimoire, ending with the words "Jehosua, Evam, Zariat, natmik, Come, come, come."

My voice died away in the twilight, and I stood among the grey rocks waiting, mad creature that I surely was! But only the rippling voice of the burn answered my adjuration. Then I repeated the words in a louder tone, adding menaces and imprecations to my formula. And all the time the fire I had kindled sprang up into the mist; and the twilight of the heavy Autumn fell slowly round me. Again I paused, and again my madness received no satisfaction, no response. But it seemed to me that I heard the browsing sheep on the summit of the right bank of the gully scatter as if at the

approach of some one. Yet there was no stir of footsteps. It must have been my fancy, or the animals were merely changing their feeding ground in a troop, as they sometimes will, for no assignable cause. And now I made one last effort, urged by the voice of the burn, which sang so loudly the words which had mingled with my dream of Faust. I cried aloud the supreme appellation, making an effort that brought out the sweat on my forehead, and set the pulses leaping in my thin and shivering body. "*Chavajoth! chavajoth! chavajoth! I command thee by the Key of Solomon and the great name Semhamphoras.*"

A little way up the course of the burn the dead wood cracked and shuffled under the pressure of descending feet. Again I heard a scattering of the sheep upon the hillside. My hair stirred on my head under my cap, and the noise of the falling water was intolerably loud to me. I wanted to hear plainly, to hear what was coming down to me in the mist. The brush-wood sang nearer. In the heavy and damp air there was the small, sharp report of a branch snapped from a tree. I heard it drop among the ferns close to me. And then in the mist and in the twilight I saw a slim figure standing motionless. It was vague, but less vague than a shadow. It seemed to be a man, or a youth, clad in a grey suit that could scarcely be differentiated from the mist. The flames of my fire, bent by a light breeze that had sprung up, stretched themselves towards it, as if to salute it. And now I could not hear any movement of the sheep; evidently they had gone to a distance. At first, seized with a strange feeling of extreme, almost unutterable fear, I neither moved nor spoke. Then, making a strong effort to regain control of my ordinary faculties, I cried out in the twilight—

"What is that? What is it?"

"Only a stranger who has missed his way on the mountain, and wants to go on to Wester Denoon."

The voice that came to me from the figure beyond the fire sounded, I remember, quite young, like the voice of a boy. It was clear and level, and perhaps a little formal. So that was all. A tourist— that was all!

"Can you direct me on the way?" the voice said.

I gave the required direction slowly, for I was still confused, nervous, exhausted with my insane practices in the den. But the youth—as I supposed he was—did not move away at once.

"What are you doing by this fire?" he said. "I heard your voice calling by the torrent among the trees when I was a very long way off."

Strangely, I did not resent the question. Still more strangely, I was impelled to give him the true answer to it.

"Raising the Devil!" he said. "And did he come to you?"

"No; of course not. You must think me mad."

"And why do you call him?"

Suddenly a desire to confide in this stranger, whose face I could not see now, whose shadowy form I should, in all probability, never see again, came upon me. My usual nervousness deserted me. I let loose my heart in a turbulent crowd of words. I explained my impotence of body and of mind to this grey traveller in the twilight. I dwelt upon my misery. I repeated the cry of the burn and related my insane dream of imitating Faust, of making my poor pact with Lucifer, with the Sphinx of mediæval terrors. When I ceased, the boy's voice answered:—

"They say that in these modern days Satan has grown exigent. It is not enough to dedicate to him your own soul; but you must also pay a tribute of souls to the Cæsar of hell."

"A tribute of souls?"

"Yes. You must bring, they say, the mystic number, three souls to Satan."

Suddenly I laughed.

"I could never do that," I said. "I have no power to seduce man or woman. I cannot win souls to heaven or to hell."

"But if you received new powers, such as you desire, would you use them to win souls, three souls, to Lucifer?"

"Yes," I said with passionate earnestness. "I swear to you that I would."

Suddenly the boy's voice laughed.

"*Quomodo cecidisti, Lucifer!*" he said. "When thou canst not contrive to capture souls for thyself! But," he added, as if addressing himself once more to me, after this strange ejaculation, "your words have, perhaps, sealed the bond. Who knows? Words that come from the very heart are often deeds. For, as we can never go back from things that we have done, it may be that, sometimes, we can never go back from things that we have said."

On the words he moved, and passed so swiftly by me into the twilight down the glen that I never saw his face. I turned instinctively to look after him; and, this was strange, it seemed that the wind at that very moment must have turned with me, blowing from, instead of towards, the mountain. This certainly was so; for the tongues of flame from my fire bent backward on a sudden and leaned after the grey traveller, whose steps died swiftly away among the rocks, and on the shuffling dead wood and leaves of the birches and the oaks. [111]

And then there came a singing in my ears, a beating of many drums in my brain. I drooped and sank down by the fire in the mist. My fever came upon me like a giant, and presently Gavin and Doctor Wedderburn, searching in the night, found me in a delirium, and bore me back to Carlounie.

II THE SOUL OF DR WEDDERBURN

To emerge from a great illness is sometimes dreadful, sometimes divine. To one man the return from the gates of death is a progress of despair. He feels that he cannot face the wild contrasts of the surprising world again, that his courage has been broken upon the wheel, that energy is desolation, and sleep true beauty. To another this return is a marvellous and superb experience. It is like the vivid re-awakening of youth in one who is old, a rapture of the past committing an act of brigandage upon the weariness of the present, a glorious substitution of Eden for the outer courts where is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It will be supposed that I found myself in the first category, a terror-stricken and rebellious mortal when the fever gave me up to the world again. For the world had always been cruel to me, because I was afraid of it, and was a puny thing in it. Yet this was not so. My convalescence was like a beautiful dream of rest underneath which riot stirred. A simile will explain best exactly what I mean. Let me liken the calm of my convalescence to the calm of earth on the edge of Spring. What a riot of form, of scent, of colour, of movement, is preparing beneath that enigmatic, and apparently profound, repose. In the simile you have my exact state. And I alone felt that, within this womb of inaction, the child, action, lay hid, developing silently, but inexorably, day by day. This knowledge was my strange secret. It came upon me one night when I lay awake in the faint twilight, shed by a carefully shaded lamp over my bed. Rain drummed gently against the windows. There was no other sound. By the fire, in a great armchair, the trained nurse, Kate Walters, was sitting with a book—"Jane Eyre" it was—upon her knees. I had been sleeping and now awoke thirsty. I put out my hand to get at a tumbler of lemonade that stood on a table by my pillow. And suddenly a thought, a curious thought, was with me. My hand had grasped the tumbler and lifted it from the table; but, instead of bringing my hand to my mouth I kept my arm rigidly extended, the tumbler poised on my palm as upon the palm of a juggler. [112]

"How long my arm is!" that was my thought, "and how strong!" Formerly it had been short, weak, awkward. Now, surely, after my illness, my arms would naturally be nerveless, useless things. The odd fact was that now, for the first time in my life, I felt joy in a physical act. An absurd and puny act, you will say, I daresay. What of that? With it came a sudden stirring of triumph. I lay there on my back and kept my arm extended for full five minutes by the watch that ticked by my bed-head. And with each second that passed joy blossomed more fully within my heart. I drank the lemonade as one who drinks a glad toast. Yet I was puzzled. "Is this—can this be a remnant of delirium?" I asked myself. And beneath the clothes drawn up to my chin I fingered my arm above the elbow. It was the limb of a big, strong man. Surprise, supreme astonishment forced an exclamation from my lips. Kate got up softly and came towards me; but I feigned to be asleep, and she returned to the fire. Yet, peering under my lowered eyelids, I noticed an expression of amazement upon her young and pretty face. I knew afterwards that it was the sound of my voice—my new voice—that drew it there. After that night my convalescence was more than a joy to me, it was a rapture, touched by, and mingled with something that was almost awe. Is not the earth awe-struck when she considers that Spring and Summer nestle silently in her bosom? With each day the secret which I kept grew more mysterious, more profound. Soon I knew it could be a secret no longer. The fever—it must be that!—had wrought magic within my body, driving out weakness, impotence, lassitude, developing my physical powers to an extent that was nothing less than astounding. Lying there in my bed, I felt the dwarf expand into the giant. Think of it! Did ever living man know such an experience before? A bodily spring came about within me. And I was already twenty-two years old before the fever took me. My limbs grew large and strong; the muscles of my chest and back were tensely strung and knit as firmly as the muscles of an athlete. I lay still, it is true, and felt much of the peculiar vagueness that follows fever; but I was conscious of a supine, latent energy never known before. I was conscious that when I rose, and went out into the world again, it would be as a man, capable of holding his own against other strong, straight men. That was a wonder. But it was succeeded by a greater marvel yet. [113]

One afternoon, while I was still in bed, Doctor Wedderburn came to see me and to sit with me. He had been away on a holiday, and, consequently, had not visited me before, except once when I had been delirious. The doctor was a short, spare man, with a sharply cut brick-red face, lively and daring dark eyes, and straight hair already on the road to grey. His self-possession bordered on self-satisfaction; and, despite his good heart and the real and anxious sanctity of his life, he could seldom entirely banish from his manner the contempt he felt for those less intellectual, less [114]

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swift-minded than himself. Often had I experienced the stinging lash of his sarcasm. Often had I withered beneath one of his keen glances that dismissed me from an argument as a profound sage might kick an urchin from the study into the street. Often had I hated him with a sick hatred and ground my teeth because my mind was so clouded and so helpless, while his was so lucent and so adroit. So now, when I heard his tap on the door, his deep voice asking to come in, a rage of self-contempt seized me, as in the days before my illness. The doctor entered with an elaborate softness, and walked, flat-footed, to my bed, pursing his large lips gently as men do when filled with cautious thoughts. I could see he desired to moderate his habitual voice and manner; but, arrived close to me, he suddenly cried aloud, with a singularly full-throated amazement.

"Boy—boy, what's come to you?" he called. Then, abruptly putting his finger to his lips, he sank down in a chair, his bright eyes fixed upon me. [116]

"It's a miracle," he said slowly.

"What is?" I asked with an invalid's pettishness.

"The voice, too—the voice!"

I grew angry easily, as men do when they are sick.

"Why do you say that? Of course I've been bad—of course I'm changed."

"Changed! Look at yourself—and praise God, Alistair."

He had caught up a hand-mirror that lay on the dressing-table and now put it into my hand. For the first time since the fever I saw my face. It was as it had been and yet it was utterly different, for now it was beautiful. The pinched features seemed to have been smoothed out. The mouth had become firm and masterful. The haggard eyes were alight as if torches burned behind them. My expression, too, was powerful, collected, alert. I scarcely recognised myself. But I pretended to see no change.

"Well—what is it?" I asked, dropping the glass.

The doctor was confused by my calm.

"Your look of health startled me," he answered, sitting down by the bed and examining me keenly.

All at once I was seized by a strange desire to get up an argument with this man, by whom I had so often been crushed in conversation. I leaned on my elbow in the bed, and fixing my eyes on him, I said:— [117]

"And why should I praise God?"

The doctor seemed in amazement at my tone.

"Because you are a Christian and have been brought back from death," he replied, but with none of his usual half-sarcastic self-confidence.

"You think God did that?"

"Alistair, do you dare to blaspheme the Almighty?"

I felt at that moment like a cat playing with a mouse. My lips, I know, curved in a smile of mockery, and yet I will swear—yes, even to my own heart—that all I said that day I said in pure mischief, with no evil intent. It seemed that I, Alistair Ralston, the dolt, the ignoramus, longed to try mental conclusions with this brilliant and opinionated divine. He bade me praise God. In reply I praised—the Devil, and I forced him to hear me. Absolutely I broke into a flood of words, and he sat silent. I compared the good and evil in the scheme of the world, balancing them in the scales, the one against the other. I took up the stock weapon of atheism, the deadly nature, the deadly outcome of free will. I used it with skill. The names of Strauss, Comte, Schopenhauer, Renan, a dozen others, sprang from my lips. The dreary doctrine of the illimitable triumph of sin, of the appalling mistake of the permission granted it to step into the scheme of creation, in order that its presence might create a *raison d'être* for the power of personal action one way or the other in mankind—such matters as these I treated with a vehement eloquence and command of words that laid a spell upon the doctor. Going very far, I dared to exclaim that since God had allowed his own scheme to get out of gear, the only hope of man lay in the direction of the opposing force, in frank and ardent Satanism. [118]

When at length I ceased from speaking, I expected Dr Wedderburn to rise up in his wrath and to annihilate me, but he sat still in his chair with a queer, and, as I thought, puzzled expression upon his face. At last he said, as if to himself:

"The miracle of Balaam; verily, the miracle of Balaam."

The ass had indeed spoken as never ass spoke before. I waited a moment, then I said:—

"Well, why don't you rebuke me, or why don't you try to controvert me?"

Again he looked upon me, very uneasily I thought, and with something that was almost fear in his keen eyes.

"Ah!" he said, "I have praised the Lord many a morning and evening for his gift of words to me. It seems others bestow that gift too. Alistair"—and here his voice became deeply solemn—"where have you been visiting when you lay there, mad to all seeming? In what dark place have you been to gather destruction for men? With whom have you been talking?"

Suddenly, I know not why, I thought of the grey stranger, and, with a laugh, I cried:—

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"The grey traveller taught me all I have said to you."

"The grey traveller! Who may he be?"

But I lay back upon the pillows and refused to answer, and very soon the doctor went, still bending uneasy, nervous eyes upon me.

In those eyes I read the change that had stolen over my intellect, as in the hand-mirror I had read the change that had stolen over my face. This strange fever had caused both soul and body to blossom. I trembled with an exquisite joy. Had Fate relented to me at last? Was it possible that I was to know the joys of the heroes? I longed for, yet feared my full recovery. In it alone should I discover how sincere was my transformation. Doctor Wedderburn did not come to me again. The days passed, my convalescence strengthened, watched over by the pretty nurse, Kate Walters, a fresh, pure, pious, innocent, beautiful soul, tender, temperate, and pitiful for all sorrow and evil. At length I was well. At length I knew, to some extent, my new, my marvellous self. For I had, indeed, been folded up in my fever like a vesture, and, like a vesture, changed. I had grown taller, expanded, put forth mighty muscles as a tree puts forth leaves. My cheeks and my eyes glowed with the radiance of strong health. I went out with my cousin Gavin, whose estate marched with mine, and I shot so well that he was filled with admiration, and forthwith conceived a sort of foolish worship for me—having a sportsman's soul but no real mind. For the first time in my life I felt absolutely at home on a horse, an unwonted skill came to my hands, and I actually schooled Gavin's horses over some fences he had had set up in a grass park at the Mains of Cossens. The keepers who had once secretly jeered at me were now at my very feet. Their children looked upon me as a young god. I rejoiced in my strength as a giant. But I asked myself then, as I ask myself now—what does it mean? The days of miracles are over. Yet, is this not a miracle? And in a miracle is there not a gleam of terror, as there is a gleam of stormy yellow in the fated opal? But here I leave my condition of body alone, and pass on to the episode of Doctor Wedderburn, partially related in the newspapers of the day and marvelled at, I believe, by all who ever knew, or even set eyes upon him.

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The doctor, as I have said, did not come again to see me, but I felt an over-mastering desire to set forth and visit him. This was surprising, as hitherto I had rather avoided and hated him. Now something drew me to the Manse. At first I resisted my inclination, but a chance word led me to yield to it impulsively. Since my illness I had not once attended church. Moved by a violent distaste for the religious service, that was novel in me, I had frankly avowed my intention of keeping away. But, as I did not go to the kirk, I missed seeing Dr Wedderburn; and I wanted to see him. One day, leaning by chance against a stone dyke in the Glen of Ogilvy, smoking a pipe and enjoying the soft air of Spring as it blew over the rolling moorland, I heard two ploughmen exchange a fragment of gossip that made excitement start up quick within me.

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One said:—

"The doctor's failin'. Man, he was fairly haverin' last Sabbath, on and on, wi'out logic or argeyment or sense."

The other answered:—

"Ay; he's greatly changed. He's no the man he was. It fairly beats me; I canna mak' it out. Ye've heard that—" And here he lowered his voice and I could not catch his words.

I turned away from the wall, and walking swiftly, set out for the Manse with a busy mind. The afternoon was already late, and when I gained a view of the Manse, a cold grey house standing a little apart in a grove of weary-looking sycamores, one or two lights smiled on me from the small windows that stared upon the narrow and muddy road. The minister's study was on the right of the hall door; and, as I pulled the bell, I observed the shadow of his head to dance upon the drawn white blind, a thought fantastically, or with a palsied motion, I fancied. The yellow-headed maidservant admitted me with a shrunken grin, that suggested wild humour stifled by achieved respect, and I was soon in the minister's study. Then I saw that Doctor Wedderburn was moving up and down the room, and that his head was going this way and that, as he communed in a loud voice with himself. My entrance checked him as soon as he observed me, which was not instantly, as, at first, his back was set towards me and the mood-swept maid. When he turned about, his discomposure was evident. His gaze was troubled, and his manner, as he shook hands with me, had in it something of the tremulous, and was backward in geniality. We sat down on either side of the fire, the tea service and the hot cakes, loved of the doctor, between us. At first we talked warily of such things as my recovery, the weather, the condition of affairs in the parish and so forth. I noticed that though the doctor's eyes often rested with an almost glaring expression of scrutiny or of surprise upon me, he made no remark on the change of my appearance. Nor did I on the change of his, which was startling, and suggested I know not what of sorrow and of the attempt to kill it with evil weapons. The healthy brick-red of his complexion was now become scarlet and full of heat; his mouth worked loosely while he talked; the flesh of his cheeks was puffed and wrinkled; his eyes had the clouded and yet fierce aspect of the drunkard. But, absurdly enough, what most struck me in him was his abstinence from an accustomed act. He

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drank his tea, but he ate no hot cakes. This was a departure from an established, if trifling custom of many years' standing, and worked on my imaginative conception of what the doctor now was more than would, at the first blush, appear likely, or even possible. Instead of, as of old, feeling myself on the worm level in his presence, I was filled with a sense of pity, as I looked upon him and wondered what subtle process of mental or physical development or retrogression had wrought this dreary change. Presently, while I wondered, he put his cup down with an awkward and errant hand that set it swaying and clattering in the tray, and said abruptly:—

“And what have you come for, Alistair, eh? what have you come for? To go on with what you've begun? Well, well, lad, I'm ready for you; I'm ready now.”

His voice was full of timorous irritation, his manner of pitiable distress.

“I've thought it out, I've thought it all out,” he continued; “and I can combat you, I can combat you, Alistair, wherever you've got your fever-mind from and your fever-tongue.”

I knew what he meant, and suddenly I knew, too, why I had wanted so eagerly to come to the Manse. My instinct of pity and of sympathy died softly away. My new instinct of cruel rapture in the ruthless exercise of my—shall I call them fever-powers then?—woke, dawned to sunrise. And Doctor Wedderburn and I fell forthwith into an animated theological discussion. He was desperately nervous, desperately ill at ease. His argumentative struggles were those of a drowning man positively convinced—note this,—that he would drown, that no human or divine aid could save him. There was, too, a strong hint of personal anger in his manner, which was strictly undignified. He fought a losing battle with bludgeons, and had an obvious contempt for the bludgeons while in the act of using them in defence or in attack. And at last, with a sort of sharp cry, he threw up his hands, and exclaimed in a voice I hardly knew as his:—

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“God forgive you, Alistair, for what you're doing! God forgive you—murderer, murderer!”

This dolorous exclamation ran through me like cold water and chilled all the warmth of my intellectual excitement.

“Murderer!” I repeated inexpressively.

Doctor Wedderburn sat in his chair trembling, and looking upon me with despairing and menacing eyes, the eyes of a man who curses but cannot fight his enemy.

“Of a soul, of a soul,” he said. “The poisoned dagger?—doubt, the poisoned dagger—you've plunged it into me, boy.”

Then raising his voice harshly, he exclaimed:

“Curse you, curse you!”

I was thunderstruck. I declare it here, for it is true. I had defamed—and deliberately—the doctor's dearest idols. I had driven my lance into his convictions. I had blasphemed what he worshipped, and had denied all he affirmed. But that I had made so terrific an impression upon his mind, his soul—this astounded me. Yet what else could his passionate denunciation mean? Had I, a boy, unused to controversy, unskilled in dialectics, overthrown with my hasty words the faith of this strong and fervent man? The thought thrilled one side of my dual nature with triumph, pierced the other with grim horror. My emotions were divided and complex. As I sat silent, my face dogged yet ashamed, the doctor got up from his chair trembling like one with the palsy.

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“Away from me—away,” he cried in a hoarse voice, and pointing at the door. “I'll have no more talk with the Devil, no more—no more!”

I had not a word. I got up and went, bending a steady, fascinated look upon this old mentor of mine, who now proclaimed himself my victim. Arrived in the garden I found a thin moon riding above the sycamores, and soft airs of Spring playing round the doctor's habitation. Strangely, I had no mind to begone from it immediately. I crossed the garden bit and paced up and down the country lane that skirted it, keeping an eye upon the lighted window of the study. So I went back and forth for full an hour, I suppose. Then I heard a sound in the Spring night. The doctor's hall door banged, and, peering through the privet hedge that protected his meagre domain, I perceived him come out into the air bareheaded. He took his way to the small path that ran by the hedge parallel to the lane, coming close to the place by which I crouched, spying upon his privacy. And there he paced, bemoaning aloud the ill fate that had come upon him. I heard all the awful complaining of this soul in distress, besieged by doubts, deserted by the faith and hope of a lifetime. It was villainous to be his audience. Yet, I could not go. Sometimes the poor man prayed with a desolate voice, calling upon God for a sign, imploring against temptation. Sometimes—and this was terrible—he blasphemed, he imprecated. And then again he prayed—to the Devil, as do the Satanists. I heard him weeping in his garden in the night, alone under the sycamores. It was a new agony of the garden and it wrung my heart. Yet I watched it till the spectral moon waned, and the trees were black as sins against the faded sky.

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About this time, as I have said, his parishioners began to mark the outward change of Dr Wedderburn that signified the inward change in him. The talking ploughmen had their fellows. All who sat under the doctor were conscious of a difference, at first vague, in his eloquent discourses, of a diminuendo in the full fervour of his delivery and manner. Gossip flowed about him, and presently there were whisperings of change in his bodily habits. He had been seen by

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night wandering about his garden in very unholy condition, he who had so often rebuked excess. Children, passing his gate in the dark of evening, had endured with terror his tipsy shoutings. A maidservant left him, and spread doleful reports of his conduct through the village. By degrees, rumours of our minister's shortcomings stole, like snakes, into the local papers, carefully shrouded by the wrappings that protect scandal-mongers against libel actions. The congregation beneath the doctor's pulpit dwindled. Women looked at him askance. Men were surly to him, or—and that was less kind—jocular. I, alone, followed with fascination the paling to dusk of a bright and useful career. I, alone, partially understood the hell this poor creature carried within him. For I often heard his dreary night-thoughts, and assisted, unperceived of him, at the vigils that he kept. The lamp within his study burned till dawn while he wrestled, but in vain, with the disease of his soul, the malady of his tortured heart.

One night in Summer time, towards midnight, I bent my steps furtively to the Manse. It was very dark and the weather was dumb and agitating. No leaf danced, no grass quivered. Breathless, dead, seemed the woods and fields, the ocean of moorland, the assemblage of the mountains. I heard no step upon the lonely road but my own, and life seemed to have left the world until I came upon the Manse. Then I saw the light in the doctor's window, and, drawing near, observed that the blind was up and the lattice thrust open among the climbing dog-roses. Craftily I stole up the narrow garden path, and, keeping to the side of the window, looked into the room. [128]

Doctor Wedderburn lounged within at the table facing me. A pen was in his shaking hand. A shuffle of manuscript paper was before him, and a Bible, in which he thrust his fingers as if to keep texts already looked out. Beyond the Bible was a bottle, three-quarters full of whiskey, and a glass. His muttering lips and dull yet shining eyes betokened his condition. I saw before me a drunkard writing a sermon. The vision was sufficiently bizarre. A tragedy of infinite pathos mingled with a comedy of hideous yet undeniable humour in the live picture. I neither wept nor did I laugh. I only watched, shrouded by the inarticulate night. The doctor took a pull at the bottle, then swept the leaves of the Bible....

"Let me die the death of the righteous," he murmured thickly. "That's it—that's—that's—" He wrote on the paper before him with a wandering pen, then pushed the sheet from him. It fell on the floor by the window.

"And let my last end be like his—Ah—ah!"

He drank again, and again wrote with fury. How old and how wicked he looked, yet how sad! He crouched down over the table and the pen broke in his hand. A dull exclamation burst from him. Taking up the bottle, he poured by accident some of the whiskey over the open Bible. [129]

"A baptism! A baptism!" he ejaculated, bursting into laughter. "Now—now—let's see—let's see."

Again he violently turned the sodden leaves and shook his head. He could not read the words, and that angered him. He drank again and again till the bottle was empty, then staggered out of the room. I heard his frantic footsteps echoing in the uncarpeted passage. Quickly I leaned in at the window and caught up the sheet of paper that had fallen to the floor. I held it up to the light. Only one sentence writhed up and down over it, repeated a dozen times; "There is no God!" While I read I heard the doctor returning, and I shrank back into the night. He came stumbling in, another whiskey bottle full in his hand. Falling down in the chair he applied his lips to it and drank—on and on. He was killing himself there and then. I knew it. I wanted to leap into the room, to stop him, yet I only watched him. Why?—I want to know why—

At last he fell forward across the Bible with a choking noise. His limbs struggled. His arms shot out wildly, the table broke under him—there was a crash of glass. The lamp was extinguished. Darkness crowded the little room—and silence.

The papers recorded the shocking death of a minister. They did not record this. [130]

As I stole home that night, alone in my knowledge of the doctor's appalling end, I heard going before me light and tripping footsteps, those, apparently, of some youth, not above three yards or so from me. What wanderer thus preceded me, I asked myself, with a certain tingling of the nerves, shaken, perhaps, by what I had just seen? I paused. The steps also paused. The person was stopping too. I resumed my way. Again I heard the tripping footfalls. Their sound greatly disquieted me, yet I hurried, intending to catch up the wayfarer. Still the steps hastened along the highway, and always just before me. I ran, yet did not come up with any person. I called "Stop! Stop!" There was no reply. Again I waited. This man—or boy—(the steps seemed young) waited also. I started forward once more. So did he. Then a fury of fear ran over me, urging me at all hazards to see in whose train I travelled. We were now close to Carlounie. We entered the policies. Yes, this person turned from the public road through my gates into the drive, and the footfalls reached the very house. I stopped. I dared not approach quite close to the door. With trembling fingers I fumbled in my pocket, drew out my match-box, and, in the airless night, struck a match. The tiny flame burned steadily. I stretched my hand out, approaching it, as I supposed, to the face of the stranger.

But I saw nothing. Only, on a sudden, I heard some one hasten from me across the sweep of gravel in the direction of the burn. And then, after an interval, I heard the rush of startled sheep through the night. [131]

Just so had they scattered on the day I spoke with the grey traveller by the waterside.

III THE SOUL OF KATE WALTERS

IT is more than two years since I wrote down any incident of my life. Two years ago I seemed to myself a stranger. To-day an intimacy has sprung up between myself and that observant, detached something within me—that little extra spirit which looks on at me, and yet is, somehow, me. I am at home with my own power. I am accustomed to my strength of personality. From my fever I rose like some giant. Long ago my world recognised the obedience it owed me. Long ago, by many signs, in many ways, it taught me the paramount quality of the emanation from my soul that is called my influence. Yet sometimes, even now, I seem to stare at myself aghast, to turn cold when I am alone with myself. I am seized with terrible fancies. I think of the voice of the burn. I think of that childish Autumn ceremony upon its bank among the mists and the flying leaves. I think of the grey youth who spoke with me in the twilight, and my soul is full of questions. I muse upon the Wandering Jew, upon Faust, upon Van Der Decken, upon the monstrous figures that are legends, yet sometimes realities to men. And then—and this is ghastly—I say to myself, can it be that I, too, shall become a legend? Can it be that my name will be whispered by the pale lips of good men long after I am dead? For, is there not a whirl of white faces attending my progress as the whirl of dead leaves attends the Autumn? Do I not hear a faint symphony of despairing cries like a dreadful music about my life? Is not my power upon men malign? Boys with their hopes shattered, men with their faiths broken, women with their love turned to gall—do they not crowd about my chariot wheels? Or is it my vain fancy that they do? Here and there from the sea of these beings one rises like a drowned creature whom the ocean will not hide, stark, stiff, corpse-like. Doctor Wedderburn was the first. Kate Walters is the second—Kate Walters.

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When my convalescence was well advanced she left Carlounie and went back to Edinburgh. Some months afterwards I heard casually that she was working in an hospital there. But a year and a half went by before I saw this girl again. Her fresh, pure, ministering face had nearly faded from my memory. Yet, she had attended intimately upon my marvellous transformation from my death of weakness to the life of strength. She had lifted me in her girl's arms when I was nothing. Yes, I had been in her arms then. How strange, how close are the commonest relations between the invalid and his nurse! When I chanced to meet Kate again I had no thought of this. I had forgotten. I came to Edinburgh on some business connected with a mine discovered on my estate, which seemed likely to make a great fortune for me, and is already on the way to accomplishing this first duty of a mine. My business done, I stayed on at my hotel in Princes Street amusing myself, for I had a multitude of friends in Edinburgh. One of these friends was a medical student attached to the hospital there, and he chanced to invite me to go with him through the wards one day. In one of the wards I encountered Kate Walters, fresh, clear, calm as in the old Carlounie days of my illness. She did not know me till I recalled myself to her recollection; then she looked into my face with the frankest astonishment. My superb physique amazed her, although she had attended upon its beginnings. I asked after her life in the interval since our last meeting; and she told me, with a delightful blush, that her period of nursing was nearly concluded, as she was engaged to be married to one Hugh Fraser, a handsome, rich, and—strange thing this!—most steadfast youth, who lived in England in the south, and who loved her tenderly. I congratulated her, and was on the point of moving away down the ward with my friend when my eyes were caught again by Kate's blushing cheeks and eyes alight with the fiery shames and joys of love. How beautiful is the human face when the torches of the heart are kindled thus. How beautiful! I paused, and, before I went, invited Kate to tea one afternoon at my hotel. She accepted the invitation. Why not? In our meeting the old chain of sympathy between patient and nurse seemed forged anew. We felt that we were indeed friends. As we left the ward, my student chum chaffed me—I let his words go by heedlessly. I was not in love with Kate, but I was half in love with her love for Hugh Fraser. It had such pretty features. She came to tea and told me all about him; and when she talked of him she was so fascinating that I was loath to let her go. It was a sweet evening, and, as Kate had not to be back at the hospital early, I suggested that we should go for a stroll on Carlton Hill, and talk a little more about Hugh Fraser. The bribe tempted her. I saw that. And she agreed after a moment's hesitation.

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There is certainly an influence that lives only out of doors and can never enter a house, or exercise itself within four walls. There is a wandering spirit in the air of evening, a soul that walks with gathering shadows, speaks in the distant hum of a city, and gazes through its twinkling lights. *There is a grey traveller who journeys in the twilight.* (What am I saying? To-day, as I write, I am full of fancies.) I felt that, so soon as Kate and I were away from the hotel, out under the sky and amid the mysteries of Edinburgh, we were changed. In a flash our intimacy advanced, the sympathy already existing between us deepened. Leaving the streets, we mounted the flight of steps that leads to the hill, and joined the few couples who were walking, almost like gods on some Olympus, above the world. They were all obviously lovers. I pointed this fact out to Kate, saying, "Hugh Fraser should be here, not I."

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She smiled, but scarcely, I thought, with much regret. For the moment it seemed that a confidant satisfied her; and this pleased me. I drew her arm within mine.

"We must not alarm the lovers," I said. "We must appear to be as they are, or we shall carry a fiery sword into their Eden."

"You seem to understand us very well," she answered with a smile. And she left her arm in mine.

The mention of "us" chilled me. It seemed to set me outside a magic circle within which she, Hugh Fraser, these people sauntering near us, like amorous ghosts in the dimness, moved. I pressed her arm ever so gently.

"Tell me how lovers feel at such a time as this," I whispered, looking into her eyes.

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From Carlton Hill at night one sees a heaving ocean of yellow lights, gleaming like phosphorescence on ebon waves. Towards Arthur's Seat, towards the Castle, they rise; by Holyrood, by the old town, they fall. That night I could fancy that this sea of light spoke to me, murmured in my ear, urging me to prosecute my will, ruthlessly stirring a strange and, perhaps, evanescent romance in my heart. I know that when I parted from Kate that night I bent and kissed her. I know that she looked up at me startled, even terrified, yet found no voice to rebuke me. I know that I did not leave Edinburgh, as I had originally intended, upon the morrow. And I know this best of all—that I had no ill-intent in staying. I was caught in a net of impulse despite my own desire. I was held fast. There are—I believe it unalterably now—influences in life that are the very Tsars of the empires of men's souls. They must be obeyed. Possibly—is it so I wonder?—they only mount upon their thrones when they are urgently invoked by men who, as it were, say, "Come and rule over us!" But once that invocation has been made, once it has been responded to, there is never again free will for him who has rashly called upon the power he does not understand, and bowed before the tyrant whose face he has not seen. I tremble now, as I write; I tremble as does the bond slave. Yet I neither speak with, nor hear, nor have sight of, my master. Unless, indeed—but I will not give way to any madness of the brain. No, no; I do not hear, I do not see, although I am conscious of, my Tsar, whose unemancipated serf I am.

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I need not tell all the story of my soul's impression that was stamped upon the soul of Kate Walters. Perhaps it is old. Certainly it is sad. I stamped deceit upon the nature which had not known it, knowledge of evil where only purity had been, satiety upon temperance. And, worst of all, I expelled from this girl's heart love for a good man who loved her, and planted, in its stead, passion for a—must I say a bad, or may I not cry, a driven man? And all this time Hugh Fraser knew nothing of his sorrow, growing up swiftly to meet him like a giant. Even now, while I write these words, he knows nothing of it. As I had carelessly taken possession of the mind, the very nature of Dr Wedderburn, so now I took possession of the very nature of Kate Walters. My immense strength, my abounding physical glory drew her—who had known me a puny invalid—irresistibly. I won the doctor by my mind; this girl, in the main, I think, by my body. And when at length I tired of her slightly, the woman, the gentle woman, sprang up a tigress. I had said one night that, since I was obliged to go to London, we must part for a while. I had added that it was well Hugh Fraser lived in complete ignorance of his betrayal.

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"Why?" Kate suddenly cried out.

"Because—because it is best so. He and you—some day."

I paused. She understood my meaning. Instantly the tigress had sprung upon me. The scene that followed was eloquent. I learned what lives and moves in the very depths of a nature, stirred by the inexhaustible greed of passion, twisted by passion's fulfilment, the ardent touched by the inert. But upon that hurricane has followed an immense and very strange calm. Kate is almost cold to me, though very sweet. She has acquiesced in my departure for town. She has come to one mind with me on the subject of Hugh Fraser. More, she has even written a letter to him asking him to come to her, pressing forward their marriage, and I am to be the bearer of it to him. This is only a woman's whim. She insists that I must see once the man who is to be her husband.

So, after all, the tragedy of Dr Wedderburn is not to be repeated. I—I shall not hear, stealing along the steep and windy streets of Edinburgh, any—any strange footsteps.

What is the awful fate that pursues me? A year ago I left Edinburgh carrying with me the letter which I understood to contain the request of Kate Walters to her lover, Hugh Fraser, to hasten on their marriage. As the train roared southwards, I congratulated myself on my clever management of a woman. I had, it is true, stepped in between Kate and the calm happiness she had been anticipating when I first met her in the hospital ward. But now I had withdrawn. And, I told myself, in time. All would be well. This girl would marry the boy who loved her. She would deceive him. He would never know that the girl he married was not the girl he originally loved. He would never perceive that a human being had intervened between her and purity, truth, honour. In this letter—I touched it with my fingers, congratulating myself—Hugh Fraser would read the summons to the future he desired, the future with Kate Walters. His soul would rush to

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meet hers, and surely, after a little while, hers would cease to hold back. She would really once more be as she had been. I forgot that no human soul can ever retreat from knowledge to ignorance.

Hugh Fraser's rooms in London were in Piccadilly. Directly I arrived in town I wrote him a note, saying that I was from Edinburgh with a message from Kate Walters for him. I explained that she had nursed me through a severe illness, and hoped I might have the pleasure of making his acquaintance. In reply, I received a most friendly note, begging me to call at an hour on the evening of the following day.

That evening I drove in a hansom from the Grand Hotel to Piccadilly, taking Kate's note with me. I was conscious of a certain excitement, and also of a certain moral exultation. Ridiculously enough, I felt as if I were about to perform a sort of fine, almost paternal act, blessing these children with genuine, as opposed to stage, emotion. Yes; I glowed with a consciousness of personal merit. How incredible human beings are! Arrived at Hugh Fraser's rooms, I was at once shown in. How vividly I remember that first interview of ours, the exact condition of the room, Hugh's attitude of lively anticipation, the precise way in which he held his cigarette, the grim, short bark of the fox-terrier that sprang up from a sofa when I came in. Hugh was almost twenty-four years old, rather tall, slim, with intense, large, dark eyes—full of shining cheerfulness just then—very short, curling black hair, and fine, straight features. His expression was boyish; so were his movements. As soon as he saw me, he sprang forward and gave me an enthusiastic welcome—for the sake of Kate, I knew. He led me to the fire and made me sit down. I at once handed him my credentials, Kate's letter. His face flushed with pleasure, and his fingers twitched with the desire to tear it open, but he refrained politely, and began to talk—about her, I confess. I understood in three minutes how deeply he was in love with her. I told him all about her that might please him, and hinted at the contents of the letter. [140] [141]

"What!" he exclaimed joyously. "She wants to hasten on our marriage at last. And she's kept me off—but you know what girls are! She couldn't leave the hospital immediately. She swore it. There were a thousand reasons for delay. But now—by Jove!"

His eyes were suddenly radiant, and he clutched hold of my hand like a schoolboy.

"You are a good chap to bring me such a letter," he cried.

"Read it," I said, again filled with moral self-satisfaction, vain, paltry egoist that I was.

"No, no—presently."

But I insisted; and at length he complied, enchanted to yield to my importunity. He opened the letter, and, as he broke the seal, his face was like morning. Never shall I forget the change that grew in it as he read. When he had finished his face was like starless night. He looked old, haggard, black, shrunken. I watched him with a sensation that something had gone wrong with my sight. Surely radiance was fully before me and my tricked vision saw it as despair. Raising his blank, bleak eyes from the letter, Hugh stared towards me and opened his lips. But no sound came from them. He frowned, as if in fury at his own dumbness. Then at last, with a sharp shake of his head sideways, he said in a low and dry voice:

"You know what is in this letter, you say?" [142]

"I—I thought so," I answered, growing cold and filled with anxiety.

"Well, read it, will you?"

I took the paper from his hand and read:—

"DEAR HUGH,—Make the man who brings you this letter marry me. If you don't, I will kill myself; for I am ruined."
KATE.

I looked up at Hugh Fraser over the letter which my hand still mechanically held near my eyes. I wonder how long the silence through which we stared lasted.

A month later I was married to Kate Walters!

IV THE SOUL OF HUGH FRASER

It may seem strange that my influence upon the soul of Hugh Fraser should follow upon such a situation as I have just described; but everything connected with my life, since the day when I met the grey boy by the burn, has been utterly strange, utterly abnormal. My treachery, one would have thought, must have led Fraser to hate me. I had wrecked his happiness. I had done him the deepest injury one man can do to another, and at first he hated me. When he had wrung [143]

from me a promise to marry Kate, he left me, and I did not see him again until after the wedding. But then, it seemed, he could not keep away from her. For he forgave us the wrong we had done him; and, after a while, wrote a friendly letter in which he suggested that we should all forget the past.

"Why should I not see you sometimes?" he concluded. "I only wish you both good, there is no longer any evil in my heart."

Poor boy! It was to be, I suppose. The Tsar of the empire of my soul set forth his edict, and one winter day carriage wheels ground harshly upon the gravel sweep, and Hugh Fraser was my guest at Carlounie. I welcomed him upon the very spot where those light footsteps paused that black night of Doctor Wedderburn's dreary end. And the faint sound of the burn mingled with our voices in greeting and reply.

The boy was changed. He had aged, grown grave, heavier in movement, fiercer in observation, less ready in speech. But his manner was friendly even to me, and it was plain to see that Kate still had his heart. They met quietly enough, but a flush ran from his cheek to hers as they touched hands. Their voices quivered when they spoke a commonplace of pleasure at the encounter. So the wheels of Fate began slowly to turn on this winter's day.

I must tell you that my fortunes had greatly changed before Hugh Fraser came to Carlounie. I was grown rich. My investments, my speculations had prospered almost miraculously. The mine I have spoken of was proving a gold mine to me. All worldly things went well with me—all worldly things, yes. [144]

Now, I believe that all mighty circumstances are born tiny, like children, at some given moment. As a rule, they usually seem so insignificant, so puny at the birth, that we take no heed of the fact that they have come into being, and that, in process of time, they will grow to might, perhaps to horrible majesty. Only, when we trace events backwards do we know the exact moment when their first faint wail broke upon our mental hearing. Generally this is so. But I affirm that I felt, at the very time of its first coming, the presence of the shadow, the tiny shadow of the events which I am about to describe. I even said to myself, "This is a birthday."

Among many improvements on my estate I had built a new Manse, in which, of course, our new minister lived. The old habitation of Doctor Wedderburn stood empty and deserted among its sycamores. One winter's day Hugh Fraser, Kate, and I, in our walk, passed along the lane by the now ragged privet hedge through which I had so often observed the doctor's agonies. It was a black and white day of frost, which crawled along the dark trees and outlined twig and branch. The air was misty, and distant objects assumed a mysterious importance. Slight sounds, too, suggested infinite activities to the mind. As we neared the Manse, Hugh Fraser said to me:— [145]

"Who lives in that old house?"

"Nobody," I replied.

Hugh glanced at me very doubtfully.

"Nobody," I reiterated.

"Really," he rejoined. "But the garden?"

"Is deserted."

"Hardly," he exclaimed, pointing with his hand. "Look!"

"Yes," said Kate, as if in agreement.

And she grew duskiely pale.

I looked over the privet hedge, seeing only the rank and frost-bitten grass, the wild bushes and narrow mossy paths. Then I stared at my two companions in silence. Their eyes appeared to follow the onward movement of some object invisible to me.

"The old man makes himself at home," Hugh said. "He has gone into the summer-house now."

"Yes," Kate said again.

There was fear in her eyes.

I felt suddenly that the air was very chill.

"That house is unoccupied," I repeated shortly.

We all walked on in silence. But, through our silence, it certainly seemed to me that there came a sound of some one lamenting in the garden.

A day or two later Fraser said to me:— [146]

"Why is that old house shut up?"

"Who would occupy it?" I said. "Of course, if I could get a tenant—"

"I'll take it," he rejoined quickly. "You can let me some shooting with it, can't you?"

"But," I began; and then I stopped. I had an instinct to keep the old Manse empty, but I fought it,

merely because it struck me as unreasonable. How seldom are our instincts unreasonable! God—how seldom!

"I've been looking out for a shooting-box," Hugh said. "That house would suit me admirably."

"All right," I answered. "I shall be very glad to have you for a tenant."

So it was arranged. When Kate heard of the arrangement, I observed her to go very pale; but she made no objection. Hugh Fraser rented the house, furnished it, engaged servants, a gardener, enlarged the stables, and took up his abode there. Doctor Wedderburn's old study was now his den. When I looked in at the window through which I had seen the doctor die, I saw Fraser smoking, or playing with his setters. I don't know why, but the sight turned me sick.

My relations with Kate, of which I have said nothing, were rather cold and distant. My passion, such as it was, had died before marriage. Hers seemed to languish afterwards. I believe that she had really loved me, but that the shame of being with me, after I had wedded her actually against my will, struck this sentiment to the dust. When one feeling that has been very strong dies, its place is generally filled by another. Sometimes I fancied that this was so with Kate, that the bitterness of shattered self-respect gradually transformed her nature, that a cruel frost bound the tenderesses, the warm vagaries of what had been a sweet woman's heart. But, to tell the truth, I did not trouble much about the matter. My affairs were prospering so greatly, my health was so abounding, I had so much beside the mere egotism of brilliant physical strength to occupy me, that I was heedless, reckless—at first. Yet, I had moments of a dull alarm connected with the dweller at the Manse. [147]

If Hugh Fraser changed as he read that fateful letter in London, he changed far more after he came to live at the Manse. And it seemed to me that there were times when—how shall I put it?—when he bore a curious, and, to me, almost intolerable likeness to—some one who was dead. A certain old man's manner came upon him at moments. His body, in sitting or standing, assumed, to my eyes, elderly and damnable attitudes. Once, when I glanced in at the study window before entering the Manse, I perceived him lounging over a table facing me, a pen in his hand and paper before him, and the spectacle threw all my senses into a violent and most distressing disorder. Instead of going into the house, as I had intended, I struck sharply upon the glass at the window. Fraser looked up quickly. [148]

"What—what are you writing?" I cried out.

He got up, came to the window, and opened it.

"Eh? What's the row, man?" he said. "Why don't you come in?"

I repeated my question, with an anxiety I strove to mask.

"Writing? Only a letter to town," he said, looking at me in wonder.

"Not a sermon?" I blurted forth.

"A sermon? Good heavens, no. Why should I write a sermon?"

"Oh," I replied, forcing an uneasy laugh. "You—you live in a Manse. Doctor Wedderburn used to write his sermons in that room."

That evening I remember that I said to Kate:

"Don't you think Fraser is getting to look very old at times?"

"I haven't observed it," she replied coldly.

Another curious thing. Very soon after he took up his abode in the Manse, Fraser, who had been a godly youth, became markedly averse to religion. He informed us, with some excitement, that he had changed his views, and seemed much inclined to carry on an atheistical propaganda among the devout people of the neighbourhood. He declared that much evil had been wrought by faith in Carlounie, and appeared to deem it as his special duty to preach some sort of a crusade against the accepted Christianity of the parish. I began to combat his views, and once sought the reason of his ardour and self-election to the post of teacher. His answer struck me exceedingly. He said:— [149]

"Why should I be the one to clear away these senseless beliefs in phantasms, you say? Why, because I suppose they were woven by my predecessor in the Manse. Didn't the minister live and die there? Do you know, Ralston, sometimes, as I sit in that study at night, I have a feeling that instead of turning to what is called repentance when he died, the minister turned the other way, recanted in his last hour the faith he had professed all through his life, and expired before he could give words to his new mind and heart. And then I feel as if his influence was left behind him in that room, and fell upon me and imposed on me this mission."

And as he spoke, he suddenly plucked at his face with an old, habitual action of Doctor Wedderburn's when excited. I scarcely restrained a cry, and with difficulty forced myself to go out slowly from his presence. Nevertheless, I felt strongly impelled to fight against the atheism of this boy, I who had formerly sown the seeds of destruction in the soul of Doctor Wedderburn. But it was as if my own act of the past rose and conquered me in the present. I declare solemnly it was so. Some emanation from the poor dead creature's soul clung round that cursed place of his doom, and, seizing upon the soul of Fraser, spread tyranny from its throne. And whom did it take [150]

first as its victim, think you? Kate, my wife.

Let our individual beliefs be what they may, one thing we must all—when we think—acknowledge, that the pulse which beats eternally in the heart of life is reparation.

Kate, as I have said, was originally finely pure and finely dowered with the blessings of faith in a divine Providence, trust in the eventual redemption of the world, hope that sin, sorrow, and sighing would, indeed, flee away, and all mankind find eternal and unutterable peace. In my worst moments I had never tried to destroy this beauty of her soul; and, in her fall, now repaired, she had never abandoned her religion. It was, I know, a haunting memory of the last moments of the doctor that held me back from ever attacking the faith of another. For myself, I did not think much of my future beyond death. Life filled my horizon then.

But now, after a short absence in England, during which I left Kate at Carlounie, I returned to find her infected with Fraser's pestilent notions. She declined to go to the kirk, declaring that it was better to act up to her real convictions than to set what is called a good example to her dependants. She and Fraser gloried openly in their new-found damnation. I say damnation, for this was actually how the matter struck me when I began carefully to consider it. Men often see only what irreligion really is and means when they find it existing in a woman. I was appalled at this deadly fire flaring up in the heart of Kate, and I set myself, at first feebly, at length determinedly, to quench it and stamp it out. [151]

But I fought against my own former self. I fought against the influence of the spectre that surely haunted the Manse, and that spectre rose originally from the very bosom of the burn at my summons. Am I mad to think so? No, no. Oh, the eternal horror that may spring from one wild and lawless action, from the recital of one diabolic litany! This was surely the strangest, subtlest reparation that ever beat in the inexorable heart of Life. Hugh Fraser was enveloped by the influence, still retained mysteriously in his abode, of the soul that was gone to its account. Through him it seized upon Kate, and thus the mystic number was made up, three souls were bound and linked together. (I hear as I write the voice of the grey traveller by the burn in the twilight.) And in the first soul I had planted the seed of death, and so in the second and in the third. Now, thrusting as it were backward through Kate and Hugh Fraser, I fought with a dead man, long ago, perhaps, wrapped in pain unknown. But, as the influence of Doctor Wedderburn had formerly—before the fever—dominated my influence, so now it dominated my influence from the tomb. Indeed, this man whom I had destroyed had a drear revenge upon me. There had been an interregnum when the doctor wavered from Christianity to atheism. But that had ceased to be. He died undoubting, a blatant unbeliever. Hence, surely, his deadly power now. He returned, as it were, to slay me. The spectre at the Manse defied me. [152]

Slowly I grew to feel, to know, all this. It did not come upon me in a moment; for sometimes my worldly affairs still occupied me. My glory of health and of strength still delighted me. I was as Faust—I was as Faust in his monstrous and damnable youth. But there came a time when the spectre at the Manse touched me with the hand of Hugh Fraser. And then I rose up to battle with it, trembling at the thought of the grey boy's words at the thought of the Cæsar of hell whose tribute was three human souls.

Kate and I were taking tea one evening with Fraser. We sat around the hearth, by which was placed the table with the tea-service and the hot cakes. Fraser began, as was his habit now, to discuss religious subjects and to rail against the professors of faith. Kate listened to him eagerly—a filthy fire, so I thought, gleaming in her great eyes. I was silent, watching. And presently it seemed to me that Fraser's gestures in talking grew like the dead gestures of the doctor. He threw his hands abroad with the fingers divided in a manner of Wedderburn's. He struck his knees sharply, and simultaneously, with both his palms to emphasise his remarks, a frequent habit of the dead man's. So vehement was the similarity that I began presently to feel that the doctor himself declaimed in the firelight, and I was seized with a desire to combat effectively his wicked, but forcible arguments. I broke in, then, upon Fraser's tirade and cried the cause of religion. He turned upon me, dealt with my pleas, scattered my contentions—growing, I fancied, very old and with the rumbling voice of age,—thrust at me with the lances of sarcasm, sore belaboured me into silence and mute fury. And all the time Kate sat by, and I seemed to see her soul, with fluttering outstretched wings, sinking down to hell, as a hawk drops out of sight into a dark cleft of the mountains. And then, in the last resort, Fraser struck his hand down on mine to clinch his defeat of me. And I, looking upon that poor Kate, cried out:— [153]

“God forgive you, Fraser, for what you're doing—murderer! murderer!”

Scarcely had my cry died away than I knew I had borrowed the very words of Wedderburn to me. A cold, like ice, came upon me. This reversal of the past in the present was too ironic. I heard the doctor chuckling drearily in Hades. I suddenly sprang up like one pursued, and got away into the night, leaving Kate and Fraser together by the fire. But the spectre of the Manse surely pursued me. I heard its soft but heavy footsteps coming in my wake. I heard its old laughter in the dark behind me; and I sickened and faltered, and was in fear beyond all human fear of an enemy. The next day I told Fraser he must leave the Manse; I would build him a shooting-lodge on any part of my estate that he preferred. [154]

“No,” he said, “no; I have grown to love the old place; I never feel alone there.”

I looked in his eyes, searching after his meaning.

“I would rather pull down the Manse,” I said.

In reply, he touched with his forefinger the lease I had signed with him, which lay on his writing-table.

"You cannot, my friend," he said.

I cannot do anything that I would. I am driven on a dark road by the creature with the whip that is surely after every man who once yields to his worst desires.

Just after this I received a visit from Mr. Mackenzie, the new minister, a young and fervent, but not very knowledgeable man, whose zeal was red-hot, but incompetent, and who would have died for the faith he could never properly expound, like many young ministers of our church. The little man was in a twisting turmoil of distress, and was moved, so he said, to deal very plainly with me. I bade him deal on. It seemed that his flock was becoming infected with atheism, which spread like the plague, from the old Manse. The young children lisped it to each other in the lanes; lovers talked it between their kisses; youths chattered perdition at the idle corner by the church wall. Even the old began to look askance at the Bible that had been their only book of age, and to shiver wantonly at the inevitable approach of death. The young minister cried denunciation upon Fraser, like a vague-minded, but angry Jonah before a provincial Nineveh.

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"Turn him out, Mr. Ralston, drive him forth," he ejaculated. "What is his rent to you? What is his money in comparison with the immortal souls of men? Away with him, away with him."

I mentioned the small matter of the lease. The young minister, with a quivering scarlet face, replied stammering:—

"A lease! But—but—your own wife—she is—is—"

"I do not discuss her," I said sternly.

"Well; they are deserting the services. You see that yourself. They will not come to hear me preach. They will not listen to me."

The man was tasting bitterness. He was almost crying. I was terribly sorry for him. Yet, all I could do was to think of the spectre at the Manse and answer:—

"I can do nothing."

His words were true. Carlounie's soul was being devoured as by a plague. A colony of unbelievers was springing up in the midst of the beautiful woods and the mountains. Soon the evil fame of the place began to spread abroad, and men, in distant parts of Scotland, to speak of mad Carlounie. The matter weighed intolerably upon me, and at last became a fixed idea. I could think of nothing else but this devil's home in the hills, this haunted and harassed centre of doom and darkness which was my possession and in which I lived. I fell into silence. I ceased to stir abroad beyond my own land. It seemed to me that Carlounie should keep strict quarantine, should be isolated, and that each person who went over its borders carried a strange infection and was guilty of murder. I forbade Kate to drive beyond my estates.

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"I never wish to," she said.

And I knew that where Fraser was she was happy. He had her soul fast by this; or, it would be truer to say, the spectre of the Manse had both him and her. And he aged apace and bore on his countenance the stamp of evil. And I brooded and brooded upon the whole matter. But, from whatever point I started, I came back to the Manse and to the spectre dwelling in it with Hugh Fraser. I had given death to Doctor Wedderburn, in return for the life so miraculously given to me, and now his spirit, retained in its ancient abiding-place, spread death about it in its turn. This was, and is, my conviction. The influence of the departed clings to roof, to walls, to floors, leans on the accustomed window-seat, trembles by the bed-head, sits by the hearthstone, stands invisible in the passage way. *To kill it one must destroy its home.* It was my duty to kill it, therefore it was my duty to destroy the Manse. This thought at length took complete possession of me, and, following it, I strove in every imaginable way to oust Fraser from the house among the sycamores. But he would not go. He loved the place, he said. He stood by his lease and I was powerless.

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Oh, God, I have, surely I have, my excuse for what I have done! I meant to be a saviour, not a destroyer! I would have restored Fraser and my poor Kate to their freedom of heart. That was what I meant. Ay, but the grey traveller fought against me. Shut up here by night in my house, on the verge of—that which I cannot, dare not speak of, I declare that I am guiltless. Let him bear the burden, him alone! In these last moments, before my deed is known, I write the truth that men may exonerate me. This is the truth.

Overwhelmed with this idea that Carlounie must be rescued, that Hugh Fraser and Kate must be rescued from this damnation that was preying upon them, I determined, secretly, on the destruction of the Manse, in which the spectre of the doctor stayed to work such evil. But, to do this, I must first make sure that Hugh Fraser was at a distance, and that his small household—he only kept two servants, hired from the village—were away from the haunted dwelling. I, therefore, suggested to Fraser that he should come and spend a week with me, and give his maids a holiday. After a little demur, and drawn, I see now, by his hidden passion for Kate, he accepted my invitation. He dismissed the maids to their homes for a week, and moved over to us. When the minister knew of it, he, no doubt, fully included me in his prayers for the damnation of those who worked evil among his flock. Will he ever read these pages, I wonder? Kate was now

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an avowed atheist, and she and Fraser were continually together, glorying in their complete freedom from old prejudices, and their new outlook upon life. They had, I heard them say, broken through the ties that bound poor, terrified Christians; and, when they said this, they smiled, the one upon the other. I did not then know why. Meanwhile, I was preparing for my deed of redemption, as I called it, and meant it to be. I was resolved to go out by night to the empty Manse, and secretly to set it in flames. It stood alone. The country people slept sound at night. I calculated that if I chose midnight for my act none would see the flames, and, ere the peasants woke at dawn, the Manse and the spectre within it would be destroyed for ever. Such was my belief—such the spirit in which I prepared myself for this strange work.

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V THE RETURN OF THE GREY TRAVELLER

I WRITE these last words after the dead of night, towards the coming of the dawn. Ere the light is grey in the sky I shall be away to the burn to meet him, the grey traveller. He is there waiting for me. He has come back. I go to meet him, and I shall never return. Carlounie will know my face no more. All is done as he ordained. My words have been as deeds, have marched on inevitably to actual deeds. Long ago he said that sometimes, even as we can never go back from things that we have done, we can never go back from things that we have said. So, indeed, it is.

According to my fixed intention, I determined on a night for the destruction of the Manse. The house was old and would burn like tinder. I should break into it through the window of the study, which was never shuttered. I should set fire to the interior at several points, and escape in the darkness of the night. By dawn the accursed place would be a ruin, and then—then I looked for a new era. Fool! Fool! I looked to see the burden of the vile influence of the spectre lifted from the soul of Fraser, and so from the soul of Kate, which was infected by him. I looked to see my people sane and satisfied as of old, Carlounie no more a plague-spot in the land, that poor and zealous man, the minister, calm and at rest with his little faithful flock once more. All this I looked for confidently. And so, when the black and starless night of my deed came, I was happy and serene. That night Kate pleaded a headache, and went to bed very early, before nine. She begged me not to come to her room to bid her good-night, as she wanted perfect quiet and sleep. All unsuspecting, I agreed to her request. Soon after she had gone, Fraser, who had seemed heavy with unusual fatigue all through the evening, also went off to bed, and I was left alone. But it was not yet time for me to start on my errand of the darkness. The burning Manse would surely attract attention before midnight. People might be out and about in the village. A belated peasant might be on his way home by the lane that skirted the privet hedge. I must wait till all were sleeping. The time seemed very long. Once I fancied I heard a movement in the house—again I dreamed that soft and hurried footsteps upon the gravel outside broke on the silence. But I said to myself that I was nervous, highly strung because of my strange project, that my imagination tricked me. At last the hour came. Without going upstairs I drew on my thickest overcoat, took my hat and a heavy stick, opened the hall door, and passed out into the night. It was still and very cold, and the voice of the burn came loudly to my ears. Treading quietly, I made my way into the road, and set forth along it in the direction of the Manse. The ground was hard, and scarcely had I gone a few yards before I thought that some one was furtively following me. I stopped rather uneasily, and listened, but heard nothing. I went on, and again seemed aware of distant footsteps treading gently behind me. The sound made me suppose that some one of my household must be after me, moved by curiosity as to the reason of my present pilgrimage; but I was not minded to be watched, so I turned sharply, yet very softly, around and faced the way I had come. I encountered no one, nor did I any longer catch the patter of feet. So, reckoning that my nerves must be playing with me, I pursued my way. But the whole of the distance between my dwelling and the Manse I seemed vaguely to hear a noise of one treading behind me. And, although I said to myself that there was nobody out beside myself, I was filled with the stir of a shifting uneasiness. I entered the lonely and narrow lane that led beside the Manse, and presently arrived in front of the house; when, what was my astonishment to perceive a light gleaming in the study window. My hand was on the gate when it went out, and all the front of the house was black and eyeless. For so brief a moment had I seen the light that I was moved to think that it, too, existed, like the sound of steps, only in my excited brain. Nevertheless, I did not go up at once to the house, but paced the lane for a full half-hour, always—so it seemed to me—tracked by some one. But, since I kept turning about, and the footfalls were always at my back, I grew certain that they were nothing more nor less than a fantasy on my part. It must have been well after twelve when I summoned courage to enter the garden and to approach the Manse. The steps, I thought, followed me to the gate and then paused, as if a sentinel was posted there to keep watch. Arrived at the stone step which preceded the hall door, I, too, paused in my turn and listened. Did the spectre that inhabited this abode know of my coming, of my purpose? Was it crouching within, like some frantic shadow, fearful of its impending fate? Or was it, perhaps, preparing to attack, to repel me? Strangely, I had now no fear of it, or of anything. I was calm. I felt that my deed was one of rescue, even though, by performing it, I wrought destruction. I moved to the study window, and was about to smash in the glass with my heavy stick when a mad idea came to me to try the hall door. I put my hand upon it and found it not locked. This opening of the door sent a shiver through me, and a ghastly sense of the occupation of this deserted abode. I was filled again with an acute consciousness of the indwelling spectre, whom, in truth, I came to murder. But, I reasoned, this door has been left unbarred by the carelessness of Fraser's servants, that is all.

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I stood on the lintel, struck a match and set it to a candle end which I drew from my coat pocket. The flame burned up, showing the narrow passage, the umbrella stand, the doors on either side. I entered the study softly, looking swiftly on all sides of me as I did so. Did I expect a vision of Doctor Wedderburn lounging at the table, his fingers thrust into a Bible? I scarcely know; but I saw nothing except the grimly standing furniture, the lamp on the table, the vacant chairs, the books in their shelves. I listened. There was no rustle of the spectre that I came to kill. Did it watch me? Did it see me there? I set fire to the room, passed quickly to the chamber on the other side of the passage, from thence to the kitchen and the dining-parlour, leaving a track of dwarf flames behind me. The means of destruction I had prepared and carried with me. They availed. When I once more reached the garden, the ground floor of the Manse was in a blaze. But now came the incredible event which I must chronicle before I go down to the burn for the last time. [163]

Having gained the garden, I waited there in the darkness to watch my work progress. I saw the light within the Manse, at first a twinkle, grow to a glare. I heard the faint crackle of the burning rooms increase to a soft and continuous roar. And, as I watched and listened, a mighty sense of relief ran through me. Thus did I burn up my past! thus did I sacrifice grandly and gladly the ill spirit my wild desires had evoked! Thus—thus! All the base of the Manse was red-hot, when, on a sudden, I heard a great shout that seemed to come from the sky. Light sprang in an upper window. There followed a sound like the smash of glass, and I saw two arms shoot out, the top part of a figure and a face framed in the glare. I deemed it the vision of the poor spectre that I destroyed. I looked upon it and fancied I could detect the tortured lineaments of the doctor, his accustomed gestures distorted by fear and fury. But then I seemed to see behind him another figure, struggling, and to hear the failing scream of a woman. But the flames from below leaped to the roof. The floors fell in with an uproar. The figure, or figures, disappeared. [164]

Trembling I turned to go, my mind shuddering at the thought of the apparition I had seen. I got into the lane and hastened towards home. Soon the burning Manse was out of sight, and I was swallowed up in the intense darkness.

Now, as I went along, a terrible and very peculiar sensation came upon me. I heard no footsteps; all was silence. Yet I seemed to be aware that I was closely companioned, that at my very side something—I knew not what—walked, keeping pace with me. And so close did I believe this thing to be, that at moments I even felt it pressing against me like a slim figure in the night. Once, when it thus nestled to me, as if in affection, I could not refrain from crying out aloud. I stretched forth my arms to grasp this surely amorous horror of the darkness, but found nothing, and pursued my road in a sweat of apprehension. And still, the thing was certainly with me, and seemed, I thought, to praise me as I walked, as the good man is praised on his journey. My great horror was that this creature that I could not see, could not hear, could not feel, and yet was so sharply conscious of, was *well disposed towards me*. My heart craved its hatred—but it loved me I knew. My soul demanded its curses. I almost heard it bless me as I moved. My knees knocked together, my limbs were turned to wax, as it was borne in upon me that I had surely done this terror that walked in darkness a service of some kind. To be pursued in fury by one of the dreadful beings that dwell in the borderland beyond our sight is sad and dreary; but to be followed thus by one as by a dog, to be fawned upon and caressed—this is appalling. I longed to shriek aloud. I broke into a run, and, like one demented, gained the gate of Carlounie; but always the thing was with me—full of joy and laudation. At the house door I paused, facing round. I was moved to address this thing I could not see. [165]

“Who is it that walks with me?” I cried, and my voice was high and strained.

A voice I knew, young, clear, level, a little formal, answered out of the darkness:—

“It is I.” [166]

It was the voice of the grey traveller whom I had seen long ago by the burnside. I leaned back against the door and my shoulders shook against it.

“What do you want of me?”

“I come to thank you.”

“What, then, have I done?”

“You have brought the tribute money.”

I did not understand, and I answered:—

“No. One soul I may have destroyed, but two I have saved to-night. For I have slain the spectre that preyed upon them and I have set them free from bondage.”

The voice answered:—

“*Go into the house and see.*”

Then again I was filled with apprehension. I turned to go in at my door, and, as I did so, I heard footsteps treading in the direction of the burn, and a fading voice which cried, like an echo:—

“And then come to me.”

And, as the voice died, I heard the rush of sheep in the night.

Filled with nameless fear and a cold apprehension, I entered the house, and, led by some cruel instinct, made my way to Kate's room. The lamp she always had at night burned dimly on the dressing-table and cast a grave radiance upon an empty bed.

What could this mean?

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I stole to the room of Fraser, bearing the lamp with me. His chamber was also untenanted; but, on the quilt of the bed, lay a piece of paper written over. I took it up and read—with the sound of the burn in my ears:—

“You stole her from me. I take back my own. To-night we stay at the old Manse. To-morrow we shall be far away.”

HUGH FRASER.

The paper dropped from my hand upon the quilt. A woman's scream rang in my ears above the roar of flames. I understood.

The tribute money has been paid. I go down to the burn. The grey traveller is waiting there for me.

ROBERT HICHENS.
FREDERIC HAMILTON.

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AN ECHO IN EGYPT

THAT lustrous land of weary music and wild dancing, of reverend tombs and pert Arabs, that Egypt of plagues and tourists, to whose sandy bosom Society flocks, affects her visitors in many different ways. Bellairs went to her under the fixed impression that he was a cynic, and found that he was a romanticist. Very acute in mind, he had long flattered himself on being unimpressionable; and he was much inclined to think that to be insensitive was to be strong with the best kind of strength. He loved to lay stress on all that was devil-may-care in his character, and to put aside all that was prone to cling, or weep, or wonder, or pray, and he fancied that if he cultivated one side of his mind assiduously he could eliminate the other sides. In England, in London, the process had seemed to be successful. But Egypt gave to him illusions with both hands, and, against his will, he had to accept them. Protests were unavailing, and soon he ceased to protest, and told himself the horrid fact that he was a sentimentalist, perhaps even a poet. Good heavens! a Bellairs—a poet! His soldier ancestors seemed forming a square and fixing bayonets to resist the charging notion. And yet—and yet—

Instead of playing pool after dinner at night, Bellairs found himself wandering, like Haroun Al Raschid, through the narrow ways of Cairo, mixing with the natives, studying their loves, and drinking their coffee. There were moments, retrograde moments, when he even wished to wear their dress, to drape his long-limbed British form in a flowing blue robe, and wrap his dark head in a bulging white turban. He resisted this devil of an idea; but the fact that it had ever come to him troubled him. And, partly to regain his manhood, his hard scepticism, his contempt of outside, delicate influences, he went up the Nile—and succumbed utterly to fantasy and to old romance. “I am no longer Jack Bellairs,” he told himself one day, as the steamer on which he travelled neared Luxor on its way down the river from the First Cataract—“I am somebody else; some one who is touched by a sunset, and responsive to a gleam of rose on the Libyan Mountains, some one who dreams at night when the pipes wail under the palm-trees, some one who feels that the great river has life, and that the desert owns a wistful soul, and has a sweet armour with silence. Good-bye, Jack Bellairs! Go home to England—I stay here.”

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And that evening he left the steamer, and took a room for a month at the Luxor Hotel. And that evening he cast the skin of his former self, and emerged, with fluttering wings, from the chrysalis of his identity. He was a bachelor, aged twenty-eight, and he was travelling alone; so there was no critical eye to mark the change in him, no chattering tongue to express surprise at his pleasant abandonment to the follies which make up the lives of sensitive artists and refined sensualists who can differentiate between the promenade of the “Empire,” and the garden of love. As he stepped out into the Arab-haunted village that night, after dinner, Bellairs breathed a sigh of relief. For a month he would let himself go. Where to? He bent his steps towards the river, the Nile that is the pulsing blood in the veins of Egypt. Moored in the shadow of its brown banks lay a string of bright-eyed dahabeeyahs. From more than one of them came music. Bellairs, his cigarette his only companion, strolled slowly along listening idly in a pleasant dream. A woman's voice sang, asking “Ninon” what was her scheme of life. A man beat out his soul at the feet of “Medje.” And, upon the deck of the last dahabeeyah, a woman played a fantastic mazurka.

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Bellairs was fond of music, and her performance was so clever, so full of nuances, understanding, wild passion, that he stood still to remark it more closely.

"She has known many things, good and evil," he thought, as his mind noted the intellect that spoke in the changes of time, the regret and the gaiety that the touch demonstrated so surely and easily, as the mood of the composition changed. The music ceased.

"Betty," a woman's voice said, in English, but with a slight French accent, "I want to see the stars. This awning hides them. Come for a little walk." [174]

"Yes; I want to see the stars too, and the awning does hide them," a girl's voice answered. "Do let us take a little walk."

Bellairs smiled, as he said to himself, "The first voice is the voice of the musician, and the second voice seems to be its echo." He was still standing on the bank when the two women stepped upon the gangway to the shore and climbed to the narrow path.

As they passed him by they glanced at him rather curiously. One was a woman of about thirty, dark, with a pale, strong-featured face. The other was a fair, aristocratic-looking girl, not more than seventeen.

"She is the echo," Bellairs thought. "Rather a sweet one." Then, at a distance, he followed them, and presently found them sitting together in the garden of the Hotel. He sat down not far off. A man, whom he knew slightly, spoke to them, and afterwards crossed to him.

"That lady plays very cleverly," Bellairs said.

"Mademoiselle Leroux, you mean—yes. You know her?"

"Not at all. I only heard her from the river bank."

"She is travelling with Lord Braydon. She is a great friend of Lady Betty Lambe, his daughter."

"That pretty girl?" [175]

"Yes. Shall I introduce you?"

"I should be delighted."

A moment later Bellairs was sitting with the two ladies and talking of Egypt. It seemed to him that they were the first nurses to dandle his new baby-nature, this nature which Egypt had given to him, and which only to-night he had definitely accepted. Perhaps this fact quickly cemented their acquaintance. At any rate, a distinct friendship began to walk in their conversation, and Bellairs found himself listening to Mdlle. Leroux, and looking at Lady Betty, with a great deal of interest and of admiration. Presently the former said:—

"I knew you would be introduced to us to-night."

Bellairs was surprised.

"When?" he asked.

"When we passed you just now on the bank of the Nile."

"I knew we should too," said Lady Betty.

"You must be very intuitive," said Bellairs.

"Women generally are," remarked Mdlle. Leroux.

"Yes. Do your intuitions tell you whether our acquaintance will be long and agreeable?"

"Perhaps—but I never prophesy."

"Why?"

"Because I am always right."

"Is that a valid reason for abstention?" [176]

"I think so. For in this world those who look forward generally see darkness."

"I cannot achieve a proper pessimism in Upper Egypt," Bellairs replied.

A week later, Bellairs felt quite certain that there had never been a period in his life when he had not known and talked with Mdlle. Leroux and Lady Betty Lambe. Lord and Lady Braydon asked him to lunch on the dahabeeyah almost every day, and he often strolled down to tea without invitation. Then, in the afternoon, there were donkey expeditions to Karnak, or across the river to the tombs of the kings, to the desert villa of Monsieur Naville, to ancient Thebes, to the two Colossi. Lord Braydon was consumptive and was spending the winter and spring in Egypt. Lady Braydon seldom left his side, and so it happened that Bellairs and his two acquaintances of the garden were often alone together. Bellairs became deeply interested in them, and for a rather

peculiar reason. He was fascinated by the extraordinary sympathy that existed between the two women—if Lady Betty could be called a woman yet. Mdlle. Leroux had obtained so strong an influence over the girl that she seemed to have grafted not only her mind, but her heart, her apparatus of emotions and of affections, on to Lady Betty's. What the former silently thought, the latter silently thought too, and when the silence died in expression, they frequently spoke almost the same sentence simultaneously. Sometimes Mdlle. Leroux would express some feeling with vehemence to Bellairs when Lady Betty was out of hearing, and an hour or two afterwards, with only a slightly fainter vehemence, Lady Betty would express the same feeling. Indeed, these two women seemed to have only one heart, one soul, between them, the heart and soul that had originally been the sole property of the elder one.

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"You are very generous," said Bellairs one day to Mdlle. Leroux.

"Why?" she asked in surprise.

"You give away things that most of us have only the power to keep."

"What do you mean?"

"Some day, perhaps, I will tell you."

Clarice Leroux was tremendously impulsive, and she had taken an immediate and strong liking to Bellairs. In this Lady Betty, as usual, coincided. But when Clarice's liking passed through self-revelations, confidences, towards a stronger feeling, it was rather strange to find Lady Betty still treading in her footsteps, still ever succeeding her in her attitudes of mind and of heart. Yet the inevitable double flirtation, apparently expected and desired by the two women, was strangely gilded by novelty; and, at first, Bellairs played as happily with these two dual natures as a child plays with two doll representatives of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. For, at first, he possessed the child's power of detachment, and felt that he could at any moment discard dolls for soldiers, or a Noah's Ark, and still keep happiness in his lap. But most things have an inherent tendency to become complicated if they are let alone and allowed to develop free from definite guidance, and presently Bellairs became conscious of advancing complications. His intellectual appreciation of a new situation began to degenerate into a more emotional condition, which disturbed and irritated him. It seemed that he was peering through the bars of the gate that guards the garden of passion. Which of the two women did he see in the garden?

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He told himself that, having regard to the circumstances of the case, he ought to see both of them. Unfortunately, a vision of that kind never has been, and never will be, seen by a man. The temple in which the idol sits always makes a difference in the nature of our worship of the idol. Bellairs was forced to recognise this fact. And the temple in which sat the idol of Lady Betty's nature attracted him more than the temple in which sat the idol of Mdlle. Leroux's nature. He came to this conclusion one afternoon at Karnak. They three were hidden away in a stone nook of this great stone forest, enshrined from the gaze of tourists by mighty rugged pillars, walled in by huge blocks of antique masonry that threw cold shadows whence the lizards stole to seek the sun. The blue sky was broken to their gaze by a narrow section of what had been, doubtless, once a wide-spread roof. A silence of endless ages hung around them in this haven fashioned by dead men and living Time.

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Mdlle. Leroux had been boiling a kettle; and they sipped tea, and, at first, did not talk. But tea unlooses the bonds of speech. After their second cups they felt communicative.

"One week gone out of my four," Bellairs said, "and each will seem shorter-lived than its forerunner."

"You go in three weeks from now?" said Mdlle. Leroux, with an uneven intonation that betokened a sudden awakening to the finality of things.

"Yes; at the end of January."

"And we are here until nearly the end of March."

"Yes," said Lady Betty; "it will seem a very long time. February will be eternal."

"It is the shortest month in the year," Bellairs remarked.

Mdlle. Leroux looked at him sarcastically.

"You English are so prosaic," she exclaimed. "Any Frenchman would have understood."

"What?"

"That we were paying you a compliment."

"Perhaps I did understand it, and preferred not to show my comprehension; there is such a thing as modesty!"

"There is—such a thing as false modesty!"

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"Exactly," remarked Lady Betty.

"I will accept your compliment gladly," said Bellairs, looking at Lady Betty.

"Mine?" asked Clarice Leroux.

"Yes," Bellairs replied.

The consciousness that he cared very much more for such a pretty meaning in Lady Betty than in Clarice Leroux led him then, for the first time, to that Garden Gate. He looked at Lady Betty again with a new feeling. She returned his gaze quietly. Then he turned his eyes to those of Clarice. Hers were fixed upon him with a curious violence. He had a momentary sensation, literally for the first time, that these two women after all, had not one soul, one heart, between them. They did not feel quite simultaneously. Lady Betty was always a step behind Clarice. Yes, that was the difference between them. However quickly the echo follows the voice that summons it, yet it must always follow. Would Lady Betty never cease to follow? Bellairs found himself wondering eagerly, for that afternoon a strange certainty came to him. He knew, in a flash, that Clarice, if she did not already love him, was on the verge of loving him. He knew now that he loved Lady Betty. But she didn't love him yet, was not even quite close to loving him. Had she been in Egypt alone, divorced from Clarice, Bellairs believed that he would not have attracted her. He attracted her through Clarice, because he attracted Clarice. Could he make her love him in the same way? It would be a curious, subtle experiment to try to win one woman's heart by winning another's: Bellairs silently decided to make it. All the rest of that afternoon he talked to Clarice, showing to her the new self that Egypt had given him, the poetry which had ousted the prose inherited from a long line of ancestors, the sentiment of which he was no longer ashamed now he felt it to be a weapon with which he might win two hearts, the heart that contained another heart, as one conjurer's box contains a hundred others. [181]

"I knew it when I first saw you," Clarice said. "Directly I looked at you that evening on the bank I knew it."

"How strange," Bellairs answered.

"And you—did you know it when you heard me playing?"

"That mazurka! Remember I am a man."

They were sitting in the garden. It was night. Very few people were out, for a great Austrian pianist was playing in the public drawing-room, and the little world of Luxor sat at his feet relentlessly. They two could hear, mingling with a Polonaise of Chopin, the throbbing of tom-toms in the dusty village, the faint and suggestive cry of the pipes, which fill the soul at the same time with desire, and regret for past desire killed by gratification. Bellairs had been making love to Clarice, and she had told him that she loved him. And he had kissed her and his kiss had been returned. [182]

"Will this kiss, too, have its echo?" he thought; and his eyes travelled towards the lighted windows of the drawing-room behind which Lady Betty sat. He turned again to Clarice.

"Do you believe in echoes?" he asked.

"Echoes!"

"That each thing we do in life, each word, each cry, each act, calls into being, perhaps very soon, perhaps very late, a repetition?"

"From the same person?"

"Or from some other person."

"What a curious idea. You think we cannot ever do anything without finding an imitator! I don't like to imagine it. I don't fancy that there can ever, in the history of the world, be an exact repetition of our feeling, our doing, to-night."

"Yet, there may be. Who knows?"

"I do. Instinct tells me there never can. There has never been, never will be, any woman with a heart just like mine, given to a man just in the same way as mine is given to you. Why should you think such a hateful thing?"

"I don't know. It was only an idea that occurred to me."

And again he glanced towards the lighted windows.

"The world is very full of echoes," he went on; "our troubles are repeated." [183]

"But not our joys, our deepest joys. No, no, never!"

"There have always been lovers, and they all act in much the same way!"

"Hateful! Ah! why can't we invent some new mode of expression for ourselves—you and I?"

"Because we are human beings, and one network of tangled limitations."

"You make me cry with anger," she said.

And when he looked, he saw that there were tears shining in her eyes.

At that moment a ghastly sensation of compunction swept over him. What had he done? A deep wrong, the deepest wrong man can do. He had made an experiment, as a scientist may make an experiment. He had vivisected a soul, but the soul was yet ignorant of the fact. When it knew, would it die? But then he told himself he had to do it. For he loved passionately, and was certain that he could only gain the heart he had not yet completely won by gaining this heart that he had completely won. He had made an experiment. If it failed! But it could not fail. All that Clarice said, all that she thought, all that she desired, Betty said, thought, desired. After the necessary interval the echo must follow the voice. And he smiled to himself.

"Why do you smile like that?" Clarice asked.

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"Because—because I thought I heard an echo," he replied. And then they kissed again. He, with his eyes shut, forced his imagination to tell him that the lips he pressed were the lips of Betty. She thought only of the lips of love, that burn up all the recollections of the lonely years, all the phantoms which dwell in the deserts through which women pass to joy—or to despair.

The Austrian pianist was exhausted. Even his long hair could no longer sustain his failing energies. He expired magnificently, the seventh rhapsody of Liszt serving as his bier. Lady Betty came out into the garden.

"How unmusical you two are," she said; "his playing was exquisite."

"We heard finer music here," Clarice answered, as she got up to go back to the dahabeeah—"did we not?"

She turned to Bellairs. He was looking at Lady Betty and did not hear. Clarice's cheek flushed angrily.

"Come, Betty," she exclaimed. "Good-night, Mr Bellairs."

"Good-night, Mr Bellairs," echoed Lady Betty.

The two women moved away, and vanished down the narrow and dusty avenue that leads to the bank of the Nile. Bellairs stood looking after them. He was wondering why he loved Betty and did not love Clarice. It seemed feeble to love an echo. Yet, the intonation of an echo is sometimes exquisite in its trilling vagueness, its far-off, thrilling beauty. And Bellairs fancied that if he once wakened Betty to passion he would free her, in a moment, from her curious bondage, would give to her the soul that Clarice must surely have crushed down and expelled, replacing it with a replica of her own soul. And then he asked himself, being analytically inclined that night, what he adored in Betty. Was it merely her fresh young beauty? It could not be her nature; for that, at present, was merely Clarice's, and he did not love the nature of Clarice. Yet he felt it was something more than her beauty. When he had made her love him he would know; for, when he had made her love him, he would force her to be herself.

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He watched the bats circling among the shadowy palms. How gentle the air was. How sweet the stars looked. Bellairs thought of England that was so far away. It seemed impossible that he could ever be in London again, ever again assume a Piccadilly nature, and laugh at the folly of having a romance. Yes, it seemed impossible. Nevertheless, in a fortnight he must go. But he would take Betty's promise with him. He was resolved on that. And then he left the silent garden to the bats, and was soon between the mosquito curtains, dreaming.

Three days afterwards Clarice was prostrated with a nervous headache. She could not bear to have any one in her cabin, and Lady Betty sat on the deck of the *Queen Hatasoo* quite inconsolable. Bellairs, arriving to pay his usual afternoon call, found her there. Lord Braydon was out, sailing in a flat-bottomed boat far up the river with Lady Braydon, so Lady Betty was quite desolate. She told Bellairs so mournfully.

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"And Clarice won't let me come near her," she exclaimed. "A step on the floor, the creak of the cabin door as I come in, tortures her. She is all nerves. I hope I shan't have her headache presently."

"Is it likely?"

"I often do. She seems to pass it on to me. I never had a headache until I knew her. But, indeed, I never seemed to live, I never seemed to know anything, be anything, until she came into my life."

"I wish I had known you before you knew her," Bellairs said.

"Why?"

"I don't know—perhaps to see if you were really so very different from what you are now."

"I was—utterly."

"What were you like?"

"I can't remember—but I was utterly different."

As she ceased speaking, Bellairs glanced over the rail to the river bank. Two blue-robed donkey

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boys stood there trying to attract his attention, and pointing significantly to their gaily-bedizened donkeys.

"Shall we go for a ride?" he said to Lady Betty. "Just along the river bank? Then we shall see Lord Braydon as he sails back. Mdlle. Leroux won't miss you. Shall we go?"

Betty hesitated. But she could do the invalid no good by staying. So she assented. Bellairs helped her to the bank and placed her in the smart red saddle. He motioned the boys to keep well in the rear, and they started at a quick, tripping walk. As they went, a white face appeared at a cabin window, staring after them, the face of Clarice, who had with difficulty lifted her throbbing head from the pillow. She watched the donkeys diminishing till they were black shadows moving along against the sky, then she began to cry weakly, but only because she was too ill to be with them. Her gift of prophecy failed her at this critical juncture of her life, and she had no sense of a coming disaster, as she lay back on her berth, and gave herself up once more to pain.

That evening Lord Braydon asked Bellairs to dine on the dahabeeyah, and he accepted the invitation. Clarice was still in durance, having entirely failed to pass her headache on to Lady Betty. After dinner Lord Braydon went into the saloon to write a letter to England, and Lady Betty and Bellairs had the deck to themselves. He was resolved to put his fate to the touch; for, during the donkey ride, he had discovered the change in Betty which he had so eagerly desired, the change from warm friendship to a different feeling. The girl had not acknowledged it. Bellairs had not asked her to do so; but he meant to. Only the thought of his treachery to the woman lying in the cabin below held him back, just for a moment, and prompted him to talk lightly of indifferent things. But that treachery had been a necessary manœuvre in his campaign of happiness. He strove to dismiss it from his mind as he leant forward in his chair, and led Lady Betty to the subject that lay so near to his heart. [188]

"You love me?" she said presently.

"Yes—deeply. You are angry?"

"How can I be? No, no—and yet—"

"Yes?"

"And yet, when you told me, I felt sad."

Bellairs looked keenly vexed, and she hastened to add:—

"Not because I am—indifferent. No, no. I can't explain why the feeling came. It was gone in a moment. And now—"

"Now you are happy?"

He caught her hand and she left it in his.

"Yes, very happy."

Bellairs bent over her and kissed her—as he lifted himself up a white hand appeared on the rail of the companion that led from the lower to the upper deck of the *Hatasoo*. Clarice wearily dragged herself up. She was wrapped in a shawl and looked very ill. Betty ran to help her. [189]

"I thought I must get a little air," she said feebly. "How d'you do, Mr Bellairs?"

She sank down in a chair.

Bellairs felt like a man between two fires.

Two days later Lord Braydon gave his consent to his daughter's engagement with Bellairs, and Lady Betty ran to tell Clarice. She had not previously said a word to her friend of what had passed between her and Bellairs. He had begged her to keep silence until he had spoken to Lord Braydon, and she had promised and had kept her promise. But now she rushed into the saloon where Clarice was playing Chopin, and, throwing her arms round her friend, told her the great news. The body of Clarice became rigid in her arms.

"And the king has consented," Betty cried.

The king was her father.

"Clarice, Clarice, isn't it wonderful?"

"Wonderful! I thought so when you told me. But already I begin to doubt if it is."

"To doubt, Clarice?"

"To doubt whether anything a man does is wonderful."

That was all Clarice said. Then she kissed Betty, and went on playing Chopin feverishly, while Betty told, to the accompaniment of the music, all that was in her heart.

"And," she said at last, "I love him, Clarice; I love him intensely. I shall always love him." [190]

Clarice played a final chord and got up.

Bellairs lunched on the dahabeeyah that day and Clarice met him as usual. Her manner gave no sign of any mental disturbance. Perhaps it was curiously calm. He wondered a little, but was too happy to wonder much. Joy made him cruel, for nothing is so cruel as joy. Only he was glad that Clarice had so much pride, for he thought now that in her pride lay his safety. He no longer feared that she would condescend to a scene, and he even thought that perhaps she did not feel so deeply as he had supposed.

"After all," he said to himself exultantly, "there's no harm done. I need not have been so conscience-stricken. What is a pretty speech and a kiss to a woman who has lived, travelled over the world, read widely, thought many things? Now, if I had treated Betty in such a way I should be a blackguard. She could not have understood. She could only have suffered. I will never hurt her—Betty!"

His nature was so full of her that it could no longer hold any thought of Clarice. And for a little while, as Bellairs dived into Betty's heart, he was astonished at the passion he found there, and congratulated himself on having released her from bondage. Now, at least, he was teaching her to be herself. He was killing the echo and creating a voice, a beautiful, clear, radiant voice that would sing to him, to him alone. [191]

"Betty has a great deal in her," he said to Clarice once.

"Yes—a great deal. Who put it there, do you think?"

"Who? Why, nobody. Surely you would not say that all you yourself have of—of strength, originality, courage, was put into you by some other man or woman."

"No. I would not say that. But then—I am not Betty."

Bellairs felt irritated.

"Please don't run Betty down," he exclaimed hastily.

"I! I run down Betty! I don't think you understand what I feel about Betty. She is the one perfect being I know. I worship her."

"I am sure you do," he said, mollified. "And you have done much for her, perhaps too much."

"I cannot tell that—yet," Clarice answered. "Some day I may know whether I have done very much, or very little."

"Some day—when?"

"Perhaps very soon."

Bellairs wondered what she meant, and wondered, too, why he had a sudden sense of uneasiness.

It was a day or two after this conversation that a light cloud seemed to float across his lover's happiness with Betty. He could not tell the exact moment when it came, nor from what quarter it journeyed. But he felt the obscuring of the sun and the lessening of the lovely warmth of intimacy. He was chilled and alarmed, and at night, when he was alone with Betty in the stern of the *Hatasoo* bidding her good-bye, he could not refrain from saying:— [192]

"Betty, is anything the matter?"

"The matter, Jack?"

"Yes. Are you quite happy to-day? Quite as happy as you were yesterday?"

"I suppose so—I believe so."

But she did not speak with a perfect conviction, and Bellairs was more gravely troubled.

"I am certain something is wrong," he persisted. "I have done something that has offended you, or said something stupid. What is it? Do tell me."

"I can't. There is nothing to tell. Really, there is not."

"You would tell me if there was?"

"Of course."

"And you love me as much as ever?"

"Oh, yes."

He looked into her eyes, asking them mutely to tell him the truth. And he thought their expression was strangely cold. The light had surely faded out of them. He kissed her silently and went forward. Clarice was standing there looking at the rising moon.

"Good-night," he said, holding out his hand. [193]

"How grave you look," she answered, not seeing the hand.

"The moonlight makes people look unnatural."

"It does not reach the deck yet."

"Good-night," he said again, and he went down the stairs.

She looked after him with a smile. When he had gone, she turned her head and called.

"Betty!"

"Yes!"

"Come here and sit with me. Let us watch the moon. Don't talk. I want to think—and to make you think—as I do."

The cloud which Bellairs had fancied he noticed did not dissolve in the night. It was not drawn up mysteriously into the sun to fade in gold. On the contrary, next day he could no longer pretend to himself that his anxiety as a lover rendered him foolishly self-conscious, dangerously observant of the merest trifles. There really was a change in Betty, and a change which grew. He became seriously alarmed. Could it be possible that the ardent passion which she had displayed in the first moments of their engagement was already subsiding as cynics say passion subsides after marriage? Such a supposition seemed ridiculous. The ardour which has never fulfilled itself is not liable to cool. And Betty was a young girl who had not known love before. If she tired of it after so short an experience of its delights, she could be nothing less than a wholly unnatural and distorted being. And she was strangely natural. Bellairs rode out alone with her along the built-up brown roads into the desert, and tried to interest her, but she was abstracted and seemed deep in thought. Often she didn't hear what he was saying, and when she did hear and replied, her answers were short and careless, and rather dismissed than encouraged the subject to which they were applied. Bellairs, at last, gave up attempting to talk, and from time to time stole a cautious glance at her pretty face. He noticed that it wore a puzzled expression, as if she were turning over something in her mind and could not come to a conclusion about it. She did not look exactly sad, but merely grave and distrait. At length he exclaimed, determined to rouse her into some sort of comradeship:—

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"You never caught that headache, did you?"

"Clarice's, you mean? No."

"Is it coming on now?"

"Oh, no. I feel perfectly well. What made you think it was?"

"You won't talk to me, and you look so preternaturally serious. I am sure I have unwittingly offended you?"

"No, you haven't. You are just as you always are, better to me than I deserve."

"You deserve the best man in the world."

"I already have the best woman."

"Mdlle. Leroux?"

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"Yes; Clarice."

"You admire her very much."

"Of course. I would give anything to be like her."

Bellairs hesitated a moment. Then he said with a slight, uneasy laugh:—

"But you are wonderfully like her."

Betty looked surprised.

"I don't see how," she answered.

"No, because we never see ourselves. But when I first knew you both, I was immensely struck by the curious resemblance between you, in mind, in the things you said, in the things you did, the people you liked."

"We both liked you."

"Yes."

"It would have been strange if we had both loved you!" Betty said, musingly.

Bellairs laughed again, and gave his horse a cut with the whip. "I only wanted one to do that," he said, not quite truthfully. "And, thank God, I have got my desire."

Betty did not answer.

"Haven't I?" he persisted.

"You know whether you have or not," she answered. "How beautiful the sunset is going to be to-night. Look at the light over Karnak."

She pointed towards the temple with her whip. Bellairs felt a crawling despair that numbed him

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What did it all mean? Was he torturing himself foolishly, or was this instinct which gnawed at his heart a thing to be reckoned with? When he left Betty at the dahabeeyah, he walked slowly, in the gathering shadows, along the path which skirts the dingy temple of Luxor. This change in Betty was simply inexplicable. In no way could he account for it. She had not the definite, angry coldness of a girl who had made a dreadful mistake and hated the man who had led her to make it. No; she seemed rather in a state of mental transition. She was setting foot on some bridge, which, Bellairs felt, led away from the shore on which she had been standing with him. Was her first transport of love and joy a pretence? He could not believe so. He knew it was genuine. That was the puzzle which he could not put together. And then he tried to comfort himself by thinking deliberately of the many moods that make the feminine mind so full of April weather, of how they come and pass and are dead. All men had suffered from them, especially all lovers. He could not expect to be exempt—only, till now, Betty had seemed so utterly free from moods, so steadily frank, eager, charming, responsive. Bellairs finally argued himself into a condition of despair, during which he came to a resolve of despair. He silently decided to seek a quiet interview with Clarice, and ask her what was the matter with Betty. After all, there was no reason why he should not take this step. Clarice had evidently not cared deeply for him. Otherwise, she would not have accepted his desertion with such truly agreeable fortitude. Theirs had been a passing flirtation—nothing more. And, indeed, their intimacy gave him the right to consult her, while her close knowledge of Betty must render her an infallible judge of any reasons which there might be to render the latter's conduct intelligible.

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Bellairs did not have to wait long before he put his resolve into practice. That evening Betty, who had become more and more abstracted and silent, got up soon after dinner, and said she was tired, and was going to bed. Bellairs tried to get a moment with her alone, but she frustrated the attempt by holding out her hand to him in public and markedly bidding him good-night before Lord and Lady Braydon. When she had disappeared, Bellairs sought Clarice, who was downstairs in the saloon writing letters. Clarice looked up from the blotting-pad as he entered.

"I want to talk to you," he exclaimed abruptly.

"I am writing letters."

"Do give me a few minutes."

"Very well," she said, pushing her paper away and laying down her pen. "What is it?"

"That's what I want to ask you. What has come over Betty? Is she ill?"

"Betty! Has anything come over her?"

Bellairs tapped his fingers impatiently on the table.

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"Don't tell me you haven't noticed the change," he said. "Forgive me for saying that I couldn't believe it if you did."

"In that case I won't trouble myself to say it."

"Ah—you have! Then what's the matter? Tell me."

"Hush, don't speak so loud or the sailors will hear you, and Abdul understands English. I did not say I knew the reason of this change."

"You must. You are Betty's other self, or rather she is—was—yours."

"Was! Do you mean that she is not now?"

"Remember, she loves me."

"Oh, and that makes a difference?"

"Surely!"

"You have observed it?"

Bellairs hesitated. He scarcely knew whether to reply in the affirmative or the negative. He resolved upon a compromise.

"There has hardly been time yet," he said; "naturally, I expect that Betty will place me before every one else."

Mdlle. Leroux's eyes flashed under the hanging lamp.

"What we expect is not always what we get," she said significantly.

Bellairs flushed. He understood that she was alluding to his treatment of her, but he preferred to ignore it, and went on:—

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"Is Betty ill to-night?"

"Not at all."

"Then what on earth is the matter? I ask you for a plain answer. I think I deserve so much."

"Men are always so deserving," she said with bitterness.

"And women are always so exacting," he retorted. "But please answer my question."

"I will first ask you another. If you reply frankly to me, I will reply frankly to you."

She leaned her elbows on the table, supporting her face on the palms of her upturned hands, and looked into his eyes.

"Ask me," said Bellairs eagerly; "I'll do anything if you'll only explain Betty to me."

"Why did you try to make me love you? Why did you make love to me?"

Bellairs pushed back his chair and there was an awkward silence. Clarice's question was very unexpected and very difficult to answer.

"Well?" she said, still with her eyes on his.

"Is it any good our discussing this?" he replied at length. "It meant nothing to you. It is over."

"How do you know it meant nothing to me?"

"You have shown that by your conduct. You care nothing. I am indifferent to you."

"No, not indifferent, not at all."

"What? You can't mean—no, it is absurd!"

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"What is absurd?"

"You can't—you don't mean that you really have any feeling for me?"

"I do mean it!"

Bellairs felt very uncomfortable. He scarcely knew what to do or say. He fidgeted on his chair almost like a boy caught in a dishonest act.

"We had really better not talk about it," he said.

"Very well." Clarice reached out her hand for her pen and drew the blotting-pad towards her.

"But Betty?" said Bellairs uneasily.

"You have not answered my question. I shall not answer yours." She dipped her pen in the ink and prepared to go on with her letter. Bellairs grew desperate.

"Look here," he said; "you must tell me the reason of this change in Betty. Now I know you don't care for me, you don't really love me."

"No, I don't love you," she said quickly.

"Well, then, since you say that, I will answer your question. I tried to win your heart because I wanted to win Betty's!"

"What do you mean?"

"That Betty is practically you—or was, your echo, in word, deed, thought. Her mind, her heart, followed yours in everything. I loved her, and I knew that if I made you like me very much she must follow you in that feeling as in others. Since you don't love me, I can dare to tell you this."

Clarice sat silent.

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"Are you angry?" he asked.

"Go on," she said.

"That's all." Again a silence.

"It was your fault in a way," Bellairs said awkwardly. "You made Betty your other self. Why did you not let her alone?"

"Can a strong nature help impressing itself on others?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm no psychologist. But—you must let Betty alone now," he said.

"Suppose I can't. Suppose this sympathy between us has got beyond my control?"

"I shall release Betty from this bondage to you," Bellairs said, "my love will—"

"You! Your love!" Clarice said. And she burst into a laugh.

Bellairs suddenly leaned forward across the table.

"I believe you hate me," he exclaimed.

She, on her part, leaned forward till her face was near his.

"You're right," she whispered; "I do hate you. Now you know what's the matter with Betty."

For a moment Bellairs did not understand.

"Now—I know—" he repeated. "I don't—Ah!" Comprehension flashed upon him.

"You devil," he said—"you she-devil! Curse—curse you!" Clarice laughed again. Bellairs sprang up.

"No, no, I won't believe it," he cried. "I can't. The thing's impossible." [202]

"Is it? The pendulum of my heart has swung back from love to hate. Betty's is following."

"No, no!"

"Wait, and you will see. Already she seems to care less for you. You yourself have remarked it."

"I have not," he said with violence.

"To-morrow she will care less, and so less—less—till she too—hates you."

"Never!"

"Only wait—and you will know. And now, good-night. I must really write my letter. It is to my mother, and must go by to-morrow's mail."

She resumed her writing quietly. Bellairs watched her for a moment. Then he strode out of the room, across the gangway, up the bank.

How dark the night was.

The explanation of Clarice struck Bellairs with a benumbing force. In vain he argued to himself that it was not the true one, that no heart could follow another as she said Betty's followed hers, that no nature could merely for ever echo another's. Some furtive despair lurking in his soul whispered that she had spoken the truth. An appalling sense of utter impotence seized him, as it seizes a man who fights with a shadow. But he resolved to fight. His whole life's happiness hung on the issue.

On the following day he forced himself to be cheerful, gay, talkative. He went early to the dahabeeyah, and proposed to Lord Braydon a picnic to Thebes. Lord Braydon assented. A hamper was packed. The boat was ordered. The little party assembled on the deck of the *Hatasoo* for the start; Lady Braydon, in a wide hat and sweeping grey veil, Clarice with her big white parasol lined with pale green, Lord Braydon in his helmet, his eyes protected by enormous spectacles. But where was Betty? Abdul, the dragoman, went to tell her that they were going. She came, without her hat, or gloves, holding a palm leaf fan in her hand. [203]

"I am not coming," she said.

Clarice glanced at Bellairs. He pressed his lips together and felt that he was turning white underneath the tan the Egyptian sun rays had painted on his cheeks. Lady Braydon protested.

"What's the matter, Betty?" she said. "The donkeys are ordered and waiting for us on the opposite bank. Why aren't you coming?"

"I have got a headache. I'm afraid of the sun to-day." All persuasion was useless. They had to set out without her. Bellairs was bitterly angry, bitterly afraid. He could scarcely make the necessary effort to be polite and talkative, but Lord and Lady Braydon readily excused his gloom, understanding his disappointment, and Clarice no longer desired his conversation. That night he did not see Betty. She was confined to her cabin and would see no one but Clarice. On the following day Bellairs went very early to the dahabeeyah and asked for her. Abdul took his message, and, after an interval, returned to him with the following note:— [204]

"DEAR MR BELLAIRS,—I am very sorry I cannot see you this morning, but I am still very unwell. I think the mental agony I have been and am undergoing accounts for my condition. I must tell you the truth. I cannot marry you. I mistook my feeling for you. I honestly thought it love. I find it is only friendship. Can you ever forgive me the pain I am causing you? I cannot forgive myself. But I should do you a much greater wrong by marrying you than by giving you up. I have told my father and mother. See them if you like. We sail to-morrow morning for Assouan.

"BETTY."

Bellairs, crumpling this note in his hand, would have burst forth into a passion of useless rage and despair, but Abdul's lustrous eyes were fixed upon him. Abdul's dignified form calmly waited his pleasure.

"Where is Lord Braydon?" said Bellairs, "I must see him."

"His lordship is on the second deck, sir."

"Take me to him."

The interview that followed only increased the despair of Bellairs. Lord Braydon was most sympathetic, most courteously sorry, but he said that his daughter's decision was absolutely irrevocable, and he could not attempt to coerce her in such an important matter. [205]

"At any rate, I must see her before you sail," said Bellairs at last. "I think she owes me at least that one last debt."

"I think so too," said Lord Braydon. "Come at six. I will undertake that you shall see her."

How Bellairs spent the intervening hours he could never remember. He did not go back to the hotel; he must have wandered all day along the river bank. Yet he felt neither the heat, nor any fatigue, nor any hunger. At six o'clock he reached the dahabeeyah. Lady Betty was sitting alone on the deck. She looked very pale and grave.

"My father and mother and Clarice have gone up to the hotel," she said. "That Austrian is playing again this evening."

"Is he?" Bellairs answered. He sat down beside her and tried to take her hand. But she would not let him.

"No," she said. "No, it's no use. I have made a ghastly mistake, but I will not make another. Oh, forgive me, do forgive me!"

"How can I? If you will not try to love me my life is ruined."

"Don't say that. It's no use to try to love. You know that. We must just let ourselves alone. Love comes, or hate, just as God wills it. We can only accept our fate."

"As God wills," Bellairs said passionately; "why do you say that, when you know it is not true?" [206]

"Not true—Mr Bellairs!"

"Yes. If you echoed the will of God how could I blame you? We must all do that—at least, when we are good. And those of us who are wicked I suppose echo the Devil. But you—what do you echo?"

"I—I echo no one. I don't understand you."

"But you shall, before it is too late. Betty, be yourself. Emancipate your soul. You are the echo of that woman, of Clarice. Don't you see it? Don't you know it? You are her echo—and she hates me!"

Betty drew back from him—she was evidently alarmed.

"Are you mad?" she said. "Why do you say such things to me? Clarice and I love each other, it is true, but our real natures are totally different. She does not hate you, nor do I. She has never said one word against you to me. She has always told me how much she liked you. What are you saying?"

"The truth!"

"I—her echo! Why, then—then if that were the case she must have loved you, or thought she loved you. Do you dare to tell me that?"

"I do not say that," Bellairs answered hopelessly.

"Of course not. The idea is so absurd. Clarice—oh! how can you talk like this? And if I am only an echo, as you call it, how can you say you care for me, care for another woman's shadow? You do not love me." [207]

"I do—with all my heart."

"And yet you say I am nothing, that I have not even a heart of my own, that I love or hate at the will of another."

"Forgive me, forgive me! I don't know what I say. I only know I love you."

Her face softened.

"And you deserve to be loved," she said; "but I—it is so horrible—I cannot!"

Suddenly Bellairs caught her in his arms.

"You shall," he exclaimed, "you shall. I will make you." But she pushed him back with a strange strength, and her face hardened till he scarcely recognised it.

"Don't do that—don't touch me—or you'll make me hate you," she said vehemently.

Bellairs let her go. At that moment there was a step on the deck. Clarice appeared. She did not seem to notice that anything was wrong. She smiled.

"Isn't it sad, Mr Bellairs," she said, "we sail to-morrow. I love Luxor. I can't bear to leave it."

Bellairs suddenly turned and hurried away. He could no longer trust himself. There was blood

before his eyes.

It was dawn. The Nile was smooth as a river of oil. Light mists rolled upwards gently, discovering the rosy flanks of the Libyan mountains to the sun. The sky began to glimmer with a dancing golden heat. On the brown bank where the boats lie in the shadow a man stood alone. His hands were tightly clenched. His lips worked silently. His eyes were fixed in a stare. And away in the distance up river, a tiny trail of smoke floated towards Luxor. It came from a steam tug that drew a following dahabeeyah. [208]

The *Queen Hatasoo* was on her voyage to Assouan.

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THE FACE OF THE MONK

I

"No, it will not hurt him to see you," the doctor said to me; "and I have no doubt he will recognise you. He is the quietest patient I have ever had under my care—gentle, kind, agreeable, perfect in conduct, and yet quite mad. You know him well?"

"He was my dearest friend," I said. "Before I went out to America three years ago we were inseparable. Doctor, I cannot believe that he is mad, he—Hubert Blair—one of the cleverest young writers in London, so brilliant, so acute! Wild, if you like, a libertine perhaps, a strange mixture of the intellectual and the sensual—but mad! I can't believe it!"

"Not when I tell you that he was brought to me suffering from acute religious mania?"

"Religious! Hubert Blair!"

"Yes. He tried to destroy himself, declaring that he was unfit to live, that he was a curse to some person unknown. He protested that each deed of his affected this unknown person, that his sins were counted as the sins of another, and that this other had haunted him—would haunt him for ever."

The doctor's words troubled me.

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"Take me to him," I said at last. "Leave us together."

It was a strange, sad moment when I entered the room in which Hubert was sitting. I was painfully agitated. He knew me, and greeted me warmly. I sat down opposite to him.

There was a long silence. Hubert looked away into the fire. He saw, I think, traced in scarlet flames, the scenes he was going to describe to me; and I, gazing at him, wondered of what nature the change in my friend might be. That he had changed since we were together three years ago was evident, yet he did not look mad. His dark, clean-shaven young face was still passionate. The brown eyes were still lit with a certain devouring eagerness. The mouth had not lost its mingled sweetness and sensuality. But Hubert was curiously transformed. There was a dignity, almost an elevation, in his manner. His former gaiety had vanished. I knew, without words, that my friend was another man—very far away from me now. Yet once we had lived together as chums, and had no secrets the one from the other.

At last Hubert looked up and spoke.

"I see you are wondering about me," he said.

"Yes."

"I have altered, of course—completely altered."

"Yes," I said, awkwardly enough. "Why is that?"

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I longed to probe this madness of his that I might convince myself of it, otherwise Hubert's situation must for ever appal me.

He answered quietly, "I will tell you—nobody else knows—and even you may—"

He hesitated, then he said:—

"No, you will believe it."

"Yes, if you tell me it is true."

"It is absolutely true.

"Bernard, you know what I was when you left England for America—gay, frivolous in my pleasures, although earnest when I was working. You know how I lived to sound the depths of sensation, how I loved to stretch all my mental and physical capacities to the snapping-point, how I shrank from no sin that could add one jot or tittle to my knowledge of the mind of any man or woman who interested me. My life seemed a full life then. I moved in the midst of a thousand intrigues. I strung beads of all emotions upon my rosary, and told them until at times my health gave way. You remember my recurring periods of extraordinary and horrible mental depression—when life was a demon to me, and all my success in literature less than nothing; when I fancied myself hated, and could believe I heard phantom voices abusing me. Then those fits passed away, and once more I lived as ardently as ever, the most persistent worker, and the most persistent excitement-seeker in London. [214]

"Well, after you went away I continued my career. As you know, my success increased. Through many sins I had succeeded in diving very deep into human hearts of men and women. Often I led people deliberately away from innocence in order that I might observe the gradual transformation of their natures. Often I spurred them on to follies that I might see the effect our deeds have upon our faces—the seal our actions set upon our souls. I was utterly unscrupulous, and yet I thought myself good-hearted. You remember that my servants always loved me, that I attracted people. I can say this to you. For some time my usual course was not stayed. Then—I recollect it was in the middle of the London season—one of my horrible fits of unreasonable melancholy swept over me. It stunned my soul like a heavy blow. It numbed me. I could not go about. I could not bear to see anybody. I could only shut myself up and try to reason myself back into my usual gaiety and excitement. My writing was put aside. My piano was locked. I tried to read, but even that solace was denied to me. My attention was utterly self-centred, riveted upon my own condition.

"Why, I said to myself, am I the victim of this despair, this despair without a cause? What is this oppression which weighs me down without reason? It attacks me abruptly, as if it were sent to me by some power, shot at me like an arrow by an enemy hidden in the dark. I am well—I am gay. Life is beautiful and wonderful to me. All that I do interests me. My soul is full of vitality. I know that I have troops of friends, that I am loved and thought of by many people. And then suddenly the arrow strikes me. My soul is wounded and sickens to death. Night falls over me, night so sinister that I shudder when its twilight comes. All my senses faint within me. Life is at once a hag, weary, degraded, with tears on her cheeks and despair in her hollow eyes. I feel that I am deserted, that my friends despise me, that the world hates me, that I am less than all other men—less in powers, less in attraction—that I am the most crawling, the most grovelling of all the human species, and that there is no one who does not know it. Yet the doctors say I am not physically ill, and I know that I am not mad. Whence does this awful misery, this unmeaning, causeless horror of life and of myself come? Why am I thus afflicted? [215]

"Of course I could find no answer to all these old questions, which I had asked many times before. But this time, Bernard, my depression was more lasting, more overwhelming than usual. I grew terribly afraid of it. I thought I might be driven to suicide. One day a crisis seemed to come. I dared no longer remain alone, so I put on my hat and coat, took my stick, and hurried out, without any definite intention. I walked along Piccadilly, avoiding the glances of those whom I met. I fancied they could all read the agony, the degradation of my soul. I turned into Bond Street, and suddenly I felt a strong inclination to stop before a certain door. I obeyed the impulse, and my eyes fell on a brass plate, upon which was engraved these words:— [216]

VANE.
Clairvoyant.
11 till 4 daily.

"I remember I read them several times over, and even repeated them in a whisper to myself. Why? I don't know. Then I turned away, and was about to resume my walk. But I could not. Again I stopped and read the legend on the brass plate. On the right-hand side of the door was an electric bell. I put my finger on it and pressed the button inwards. The door opened, and I walked, like a man in a dream, I think, up a flight of narrow stairs. At the top of them was a second door, at which a maidservant was standing.

"'You want to see Mr Vane, sir?'

"'Yes. Can I?'

"'If you will come in, sir, I will see.'

"She showed me into a commonplace, barely-furnished little room, and, after a short period of waiting, summoned me to another, in which stood a tall, dark youth, dressed in a gown rather like a college gown. He bowed to me, and I silently returned the salutation. The servant left us. Then he said:— [217]

"'You wish me to exert my powers for you?'

"'Yes.'

"'Will you sit here?'

"He motioned me to a seat beside a small round table, sat down opposite to me, and took my

hand. After examining it through a glass, and telling my character fairly correctly by the lines in it, he laid the glass down and regarded me narrowly.

“‘You suffer terribly from depression,’ he said.

“‘That is true.’

“He continued to gaze upon me more and more fixedly. At length he said:—

“‘Do you know that everybody has a companion?’

“‘How—a companion?’

“‘Somebody incessantly with them, somebody they cannot see.’

“‘You believe in the theory of guardian angels?’

“‘I do not say these companions are always guardian angels. I see your companion now, as I look at you. His face is by your shoulder.’

“I started, and glanced hastily round; but, of course, could see nothing.

“‘Shall I describe him?’

“‘Yes,’ I said.

“‘His face is dark, like yours; shaven, like yours. He has brown eyes, just as brown as yours are. His mouth and his chin are firm and small, as firm and small as yours.’ [218]

“‘He must be very like me.’

“‘He is. But there is a difference between you.’

“‘What is it?’

“‘His hair is cut more closely than yours, and part of it is shaved off.’

“‘He is a priest, then?’

“‘He wears a cowl. He is a monk.’

“‘A monk! But why does he come to me?’

“‘I should say that he cannot help it, that he is your spirit in some former state. Yes’—and he stared at me till his eyes almost mesmerised me—‘you must have been a monk once.’

“‘I—a monk! Impossible! Even if I have lived on earth before, it could never have been as a monk.’

“‘How do you know that?’

“‘Because I am utterly without superstitions, utterly free from any lingering desire for an ascetic life. That existence of silence, of ignorance, of perpetual prayer, can never have been mine.’

“‘You cannot tell,’ was all his answer.

II

“When I left Bond Street that afternoon I was full of disbelief. However, I had paid my half-guinea and escaped from my own core of misery for a quarter of an hour. That was something. I didn't regret my visit to this man Vane, whom I regarded as an agreeable charlatan. For a moment he had interested me. For a moment he had helped me to forget my useless wretchedness. I ought to have been grateful to him. And, as always, my soul regained its composure at last. One morning I awoke and said to myself that I was happy. Why? I did not know. But I got up. I was able to write once more. I was able to play. I felt that I had friends who loved me and a career before me. I could again look people in the face without fear. I could even feel a certain delightful conceit of mind and body. Bernard, I was myself. So I thought, so I knew. And yet, as days went by, I caught myself often thinking of this invisible, tonsured, and cowed companion of mine, whom Vane had seen, whom I did not see. Was he indeed with me? And, if so, had he thoughts, had he the holy thoughts of a spirit that has renounced the world and all fleshly things? Did he still keep that cloistered nature which is at home with silence, which aspires, and prays, and lives for possible eternity, instead of for certain time? Did he still hold desolate vigils? Did he still scourge himself along the thorny paths of faith? And, if he did, how must he regard me? [219]

“I remember one night especially how this last thought was with me in a dreary house, where I sinned, and where I dissected a heart. [220]

“And I trembled as if an eye was upon me. And I went home.

“You will say that my imagination is keen, and that I gave way to it. But wait and hear the end.

“This definite act of mine—this, my first conscious renunciation—did not tend, as you might suppose, to the peace of my mind. On the contrary, I found myself angry, perturbed, as I analysed

the cause of my warfare with self. I have naturally a supreme hatred of all control. Liberty is my fetish. And now I had offered a sacrifice to a prisoning unselfishness, to a false god that binds and gags its devotees. I was angry, and I violently resumed my former course. But now I began to be ceaselessly companioned by uneasiness, by a furtive cowardice that was desolating. I felt that I was watched, and by some one who suffered when I sinned, who shrank and shuddered when I followed where my desires led.

"It was the monk.

"Soon I gave to him a most definite personality. I endowed him with a mind and with moods. I imagined not only a heart for him, but a voice, deep with a certain ecclesiastical beauty, austere, with a note more apt for denunciation than for praise. His face was my own face, but with an expression not mine, elevated, almost fanatical, yet nobly beautiful; praying eyes—and mine were only observant; praying lips—and mine were but sensitively sensual. And he was haggard with abstinence, while I—was I not often haggard with indulgence? Yes, his face was mine, and not mine. It seemed the face of a great saint who might have been a great sinner. Bernard, that is the most attractive face in all the world. Accustoming myself thus to a thought-companion, I at length—for we men are so inevitably materialistic—embodied him, gave to him hands, feet, a figure, all—as before, mine, yet not mine, a sort of saintly replica of my sinfulness. For do not hands, feet, figure cry our deeds as the watchman cries the hour in the night? [221]

"So, I had the man. There he stood in my vision as you are now.

"Yes, he was there; but only when I sinned.

"When I worked and yielded myself up to the clear assertion of my intellect, when I fought to give out the thoughts that lingered like reluctant fish far down in the deep pools of my mind, when I wrestled for beauty of diction and for nameless graces of expression, when I was the author, I could not see him.

"But when I was the man, and lived the fables that I was afterwards to write, then he was with me. And his face was as the face of one who is wasted with grey grief.

"He came to me when I sinned, as if by my sins I did him grave injury. And, allowing my imagination to range wildly, as you will say, I grew gradually to feel as if each sin did indeed strike a grievous blow upon his holy nature. [222]

"This troubled me at last. I found myself continually brooding over the strange idea. I was aware that if my friends could know I entertained it, they would think me mad. And yet I often fancied that thought moved me in the direction of a sanity more perfect, more desirable than my sanity of self-indulgence. Sometimes even I said to myself that I would reorganise my life, that I would be different from what I had been. And then, again, I laughed at my folly of the imagination, and cursed that clairvoyant of Bond Street, who made a living by trading upon the latent imbecility of human nature. Yet, the desire of change, of soul-transformation, came and lingered, and the vision of the monk's worn young face was often with me. And whenever, in my waking dreams, I looked upon it, I felt that a time might come when I could pray and weep for the wild catalogue of my many sins.

"Bernard, at last the day came when I left England. I had long wished to travel. I had grown tired of the hum of literary cliques, and the jargon of that deadly parasite called 'modernity.' Praise fainted, and lay like a corpse before my mind. I was sick of gaiety. It seemed to me that London was stifling my powers, narrowing my outlook, barring out real life from me with its moods and its fashions, and its idols of the hour, and its heroes of a day, who are the traitors of the day's night. [223]

"So I went away.

"And now I come to the part of my story that you may find it hard to believe. Yet it is true.

"One day, in my wanderings, I came to a monastery. I remember the day well. It was an afternoon of early winter, and I was *en route* to a warm climate. But to gain my climate, and snatch a vivid contrast such as I love, I toiled over a gaunt and dreary pass, presided over by heavy, beetling-browed mountains. I rode upon a mule, attended only by my manservant and by a taciturn guide who led a baggage-mule. Slowly we wound, by thin paths, among the desolate crags, which sprang to sight in crowds at each turn of the way, pressing upon us, like dead faces of Nature, the corpses of things we call inanimate, but which had surely once lived. For the earth is alive, and gives life. But these mountains were now utterly dead. These grey, petrified countenances of the hills subdued my soul. The pattering shuffle of the mules woke an occasional echo, and even an echo I hated. For the enviroing silence was immense, and I wished to steep myself in it. As we still ascended, in the waste winter afternoon, towards the hour of twilight, snow—the first snow of the season—began to fall. I watched the white vision of the flakes against the grey vision of the crags, and I thought that this path, which I had chosen as my road to Summer, was like the path by which holy men slowly gain Paradise, treading difficult ways through life that they may attain at last those eternal roses which bloom beyond the granite and the snows. Up and up I rode, into the clouds and the night, into the veil of the world, into the icy winds of the heights. An eagle screamed above my head, poised like a black shadow in the [224]

opaque gloom. That flying life was the only life in this waste.

"And then my mule, edging ever to the precipice as a man to his fate, sidled round a promontory of rock and set its feet in snow. For we had passed the snow-line. And upon the snow lay thin spears of yellow light. They streamed from the lattices of the monastery which crowns the very summit of the pass.

III

"At this monastery I was to spend the night. The good monks entertain all travellers, and in summer-time their hospitalities are lavishly exercised. But in winter, wanderers are few, and these holy men are left almost undisturbed in their meditative solitudes. My mule paused upon a rocky plateau before the door of the narrow grey building. The guide struck upon the heavy wood. After a while we were admitted by a robed figure, who greeted us kindly and made us welcome. Within, the place was bare and poor enough, but scrupulously clean. I was led through long, broad, and bitterly cold corridors to a big chamber in which I was to pass the night. Here were ranged in a row four large beds with white curtains. I occupied one bed, my servant another. The rest were untenanted. The walls were lined with light wood. The wooden floor was uncarpeted. I threw open the narrow window. Dimly I could see a mountain of rocks, on which snow lay in patches, towering up into the clouds in front of me. And to the left there was a glimmer of water. On the morrow, by that water, I should ride down into the land of flowers to which I was bound. Till then I would allow my imagination to luxuriate in the bleak romance of this wild home of prayer. The pathos of the night, shivering in the snow, and of this brotherhood of aspiring souls, detached from the excitement of the world for ever, seeking restlessly their final salvation day by day, night by night, in clouds of mountain vapour and sanctified incense, entered into my soul. And I thought of that imagined companion of mine. If he were with me now, surely he would feel that he had led me to his home at length. Surely he would secretly long to remain here.

[225]

"I smiled, as I said to myself—'Monk, to-morrow, if, indeed, you are fated to be my eternal attendant, you must come with me from this cold station of the cross down into the sunshine, where the blood of men is hot, where passions sing among the vineyards, where the battle is not of souls but of flowers. To-morrow you must come with me. But to-night be at peace!'

[226]

"And I smiled to myself again as I fancied that my visionary companion was glad.

"Then I went down into the refectory.

"That night, before I retired to my room of the four beds, I asked if I might go into the chapel of the monastery. My request was granted. I shall never forget the curious sensation which overtook me as my guide led me down some steps past a dim, little, old, painted window set in the wall, to the chapel. That there should be a church here, that the deep tones of an organ should ever sound among these rocks and clouds, that the Host should be elevated and the censer swung, and litanies and masses be chanted amid these everlasting snows, all this was wonderful and quickening to me. When we reached the chapel, I begged my kind guide to leave me for a while. I longed to meditate alone. He left me, and instinctively I sank down upon my knees.

"I could just hear the keening of the wind outside. A dim light glimmered near the altar, and in one of the oaken stalls I saw a bent form praying. I knelt a long time. I did not pray. At first I scarcely thought definitely. Only, I received into my heart the strange, indelible impression of this wonderful place; and, as I knelt, my eyes were ever upon that dark praying figure near to me. By degrees I imagined that a wave of sympathy flowed from it to me, that in this monk's devotions my name was not forgotten.

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"'What absurd tricks our imaginations can play us!' you will say.

"I grew to believe that he prayed for me, there, under the dim light from the tall tapers.

"What blessing did he ask on me? I could not tell; but I longed that his prayer might be granted.

"And then, Bernard, at last he rose. He lifted his face from his hands and stood up. Something in his figure seemed so strangely familiar to me, so strangely that, on a sudden, I longed, I craved to see his face.

"He seemed about to retreat through a side door near to the altar; then he paused, appeared to hesitate, then came down the chapel towards me. As he drew near to me—I scarcely knew why—but I hid my face deep in my hands, with a dreadful sense of overwhelming guilt which dyed my cheeks with blood. I shrank—I cowered. I trembled and was afraid. Then I felt a gentle touch on my shoulder. I looked up into the face of the monk.

"Bernard, it was the face of my invisible companion—it was my own face.

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"The monk looked down into my eyes searchingly. He recoiled.

"'Mon démon!' he whispered in French. '*Mon démon!*'

"For a moment he stood still, like one appalled. Then he turned and abruptly quitted the chapel.

"I started up to follow him, but something held me back. I let him go, and I listened to hear if his tread sounded upon the chapel floor as a human footstep, if his robe rustled as he went.

"Yes. Then he was, indeed, a living man, and it was a human voice which had reached my ears, not a voice of imagination. He was a living man, this double of my body, this antagonist of my soul, this being who called me demon, who fled from me, who, doubtless, hated me. He was a living man.

"I could not sleep that night. This encounter troubled me. I felt that it had a meaning for me which I must discover, that it was not chance which had led me to take this cold road to the sunshine. Something had bound me with an invisible thread, and led me up here into the clouds, where already I—or the likeness of me—dwelt, perhaps had been dwelling for many years. I had looked upon my living wraith, and my living wraith had called me demon.

"How could I sleep?

"Very early I got up. The dawn was bitterly cold, but the snow had ceased, though a coating of ice covered the little lake. How delicate was the dawn here! The gathering, growing light fell upon the rocks, upon the snow, upon the ice of the lake, upon the slate walls of the monastery. And upon each it lay with a pretty purity, a thin refinement, an austerity such as I had never seen before. So, even Nature, it seemed, was purged by the continual prayers of these holy men. She, too, like men, has her lusts, and her hot passions, and her wrath of warfare. She, too, like men, can be edified and tended into grace. Nature among these heights was a virgin, not a wanton, a fit companion for those who are dedicated to virginity. [229]

"I dressed by the window, and went out to see the entrance of the morning. There was nobody about. I had to find my own way. But when I had gained the refectory, I saw a monk standing by the door.

"It was my wraith waiting for me.

"Silently he went before me to the great door of the building. He opened it, and we stepped out upon the rocky plateau on which the snow lay thickly. He closed the door behind us, and motioned me to attend him among the rocks till we were out of sight of the monastery. Then he stopped, and we faced one another, still without a word, the grey light of the wintry dawn clothing us so wearily, so plaintively.

"We gazed at each other, dark face to dark face, brown eyes to brown eyes. The monk's pale hands, my hands, were clenched. The monk's strong lips, my lips, were set. The two souls looked upon each other, there, in the dawn. [230]

"And then at last he spoke in French, and with the beautiful voice I knew.

"'Whence have you come?' he said.

"'From England, father.'

"'From England? Then you live! you live. You are a man, as I am! And I have believed you to be a spirit, some strange spirit of myself, lost to my control, interrupting my prayers with your cries, interrupting my sleep with your desires. You are a man like myself?'

"He stretched out his hand and touched mine.

"'Yes; it is indeed so,' he murmured.

"'And you,' I said in my turn, 'are no spirit. Yet, I, too, believed you to be a wraith of myself, interrupting my sins with your sorrow, interrupting my desires with your prayers. I have seen you. I have imagined you. And now I find you live. What does it mean? For we are as one and yet not as one.'

"'We are as two halves of a strangely-mingled whole,' he answered. 'Do you know what you have done to me?'

"'No, father.'

"'Listen,' he said. 'When a boy I dedicated myself to God. Early, early I dedicated myself, so that I might never know sin. For I had heard that the charm of sin is so great and so terrible that, once it is known, once it is felt, it can never be forgotten. And so it can make the holiest life hideous with its memories. It can intrude into the very sanctuary like a ghost, and murmur its music with the midnight mass. Even at the elevation of the Host will it be present, and stir the heart of the officiator to longing so keen that it is like the Agony of the Garden, the Agony of Christ. There are monks here who weep because they dare not sin, who rage secretly like beasts—because they will not sin.' [231]

"He paused. The grey light grew over the mountains.

"'Knowing this, I resolved that I would never know sin, lest I, too, should suffer so horribly. I threw myself at once into the arms of God. Yet I have suffered—how I have suffered!'

"His face was contorted, and his lips worked. I stood as if under a spell, my eyes upon his face. I had only the desire to hear him. He went on, speaking now in a voice roughened by emotion:

"'For I became like these monks. You'—and he pointed at me with outstretched fingers—'you, my

wraith, made in my very likeness, were surely born when I was born, to torment me. For, while I have prayed, I have been conscious of your neglect of prayer as if it were my own. When I have believed, I have been conscious of your unbelief as if it were my own. Whatever I have feebly tried to do for God, has been marred and defaced by all that you have left undone. I have wrestled with you; I have tried to hold you back; I have tried to lead you with me where I want to go, where I must go. All these years I have tried, all these years I have striven. But it has seemed as if God did not choose it. When you have been sinning, I have been agonising. I have lain upon the floor of my cell in the night, and I have torn at my evil heart. For—sometimes—I have longed—how I have longed!—to sin your sin.'

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"He crossed himself. Sudden tears sprang into his eyes.

"'I have called you my demon,' he cried. 'But you are my cross. Oh, brother, will you not be my crown?'

"His eyes, shadowed with tears, gazed down into mine. Bernard, in that moment, I understood all—my depression, my unreasoning despair, the fancied hatred of others, even my few good impulses, all came from him, from this living holy wraith of my evil self.

"'Will you not be my crown?' he said.

"Bernard, there, in the snow, I fell at his feet. I confessed to him. I received his absolution.

"And, as the light of the dawn grew strong upon the mountains, he, my other self, my wraith, blessed me."

There was a long silence between us. Then I said:—

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"And now?"

"And now you know why I have changed. That day, as I went down into the land of the sunshine, I made a vow."

"A vow?"

"Yes; to be his crown, not his cross. I soon returned to England. At first I was happy, and then one day my old evil nature came upon me like a giant. I fell again into sin, and, even as I sinned, I saw his face looking into mine, Bernard, pale, pale to the lips, and with eyes—such sad eyes of reproach! Then I thought I was not fit to live, and I tried to kill myself. They saved me, and brought me here."

"Yes; and now, Hubert?"

"Now," he said, "I am so happy. God surely placed me here where I cannot sin. The days pass and the nights, and they are stainless. And he—he comes by night and blesses me. I live for him now, and see always the grey walls of his monastery, his face which shall, at last, be completely mine."

"Good-bye," the doctor said to me as I got into the carriage to drive back to the station. "Yes, he is perfectly happy, happier in his mania, I believe, than you or I in our sanity."

I drove away from that huge home of madness, set in the midst of lovely gardens in a smiling landscape, and I pondered those last words of the doctor's:—

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"You and I—in our sanity."

And, thinking of the peace that lay on Hubert's face, I compared the so-called mad of the world with the so-called sane—and wondered.

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THE MAN WHO INTERVENED

I

THE atmosphere of the room in which Sergius Blake was sitting seemed to him strange and cold. As he looked round it, he could imagine that a light mist invaded it stealthily, like miasma rising from some sinister marsh. There was surely a cloud about the electric light that gleamed in the ceiling, a cloud sweeping in feathery, white flakes across the faces of the pictures upon the wall. Even the familiar furniture seemed to loom out faintly, with a gaunt and grotesque aspect, from shadows less real, yet more fearful, than any living form could be.

Sergius stared round him slowly, pressing his strong lips together. When he concentrated his gaze upon any one thing—a table, a sofa, a chair—the cloud faded, and the object stood out clearly before his eyes. Yet always the rest of the room seemed to lie in mist and in shadows. He knew that this dim atmosphere did not really exist, that it was projected by his mind. Yet it troubled him, and added a dull horror to his thoughts, which moved again and again, in persistent promenade, round one idea.

The hour was seven o'clock of an autumn night. Darkness lay over London, and rain made a furtive music on roofs and pavements. Sergius Blake listened to the drops upon the panes of his windows. They seemed to beckon him forth, to tell him that it was time to exchange thought for action. He had come to a definite and tremendous resolution. He must now carry it out. [238]

He got up slowly from his chair, and with the movement the mist seemed to gather itself together in the room and to disappear. It passed away, evaporating among the pictures and ornaments, the prayer-rugs and divans. A clearness and an insight came to Sergius. He stood still by the piano, on which he rested one hand lightly, and listened. The rain-drops pattered close by. Beyond them rose the dull music of the evening traffic of New Bond Street, in which thoroughfare he lived. As he stood thus at attention, his young and handsome face seemed carved in stone. His lips were set in a hard and straight line. His dark-grey eyes stared, like eyes in a photograph. The muscles of his long-fingered hands were tense and knotted. He was in evening dress, and had been engaged to dine in Curzon Street; but he had written a hasty note to say he was ill and could not come. Another appointment claimed him. He had made it for himself.

Presently, lifting his hand from the piano, he took up a small leather case from a table that stood near, opened it, and drew out a revolver. He examined it carefully. Two chambers were loaded. They would be enough. He put on his long overcoat, and slipped the revolver into his left breast pocket. His heart could beat against it there. [239]

Each time his heart pulsed, Sergius seemed to hear the silence of another heart.

And now, though his mind was quite clear, and the mists and shadows had slunk away, his familiar room looked very peculiar to him. The very chair in which he generally sat wore the aspect of a stranger. Was the wall paper really blue? Sergius went close up to it and examined it narrowly, and then he drew back and laughed softly, like a child. In the sound of his laugh irresponsibility chimed. "What is the cab fare to Phillimore Place, Kensington?" he thought, searching in his waistcoat pocket. "Half a crown?" He put the coin carefully in the ticket pocket of his overcoat, buttoned the coat up slowly, took his hat and stick, and drew on a pair of lavender gloves. Just then a new thought seemed to strike him and he glanced down at his hands.

"Lavender gloves for such a deed!" he murmured. For a moment he paused irresolute, even partially unbuttoned them. But then he smiled and shook his head. In some way the gloves would not be wholly inappropriate. Sergius cast one final glance round the room.

"When I stand here again," he said aloud, "I shall be a criminal—a criminal!" [240]

He repeated the last word, as if trying thoroughly to realise its meaning.

Then he opened the door swiftly and went out on to the staircase.

Just as he was putting a hasty foot upon the first stair, a man out in the street touched his electric bell. Its thin tingling cry made Sergius start and hesitate. In the semi-twilight he waited, his hands deep in his pockets, his silk hat tilted slightly over his eyes. The porter tramped along the passage below. The hall door opened, and a deep and strong voice asked, rather anxiously and breathlessly:—

"Is Mr. Blake at home?"

"I rather think he's gone out, sir."

"No—surely—how long ago?"

"I don't know, sir. He may be in. I'll see."

"Do—do—quickly. If he's in, say I must see him—Mr Endover. But you know my name."

"Yes, sir."

The porter, mounting the stone staircase, suddenly came upon Sergius standing there like a stone figure.

"Lord, sir!" he ejaculated. "You give me a start!" His voice was loud from astonishment.

"Hush!" Sergius whispered. "Go down at once and say that I've gone out!"

The man turned to obey, but Anthony Endover was half-way up the stairs. [241]

"It's all right," he exclaimed, as he met the porter.

He had passed him in an instant and arrived at the place where Sergius was standing.

"Sergius," he cried, and there was a great music of relief in his voice. "Hulloa! Now you're not going out."

"Yes, I am, Anthony."

"But I want to talk to you tremendously. Where are you going?"

"To dine with the Venables in Curzon Street."

"I met young Venables just now, and he said you'd written that you were ill and couldn't come. He asked me to fill your place."

Sergius muttered a "Damn!" under his breath.

"Well, come in for a minute," he said, attempting no excuse.

He turned round slowly and re-entered his flat, followed by Endover.

II

For some years Endover had been Sergius Blake's close friend. They had left Eton at the same time; had been at Oxford together. Their intimacy, born in the playing fields, grew out of its cricket and football stage as their minds developed, and the world of thought opened like a holy of holies—beyond the world of action. They both passed behind the veil, but Anthony went farther than Sergius. Yet this slight separation did not lead to alienation, but merely caused the admiration of Sergius for his friend to be mingled with respect. He looked up to Anthony. Recognising that his friend's mind was more thoughtful than his own, while his passions were far stronger than Anthony's, he grew to lean upon Anthony, to claim his advice sometimes, to follow it often. Anthony was his mentor, and thought he knew instinctively all the workings of Sergius' mind and all the possibilities of his nature. The mother of Sergius was a Russian and a great heiress. Soon after he left Oxford, she died. His father had been killed by an accident when he was a child. So he was rich, free, young, in London, with no one to look after him, until Anthony Endover, who had meanwhile taken orders, was attached as fourth—or fifth—curate to a smart West End church, and came to live in lodgings in George Street, Hanover Square. [242]

Then, as Sergius laughingly said, he had a father confessor on the premises. Yet to-night he had bidden his porter to tell a lie in order to keep his father confessor out. The lie had been vain. Sergius led the way morosely into his drawing-room, and turned on the light. Anthony walked up to the fire, and stretched his tall athletic figure in its long ebon coat. His firm throat rose out of a jam-pot collar, but his thin, strongly-marked face rather suggested an intellectual Hercules than a Mayfair parson, and neither his voice nor his manner was tinged with what so many people consider the true clericalism. [243]

For all that he was a splendid curate, as his rector very well knew.

Now he stood by the fire for a minute in silence, while Sergius moved uneasily about the room. Presently Anthony turned round.

"It's beastly wet," he said in a melodious ringing voice. "The black dog is on me to-night, Sergius."

"Oh!"

"You don't want to go out, really," Anthony continued, looking narrowly at his friend's curiously rigid face.

"Yes, I do."

"Not to Curzon Street. They've filled up your place. I told Venables to ask Hugh Graham. I knew he was disengaged to-night. Besides—you're seedy."

Sergius frowned.

"I'm all right again now," he said coldly, "and I particularly wished to go. You needn't have been so deuced anxious to make the number right."

"Well, it's done now. And I can't say I'm sorry, because I want to have a talk with you. I say, Serge, take off those lavender gloves, pull off your coat, let's send out for some dinner, and have a comfortable evening together in here. I've had a hard day's work, and I want a rest." [244]

"I must go out presently."

"After dinner then."

"Before ten o'clock."

"Say eleven."

"No—that's too late."

A violent, though fleeting expression of anxiety crossed Endover's face. Then, with a smile, he said:—

"All right. Shall I ring the bell and order some dinner to be sent in from Galton's?"

"If you like. I'm not hungry."

"I am."

Anthony summoned the servant and gave the order. Then he turned again to Sergius.

"Here, I'll help you off with your coat," he said.

But Sergius moved away.

"No thanks, I'll do it. There are some cigarettes on the mantelpiece."

Anthony went to get one. As he was taking it, he looked into the mirror over the fireplace, and saw Sergius—while removing his overcoat—transfer something from it to the left breast pocket of his evening coat.

He wanted still to feel his heart beat against that tiny weapon, still to hear—with each pulse of his own heart—the silence, not yet alive, but so soon to be alive, of that other heart.

And, as Anthony glanced into the mirror, he said to himself, "I was right!"

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He withdrew his eyes from the glass and lit his cigarette. Sergius joined him.

"I'm in the blues to-night," Anthony said, puffing at his cigarette.

"Are you?"

"Yes—been down in the East End. The misery there is ghastly."

"It's just as bad in the West End, only different in kind. You're smoking your cigarette all down one side."

Anthony took it out of his mouth and threw it into the grate. He lit two or three matches, but held them so badly that they went out before he could ignite another cigarette. At last, inwardly cursing his nerves that made his hasty actions belie the determined calm of his face, he dropped the cigarette.

"I don't think I'll smoke before dinner," he said. "Ah, here it is. And wine—champagne—that's good for you!"

"I shan't drink it. I hate to drink alone."

"You shan't drink alone then."

"What d'you mean?"

"I'll drink with you."

"But you're a teetotaller."

"I don't care to-night."

Anthony spoke briefly and firmly. Sergius was amazed.

"What!" he said. "You're going to break your vow? You a parson!"

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"Sometimes salvation lies in the breaking of a vow," Anthony answered as they sat down. "Have you never registered a silent vow?"

Sergius looked at him hard in the eyes.

"Yes," he said; and in his voice there was the hint of a thrilling note. "But I shan't—I shouldn't break it."

"I've known a soul saved alive by the breaking of a vow," Anthony answered. "Give me some champagne."

Sergius—wondering, as much as the condition of his mind, possessed by one idea, would allow—filled his friend's glass. Anthony began to eat, with a well-assumed hunger. Sergius scarcely touched food, but drank a good deal of wine. The hands of the big oaken-cased clock that stood in a far corner of the room crawled slowly upon their round, recurring tour. Anthony's eyes were often upon them, then moved with a swift directness that was akin to passion to the face of Sergius, which was always strangely rigid, like the painted face of a mask.

"I sat by a woman to-day," he said presently, "sat by her in an attic that looked on to a narrow street full of rain, and watched her die."

"This morning?"

"Yes."

"And now she's been out of the world seven or eight hours. Lucky woman!"

"Ah, Sergius, but the mischief, the horror of it was that she wasn't ready to go, not a bit ready."

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Sergius suddenly smiled, a straight, glaring smile, over the sparkling champagne that he was lifting to his lips.

"Yes; it's devilish bad for a woman or a—man to be shot into another world before they're prepared," he said. "It must be—devilish bad."

"And how can we know that any one is thoroughly prepared?"

Sergius' smile developed into a short laugh.

"It's easier to be certain who isn't than who is," he said.

The eyes of Anthony fled to the clock face mechanically and returned.

"Death terrified me to-day, Sergius," he said; "and it struck me that the most awful power that God has given to man is the power of setting death—like a dog—at another man."

Sergius swallowed all the wine in his glass at a gulp. He was no longer smiling. His hand went up to his left side.

"It may be awful," he rejoined; "but it's grand. By Heaven! it's magnificent."

He got up, as if excited, and moved about the room, while Anthony went on pretending to eat. After a minute or two Sergius sat down again.

"Power of any kind is a grand thing," he said.

"Only power for good."

"You're bound to say that; you're a parson."

"I only say what I really feel; you know that, Serge."

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"Ah, you don't understand."

Anthony looked at him with a sudden, strong significance.

"Part of a parson's profession—the most important part—is to understand men who aren't parsons."

"You think you understand men?"

"Some men."

"Me, for instance?"

The question came abruptly, defiantly. Anthony seemed glad to answer it.

"Well, yes, Sergius; I think I do thoroughly understand you. My great friendship alone might well make me do that."

The face of Sergius grew a little softer in expression, but he did not assent.

"Perhaps it might blind you," he said.

"I don't think so."

"Well, then, now, if you understand me—tell me—"

Sergius broke off suddenly.

"This champagne is awfully good," he said, filling his glass again.

"What were you going to say?" Anthony asked.

"I don't know—nothing."

Anthony tried to conceal his disappointment. Sergius had seemed to be on the verge of over-leaping the barrier which lay between them. Once that barrier was overleapt, or broken down, Anthony felt that the mission he had imposed upon himself would stand a chance of being accomplished, that his gnawing anxiety would be laid to rest. But once more Sergius diffused around him a strange and cold atmosphere of violent and knowing reserve. He went away from the table and sat down close to the fire. From there he threw over his shoulder the remark:—

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"No man or woman ever understands another—really."

III

Anthony did not reply for a moment and Sergius continued:—

"You, for instance, could never guess what I should do in certain circumstances."

"Such as—"

"Oh, in a thousand things."

"I should have a shrewd idea."

"No."

Anthony didn't contradict him, but got up from the dinner-table and joined him by the fire, glass in hand.

"I might not let you know how much I guessed, how much I knew."

Sergius laughed.

"Oh, ignorance always surrounds itself with mystery," he said.

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"Knowledge need not go naked."

Again the eyes of the two friends met in the firelight, and over the face of Sergius there ran a new expression. There was an awakening of wonder in it, but no uneasiness. Anxiety was far away from him that night. When passion has gripped a man, passion strong enough, resolute enough, to over-ride all the prejudices of civilisation, all the promptings of the coward within us, whose voice, whining, we name prudence, the semi-comprehension, the criticism of another man cannot move him. Sergius wondered for an instant whether Anthony suspected against what his heart was beating. That was all.

While he wondered, the clock chimed the half hour after nine. He heard it.

"I shall have to go very soon," he said.

"You can't. Just listen to the rain."

"Rain! What's that got to do with it?"

Sergius spoke with a sudden unutterable contempt.

"Ring for another bottle of champagne," Anthony replied. "This one is empty."

"Well—for a parson and a teetotaller, I must say!"

Sergius rang the bell. A second bottle was opened. The servant went out of the room. As he closed the door, the wind sighed harshly against the window panes, driving the rain before it.

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"Rough at sea to-night," Anthony said.

The remark was an obvious one; but, as spoken, it sounded oddly furtive, and full of hidden meaning. Sergius evidently found it so, for he said:

"Why, whom d'you know that's going to sea to-night?"

Anthony was startled by the quick question, and replied almost nervously:—

"Nobody in particular—why should I?"

"I don't know why, but I think you do."

"People one knows cross the channel every night almost."

"Of course," Sergius said indifferently.

He glanced towards the clock and again mechanically his hand went up, for a second, to his left breast. Anthony leaned forward in his chair quickly, and broke into speech. He had seen the stare at the clock-face, the gesture.

"It's strange," he said, "how people go out of our lives, how friends go, and enemies!"

"Enemies!"

"Yes. I sometimes wonder which exit is the sadder. When a friend goes—with him goes, perhaps for ever, the chance of saying 'I am your friend.' When an enemy goes—"

"Well, what then?"

"With him goes, perhaps for ever, too, the chance of saying, 'I am not your enemy.'"

"Pshaw! Parson's talk, Anthony."

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"No, Sergius, other men forgive besides parsons; and other men, and parsons too, pass by their chances of forgiving."

"You're a whole Englishman, I'm only half an Englishman. There's something untamed in my blood, and I say—damn forgiveness!"

"And yet you've forgiven."

"Whom?"

"Olga Mayne."

The face of Sergius did not change at the sound of this name, unless, perhaps, to a more fixed calm, a more still and pale coldness.

"Olga is punished," he said. "She is ruined."

"Her ruin may be repaired."

Sergius smiled quietly.

"You think so?"

"Yes. Tell me, Sergius"—Anthony spoke with a strong earnestness, a strong excitement that he strove to conceal and hold in check—"you loved her?"

"Yes, I loved her—certainly."

"You will always love her?"

"Since I'm not changeable, I daresay I shall."

Anthony's thin, eager face brightened. A glow of warmth burned in his eyes and on his cheeks.

"Then you would wish her ruin repaired."

"Should I?"

"If you love her, you must."

"How could it be repaired?"

"By her marriage with—Vernon."

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Anthony's strong voice quivered before he pronounced the last word, and his eyes were alight with fervent anxiety. He was looking at Sergius like a man on the watch for a tremendous outbreak of emotion. The champagne he had drunk—a new experience for him since he had taken orders—put a sort of wild finishing touch to the intensity of the feelings, under the impulse of which he had forced himself upon Sergius to-night. He supposed that his inward excitement must be more than matched by the so different inward excitement of his friend. But he—who thought he understood!—had no true conception of the region of cold, frosty fury in which Sergius was living, like a being apart from all other men, ostracised by the immensity and peculiarity of his own power of emotion. Therefore he was astonished when Sergius, with undiminished quietude, replied:

"Oh, with Vernon, that charming man of fashion, whose very soul, they say, always wears lavender gloves? You think that would be a good thing?"

"Good! I don't say that. I say—as the world is now—the only thing. He is the author of her fall. He should be her husband."

"And I?"

Anthony stretched out his hand to grasp his friend's hand, but Sergius suddenly took up his champagne glass, and avoided the demonstration of sympathy.

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"You can be nothing to her now, Serge," Anthony said, and his voice quivered with sympathy.

"You think so? I might be."

"What?"

"Oh, not her husband, not her lover, not her friend."

"What then?"

Sergius avoided answering.

"You would have her settle down with Vernon in Phillimore Place?" he said. "Play the wife to his noble husband? Well, I know there's been some idea of that, as I told you yesterday."

The clock chimed ten. Although Sergius seemed so calm, so self-possessed, Anthony observed that now he paid no heed to the little, devilish note of time. This new subject of conversation had been Anthony's weapon. Desperately he had used it, and not, it seemed, altogether in vain.

"Yes; as you told me yesterday."

"And it seems good to you?"

"It seems to me the only thing possible now."

"There are generally more possibilities than one in any given event, I fancy."

Again Anthony was surprised at the words of Sergius, who seemed to grow calmer as he grew more excited, who seemed, to-night, strangely powerful, not simply in temper, but even in intellect.

"For a woman there is sometimes only one possibility if she is to be saved from ignominy, Serge."

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"So you think that Olga Mayne must become the wife of Vernon, who is a—"

"Coward. Yes."

At the word coward, Sergius seemed startled out of his hard calm. He looked swiftly and

searchingly at Anthony.

"Why do you say coward?" he asked sharply. "I was not going to use that word."

Anthony was obviously disconcerted.

"It came to me," he said hurriedly.

"Why?"

"Any man that brings a girl to the dust is a coward."

"Ah—that's not what you meant," Sergius said.

Anthony stole a glance at the clock. The hand crawled slowly over the quarter of an hour past ten.

"No, it was not," he said slowly.

IV

Sergius got up from his chair and stood by the fire. He was obviously becoming engrossed by the conversation. Anthony could at least notice this with thankfulness.

"Anthony, I see you've got a fresh knowledge of Vernon since I was with you yesterday," Sergius continued; "some new knowledge of his nature." [256]

"Perhaps I have."

"How did you get it?"

"Does that matter?"

"You have heard of something about him?"

"No."

"You have seen him, then; I say, you have seen him?"

Anthony hesitated. He pushed the champagne bottle over towards Sergius. It had been placed on a little table near the fireplace.

"No; I don't want to drink. Why on earth don't you answer me, Anthony?"

"I have always felt that Vernon was a coward. His conduct to you shows it. He was—or seemed—your friend. He saw you deeply in love with this—with Olga. He chose to ruin her after he knew of your love. Who but a coward could act in such a way?"

An expression of dark impatience came into the eyes of Sergius.

"You are confusing treachery and cowardice, and you are doing it untruthfully. You have seen Vernon."

Anthony thought for a moment, and then said:

"Yes, I have."

"By chance, of course. Why did you speak to him?"

"I thought I would." [257]

Sergius was obviously disturbed and surprised. The deeply emotional, yet rigid calm in which he had been enveloped all the evening was broken at last. A slight excitement, a distinct surface irritation, woke in him. Anthony felt an odd sense of relief as he observed it. For the constraint of Sergius had begun to weigh upon him like a heavy burden and to move him to an indefinable dread.

"I wonder you didn't cut him," Sergius said. "You're my friend. And he's—he's—"

"He's done you a deadly injury. I know that. I am your friend, Serge; I would do anything for you."

"Yet you speak to that—devil."

"I spoke to him because I'm your friend."

Sergius sat down again, with a heavy look, the look of a man who has been thrashed, and means to return every blow with curious interest.

"You parsons are a riddle to me," he said in a low and dull voice. "You and your charity and your loving-kindness, and your turning the cheek to the smiter and all the rest of it. And as to your way of showing friendship—"

His voice died away in something that was almost a growl, and he stared at the carpet. Between

it and his eyes once more the mist seemed rising stealthily. It began to curl upwards softly about him. As he watched it, he heard Anthony say:—

“Sergius, you don't understand how well I understand you.”

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The big hand of the clock had left the half-hour after ten behind him. Anthony breathed more freely. At last he could be more explicit, more unreserved. He thought of a train rushing through the night, devouring the spaces of land that lie between London and the sea that speaks, moaning, to the South of England. He saw a ship glide out from the dreary docks. Her lights gleamed. He heard the bell struck and the harsh cry of the sailors, and then the dim sigh of a coward who had escaped what he had merited. Then he heard Sergius laugh.

“That again, Anthony!”

“Yes. I didn't meet Vernon by chance at all.”

“What? You wrote to him, you fixed a meeting?”

“I went to Phillimore Place, to his house.”

Sergius said nothing. Strange furrows ploughed themselves in his young face, which was growing dusky white. He remained in the attitude of one devoted entirely to listening.

“You hear, Sergius?”

“Go on—when?”

“To-day. I decided to go after I met you yesterday night—and after I had seen that woman die—unprepared.”

“What could she have to do with it?”

“Much. Everything almost.”

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Anthony got up now, almost sprang up from his chair. His face was glowing and working with emotion. There was a choking sensation in his throat.

“You don't know what it is,” he said hoarsely, “to a man with—with strong religious belief to see a human being's soul go out to blackness, to punishment—perhaps to punishment that will never end. It's abominable. It's unbearable. That woman will haunt me. Her despair will be with me always. I could not add to that horror.”

His eyes once more sought the clock. Seeing the hour, he turned, with a kind of liberating relief, to Sergius.

“I couldn't add to it,” he exclaimed, almost fiercely, “so I went to Vernon.”

“Why?”

“Sergius—to warn him.”

There was a dead silence. Even the rain was hushed against the window. Then Sergius said, in a voice that was cold as the sound of falling water in winter:—

“I don't understand.”

“Because you won't understand how I have learnt to know you, Sergius, to understand you, to read your soul.”

“Mine too?”

“Yes; I've felt this awful blow that's come upon you—the loss of Olga, her ruin—as if I myself were you. We haven't said much about it till yesterday. Then, from the way you spoke, from the way you looked, from what you said, even what you wouldn't say, I guessed all that was in your heart.”

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“You guessed all that?”

Sergius was looking directly at Anthony and leaning against the mantelpiece, along which he stretched one arm. His fingers closed and unclosed, with a mechanical and rhythmical movement, round a china figure. The motion looked as if it were made in obedience to some fiercely monotonous music.

“Yes, more—I knew it.”

Sergius nodded.

“I see,” he said.

Anthony touched his arm, almost with an awe-struck gesture.

“I knew then that you—that you intended to kill Vernon. And—God forgive me!—at first I was almost glad.”

“Well—go on!”

Anthony shivered. The voice of Sergius was so strangely calm and level.

"I—I—" he stammered. "Serge, why do you look at me like that?"

Sergius looked away without a word.

"For I, too, hated Vernon, more for what he had done to you even than for what he had done to Olga. But, Sergius, after you had gone, in the night, and in the dawn too, I kept on thinking of it over and over. I couldn't get away from it—that you were going to commit such an awful crime. I never slept. When at last it was morning, I went down to my district; there are criminals there, you know." [261]

"I know."

"I looked at them with new eyes, and in their eyes I saw you, always you; and then I said to myself could I bear that you should become a criminal?"

"You said that?"

The fingers of Sergius closed over the china figure, and did not unclose.

"Yes. I almost resolved then to go to Vernon at once and to tell him what I suspected—what I really knew."

The clock struck eleven. Anthony heard it; Sergius did not hear it.

"Then I went to sit with that wretched woman. Already I had resolved, as I believed, on the course to take. I had no thought for Vernon yet, only for you. It seemed to me that I did not care in the least to save him from death. I only cared to save you—my friend—from murder. But when the woman died I felt differently. My resolve was strengthened, my desire was just doubled. I had to save not only you, but also him. He was not ready to die."

Anthony trembled with a passion of emotion. Sergius remained always perfectly calm, the china figure prisoned in his hand. [262]

"So—so I went to him, Sergius."

"Yes."

"I saw him. Almost as I entered he received your letter, saying that you forgave him, that you would call to-night after eight o'clock to tell him so, and to urge on his marriage with Olga. When he had read the letter—I interpreted it to him; and then I found out that he was a coward. His terror was abject—despicable; he implored my help; he started at every sound."

"To-night he'll sleep quietly, Anthony."

"To-night he has gone. Before morning he will be on the sea."

The sound of the wind came to them again, and Sergius understood why Anthony had said: "Rough at sea to-night."

Suddenly Sergius moved; he unclosed his fingers: the ruins of the china figure fell from them in a dust of blue and white upon the mantelpiece.

"No—it's too late, Sergius. He went at eleven."

Sergius stood quite still.

"You came here to-night to keep me here till he had gone?"

"Yes."

"That's why you—"

He stopped.

"That's why I came. That's why I broke my pledge. I thought wine—any weapon to keep you from this crime. And, Sergius, think. Vernon dead could never have restored Olga to the place she has lost. That, too, must have driven me to the right course, though I scarcely thought of it till now." [263]

Sergius said, as if in reply: "So you have understood me!"

"Yes, Sergius. Friendship is something. Let us thank God, not even that he is safe, but that you—you are safe—and that Olga—"

"Hush! Has she gone with him?"

"She will meet him. He has sworn to marry her."

The hand of Sergius moved to his left breast. Anthony's glowing eyes were fixed upon him.

"Ah, yes, Sergius," Anthony cried. "Put that cursed, cursed thing down, put it away. Now it can never wreck your life and my peace."

Sergius drew out the revolver slowly and carefully. Again the mist rose around him. But it was no longer white; it was scarlet.

There was a report. Anthony fell, without a word, a cry.

Then Sergius bent down, and listened to the silence of his friend's heart—the long silence of the man who intervened.

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AFTER TO-MORROW

I

IN his gilded cage, above the window-boxes that were full of white daisies, the canary chirped with a desultory vivacity. That was the only near sound that broke the silence in the drawing-room of No. 100 Mill Street, Knightsbridge, in which a man and a woman stood facing one another. Away, beyond his twittering voice, sang in the London streets the muffled voice of the season. The time was late afternoon, and rays of mellow light slanted into the pretty room, and touched its crowd of inanimate occupants with a radiance in which the motes danced merrily. The china faces of two goblins on the mantelpiece glowed with a grotesque meaning, and their yellow smiles seemed to call aloud on mirth; but the faces of the man and woman were pale, and their lips trembled, and did not smile.

She was tall, dark, and passionate-looking, perhaps twenty-eight or thirty. He was a few years older, a man so steadfast in expression that silly people, who spring at exaggeration as saints spring at heaven, called him stern, and even said he looked forbidding—at balls.

At last the song of the canary was broken upon by a voice. Sir Hugh Maine spoke, very quietly. [268]
“Why not?” he said.

“I don't think I can tell you,” Mrs. Glinn answered, with an obvious effort.

“You prefer to refuse me without giving a reason?”

“I have a right to,” she said.

“I don't question it. You cannot expect me to say more than that.”

He took up his hat, which lay on a chair, and smoothed it mechanically with his coat-sleeve.

The action seemed to pierce her like a knife, for she started, and half-extended her hand. “Don't!” she exclaimed. “At least, wait one moment. So you belong to the second class of men.”

“What do you mean?”

“Men are divided into two classes—those who refuse to be refused, and those who accept. But don't be too—too swift in your acceptance. After all, a refusal is not exactly a bank-note.”

She tried to smile.

“But I am exactly a beggar,” he answered, still keeping the hat in his hand. “And if you have nothing to give me, I may as well go.”

“And spend the rest of your life in sweeping the old crossing?”

“And spend the rest of my life as I can,” he said. “That need not concern you.”

“A woman must be all to a man, or nothing?”

[269]

“You must be all to me, or nothing.”

She sat down in an arm-chair in that part of the room that was in shadow. She always sat instinctively in shadow when she wanted to think.

“Well?” Sir Hugh said. “What are you thinking?”

She glanced up at him. “That you don't look much like a beggar,” she said.

“It is possible to feel tattered in a frock-coat and patent-leather boots,” he answered. “Good-bye. I am going back to my crossing.” And he moved towards the door.

“No, stop!” she exclaimed. “Before you go, tell me one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Will you ever ask me to marry you again?”

He looked hard into her eyes. “I shall always want to, but I shall never do it,” he said slowly.

“I am glad you have told me that. We women depend so much on a repetition of the offence, when we blame a man for saying he loves us, and ask him not to do it again. If you really mean only to propose once, I must reconsider my position.”

She was laughing, but the tears stood in her eyes.

"Why do you want to make this moment a farcical one?" he asked rather bitterly.

"Oh, Hugh!" she answered, "don't you see? Because it is really—really so tragic. I only try to do for this moment what we all try to do for life." [270]

"Then you love me?" he said, moving a step forward.

"I never denied that," she replied. "I might as well deny that I am a woman."

He held out his arms. "Eve—then I shall never go back to the crossing."

But she drew back. "Go—go there till to-morrow! To-morrow afternoon I will see you; and if you love me after that—"

"Yes?"

She turned away and pressed the bell. "Good-bye," she said. Her voice sounded strange to him.

He came nearer, and touched her hand; but she drew it away.

"You may kiss me," she said.

"Eve!"

"After to-morrow."

The footman came in answer to the bell. Mrs Glinn did not turn round. "I only rang for you to open the door for Sir Hugh," she said. "Good-bye then, Sir Hugh. Come at five."

"I will," he answered, wondering.

When he had gone, Mrs Glinn sat down in a chair and took up a French novel. It was by Gyp. She tried to read it, with tears running over her cheeks. But at last she laid it down.

"After to-morrow," she murmured. "Ah, why—why does a woman ever love twice?" And then she sobbed. [271]

But the canary sang, and the notes danced merrily in the sunbeams. And on the table where she had put it down lay "*Le Mariage de Chiffon*."

II

That evening, when Sir Hugh Maine came back to his rooms in Jermyn Street after dining out, he found a large man sprawling in one of his saddle-back chairs, puffing vigorously at a pipe that looked worn with long and faithful service. The man took the pipe out of his mouth and sprang up.

"Hullo, Maine!" he cried. "D'you recognise the tobacco and me?"

Hugh grasped his hand warmly. "Rather," he said. "Neither is changed. At least—h'm—I think you both seem a bit stronger even than usual. Who would have thought of seeing you, Manning? I did not know you were in Europe."

"I came from Asia. I thought I should like to hear Melba before the end of the season. And it was getting sultry out there. So here I am."

"And were those your only reasons?"

"Give me a brandy-and-soda," said the other.

Maine did as he was bid, lit a cigar, and sat down, stretching out his long legs. The other man took a pull at his glass, and spoke again. [272]

"I am very fond of music," he said; "and Melba sings very well."

"Ah!"

"Look here, Maine," Manning broke out suddenly, "you are right—I had another reason. Kipling says that those who have heard the East a-calling never heed any other voice. He's wrong though. The West has been calling me, or, at least, a voice in the West, and I have resisted it for a deuce of a time. But at last it became imperative."

"A woman's voice, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what is its *timbre*, if you care to."

"I will. You're an old friend, and I can talk to you. But you tell me one thing first: Is a man really a fool to marry a woman with a past?"

"You are going to?"

"I have tried not to. I have been trying not to for three years. Listen! When I was travelling in Japan I met her. She was with an American called Glinn."

"What?"

"You knew him?"

"No! It's all right. I was surprised, because at the moment I was thinking of that very name."

"Oh! Well, she passed as Mrs Glinn; but, somehow, it got out that she was something else. The usual story, you know. People fought shy of her; but I don't think she cared much. Glinn was devoted to her, and she loved him, and was as true to him as any wife could have been. Then the tragedy came."

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"What was it?"

"Glinn died suddenly in Tokio, of typhoid. She nursed him to the end. And when the end came her situation was awful, so lonely and deserted. There wasn't a woman in the hotel who would be her friend; so I tried to come to the rescue, arranged her affairs, saw about the funeral, and did what I could. She was well off; Glinn left her nearly all his money. He would have married her, only he had a wife alive somewhere."

"And you fell in love with her, of course?"

"That was the sort of thing. If you knew her you would not wonder at it. She was not a bad woman. Glinn had been the only one. She loved him too much; that was all. She came to Europe, and lived in Paris for a time, keeping the name of Mrs Glinn. I used to see her sometimes, but I never said anything. You see, there was her past. In fact, I have been fighting against her for three years. I went to India to get cured; but it was no good. And now, here I am."

"And she is in Paris?"

"No, in London at present; but I didn't know her address till to-day. I think she had her doubts of me, and meant to give me the slip."

"How did you find it out?"

[274]

"Quite by chance. I was walking in Mill Street, Knightsbridge, and saw her pass in a victoria."

Maine got up suddenly, and went over to the spirit-stand. "In Mill Street?" he said.

"Yes. The carriage stopped at No. 100. She went in. A footman came out and carried in her rug. *Ergo*, she lives there."

"How hot it is!" said Maine in a hard voice. He threw up one of the windows and leaned out. He felt as if he were choking. A little way down the street a half-tipsy guardsman was reeling along, singing his own private version of "Tommy Atkins." He narrowly avoided a lamp-post by an abrupt lurch which took him into the gutter. Maine heard some one laugh. It was himself.

"Well, old chap," said Manning, who had come up behind him, "what would you advise me to do? I'm in a fix. I'm in love with Eve—that's her name; I can't live without her happily, and yet I hate to marry a woman with a—well, you know how it is."

Maine drew himself back into the room and faced round. "Does she love you?" he asked; and there was a curious change in his manner towards his friend.

"I don't know that she does," Manning said, rather uncomfortably. "But that would come right. She would marry me, naturally."

"Why?"

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"Well, I mean the position. Lady Herbert Manning could go where Mrs Glinn could not, and all that sort of thing."

"The only question is whether you can bring yourself to ask her?"

"My dear chap, you don't put it too pleasantly."

"It's the fact, though."

Lord Herbert hesitated. Then he said dubiously, "I suppose so."

Maine lit another cigar and sat down again. His face was very white. "You're rather conventional, Manning," he said presently.

"Conventional! Why?"

"You think her—this Mrs Glinn—a good woman. Isn't that enough for you?"

"But, besides Eve and myself, there is a third person in the situation."

"How on earth did you find out that?" exclaimed Maine.

The other looked surprised. "How did I find out? I don't understand you."

Maine recollected himself. He had made the common mistake of fancying another might know a

thing because he knew it.

"Who is this third person?" he asked.

"Society."

"Ah! I said you were conventional."

"Every sensible man and woman is."

"I don't know that I agree. But the third person does certainly complicate the situation. What are you going to do then?" [276]

Lord Herbert put down his pipe. It was not smoked out. "That's what I want to know," he answered.

"Of course, there's the one way—of being unconventional. Then, there's the way of being conventional but unhappy. Is there any alternative?"

Lord Herbert hesitated obviously, but at length he said: "There is, of course; but Mrs Glinn is a curious sort of woman. I don't quite know—"

He paused, looking at his friend. Maine's face was drawn and fierce.

"What's the row?" Lord Herbert asked.

"Nothing; only I shouldn't advise you to try the alternative. That's all."

"Maine, what do you mean?"

"Just this," replied the other. "That I know Mrs Glinn, that I agree with you about her character —"

"You know her? That's odd!"

"I have known her for a year."

They looked each other in the eyes while a minute passed. Then Lord Herbert said slowly, "I understand."

"What?"

"That I have come to the wrong man for advice."

There was a silence, broken only by the ticking of a clock and the uneasy movements of Maine's fox-terrier, which was lying before the empty grate and dreaming of departed fires. [277]

At last Maine said: "To-day I asked Mrs Glinn to marry me."

The other started perceptibly. "Knowing what I have told you?" he asked.

"Not knowing it."

"What—what did she say?"

"Nothing. I am to see her to-morrow."

Lord Herbert glanced at him furtively. "I suppose you will not go—now?" he said.

"Yes, Manning, I shall," Maine answered.

"Well," the other man continued, looking at his watch and yawning, "I must be going. It's late. Glad to have seen you, Maine. I am to be found at 80 St James's Place. Thanks; yes I will have my coat on. My pipe—oh! here it is. Good-night."

The door closed, and Maine was left alone.

"Will she tell me to-morrow, or will she be silent?" he said to himself. "That depends on one thing: Has love of truth the largest half of her heart, or love of me?"

He sighed—at the conventionality of the world, perhaps.

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III

"I am not at home to any one except Sir Hugh Maine," Mrs Glinn said to the footman. "You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He went out softly and closed the door.

The English summer had gone back upon its steps that afternoon, and remembered the duty it owed to its old-time reputation. The canary, a puffed-out ball of ragged-looking feathers in its cage, seemed listening with a depressed attention to the beat of the cold rain against the window. The daisies, in their boxes, dripped and nodded in the wind. There was a darkness in the

pretty room, and the smile of the china goblins was no longer yellow. Like many people who are not made of china, they depended upon adventitious circumstances for much of their outward show. When they were not gilded there was a good deal of the pill apparent in their nature.

Mrs Glinn was trying not to be restless. She was very pale, and her dark eyes gleamed with an almost tragic fire; but she sat down firmly on the white sofa, and read Gyp, as Carmen may have read her doom in the cards. One by one the pages were turned. One by one the epigrams were made the property of another mind. But through all the lightness and humour of the story there crept like a little snake a sentence that Gyp had not written:—

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“Can I tell him?”

And no answer ever came to that question. When the door-bell at last rang, Mrs Glinn laid down her novel carefully, and mechanically stood up. A change of attitude was necessary to her.

Sir Hugh came in, and was followed by tea. They sat down by the tiny table, and discussed French literature. Flaubert and Daudet go as well with tea as Fielding and Smollett go with supper.

But, when the cups were put down, Maine drove the French authors in a pack out of the conversation.

“I did not come here to say what I can say to every woman I meet who understands French,” he remarked.

And then Mrs Glinn was fully face to face with her particular guardian devil.

“No?” she said.

She did not try to postpone the moment she dreaded. For she had a strong man to deal with, and, being a strong woman at heart, she generally held out her hand to the inevitable.

“You have been thinking?” Maine went on.

“Yes. What a sad occupation that is sometimes—like knitting, or listening to church-bells at night!”

“Eve, let us be serious.”

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“God knows I am,” she answered. “But modern gravity is dressed in flippancy. No feeling must go quite naked.”

“Don't talk like that,” he said. “As there is a nudity in art that may be beautiful, so there is a nudity in expression, in words, that may be beautiful. Eve, I have come to hear you tell me something. You know that.” He glanced into her face with an anxiety that she did not fully understand. Then he said: “Tell it me.”

“There is—is so much to tell,” she said.

“Yes, yes.”

“He does not understand,” she thought.

He thought, “She does not understand.”

“And I am not good at telling stories.”

“Then tell me the truth.”

She tried to smile, but she was trembling. “Of course. Why should I not?” She hesitated, and then added, with a forced attempt at petulance, “But there is nothing so awkward as giving people more than they expect. Is there?”

He understood her question, despite its apparent inconsequence, and his heart quickened its beating: “Give me everything.”

“I suppose I should be doing that if I gave you myself,” she said nervously.

“You know best,” he answered; and for a moment she was puzzled by not catching the affirmative for which she had angled.

“Do you want me very, very much?” she asked.

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“So much that, as I told you yesterday, I could not ask for you twice. Don't you understand?”

“Yes. I could not marry a man who had bothered me to be his wife. One might as well be scolded into virtue. You want me, then, Hugh, and I want you. But—”

Again she stopped, with sentences fluttering, as it seemed, on the very edges of her lips. Her heart was at such fearful odds with her conscience, that she felt as if he must hear the clashing of the swords. And he did hear it. He would fain have cheered on both the combatants. Which did he wish should be the conqueror? He hardly knew.

“Yes?” he said.

“It is always so difficult to finish a sentence that begins with ‘but,’” she began; and for the first

time her voice sounded tremulous. "When two people want each other very much, there is always something that ought to keep them apart—at least, I think so. God must love solitude; it is His gift to so many." There were tears in her eyes.

"Why should we keep apart, Eve?"

"Because we should be too happy together, I suppose."

He leaned suddenly forward and took both her hands in his. "How cold you are!" he said, startled.

The words seemed to brace her like a sea-breeze.

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"Hugh," she said, "I wish to tell you something. There is a 'but' in the sentence of my life."

He drew her closer to him, with a strange impulse to be nearer the soul that was about to prove itself as noble as he desired. But that very act prevented the fulfilment of his wish. The touch of his hands, the eagerness of his eyes, gave the victory to her heart. She shut the lips that were speaking, and he kissed them. Kisses act as an opiate on a woman's conscience. Only when Eve felt his lips on hers did she know her own weakness. Sir Hugh having kissed her, waited for the telling of the secret. At that moment he might as well have sat down and waited for the millennium.

"What is it?" he said at last.

"Nothing," she answered, "nothing." She spoke the word with a hard intonation.

Hugh held her close in his arms, with a sort of strange idea that to do so would crush his disappointment. She was proving her love by her silence. Why, then, did he wish that she should speak? At last she said, in a low voice:—

"There is one thing you ought to know. If I marry you, I marry you a beggar. I shall lose my fortune. I am not obliged to lose it, but I mean to give it up. Don't ask me why."

He had no need to. He waited, but she was silent. So that was all. He kissed her again, loosened his arms from about her and stood up.

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"I have enough for both," he said.

He did not look at her, and she could not look at him.

"Are you going?" she said.

"Yes; but I will call this evening."

He was at the door, and had half-opened it when he turned back, moved by a passionate impulse.

"Eve!" he cried, and his eyes seemed asking her for something.

"Yes?" she said, looking away.

There was a silence. Then he said "Good-bye!" The door closed upon him.

Mrs Glinn stood for a moment where he had left her. In her mind she was counting the seconds that must elapse before he could reach the street. If she could be untrue to herself till then, she could be untrue to herself for ever. Would he walk down the stairs slowly or fast? She wanted to be a false woman so much, so very much, that she clenched her hands together. The action seemed as if it might help her to keep on doing wrong. But suddenly she unclasped her hands, darted across the room to the door, and opened it. She listened, and heard Hugh's footsteps in the hall. He picked up his umbrella, and unfolded it to be ready for the rain. The *frou-frou* of the silk seemed to stir her to action.

"Hugh!" she cried in a broken voice.

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He turned in the hall, and looked up.

"Come back," she said.

He came up the stairs three steps at a time.

"Hugh," she said, leaning heavily on the balustrade, and looking away, "I have a secret to tell you. I have tried to be wicked to-day, but somehow I can't. Listen to the truth."

"I need not," he answered. "I know it already."

Then she looked at him, and drew in her breath: "You know it?"

"Yes."

"How you must love me!"

There was a ring at the hall door. The footman opened it, held a short parley with some one who was invisible, shut the door, and came upstairs with a card.

Mrs Glinn took it, and read, "Lord Herbert Manning."

He had decided to be unconventional too late.

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A SILENT GUARDIAN

I

THE door of the long, dreary room, with its mahogany chairs, its littered table, its motley crew of pale, silent people, opened noiselessly. A dreary, lean footman appeared in the aperture, bowing towards a corner where, in a recess near a forlorn, lofty window, sat a tall, athletic-looking man of about forty-five years of age, with a strong yet refined face, clean shaven, and short, crisp, dark hair. The tall man rose immediately, laying down an old number of *Punch*, and made his way out, watched rather wolfishly by the other occupants of the room. The door closed upon him, and there was a slight rustle and a hiss of whispering.

Two well-dressed women leaned to one another, the feathers in their hats almost mingling as they murmured: "Not much the matter with him, I should fancy."

"He looks as strong as a horse; but modern men are always imagining themselves ill. He has lived too much, probably."

They laughed in a suppressed ripple.

At the end of the room near the door, under the big picture of a grave man in a frock-coat, holding a double eye-glass tentatively in his right hand as if to emphasise an argument—a young girl bent towards her father, who said to her in a low voice: [288]

"That man who has just left the room is Brune, the great sculptor."

"Is he ill?" the girl asked.

"It seems so, since he is here."

Then a silence fell again, broken only by the rustle of turned pages and the occasional uneasy shifting of feet.

Meanwhile, in a small room across the hall, by a window through which the autumn sun streamed with a tepid brightness, Reginald Brune lay on a narrow sofa. His coat and waistcoat were thrown open; his chest was bared. Gerard Fane, the great discoverer of hidden diseases, raised himself from a bent posture, and spoke some words in a clear, even voice.

Brune lifted himself half up on his elbow, and began mechanically to button the collar of his shirt. His long fingers did not tremble, though his face was very pale.

He fastened the collar, arranged his loose tie, and then sat up slowly.

A boy, clanking two shining milk-cans, passed along the pavement, whistling a music-hall song. The shrill melody died down the street, and Brune listened to it until there was a silence. Then he looked up at the man opposite to him, and said, as one dully protesting, without feeling, without excitement:— [289]

"But, doctor, I was only married three weeks ago."

Gerard Fane gave a short upward jerk of the head, and said nothing. His face was calmly grave. His glittering brown eyes were fastened on his patient. His hands were loosely folded together.

Brune repeated, in a slightly raised voice:—

"I was married three weeks ago. It cannot be true."

"I am here to tell the truth," the other replied.

"But it is so—so ironic. To allow me to start a new life—a beautiful life—just as the night is coming. Why, it is diabolical; it is not just; the cruelty of it is fiendish."

A spot of gleaming red stained each of the speaker's thin cheeks. He clenched his hands together, riveting his gaze on the doctor, as he went on:—

"Can't you see what I mean? I had no idea—I had not the faintest suspicion of what you say. And I have had a very hard struggle. I have been poor and quite friendless. I have had to fight, and I have lost much of the good in my nature by fighting, as we often do. But at last I have won the battle, and I have won more. I have won goodness to give me back some of my illusions. I had [290]

begun to trust life again. I had—”

He stopped abruptly. Then he said:—

“Doctor, are you married?”

“No,” the other answered; and there was a note of pity in his voice.

“Then you can't understand what your verdict means to me. Is it irrevocable?”

Gerard Fane hesitated.

“I wish I could hope not; but—”

“But—?”

“It is.”

Brune stood up. His face was quite calm now and his voice, when he spoke again, was firm and vibrating.

“I have some work that I should wish to finish. How long can you give me?”

“Three months.”

“One will do if my strength keeps up at all. Good-bye.”

There was a thin chink of coins grating one against the other. The specialist said:—

“I will call on you to-morrow, between four and five. I have more directions to give you. To-day my time is so much taken up. Good-bye.”

The door closed.

In the waiting-room, a moment later, Brune was gathering up his coat and hat.

The two ladies eyed him curiously as he took them and passed out.

“He does look a little pale, after all,” whispered one of them. A moment later he was in the street. [291]

From the window of his consulting-room, Gerard Fane watched the tall figure striding down the pavement.

“I am sorry that man is going to die,” he said to himself.

And then he turned gravely to greet a new patient.

II

Gerard Fane's victoria drew up at the iron gate of No. 5 Ilbury Road, Kensington, at a quarter past four the following afternoon. A narrow strip of garden divided the sculptor's big red house from the road. Ornamental ironwork on a brick foundation closed it in. The great studio, with its huge windows and its fluted pillars, was built out at one end. The failing sunlight glittered on its glass, and the dingy sparrows perched upon the roof to catch the parting radiance as the twilight fell. The doctor glanced round him and thought, “How hard this man must have worked! In London this is a little palace.”

“Will you come into the studio, sir, please?” said the footman in answer to his summons. “Mr Brune is there at present.”

“Surely he cannot be working,” thought the doctor, as he followed the man down a glass-covered paved passage, and through a high doorway across which a heavy curtain fell. “If so, he must possess resolution almost more than mortal.” [292]

He passed beyond the curtain, and looked round him curiously.

The studio was only dimly lit now, for daylight was fast fading. On a great open hearth, with dogs, a log-fire was burning; and beside it, on an old-fashioned oaken settle, sat a woman in a loose cream-coloured tea-gown. She was half turning round to speak to Reginald Brune, who stood a little to her left, clad in a long blouse, fastened round his waist with a band. He had evidently recently finished working, for his hands still bore evident traces of labour, and in front of him, on a raised platform, stood a statue that was not far from completion. The doctor's eyes were attracted from the woman by the log-fire, from his patient, by the lifeless, white, nude figure that seemed to press forward out of the gathering gloom. The sculptor and his wife had not heard him announced, apparently, for they continued conversing in low tones, and he paused in the doorway, strangely fascinated—he could scarcely tell why—by the marble creation of a dying man.

The statue, which was life size, represented the figure of a beautiful, grave youth, standing with one foot advanced, as if on the point of stepping forward. His muscular arms hung loosely; his head was slightly turned aside as in the attitude of one who listens for a repetition of some vague sound heard at a distance. His whole pose suggested an alert, yet restrained, watchfulness. The [293]

triumph of the sculptor lay in the extraordinary suggestion of life he had conveyed into the marble. His creature lived as many mollusc men never live. Its muscles seemed tense, its body quivering with eagerness to accomplish—what? To attack, to repel, to protect, to perform some deed demanding manfulness, energy, free, fearless strength.

“That marble thing could slay if necessary,” thought Gerard Fane, with a thrill of the nerves all through him that startled him, and recalled him to himself.

He stepped forward to the hearth quietly, and Brune turned and took him by the hand.

“I did not hear you,” the sculptor said. “The man must have opened the door very gently. Sydney, this is Dr Gerard Fane, who is kindly looking after me.”

The woman by the fire had risen, and stood in the firelight and the twilight, which seemed to join hands just where she was. She greeted the specialist in a girl's young voice, and he glanced at her with the furtive thought, “Does she know yet?”

She looked twenty-two, not more.

Her eyes were dark grey, and her hair was bronze. Her figure was thin almost to emaciation; but health glowed in her smooth cheeks, and spoke in her swift movements and easy gestures. Her expression was responsive and devouringly eager. Life ran in her veins with turbulence, never with calm. Her mouth was pathetic and sensitive, but there was an odd suggestion of almost boyish humour in her smile. [294]

Before she smiled, Fane thought, “She knows.”

Afterwards, “She cannot know.”

“Have you a few moments to spare?” Brune asked him. “Will you have tea with us?”

Fane looked at Mrs Brune and assented. He felt a strange interest in this man and this woman. The tragedy of their situation appealed to him, although he lived in a measure by foretelling tragedies. Mrs Brune touched an electric bell let into the oak-panelled wall, and her husband drew a big chair forward to the hearth.

As he was about to sit down in it, Gerard Fane's eyes were again irresistibly drawn towards the statue; and a curious fancy, born, doubtless, of the twilight that invents spectres and of the firelight that evokes imaginations, came to him, and made him for a moment hold his breath.

It seemed to him that the white face menaced him, that the white body had a soul, and that the soul cried out against him.

His hand trembled on the back of the chair. Then he laughed to himself at the absurd fancy, and sat down.

“Your husband has been working?” he said to Mrs Brune. [295]

“Yes, all the day. I could not tempt him out for even five minutes. But then, he has had a holiday, as he says, although it was only a fortnight. That was not very long for—for a honeymoon.”

As she said the last sentence she blushed a little, and shot a swift, half-tender, half-reproachful glance at her husband. But he did not meet it; he only looked into the fire, while his brows slightly contracted.

“I think Art owns more than half his soul,” the girl said, with the flash of a smile. “He only gives to me the fortnights and to Art the years.”

There was a vague jealousy in her voice; but then the footman brought in tea, and she poured it out, talking gaily.

From her conversation, Fane gathered that she had no idea of her husband's condition. With a curious and fascinating naturalness she spoke of her marriage, of her intentions for the long future.

“If Reginald is really seedy, Dr Fane,” she said, “get him well quickly, that he may complete his commissions. Because, you know, he has promised, when they are finished, to take me to Italy, and to Greece, to the country of Phidias, whose mantle has fallen upon my husband.”

“Do not force Dr Fane into untruth,” said Brune, with an attempt at a smile.

“And is that statue a commission?” Fane asked, indicating the marble figure, that seemed to watch them and to listen. [296]

“No; that is an imaginative work on which I have long been engaged. I call it, ‘A Silent Guardian.’”

“It is very beautiful,” the doctor said. “What is your idea exactly? What is the figure guarding?”

Brune and his wife glanced at one another—he gravely, she with a confident smile.

Then he said, “I leave that to the imagination.”

Dr Fane looked again at the statue, and said slowly, “You have wrought it so finely that in this light my nerves tell me it is alive.”

Mrs Brune looked triumphant.

"All the world would feel so if they could see it," she said; "but it is not to be exhibited. That is our fancy—his and mine. And now I will leave you together for a few minutes. Heal him of his ills, Dr Fane, won't you?"

She vanished through the door at the end of the studio. The two men stood together by the hearth.

"She does not know?" Fane asked.

The other leaned his head upon his hand, which was pressed against the oak mantelpiece.

"I am too cowardly to tell her," he said in a choked voice. "You must."

"And when?"

"To-day."

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There was a silence. Then, in his gravest professional manner, Fane gave some directions, and wrote others down, while the sculptor looked into the dancing fire. When Fane had finished:—

"Shall I tell her now?" he asked gently.

Brune nodded without speaking. His face looked drawn and contorted as he moved towards the door. His emotion almost strangled him, and the effort to remain calm put a strain upon him that was terrible.

Gerard Fane was left alone for a moment—alone with the statue whose personality, it seemed to him, pervaded the great studio. In its attitude there was a meaning, in its ghost-like face and blind eyes a resolution of intention, that took possession of his soul. He told himself that it was lifeless, inanimate, pulseless, bloodless marble; that it contained no heart to beat with love or hate, no soul to burn with impulse or with agony; that its feet could never walk, its hands never seize or slay, its lips never utter sounds of joy or menace. Then he looked at it again, and he shuddered.

"I am over-working," he said to himself; "my nerves are beginning to play me tricks. I must be careful."

And he forcibly turned his thoughts from the marble that could never feel to the man and woman so tragically circumstanced, and to his relation towards them.

A doctor is so swiftly plunged into intimacy with strangers. To the sculptor it was as if Fane held the keys of the gates of life and death for him; as if, during that quarter of an hour in the consulting-room, the doctor had decided, almost of his own volition, that death should cut short a life of work and of love. And even to Fane himself it seemed as if his fiat had precipitated, even brought about, a tragedy that appealed to his imagination with peculiar force. His position towards this curiously interesting girl was strange. He had seen her for a quarter of an hour only, and now it was his mission to cause her the most weary pain that she might, perhaps, ever know. The opening of the studio door startled him, and his heart, that usually beat so calmly, throbbed almost with violence as Mrs Brune came up to him.

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"What is it?" she asked, facing him, and looking him full in the eyes with a violence of interrogation that was positively startling. "What is it you have to tell me? Reginald says you have ordered him to keep quiet—that you wish me to help you in—in something. Is he ill? May he not finish his commissions?"

"He is ill," said Gerard Fane, with a straightforward frankness that surprised himself.

She kept her eyes on his face.

"Very ill?"

"Sit down," the doctor said, taking her hands and gently putting her into a chair.

With the rapidity of intellect peculiar to women, she heard in those two words the whole truth. Her head drooped forward. She put out her hands as if to implore Fane's silence.

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"Don't speak," she murmured. "Don't say it; I know."

He looked away. His eyes rested on the statue that made a silent third in their sad conference. How its attitude suggested that of a stealthy listener, bending to hear the more distinctly! Its expressionless eyes met his, and was there not a light in them? He knew there was not, yet he caught himself saying mentally:—

"What does he think of this?" and wondering about the workings of a soul that did not, could not, exist.

Presently the girl moved slightly, and said:—

"He only knew this for certain yesterday?"

"Only yesterday."

"Ah! but he must have suspected it long ago,"—she pointed towards the statue—"when he began that."

"I don't understand," Fane said. "What can that marble have to do with his health or illness?"

"When we first began to love each other," she said, "he began to work on that. It was to be his marriage gift to me, my guardian angel. He told me he would put all his soul into it, and that sometimes he fancied, if he died before me, his soul would really enter into that statue and watch over and guard me. 'A Silent Guardian' he has always called it. He must have known."

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"I do not think so," Fane said. "It was impossible he should."

The girl stood up. The tears were running over her face now. She turned towards the statue.

"And he will be cold—cold like that!" she cried in a heart-breaking voice. "His eyes will be blind and his hands nerveless, and his voice silent."

She suddenly swayed and fainted into Fane's arms. He held her a moment; and when he laid her down, a reluctance to let the slim form, lifeless though it was, slip out of his grasp, came upon him. He remembered the previous day, the doomed man going down the street—his thought as he looked from the window of his consulting-room, "I am sorry that man is going to die."

Now, as he leant over the white girl, he whispered, forming the very words with his lips, "I am not sorry."

And the statue seemed to bend and to listen.

III

Six weeks passed away. Winter was deepening. Through the gloom and fog that shrouded London, Christmas approached, wrapped in seasonable snow. The dying man had finished his work, and a strange peace stole over him. Now, when he suffered, when his body shivered and tried to shrink away, as if it felt the cold hands of death laid upon it, he looked at the completed statue, and found he could still feel joy. There had always been in his highly-strung, sensitive nature an element, so fantastic that he had ever striven to conceal it, of romance; and in his mind, affected by constant pain, by many sleepless nights, grew the curious idea that his life, as it ebbed away from him, entered into his creation. As he became feeble, he imagined that the man he had formed towered above him in more God-like strength, that light flowed into the sightless eyes, that the marble muscles were tense with vigour, that a soul was born in the thing which had been soulless. The theory, held by so many, of re-incarnation upon earth, took root in his mind, and he came to believe that, at the moment of death, he would pass into his work and live again, unconscious, it might be, of his former existence. He loved the statue as one might love a breathing man; but he seldom spoke of his fancies, even to Sydney.

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Only, he sometimes said to her, pointing to his work:—

"You will never be alone, unprotected, while he is there."

And she tried to smile through the tears she could not always keep back.

Gerard Fane was often with them. He sunk the specialist in the friend, and not a day passed without a visit from him to the great studio, in which the sculptor and his wife almost lived.

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He was unwearied in his attendance upon the sick man, unwavering in his attempts to soothe his sufferings. But, in reality, and almost against his will, the doctor numbered each breath his patient drew, noted with a furious eagerness each sign of failing vitality, bent his ear to catch every softest note in the prolonged *diminuendo* of this human symphony.

When Fane saw Mrs Brune leaning over her husband, touching the damp brow with her cool, soft fingers, or the dry, parched lips with her soft, rosy lips, he turned away in a sick fury, and said to himself:—

"He is dying, he is dying. It will soon be over."

For with a desperate love had entered into him a desperate jealousy, and even while he ministered to Brune he hated him.

And the statue, with blind eyes, observed the drama enacted by those three people, the two men and the woman, till the curtain fell and one of the actors made his final exit.

Fane's nerves still played him tricks sometimes. He could not look at the statue without a shudder; and while Brune imaginatively read into the marble face love and protection, the doctor saw there menace and hatred. He came to feel almost jealous of the statue, because Sydney loved it and fell in with her husband's fancy that his life was fast ebbing into and vitalising the marble limbs, that his soul would watch her from the eyes that were now without expression and thought.

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When Fane entered the studio, he always involuntarily cast a glance at the white figure—at first, a glance of shuddering distaste, then, as he acknowledged to himself his love for Sydney, a

glance of defiance, of challenge.

One evening, after a day of many appointments and much mental stress and strain, he drove up to Ilbury Road, was admitted, and shown as usual into the studio. He found it empty. Only the statue greeted him silently in the soft lamplight, that scarcely accomplished more than the defining of the gloom.

"My master is upstairs, sir," said the footman. "I will tell him you are here."

In a moment Sydney entered, with a lagging step and pale cheeks. Without thinking of the usual polite form of greeting, she said to Fane, "He is much worse to-day. There is a change in him, a horrible change. Dr Fane, just now when I was talking to him it seemed to me that he was a long way off. I caught hold of his hands to reassure myself. I held them. I heard him speaking, but it was as if his words came from a distance. What does it mean? He is not—he is not—"

She looked the word he could not speak.

Fane made her sit down.

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"I will go to him immediately," he said. "I may be able to do something."

"Yes, go—do go!" she exclaimed with feverish excitement.

Then suddenly she sprang up, and seizing his hands with hers, she said in a piercing voice: "You are a great doctor. Surely—surely you can keep this one life for me a little longer."

As they stood, Fane was facing the statue, which was at her back, and while she spoke his eyes were drawn from the woman he loved to the marble thing he senselessly hated. It struck him that a ghastly change had stolen over it. A sudden flicker of absolute life surely infused it, quickened it even while she spoke, stole through the limbs one by one, welled up to the eyes as light pierces from a depth, flowed through all the marble. A pulse beat in the dead, cold heart. A mind rippled into the rigid, watching face. There was no absolute movement, and yet there was the sense of stir. Fane, absorbed in horror, seemed to watch an act of creation, to see life poured from some invisible and unknown source into the bodily chamber that had been void and dark.

Motionless he saw the statue dead; motionless he saw the statue live.

He drew his hands from Sydney's. He was too powerfully impressed to speak, but she looked up into his face, turned, and followed his eyes.

She, too, observed the change, for her lips parted, and a wild amazement shone in her eyes. Then she touched Fane's arm, and whispered, rather in awe than in horror, "Go—go to him. See if anything has happened. I will stay and watch here."

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With a hushed tread Fane left the studio, passed through the hall, ascended the stairs to the sculptor's room. Outside the door he hesitated for a moment. He was trembling. He heard a clock ticking within. It sounded very loud, like a hammer beating in his ears. He pushed the door open at length, and entered. Brune's tall figure was sitting in an armchair, bowed over a table on which lay an open Art magazine.

His head lay hidden on his arms, which were crossed.

Fane raised the face and turned it up towards him.

It was the face of a dead man.

He looked at it, and smiled.

Then he stole down again to the studio, where Sydney was still standing.

"Yes?" she said interrogatively, as he entered.

"He is dead," Fane answered.

She only bowed her head, as if in assent. She stood a moment, then she turned her tearless eyes to him, and said:—

"Why could not you save him?"

"Because I am human," Fane answered.

"And we did not say good-bye," she said.

Fane was strung up. Conflicting feelings found a wild playground in his soul. His nerves were in a state of abnormal excitement, and something seemed to let go in him—the something that holds us back, normally, from mad follies. He suddenly caught Sydney's hand, and in a choked voice said:—

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"He is dead. Think a little of the living."

She looked at him, wondering.

"Think of the living that love you. He neither hates nor loves any more. Sydney! Sydney!"

As she understood his meaning she wrung her hand out of his, and said, as one trying to clear the

road for reason:—

“You love me, and he bought you to keep him alive. Why, then—”

A sick, white change came over her face.

“Sydney! Sydney!” he said.

“Why, then he bought death from you. Ah!”

She put her hand on the bell, and kept it there till the servant hurried in.

“Show Dr Fane out,” she said. “He will not come here again.”

And Fane, seeing the uselessness of protest, ready to strike himself for his folly, went without a word. Only, as he went, he cast one look at the statue. Was there not the flicker of a smile in its marble eyes?

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IV

People said Dr Gerard Fane was over-working, that he was not himself. His manner to patients was sometimes very strange, brusque, impatient, intolerant. A brutality stole over him, and impressed the world that went to him for healing very unfavourably. The ills of humanity rendered him now sarcastic instead of pitiful, a fatal attitude of mind for a physician to adopt; and he was even known to pronounce on sufferers sentence of death with a callous indifference that was inhuman as well as impolitic. As the weeks went by, his reception-room became less crowded than of old. There were even moments in his day when he had leisure to sit down and think, to give a rein to his mood of impotent misery and despair. Sydney had never consented to receive him again. Woman-like—for she could be extravagantly yet calmly unreasonable—she had clung to the idea that Fane had hastened, if not actually brought about, her husband's death by his treatment. She made no accusation. She simply closed her doors upon him. She had a horror of him, which never left her.

Again and again Fane called. She was always denied to him. Then he met her in the street. She cut him. He spoke to her. She passed on without a reply. At last a dull fury took possession of him. Her treatment of him was flagrantly unjust. He had wished the sculptor to die, but he had allowed nature to accomplish her designs unaided, even to some extent hampered and hindered by his medical skill and care. He loved Sydney with the violence of a man whose emotions had been sedulously repressed through youth, vanquished but not killed by ambition, and the need to work for the realisation of that ambition. The tumults of early manhood, never given fair play, now raged in his breast, from which they should have been long since expelled, and played havoc with every creed of sense, and every built-up theory of wisdom and experience. Fane became by degrees a monomaniac.

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He brooded incessantly over his developed but starved passion, over the thought that Sydney chose to believe him a murderer. At first, when he was trying day after day to see her, he clung to his love for her; but when he found her obdurate, set upon wronging him in her thought, his passion, verging towards despair, changed, and was coloured with hatred. By degrees he came to dwell more upon the injury done to him by her suspicion than upon his love of her, and then it was that a certain wildness crept into his manner, and alarmed or puzzled those who consulted him.

That his career was going to the dogs Fane understood, but he did not care. The vision of Sydney was always before him. He was for ever plotting and planning to be with her alone—against her will or not, it was nothing to him. And when he was alone with her, what then?

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He would know how to act.

It was just in the dawn of the spring season over London that further inaction became insupportable to him. One evening, after a day of listless inactivity spent in waiting for the patients who no longer came in crowds to his door, he put on his hat and walked from Mayfair to Kensington, vaguely, yet with intention. He looked calm, even absent; but he was a desperate man. All fear of what the world thinks or says, all consideration of outward circumstances and their relation to worldly happiness, had died within him. He was entirely abstracted and self-centred.

He reached the broad thoroughfare of Ilbury Road, with its line of artistic red houses, detached and standing in their gardens. The darkness was falling as he turned into it and began to walk up and down opposite the house with the big studio in which he was once a welcome visitor. There was a light in one of the bedroom windows and in the hall, and presently, as Fane watched, a brougham drove up to the door. It waited a few moments before the house, then some one entered the carriage. The door was banged; the horse moved on. Through the windows Fane saw a woman's face, pale, against the pane. It was the face of Sydney. For a moment he thought he would call to the coachman to stop. Then he restrained himself, and again walked up and down, waiting. She must return presently. He would speak to her as she was getting out of the carriage. He would force her to receive him.

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Towards nine o'clock his plans were altered by an event which took place. The house door

opened, and the footman came out with a handful of letters for the post. The pillar-box was very near, and the man carelessly left the hall door on the jar while he walked down the road. Fane caught a glimpse of the hall that he knew so well. A step, and he could be in the house. He hesitated. He looked down the road. The man had his back turned, and was putting the letters into the box. Fane slipped into the garden, up the steps, through the door. The hall was empty. At his right was the passage leading to the studio. He stole down it, and tried the door. It opened. In the darkness the heavy curtain blew against his face. In another instant he closed the door softly at his back, and stood alone in the wide space and the blackness. Here there was not a glimmer of light. Thick curtains fell over the windows. No fire burned upon the hearth. There was no sound except when a carriage occasionally rolled down the road, and even then the wheels sounded distant.

The silence and darkness had their effect upon Fane. He had done a desperate thing; but, until he found himself alone in the vacant studio, he had not fully realised the madness of his conduct, and how it would appear to the world. After the first moments of solitude had passed he came to himself a little, and half opened the door with the intention of stealing out; but he heard steps in the hall, and shrank back again like a guilty creature. He must wait, at least, until the household retired to rest. [311]

And, waiting, the old, haunting thoughts came back to assail him once more. He began to brood over Sydney's cruel treatment of him, over her vile suspicions. Here, in the atmosphere which he knew so well—for a faint, strange perfume always lingered about the studio, and gave to it the subtle sense of life which certain perfumes can impart—his emotions were gradually quickened to fury. He recalled the days of his intimacy with the sculptor, of his unrestrained converse with Sydney. He recalled his care for the invalid, persevered in, despite his passion, to the end. And then his thought fastened upon the statue, which, strange to say, he had almost forgotten.

The statue!

It must be there, with him, in the darkness, staring with those white eyes in which he had seen a soul flicker.

As the recollection of it came to him, he trembled, leaning against the wall.

He was in one of those states of acute mental tension in which the mind becomes so easily the prey of the wildest fantasies, and slowly, laboriously, he began to frame a connection between the lifeless marble creature and his own dreary trouble. [312]

Because of one moment of folly Sydney treated him as a pariah, as a criminal. Her gentle nature had been transformed suddenly.

By what subtle influence?

Fane remembered the day of his first visit to Ilbury Road, and his curious imagination that the statue recognised and hated him.

Had that hatred prompted action? Was there a devil lurking in the white, cold marble to work his ruin? When Sydney sent him out of her presence for ever, the watching face had seemed to smile.

Fane set his teeth in the darkness. He was no longer sane. He was possessed. The tragedy of thought within him invited him to the execution of another tragedy. He stretched out his hand with the rehearsing action of one meditating a blow.

His hand fell upon an oak table that stood against the wall, and hit on something smooth and cold. It was a long Oriental dagger that the dead sculptor had brought from the East. Fane's fingers closed on it mechanically. The frigid steel thrilled his hot palm, and a pulse in his forehead started beating till there was a dull, senseless music in his ears that irritated him.

He wanted to listen for the return of Sydney's carriage. [313]

His soul was ablaze with defiance. He was alone in the darkness with his enemy; the cold, deadly, blind, pulseless thing that yet was alive; the silent thing that had yet whispered malign accusations of him to the woman he loved; the nerveless thing that poisoned a beautiful mind against him, that stole the music from his harp of life and let loose the winds upon his summer.

His fingers closed more tightly, more feverishly upon the slippery steel.

Sydney actually thought, or strove to think, him a criminal. What if he should earn the title? A sound as of the sea beating was in his ears, and flashes of strange light seem to leap to his vision. What would a man worth the name do to his enemy?

And he and his enemy were shut up alone together.

He drew himself up straight and steadied himself against the wall, peering through the blackness in the direction of the statue.

And, as he did so, there seemed to steal into the atmosphere the breath of another living presence. He could fancy he heard the pulse of another heart beating near to his. The sensation increased upon him powerfully until suspicion grew into conviction.

His intention had subtly communicated itself to the thing he could not see.

He knew it was on guard.

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There was no actual sound, no movement, but the atmosphere became charged by degrees with a deadly, numbing cold, like the breath of frost in the air. A chill ran through Fane's blood. A sluggish terror began to steal over him, folding him for the moment in a strange inertia of mind and of body. A creeping paralysis crawled upon his senses, like the paralysis of nightmare that envelops the dreamer. He opened his lips to speak, but they chattered soundlessly. Mechanically his hand clutched the thin, sharp steel of the dagger.

His enemy—then Sydney.

He would not be a coward. He struggled against the horror that was upon him.

And still the cold increased, and the personality of Fane's invisible companion seemed to develop in power. There was a sort of silent violence in the hidden room, as if a noiseless combat were taking place. Waves of darkness were stirred into motion; and Fane, as a man is drawn by the retreating tides of the sea out and away, was drawn from the wall where he had been crouching.

He stole along the floor, the dagger held in his right hand, his heart barely beating, his lips white—nearer, nearer to his enemy.

He counted each step, until he was enfolded in the inmost circle of that deadly frost emanating from the blackness before him.

Then, with a hoarse cry, he lifted his arm and sprang forward and upward, dashing the dagger down as one plunging it through a human heart. [315]

The cry died suddenly into silence.

There was the sound of a heavy fall.

It reached the ears of the servants below stairs.

The footman took a light, and, with a scared face, went hesitatingly to the studio door, paused outside and listened while the female servants huddled in the passage.

The heavy silence succeeding the strange sound appalled them, but at length the man thrust the door open and peered in.

The light from the candle flickered merrily upon Fane's bowed figure, huddled face downwards upon the floor.

His neck was broken.

The statue, that was the dead sculptor's last earthly achievement, stood as if watching over him. But it was no longer perfect and complete.

Some splinters of marble had been struck from the left breast, and among them, on the smooth parquet, lay a bent Oriental dagger.

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A BOUDOIR BOY

I

"It is so impossible to be young," Claude Melville said very wearily, and with his little air of played-out indifference. He was smoking a cigarette, as always, and wore a dark red smoking-suit that, he thought, went excellently with his black eyes and swarthy complexion.

His father had been a blue-eyed Saxon giant, his mother a pretty Kentish woman, with an apple-blossom complexion and sunny hair; yet he managed to look exquisitely Turkish, and thought himself a clever boy for so doing. But then he always thought himself clever. He had cultivated this conception of himself until it had become a confirmed habit of mind. On his head was a fez with a tassel, and he was sitting upon the hearthrug with his long legs crossed meditatively. His room was dimly lit, and had an aspect of divans, Attar of roses scented the air. A fire was burning, although it was a spring evening and not cold. London roared faintly in the distance, like a lion at a far-away evening party.

"It is so impossible to be young," Claude repeated, without emphasis. "I was middle-aged at ten. Now I am twenty-two, and have done everything I ought not to have done, I feel that life has become altogether improbable. Even if I live until I am seventy—the correct age for entering into one's dotage, I believe—I cannot expect to have a second childhood. I have never had a first." [320]

He sighed. It seemed so hard to be deprived of one's legal dotage.

His friend, Jimmy Haddon, looked at him and laughed. Jimmy was puffing at a pipe. His pipe was

the only one Claude ever allowed to be smoked among his divans and his roses.

After thoroughly completing his laugh, Jimmy remarked:—

“Would you like to take a lesson in the art of being young?”

“Immensely.”

“I know somebody who could give you one.”

“Really, Jimmy! What strange people you always know; curates, and women who have never written improper novels, and all sorts of beings who seem merely mythical to the rest of us!”

“This is not a curate.”

“Then it must be a woman who has never written an improper novel.”

“It is.”

“And you mean to tell me seriously that there is such a person? To see her would be to take what *Punch* calls a pre-historic peep. She must be ingeniously old.”

“She is sixty-four, and she is my aunt.”

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“How beautiful of her. I am an only child, so I can never be an uncle. It is one of my lasting regrets, although I daresay that profession is terribly overcrowded like the others. But why is she sixty-four? It seems a risky thing for a woman to be?”

“She takes the risk without thinking at all about it.”

“She must be very daring.”

“No; she's only completely natural.”

“Natural. What is that?”

Jimmy laughed again. He was fond of Claude, but he and Claude met so often chiefly because they were extremes. Jimmy was a handsome athlete, who had been called to the bar, and persistently played cricket or football whenever the courts were sitting. He was cursed with a large private income, which he spent royally, and blessed with a good heart. Once he had appeared for the defence in a divorce case, which—lasting longer than he had anticipated, owing to the obvious guilt of all parties concerned in it, and the consequent difficulty of getting an innocent jury to agree about a verdict—had cost him a cricket match. Since then he had looked upon the law in the legendary way, as an ass, and spent most of his time in exercising his muscles. In the intervals of leisure which he allowed himself from sports and pastimes, he saw a good deal of Claude, who amused him, and whom he never bored. He called him a boudoir boy, but had a real liking for him, nevertheless, and sometimes longed to wake him up, and separate him from the absurd *chiffons* with which he occupied his time. Now he laughed at him openly, and Claude did not mind in the least. They were really friends, however preposterous such a friendship might seem.

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“What is that? Well—my aunt. When you see her you will understand thoroughly.”

“Does she live in Park Lane or in Clapham?”

“She lives in the country, in Northamptonshire, is very well off, and has a place of her own.”

“And a husband?”

“No. She is a prosperous spinster, dines the local cricket team once a year, keeps the church going, knows all the poor people, and all the rich in the neighbourhood, and has only one fad.”

“What is that?”

“She always wears her hair powdered. Come down and stay with her, and she will teach you to be young.”

“Well—but I am afraid she will work me very hard.”

“Not she. You would like a new experience.”

Claude yawned, and blinked his long dark eyes in a carefully Eastern manner.

“I am afraid there is no such thing left for me,” he said with an elaborate dreariness. “Still, if your aunt will invite me, I will come. Of course you will accompany me, I must have a chaperon.”

“Of course.”

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“Ah!” Claude said, as a footman came softly into the room, “here is our absinthe. Now, Jimmy, please do forget your horrible football, and I will teach you to be decadent.”

“As my aunt will teach you to be young—you old boy.”

II

"Mr Haddon has left, sir," said the footman, standing by Claude's bedside in the detached manner of the well-bred domestic. "Here is a note for you, sir; I was to give it you the first thing."

And he handed it on a salver.

Claude stretched out his thin white arm and took it, without manifesting any of the surprise that he felt. When the footman had gone, he poured out a cup of tea from the silver teapot that stood on a small table at his elbow, sipped it, and quietly opened the square envelope. The Northamptonshire sun was pouring in with a countrified ardour through the bedroom window. Outside the birds twittered in Miss Haddon's cherished garden. For Claude had come down at that contented spinster's invitation to spend a week with her, bringing Jimmy as chaperon, and this was the very first morning of his visit. Now he learnt that his chaperon had already "left," possibly to be a "half-back," or something equally ridiculous, at a local football match in a neighbouring village. Claude spread the note out and read it, while the birds chirped to the very manifest spring. [324]

"DEAR BOY,—Good-bye, and good luck to you. I know you are never angry, so it is scarcely worth while to tell you not to be. I am off. Back in a week. You will learn your lesson better alone with Aunt Kitty. There is no absinthe in her cellar, but she knows good champagne from bad. You will be all right. Study hard.—Yours ever,

JIM."

Claude drank two cups of tea instead of his usual one, and read the note four times. Then he lay back, wrapping his dressing-gown—a fine specimen of Cairene embroidery—closely round him, shut his eyes, and seemed to go to sleep. All he said to himself was:—

"Jimmy writes a very dull letter."

At half-past nine, Miss Haddon's house reverberated in a hollow manner with the barbarous music of a gong, the dressing-gong. Claude heard it very unsympathetically, and felt rather inclined merely to take off his dressing-gown, as an act of mute defiance, and go deliberately to sleep, instead of getting up and putting things on. But he remembered his manners wearily, and slid out of bed and into a carefully-warmed bath that was prepared in the neighbouring dressing-room. Having completed an intricate toilette, and tied a marvellously subtle tie, shot with rigorously subdued, but voluptuous colours, he sauntered downstairs in time to be thoroughly immersed in the full clamour of the second—or breakfast—gong, which he encountered in the hall. [325]

"Why will people wake the dead merely because they are going to eat a boiled egg and a bit of toast?" he asked himself as he entered the breakfast-room.

Miss Haddon was standing by the window, reading letters in the proper English manner. The sun lay on her grey hair, which she wore dressed high, and void of cap.

"You are very punctual," she said with a smile. "I was going to send up to know whether you would prefer to breakfast in your room. My nephew told me you might like to. I shall be glad to have your company. Jimmy has run away and left us together, I find."

"Yes, Jimmy has run away," Claude answered, beginning slowly to feel the full force of Jimmy's perfidy. He looked at Miss Haddon's cheerful, rosy face, and bright brown eyes, and wondered whether she had been in the plot.

"I hope you will not be bored," Miss Haddon went on, as they sat down together, the intonation of her melodious elderly voice seeming to dismiss the supposition, even while she suggested it. "But, indeed, I think it is almost impossible to be bored in the country."

Claude, who was always either in London or Paris, looked frankly astonished. In handing him his cup of tea, Miss Haddon noticed it. [326]

"You don't agree with me?" she asked.

"I cannot disagree, at least," he said; "because, to tell the truth, I am always in towns."

"Probably you are happy there then," she rejoined, with a briskness that was agreeable, because it was not a hideous assumption, like the geniality that often prevails, fitfully, at Christmas time.

But Claude could not permit his hostess to remain comfortable in this utterly erroneous belief.

"Oh, please—" he said, with gentle rebuke, "I am not happy anywhere."

Miss Haddon glanced at him with a gay and whimsical, but decidedly acute, scrutiny.

"Perhaps you are too young to be happy," she said; "you have not suffered enough."

"I have never been young," he answered, eating his devilled kidney with a silent pathos of

perseverance—"never."

"And I shall never be old, or, at any rate, feel old. It can't be done. I'm sixty-four, and look it, but I can't cease to revel in details, take an interest in people, and regard life as my half-opened oyster. It is a pity one can't go on living till one is two or three hundred or so. There is so much to see and know. Our existence in the world is like a day at the Stores. We have to go away before we have been into a quarter of the different departments."

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"I don't find life at all like that. I have seen all the departments till I am sick of them. But perhaps you never come to London?"

"Every year for three months to see my friends. I stay at an hotel. It is a most delightful time."

Her tone was warm with pleasant memories. Claude felt himself more and more surprised.

"You enjoy the country, and London?" he said.

"I enjoy everything," said Miss Haddon. "And surely most people do."

"None of the people I know seem to enjoy anything very much. They try everything, of course. That is one's duty."

"Then the latest literature really reflects life, I imagine," Miss Haddon said. "If what you say is true, everything includes the sins as well as the virtues. I have often wondered whether the books that I have thought utterly and absurdly false could possibly be the outcome of facts."

"Such as what books?"

"Oh, I'll name no names. The authors may be your personal friends. But it is so then? In their search after happiness the people of to-day, the moderns, give the warm shoulder to vice as well as to virtue?"

"They ignore nothing."

"Not even duty?"

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"Our duty is to ourselves, and can never be ignored."

Miss Haddon tapped a boiled egg very sharply on its head with a spoon. She wondered if the action were a performance of duty to herself or to the egg.

"That, I understand," she remarked briskly, "is the doctrine of what is called in London the young decadent; and in the country—forgive me—sometimes the young devil of the day."

"I am decadent, Miss Haddon," Claude said with a gentle pride that was not wholly ungraceful.

The elderly lady swept him with a bright look of fresh and healthy interest.

"How exciting," she exclaimed, after a moment's decisive pause, but with a completely natural air. "You are the first I have seen. For Jimmy isn't one, is he?"

"Jimmy! No. He plays football, and eats cold roast beef and cheese for lunch."

"Do tell me—how does one do it?"

She seemed intensely interested, and was merrily munching an apple grown in one of her own orchards.

Claude raised his dark eyebrows.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How does one become a decadent? I have heard so much about you all, about your cleverness, and your clothes, and the things you write, and draw, and smoke, and think, and—and eat—"

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She seemed suddenly struck by a bright idea.

"Oh, Mr Melville!" she exclaimed, leaning forward behind the great silver urn, and darting at him a glance of imploring earnestness, "will you do me a favour? We are left to ourselves for a whole week. Teach me, teach me to be a decadent."

"But I thought you were going to teach me to be yo—" Claude began, and stopped just in time. "I mean—er—"

He paused, and they gazed at each other. There was meditation in the boy's eyes. He was wondering seriously whether it would be possible for an elderly spinster lady, of countrified morals and rural procedure, to be decadent. She was rather stout, too, and appeared painfully healthy.

"Will you?" Miss Haddon breathed across the urn and the teapot.

"Well, we might try," Claude answered doubtfully.

He was remarking to himself:—

"Poor, dear Jimmy! He certainly doesn't understand his aunt!"

III

"Mr Melville, Mr Melville," cried Miss Haddon's voice towards evening on the following day, "the absinthe has arrived!"

Claude came out languidly into the hall.

"Has it?" he said dreamily.

"Yes, and Paul Verlaine's poetry, and the blue books—I mean the yellow books, and" (rummaging in a just-opened parcel) "yes, here are two novels by Catulle Mendez, and a box of those rose-tipped cigarettes. Now, what ought I to do? Shall we have some absinthe instead of our tea, or what?"

Claude looked at her with a momentary suspicion, but her grey hair crowned an eager face decorated with an honest expression. The suspicion was lulled to rest.

"We had better have our tea," he answered slowly. "I like my absinthe about an hour or so before dinner."

"Very well. Tea, James, and muffins."

The butler retired with fat dignity, but wondering not a little at the unusual vagaries of his mistress. Miss Haddon and Claude, laden with books, repaired to the drawing-room and sat down by the fire. Claude placed himself, cross-legged, upon a cushion on the floor. The box of rose-tipped cigarettes was in his hand. Miss Haddon regarded him expectantly from her sofa. Her expression seemed continually exclaiming, "What's to be done now?"

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The boy felt that this was not right, and endeavoured gently to correct it.

"Please try to be a little—a—"

"Yes?"

"A little more restrained," he said. "What we feel about life is that it should never be crude. All extremes are crude."

"What—even extremes of wickedness?"

He hesitated.

"Well, certainly extremes of goodness, or happiness, or anything of that kind. When one comes to think of it seriously, happiness is really absurd, is it not? Just consider how preposterous what is called a happy face always looks, covered with those dreadful, wrinkled things named smiles, all the teeth showing, and so on. I know you agree with me. Happiness drives all thought out of a face, and distorts the features in a most painful manner. When I go out walking on a Bank Holiday, a thing I seldom do, I always think a cheerful expression the most degrading of all expressions. A contented clerk disfigures a whole street—really."

Miss Haddon's appearance had gradually grown very sombre during this speech, and she did not brighten up on the approach of tea and muffins on a wicker table whimsical with little shelves.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "I daresay happiness is unreasonable. Ought I to sit on the floor too?"

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Claude deprecated such an act on the part of his hostess. Sitting on the floor was one of his pet originalities, and he hated rivalry. Besides, Miss Haddon was distinctly too stout for that sort of thing.

"I do it because I feel so Turkish," he explained. "Otherwise, it would be an assumption, and not naïve. People make a great mistake in fancying the decadent is unnatural. If anything, he is too natural. He follows his whim. The world only calls us natural when we do everything we dislike. If Rossetti had played football every Saturday, his poetry would have been much more read in England than it has been. Yes, please, I will have another muffin."

"But I think I feel Turkish too," Miss Haddon said calmly. "Yes, I am sure I do. I ought not to resist it; ought I? Otherwise I shall be flying in the face of your beautiful theories." And she squatted down on the floor at his elbow.

Claude had a wonderful purple moment of acute irritation, during which he felt strangely natural. Miss Haddon did not appear to notice it. She went on bombarding him with questions in a cheery manner until he began to be rather ill, but her face never lost its expression of grave sadness, a strange, inexplicable melancholy that was not in the least Bank Holiday. The contrast between her expression and her voice worried Claude, as an intelligent pantaloan might worry a clown. He felt that something was wrong. Either face or voice required alteration. And then questions are like death—extremely irksome. Besides, he found it difficult to answer many of them, difficult to define precisely the position of the decadent, his intentions and his aims. It was no use to tell Miss Haddon that he didn't possess either the one or the other. Always with the same definitely

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sad face, the same definitely cheerful voice, she declined to believe him. He fidgeted on his cushion, and his Turkish placidity threatened to be seriously disturbed.

The appearance of the absinthe created a diversion. Claude arranged a glass of it, much diluted with water, for the benefit of his hostess, and she began to sip it with an air of determined reverence.

"It tastes like the smell of a drag hunt," she said after a while.

Claude's gently-lifted eyebrows proclaimed misapprehension.

"When they drag a trail over a course and satisfy the hounds with a dead rabbit at the end of it," she explained.

"My dear lady," he protested plaintively. "Really, you do not grasp the inner meaning of what you are drinking. Presently the most perfect sensation will steal over you, a curious happy detachment from everything, as if you were floating in some exquisite element. You will not care what happens, or what—" [334]

"But must I drink it all before I feel detached?" she asked. "It's really so very nasty, quite disgusting to the taste. Surely you think so."

"I drink it for its after-effect."

"Is it like a good act that costs us pain at the moment, and gives us the pleasure of self-satisfaction ultimately?"

"I don't know," the boy exclaimed abruptly. To compare absinthe to a good act seemed to him quite intolerable.

He let his rose-tipped cigarette go out, and was glad when the dressing gong sounded in the hall.

Miss Haddon sprang up from the floor briskly.

"I rather admire you for drinking this stuff," she said. "I am sure you do it to mortify the flesh. A Lenten penance out of Lent is most invigorating to the mind."

As Claude went up to dress, he felt as if he never wished to touch absinthe again. The glitter of its personality was dulled for him now that it was looked upon as merely a nasty sort of medicine to be indulged in as a mortification of the flesh, like wearing a hair shirt, or rejecting meat on Fridays. He found Miss Haddon painfully prosaic. It seemed almost silly to be a decadent in her company. To feel Turkish alone was graceful and quaint, almost intellectual, but to have an old lady feeling Turkish, too, and squatting on the floor to emphasise the sensation, was tragic, seemed to bring imbecility very near. Claude dressed with unusual agitation, and made a distinct failure of his tie. [335]

All through dinner Miss Haddon talked optimistically about her prospects as a successful decadent, much as if she were discussing her future on the Stock Exchange, or as the editor of a paper. She calculated that at her present rate of progress she ought to be almost on a level with her guest by the end of the week, and spoke hopefully of ceasing to take any interest in the ordinary facts of life, of learning a proper contempt for all healthy-minded humanity, and of appreciating at its proper value what seems to ordinary people, weak-kneed affection in literature, in art, and, above all, in movement and in appearance. Her bright eyes flashed upon Claude beneath her crown of powdered hair, as she talked, and the big room rang with her jovial voice.

The boy began to feel exceedingly confused. Yet he had never been less bored. Miss Haddon might be stout and sixty-four. Nevertheless, her net personality was far less wearisome than that of many a town-bred sylph. Unconsciously Claude ate with a hearty appetite, indulged immoderately in excellent roast beef, and even swallowed a beautifully-cooked Spanish onion without thinking of the committal of a crime. During dessert Miss Haddon gave him a racy description of a rural cricket match and of the supper and speeches which followed it, and he found himself laughing heartily and wishing he had been there. He pulled himself up short with a sudden sensation of horror, and his hostess rose to go into the drawing-room. [336]

"Shall we play Halma or Ek Bahr?" she asked; "or would they be out of order? I wish particularly to conform to all your tenets."

"Dear lady, please, we have no tenets," he protested. "Do remember that, or you will never become what you wish. But I do not care for any games."

"Then shall we sit down and each read a volume of the 'Yellow Book'?"

She hastened towards a table to find copies of that work, but something in her brisk and anxious movement caused Claude to exclaim hurriedly:

"Please—please teach me Halma."

That night he went up to bed flushed with triumph.

Miss Haddon had allowed him to win a couple of games. Never before had he felt so absolutely certain of the unusual acuteness of his intellect.

IV

Three days later, Miss Haddon and Claude Melville were feeding chickens—under protest.

"I mean to give it up, of course," the former said. "It's a degrading pursuit; it's almost as bad as the 'things that Jimmy does,' the things that give him such a marvellous complexion and keep his figure so magnificent." [337]

She threw a handful of grain to the frenzied denizens of the enlarged meat-safe before them, and added in a tone of pensive reflectiveness:

"Why is it, I wonder, that these actions which, as you have taught me, are unworthy of thinking people, tend to make the body so beautiful, the eyes so bright and clear, the cheeks rose-tinted, the limbs straight and supple?"

All the time that she was speaking her glance crept musingly over Claude's tall, but weak-looking and rather flaccid form, seeming to pause on his thin undeveloped arms, his lanky legs, and his slightly yellow face. That face began to flush. She sighed.

"There must be something radically wrong in the scheme of the universe," she continued. "But, of course, one ought to live for the mind and for subtle sensations, even though they do make one look an object."

Her eyes were on the chickens now, who were fighting like feathered furies, pouncing, clucking, running for safety, grain in beak, or, with a fiery anxiety, chasing the favoured brethren who had secured a morsel and were hoping to be permitted to swallow it. Claude glanced at her furtively out of the corner of his eye, and endeavoured, for the first time in his life, to stand erect and broaden his rather narrow chest. [338]

Silently he resolved to give instructions to his tailor not to spare the padding in his future coats. He was glad, too, that knee-breeches, for which he had occasionally sighed, had not come into fashion again. After all, modern dress had its little advantages. Miss Haddon was still scattering grain, rather in the attitude of Millet's "*Sower*," and still talking reflectively.

"We must try to convert Jimmy," she said. "I have a good deal of influence over him, Mr Melville. We must try to make him more like you, more thoughtful, more inactive, more frankly sensual, more fond of sofas, in the future than he has been in the past. Do you know, I am ashamed to say it, but I don't believe I have ever seen Jimmy lying on a sofa. Poor Jimmy! Look at that hen! She is choking. Hens gulp their food so! And then, he's inclined to be persistently unselfish. That must be stopped too. I have learnt from you that to be decadent one must be acutely and untiringly selfish. The blessings of selfishness! What a volume might be written upon them! Mr Melville, all chickens must be decadent, for all chickens are entirely selfish. It is strange to think that the average fowl is more advanced in ethics—is it ethics I mean?—than the average man or woman, is it not? And we ate a decadent at dinner last night. I feel almost like a cannibal."

She threw away the last grain, and was silent. But suddenly Claude spoke. [339]

"Miss Haddon," he said, and his voice had never sounded so boyish to her before, "you have been laughing at me for nearly a week." He paused, then he went on, rather unevenly, in the up-and-down tones induced by stifled excitement, "and I have never found it out until this moment. I suppose you think me a great fool. I daresay I have been one. But please don't—I mean, please let us give up acting our farce."

"But have we reached the third act?" she said.

They were walking through the garden, among the crocuses and violets now.

"I am sure I don't know," he answered, trying to seem easy. "Perhaps it is a farce in one act."

"Perhaps it is not a farce at all, my dear boy," she said very gently and with a sudden old-world gravity that was not without its grace.

They reached the house. She put her basket down on the oak table in the wide hall, and faced him in the eager way that was natural to her, and that was so youthful.

"Mr Melville—Claude," she said, as she held out her hand, clad in a very countrified brown glove, with a fan-like gauntlet, "of all Jimmy's friends I think I shall like you the best. People who have acted together ought to be good comrades."

He took the hand. That seemed necessary.

"But I haven't been acting," he said. [340]

"Oh, yes, you have," she answered, "and I have only been on the stage for a week; while you—well, I suppose you have been on it for at least two or three years. I am taking my farewell of it this morning, and you—?"

The boy's face was deeply flushed, but he did not look, or feel, actually angry.

"I don't know about myself yet," he said.

"Think it all over," the old lady exclaimed. "And now let us have lunch. I am hungry."

Jimmy arrived that evening.

"How old are you, Claude?" he exclaimed, clapping his friend on the back.

"I am not sure," Claude replied. "But I almost begin to wish that I were sixty-four."

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THE TEE-TO-TUM

I

JACK BURNHAM was quite determined not to marry Mrs Lorton, and if there was one thing in the world upon which she had rigidly set her heart it was upon refusing him. There were several things about her which he deliberately disliked. In the first place, she was a widow, and he always had an uneasy suspicion that widows, like dynamite, were mysteriously dangerous. Then her Christian name was Harriet, and she never took afternoon tea. The former of these two facts indicated, according to his ideas, that her parents were people of bad taste, the latter that she possessed notions that were against nature. Also, she was well informed, and knew it. This condition of the mind, he considered, should be the blessed birthright of the male sex, and he looked upon her as an usurper. She didn't wear mourning, which implied that she was forgetful—of dead husbands. Then—well, that was about all he had against her, and it was quite enough.

As for her, the whole nature of her protested eloquently against the way he waxed his moustache, against the colour of his brown hair, and of his brown boots, against his lounging gait, and his opinion of Mr Gladstone. He had a certain arrogance about him, when with her, which arose in truth from his fear of her intellectual prowess. This led her to dub him intolerably conceited. She desired to humble him, and considered that she could best do so by refusing his offer of marriage. But she must first persuade him to propose. That was the difficulty.

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They were constantly meeting in London. You always constantly meet your enemies in London. And, when they met, they always devoted a great deal of time to the advancement of the tacit and polite quarrel between them. They argued with one another in Hyde Park on fine mornings, and were really disgusted with one another at dinner parties and "At Homes." He thought her fast—at balls; and she had once considered him blatant—at a Marlborough House garden party. This last fact, indeed, put the coping stone to the feud between them, for Mrs Lorton expressed her opinion to a friend, and Burnham, of course, got to know of it. To be thought blatant at Marlborough House was really intolerable. One might as well be pronounced to have had a heathen air at Lambeth Palace.

Distinctly, Jack Burnham and Harriet Lorton were acutely antagonistic.

Yet, there must surely have been some strange, unknown link of sympathy between them, for they both caught the influenza on the same day—it was a Sunday morning—and both permitted it to develop into double pneumonia.

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After all, spar as we may, are we not all brothers and sisters?

The double pneumonia ought to have drawn them together; but, as he lived in Piccadilly and she in Queen's Gate, and each was thoroughly self-centred—nothing produces egoism so certainly as influenza—neither knew of the illness of the other.

Providence denied to both that subtle joy, and they got to the mutton chop and chipped potato stage of convalescence in childlike ignorance of each other's misfortune.

There must certainly have been a curious community of mind between them, for both their doctors ordered them to Margate, and they both took rooms at Westgate. Now a similar taste in seaside places is undoubtedly an excellent foundation for eternal friendship. Let the world crumble in atoms, two people who both like Westgate will still find something to talk about amid the confusion occasioned by the dissolution of kingdoms.

Jack Burnham arrived at the St Mildred's Hotel on a Thursday, with his man.

Harriet Lorton came on the following Friday, with her maid.

Neither had any notion of the other's proceedings until they met back to back, as you shall presently hear.

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II

In ordinary circumstances of health and vigour, Burnham and Mrs Lorton possessed dispositions of quite singular vivacity, looked upon life as a fairly good, if rather practical joke, and were fully disposed to consider happiness their *métier*. Being modern, they sometimes concealed their original gaiety, as if it were original sin, and pretended to a cruel cynicism; yet at heart, it must be confessed, they were as lively as poor children playing in the street. But when they went to Westgate, influenza had had its fill of them, and the infinite pathos of the world, and of all that is therein, appealed to them with a seizing vitality. Burnham, on the Thursday, was moved to tears at Birchington Station by the sight of a mother and eleven children missing the last train to Margate. Harriet Lorton, on the following Friday, had hysterics at Victoria, when she perceived a young lady drop a cage containing a grey parrot, and smash the bird's china bath upon the platform. The fact that the parrot had been actually taking its bath at the moment, and was left by the misfortune in much confusion and no water, struck her so poignantly as nearly to break her heart. She wept in a first-class carriage all the way down, and arrived at Westgate, towards ten o'clock, in a state of complete collapse.

Mr Burnham was in bed drinking a cup of soup at this time. He heard the luggage being carried up, but did not suspect whose it was. Nevertheless, the ravages of disease led him to consider the slight noise and bustle a personal insult, and he lay awake most of the night brooding upon the wrongs of which he, erroneously, believed himself to be the victim. [347]

It was on the next morning that the two invalids met back to back in a shelter with glass partitions upon the lawn.

Mrs Lorton, smothered in wraps, had taken up her position on the bench that faces Westgate without noticing a bowed and ulstered figure, shod in brown boots, sitting in a haggard posture on the reciprocal bench that faces the sea. Nobody was about, for it was not the season, and Mrs Lorton began slowly to weep on account of the loneliness. It struck her disordered fancy as so personal. Creation was sending her to Coventry. At her back the tears ran over Burnham's handsome countenance. He was staring at the sea, and thinking of all the people who had been drowned in water since the days of the Deluge. He wondered how many there were, and cried copiously, considering himself absolutely alone and free to give vent to his feelings, which struck him as splendidly human.

When two people weep together one of them usually weeps louder than the other, and, on this occasion, Burnham made the most noise. He became, in fact, so uproariously solicitous about the drowned men and women whom he had never known that Mrs Lorton gradually was made aware of the presence of another mourner who was not a mute. She turned round and beheld a back convulsed with emotion. Its grief went straight to her heart, and, casting her own sorrow and her sense of etiquette to the wind—which blew bracingly from the north-east—she tapped upon the glass screen that bisected the shelter. [348]

Burnham took no notice. He was too deeply involved in grief. So Mrs Lorton knocked again, with all the vigour that incipient convalescence gave to her. This time Burnham was startled, and turned a hollow face upon her. They stared at each other through the intervening glass for a moment in wild surprise, the tears congealing upon their cheeks.

Beyond Burnham Mrs Lorton saw the whirling white foam of the sea. Beyond Mrs Lorton Burnham saw the neat villas of Westgate. It struck them both as a tremendous moment, and they trembled.

Remember that they were very weak.

At last he, conceiving naturally that she had recognised and desired to summon him, walked slowly round to her side of the shelter, and held out to her a wavering hand.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "The last person I—"

"You!" said Mrs Lorton. "How astonishing! What on earth—"

He seized the opening she gave him with all the ardour of the whole-souled influenza patient. [349]

"I have been ill," he said with a deep pathos, "very, very ill. My symptoms were most extraordinary."

He sank down heavily at her side, and continued, "I doubt if any one has endured such agony before. It began on a Sunday with—"

"So did mine," Mrs Lorton interrupted with some show of determination. "You cannot conceive what it was like. I had pains in every limb, every limb positively. The doctor—"

"Of course I went straight to bed," he remarked with firmness. "I knew at once what was wrong. But mine was no ordinary case. Talk of thumbscrews! Why—"

"For nights I tossed in agony," she went on with a poignant self-pity, so much engrossed that she never noticed the brown boots which on other occasions had so deeply offended her. "Morphia and eucalyptus were no—"

"He said it was pneumonia, double pneumonia," Burnham concluded emphatically. "How I came through it I shall never know." His smile at this point was wan, and seemed to deprecate existence. "I suppose there is still some work for me to do. At the same time, I—"

"Mine was also double!" Mrs Lorton said with distinct tartness, condemning privately his arrogance, and noticing the boots with a strange feeling of sudden and unutterable despair. [350]

"It is all so much worse for a woman," she added vaguely, with some idea of out-doing him, such as she had felt once or twice at dinner parties, when her epigrams had been smarter than his.

"The strong possess a greater capacity for suffering than the weak," Burnham retorted. "Medical science tells us that—"

"Please spare me the revelations of the dissecting-room," she cried bitterly; "I am in no condition to bear them."

She glanced at him with pathetic eyes, and added, "I ought to have gone to Margate."

"I ought to have gone there too," he said.

"Really, you make the conversation sound like one of Maeterlinck's plays," she rejoined. "Do be more original."

The reproach cut him to the heart. He never knew why, but he felt so much injured that he with great difficulty restrained his tears.

"Women can be very brutal," he said moodily, biting his lips, and wondering how many authors it was necessary to read in order never to be at a disadvantage with a clever woman.

Mrs Lorton was conscious that she had hurt him, and instead of being her nice, natural self and glorying in the fact, she experienced a sense of profound pity that gave her quite a tightened feeling about the left side. However, she only said, "Men can be very selfish"—a generality that many people consider as convincing as a bomb—and got up to go. [351]

"I am staying at the St Mildred's," she remarked. "It is the dull season, so I am the only person there at present."

"I beg your pardon," Burnham said, also getting upon his feet, "I am there too. My number is 12 and I have a private sitting-room. I do not feel up to the coffee-room yet."

Mrs Lorton turned as pale as ashes with vexation. She had no private sitting-room, and had ordered dinner in the coffee-room for that very evening.

She felt herself at a disadvantage as they walked in a gloomy silence towards the beach.

III

Three days had passed away, and Jack Burnham had found that he was, in his own phrase, "up to the coffee-room" after all. In consequence, Mrs Lorton and he dined there every evening at separate tables. A sense of rivalry—and there is no rivalry more keen than that between contesting invalids—prevented both of them from eating as much as they would have liked. When the widow refused a course, Burnham shook his head at it wearily, and they rose from their meals in a state of passionate hunger, which they solaced with captain's biscuits in the seclusion of their bedrooms. Since they had Westgate almost to themselves, and the weather was becoming bright and warm, they were much out of doors; but their profound depression still continued, and they were as morbid human beings as Max Nordau could have desired to meet with when he was seeking for specimens of degeneration. [352]

Their continual greedy anxiety to narrate the details of their physical and mental sensations drove them to seek one another's company, and soon it became an understood thing that they should sit together on the lawn or in the winter garden during the morning, and stroll feebly in the direction of Margate during the breezy afternoon.

These times were times of battle, of a struggle for supremacy in symptoms that led to much heart searching and to infinite exaggeration. Mrs Lorton, being a woman, generally got the best of it, and Burnham entered the hotel at tea-time with set teeth, and an appalling sense of injustice and of failure in his breast. One night at dinner, determined to conquer or to die, he refused everything but soup; and noted, with a grim satisfaction, that Mrs Lorton could hardly contain her chagrin at having inadvertently devoured a cutlet and a spoonful of jelly. Indeed, her temper was so much upset by this occurrence that she went straight to bed on leaving the coffee-room, and sent down a message the next morning to say that she was far too ill to venture out. [353]

Burnham, therefore, sat in the shelter alone, cursing the craft of woman. In the intervals between the cursings he was conscious of a certain loneliness that seemed to be in the atmosphere. It hovered with the seagulls above the sprightly waves, swept over the lawn hand in hand with the wind, basked in the sunshine, and companioned him closely upon the esplanade as he walked home to lunch. He was puzzled by it.

At lunch-time Mrs Lorton was still confined to bed, so her maid announced. Burnham promptly

began to wonder whether she was going to die. He strolled towards Margate wondering, and found himself presently in the sunset, gazing with tears in his eyes at the silhouette of Margate Pier, and, mentally, placing a reverent tribute of flowers from Covent Garden upon her early grave in Brompton Cemetery.

He also found himself, later, dropping a tear at the thought of his own death, for of course with his weak health he could not hope to outlive anybody for very long. Mrs Lorton's absence at dinner struck him as more pathetic than all the misery of the travailing universe, until he remembered that at last he could gratify his appetite, and even accept two *entrées* at the hands of the waiter.

Life, if it is full of sorrows, is also full of consolations.

[354]

He ate steadily for a couple of hours, pitying himself all the time.

Next day Mrs Lorton re-appeared in a very bad temper. Her seclusion, although it had enabled her to score several points off her rival, had been in other respects wearisome and vexatious. She barely nodded to Burnham, and went out towards the shelter alone. He followed furtively, longing, as usual, for condolence, and presently saw her seat herself facing the sea. The strained relations between them seemed to forbid his placing himself at her side. The back-to-back posture would be more illustrative of the exact position of affairs, and Burnham's nicety and accuracy of mind induced him accordingly to face Westgate. Their positions of the first day were thus reversed. She looked at the sea; he stared at the villas. Strange turmoil of life, in which we never know which way we shall be facing next! It struck Burnham suddenly, and so forcibly, *à propos* of his and Mrs Lorton's reversal, that the ready tears sprang to his eyes. How would it all end? Man spins about like a tee-to-tum, bowing to all points of the compass. The time comes when the tee-to-tum runs down—and what then? Burnham was certainly run down. That must be his excuse for what he did. He glanced behind him through the glass screen, and saw by the motion of Mrs Lorton's back that she was sobbing. In truth, the sight of the dancing waves had set her thinking of all the poor people who have been drowned in water since the beginning of things. Poor dead folk! She was trembling with emotion, and still wept mechanically when she found Mr Burnham on her side of the shelter proposing to her with all his might and main. He was asking her to comfort him, to be a true woman and shield him with her strength, to support his tottering footsteps along the rugged ways of life, to dry his tears and stay the agonies of his shaken soul.

[355]

"Your health will help my weakness," he said. "Your vigour will teach me to be strong."

It was a strange proposal, and she began to defend herself from his imputations, stating her maladies, marshalling her symptoms of decay in an imposing procession.

But it was no good. He had taken her unawares and got the start of her. She felt it, and his determined weakness obtained a power over her which she could never afterwards explain.

His influenza triumphed, for she forgot her resolution.

A wave of morbid pity for him swept over the woman in her. If he was disorganised now, what would be his condition if she refused him?

"Have I the right," she asked herself, "to devote a fellow-creature to everlasting misery?"

Her influenza told her plainly that she had not.

[356]

People say that the marriage will really come off.

Jack Burnham announced it everywhere before Mrs Lorton got thoroughly well, and Mrs Lorton told everybody while Jack Burnham was still what his friends called "awfully dicky."

One can but hope that their married life will be passed on the same side of the shelter. If he persists in facing the sea, and she in staring at the villas—well, they will live most of Ibsen's plays!

But at least they will be modern.

And so the tee-to-tum, thought of pathetically by Burnham on a memorable occasion, spins round, and the sea and the villas are the two aspects of life.

Transcriber's note:

Inconsistent hyphenation has been retained.

Duplicate title headings at the beginning of the book and before each story have been removed.

The following corrections were made to the text:

[p. 267](#): missing period added (danced merrily.)

[p. 325](#): single close quote to double close quote ("I hope you will not be bored,")

[p. 328](#): healthly to healthy (fresh and healthy interest)

[p. 331](#): be to he ("A little more restrained," he said.)

[p. 349](#): paragraph break removed after comma (and continued, "I doubt if any one)

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