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Being the Gospel of Inaction, by Ralph Adams  
Cram**

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Title: The Decadent: Being the Gospel of Inaction

Author: Ralph Adams Cram

Release date: November 26, 2012 [EBook #41490]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Demian Katz and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (Images courtesy of the Digital Library@Villanova University (<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/>))

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INACTION \*\*\*



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**THE DECADENT: BEING  
THE GOSPEL OF  
INACTION: WHEREIN  
ARE SET FORTH IN  
ROMANCE FORM  
CERTAIN REFLECTIONS  
TOUCHING THE  
CURIOUS  
CHARACTERISTICS OF  
THESE ULTIMATE**

# YEARS, AND THE DIVERS CAUSES THEREOF.



PRIVATELY PRINTED FOR  
THE AUTHOR MDCCCXCIII

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TIBI · MEO · CARO · B · G · G ·  
CVIVS · LABORIBVS · PRETIUM · NON · PROPRIUM · EI · FIEBAT ·  
OPERA · TVA · EXARCHO · FRATRIBVSQVE ·  
EIVS · ORDINIS · QVAE · SVMNIA · SIBI · FINGIT ·  
DENIQVE · OMNIBVS · DELECTIS · PER · ORBEM · TERRARVM ·  
HVNC · LIBRVM · GRATE · DICO ·

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## THE DECADENT.

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#### I.

[Pg 1]



HE 3.20 train from Boston slowed up as it drew into a way station, and Malcolm McCann, grim and sullen from his weary ride in the dirt and cinders, the coal-smoke and the foetid air, the fretting babies and hot, worrying men, that characterise a railway journey in August, hurried out with a grunt of relief.

It was not a pretty station where he found himself, and he glared ill-naturedly around with restless, aggressive eyes. The brick walls, the cheaply grained doors bearing their tarnished legends, "Gents," "Ladies," "Refreshment Saloon," the rough raftered roof over the tracks,—everything was black and grimy with years of smoke, belching even now from the big locomotive, and gathering like an ill-conditioned thunder-cloud over the mob of scurrying, pushing men and women, a mob that swelled and scattered constantly in fretful confusion. A hustling business-man with a fat, pink face and long sandy whiskers, his silk hat cocked on one side in grotesque assumption of jauntiness, tripped over the clay-covered pick of a surly labourer, red of face and sweaty, blue of overalls and mud-coloured of shirt, and as he stumbled over the annoying implement scowled coarsely, and swore, with his cigar between his teeth.

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Ragged and grimy children, hardly old enough to walk, sprawled and scrambled on the dirty platform, and as McCann hurried by, a five-year old cursed shrilly a still more youthful little tough, who answered in kind. Vulgar theatre-bills in rank reds and yellows flaunted on the cindery walls; discarded newspapers, banana-skins, cigar-butts, and saliva were ground together vilely under foot by the scuffling mob. Dirt, meanness, ugliness everywhere,—in the unhappy people no less than in their surroundings.

McCann strode scornfully to the rear of the station and looked vaguely around to see if Aurelian had sent any kind of a conveyance to take him to his home,—of the location of which, save that it was to be reached from this particular station, McCann knew nothing. The prospect was not much better outside than in. The air was thick with fine white dust, and dazzling with fierce

sunlight. On one side was a wall of brick tenements, with liquor saloons, cheap groceries, and a fish-market below, all adding their mite to the virulence of the dead, stifling air. Above, men in dirty shirt-sleeves lolled out of the grimy windows, where long festoons of half-washed clothes drooped sordidly. On the other side, gangs of workmen were hurriedly repairing the ravages of a fire that evidently had swept clear a large space in its well-meant but ineffectual attempts at purgation. Gaunt black chimneys wound with writhing gas-pipes, tottering fragments of wall blistered white on one side, piles of crumbling bricks where men worked sullenly loading blue carts, mingled with new work, where the walls, girdled with yellow scaffolding, were rising higher, uglier, than before; the plain factory walls with their rows of square windows less hideous by far than those buildings where some ignorant contractor was trying by the aid of galvanised iron to produce an effect of tawdry, lying magnificence. Dump-carts, market-waggons, shabby hacks, crawled or scurried along in the hot dust. A huge dray loaded with iron bars jolted over the granite pavement with a clanging, clattering din that was maddening. In fact, none of the adjuncts of a thriving, progressive town were absent, so far as one could see.

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McCann turned away from this spectacle of humiliating prosperity, and ran his eyes over the vehicles about the station, searching for some indication of his friend. He had thought that perhaps Aurelian might come himself; but he saw no sign of a familiar figure, no indication even of any conveyance that might belong to Aurelian Blake. The greater part of the carriages had gone, and now only remained an express-waggon or two, a decrepit old hack, an old-fashioned chaise, one or two nondescript country conveyances, and a particularly gorgeous victoria, drawn by a pair of splendid grey horses, a liveried driver sitting on the box in Ethiopian state. None of these vehicles could possibly belong to the fastidious but democratic Aurelian, and McCann almost thought his telegram must have miscarried.

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A black footman in fawn-coloured livery, wearing a small cockade of scarlet and silver, touched his hat to the sulky traveller.

"Beg yo pahdon, suh, but ah yo Mistuh McCann, Mistuh Malcolm McCann, of Boston, suh?"

"That is my name," said McCann, shortly.

"I have the honnoh to be Mistuh Blake's footman, suh," and he touched the cockade in his hat again. "Will yo have the kindness to follow me, suh?"

There was a touch of servile imperiousness in the voice, and McCann followed in bewildered surprise. "Aurelian Blake's footman"—that did not sound well. Could his pupil have become a backslider in the last two years? "Aurelian Blake's footman"—the idea was surprising in itself; but the fact of the big victoria with its luxurious trappings where he soon found himself being whirled swiftly on through the screaming, clattering city was more surprising still, and not a little disquieting.

The carriage threaded its way through the roaring crowd of vehicles, passing the business part of the city, and entering a tract given over to factories, hideous blocks of barren brick and shabby clapboards, through the open windows of which came the brain-killing whirl of heavy machinery, and hot puffs of oily air. Here and there would be small areas between the buildings where foul streams of waste from some factory of cheap calico would mingle dirtily with pools of green, stagnant water, the edges barred with stripes of horrible pinks and purples where the water had dried under the fierce sun. All around lay piles of refuse,—iron hoops, broken bottles, barrels, cans, old leather stewing and fuming in the dead heat, and everywhere escape-pipes vomiting steam in spurts. Over it all was the roar of industrial civilisation. McCann cast a pitying look at the pale, dispirited figures passing languidly to and fro in the midst of the din and the foul air, and set his teeth closely.

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Presently they entered that part of the city where live the poor, they who work in the mills, when they are not on strike, or the mills are not shut down,—as barren of trees or grass as the centre of the city, the baked grey earth trodden hard between the crowded tenements painted lifeless greys, as dead in colour as the clay about them. Children and goats crawled starvedly around or huddled in the hot shadow of the sides of the houses. This passed, and then came the circle of "suburban residences," as crowded almost as the tottering tenements, but with green grass around them. Frightful spectacles these,—"Queen Anne" and colonial vagaries painted lurid colours, and frantic in their cheap elaboration. Between two affected little cottages painted orange and green and with round towers on their corners, stood a new six-story apartment-house with vulgar front of brown stone, "Romanesque" in style, but with long flat sides of cheap brick. McCann caught the name on the big white board that announced "Suites to let," "Hotel Plantagenet," and grinned savagely.

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Then, at last, even this region of speculative horrors came to an end, giving place to a wide country road that grew more and more beautiful as they left the town far behind. McCann's eyebrows were knotted in a scowl. The ghastly nonsense, like a horrible practical joke, that the city had been to him, excited, as it always did, all the antagonism within his rebellious nature. Slowly and grimly he said to himself, yet half aloud, in a tone of deliberation, as though he were cursing solemnly the town he had left: "I hope from my soul that I may live to see the day when that damned city will be a desolate wilderness; when those chimneys shall rise smokeless; when those streets shall be stony valleys between grisly ridges of fallen brick; when Nature itself shall shrink from repairing the evil that man has wrought; when the wild birds shall sweep widely around that desolation that they may not pass above; when only rats and small snakes shall crawl through the ruin of that 'thriving commercial and manufacturing metropolis;' when the very name it bore in the days of its dirty glory shall have become a synonym for horror and despair!" Having thus relieved himself he laughed softly, and felt better.

Presently a flash of recollection passed over his face, and he eagerly dropped his hand into a side pocket, pulling therefrom a brierwood pipe, discovered with a sigh of satisfaction that a sweet heel of "Dills Best" still lurked in the bottom of the bowl, and, regardless of the amazement of the immaculate footman, lighted it, and sank back in the cushions, well content. As he smoked, his thoughts went back to Aurelian with some uneasiness. "I am afraid he is a backslider," he mused seriously. "Now, when I went over to England a couple of years ago, he was a good socialist, the best pupil I ever had. He would rail at the world in good set terms, better than I myself. And now he runs a trap like this, with a coon slave for a driver and a footman beside him. Now, I *can't* lose a man like that; he was a born leader of men, when leaders are what we lack. Besides, he had a lot of money, and we need money as badly as we need leaders. I must get him back some way, if gone he is; and I very much expect bad news from the boy when I get to—Now, what did he call his place?" he pulled a letter from his pocket, shaking tobacco ashes out of its folds. "Oh, yes, 'Vita Nuova.' Now, why the devil did he name his place that?"

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The stubby pipe sucked and sputtered, and McCann knocked the ashes into the road. They had driven already nearly an hour, and he was growing impatient; "how much farther had they to go?" He asked the coachman, who only replied, "Just a fractional bit further, suh," which was indefinite. They left the highway and struck into a hilly road where the hedgerows grew thick on either side, with rough pastures beyond, on the one hand, and on the other thick and ancient pine forests, where the low sunlight struck under the sighing branches and rested on mossy boulders and level patches of golden ferns. Now and then a grey farmhouse appeared in its orchard, and once they passed a dingy white meeting-house, with pointed wooden spikes on the four corners of its belfry, its green blinds faded a sickly yellow. Just beyond they met the country milk-team with its cantering horses and clattering cans, the driver nodding on his seat, with a watchful collie beside him. Then the pastures on the right ended, and they plunged into deep forests, black, almost lightless, where the road wound like the bed of a dry torrent in a vast green cañon. The carriage climbed steeply up the rocky road, with no sound around but the rattle of pebbles under the feet of the horses, and the melancholy calling of the wood thrushes. On the crown of the hill heavy wrought-iron gates closed their passage, gates that swung back slowly as the footman whistled twice. They passed through, turned sharply to the left, and in a flash were out of the forest.

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Malcolm McCann had not a very keen sense of beauty, but even to him the vision that lay before him startled him into sudden enthusiasm. They were riding along the comb of a ridge of high hills thick with ink-black pine forests to the left, while to the right they swept down in gracious undulations into a basin-shaped valley, the level floor of which was, it may be, something over a thousand acres in extent, shaped like an elongated ellipse, with lofty hills rising on all sides.

The sun dropped down and lay on the edge of the world; from the farther side of the valley it poured a suave, golden glory of molten light down over the purple, serrated hills, that lay in the valley like amber wine. Smooth fields of ripening grain and velvet meadow-land chequered the valley irregularly, slim elms and dark, heavy oaks rising among them. In the midst, curling like level smoke, wound a narrow river with black poplars and golden chestnut-trees leaning above. In all the valley was no sign of a dwelling save far away at the distant end, where from the midst of thick foliage rose dark roofs and towers and chimneys, as of some chateau on the Loire.

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McCann caught his breath. "Is that the place?" he said quickly.

"Suh, that is Vita Nuova," answered the footman.

## II.



"THIS," said Eveleth, languidly, turning his head in the valley of silken pillows until he could see the long figure of Aurelian drooping in the Mexican hammock across the big room through the dim strata of blue smoke that, in the silence, lay almost motionless, swirled now and then into subtle curlings and windings as some drowsy smoker breathed more white vapour into the slowly moving and rising tide,—"This is the peace of the land of Proserpina, the faultless content of perfect possession.

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Philistinism is not without honour, for behold! it has conceived and brought forth—the Decadence."

*"Non sentir m'e gran ventura  
Porò non mi distar: deh! parla basso!"*

said Aurelian, softly. "It is only a dream after all, even a dream of the land of endless afternoon. There is lotos mingled with the tobacco, but we wake easily."

A deeper voice came from a motionless figure prone on a tiger skin before the crumbling fire. "Opium and Burgundy are not faultless substitutes for the true lotos after all, but—they do very well—for the time."

Murmurs of inarticulate assent rose and faded in the opium-heavy air, and then the smoke grew still again. Now and then a bit of wood fell in the fireplace. Aurelian's narghileh gurgled and sighed in slow cadence. These things were only a modulation of the silence.

The room was vast and dim, seemingly without bounds, save on that side where the violet flames

of a drift-wood fire flickered quiveringly, making a centre, a concentration of dull light; for the rest, a mysterious wilderness of rugs and divans, Indian chairs and hammocks, where silent figures lay darkly, each a primal cause of one of the many thin streams of smoke that curled heavily upward;—smoke from strange and curious pipes from Lahore and Gualior; small sensitive pipes from Japan; here and there the short thick stems of opium-pipes, and by the motionless Mexican hammock a splendid and wonderful hookah with writhing stem. As the thin flames of the dying fire flashed into some sudden brightness, they revealed details unseen in the general gloom,—a vast and precious missal gorgeous with scarlet and gold and purple illumination, open, on a carved oak lectern, spoil of some Spanish monastery; the golden gloom of a Giovanni Bellini reft from its home in Venice, and as yet unransomed; the glint of twisted and gilded glass in an ebony cabinet; great folios and quartos in ancient bindings of vellum and ivory and old calf-skin, heavily tooled with gold, and with silver and jewelled medallions and clasps, stacked in heaps in careless indifference; the flash and sparkle of a cabinet of gems, the red splendour of old lacquer; the green mystery of wrought jade. And everywhere a heavy atmosphere that lay on the chest like a strange yet desirable dream; the warm, sick odour of tobacco and opium, striving with the perfume of sandal-wood, and of roses that drooped and fluttered in pieces in the hot air.

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Around a brazier of green bronze, on the floor, before the fire, lay the three men who were gently breathing in the bland opium, their dark figures radiating from the queer brazier wrought of two ugly dragons chasing each other around a great globe of Japanese chrystal, the firelight gleaming on the tall glasses of champagne where the little column of gold bubbles rose steadily. The fire fell together, and a leaping flame cast a fitful light on heavy tapestry curtains wrought with the story of the loves of Cupid and Psyche. Its two halves parted slowly, and a flush of red light fell through as, in the midst, appeared a dark figure with closed eyes, swaying softly as it leaned forward, and, while the curtains closed, fell with a long sweep gently toward the brazier,—not as men fall, but as a snake with its head lifted high might advance slidingly, and as it came, droop lower and lower until it rested prone on the uncrushed flowers. So Enderby, heavy with the suave sleep of haschish, came among the smokers and dropped motionless in the midst of the cushions. The movement set a tall glass quivering until it fell to one side, and the yellow wine sank slowly into the silky fur of a leopard skin.

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Aurelian lifted his hand to a gold cord that hung over the hammock. Presently a slim girl with flesh like firelight on ivory, clad in translucent silk of a dusky purple that made no sound as she came, appeared in the darkness of the farther doorway. She came to the hammock where Aurelian was lying.

"Will the honourable master be served with the august saké?" she asked with a voice that was like the fluttering of cherry blossoms in Yoshiwara.

"No, O Shiratsuyu," said Aurelian, drawing the slim figure toward him, kissing the scarlet mouth that drooped above as he lay full length, looking sleepily upward. "No, O Shiratsuyu, but fill the glasses of the honourable guests with the wine, there on the table."

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The girl glided among the drowsy figures, filling the glasses. As she knelt by the brazier to lift the overturned glass, her slim fingers lingered; a head turned sleepily, and, as the lips fell on the little hand, kissed it softly.

At a movement of Aurelian's eyes the girl vanished.

Eveleth half rose to look after her with delight. "Where did you find that bauble, Aurelian?" he said.

Aurelian neither moved nor opened his eyes as he replied, "In Kioto."

"She is more precious than your Delhi topaz."

"She cost me more."

"What is she called?"

"The Honourable White Dew."

"I have never seen her before."

"Nor any other than myself."

"I think she is a dream."

"No, only part of a dream."

"How long will the dream last?"

"Until dawn."

"What is the dawn?"

"Death."

The word roused ungracious thoughts in Eveleth, and he turned his face to the wall, falling into a half dream. When next he looked toward his host it was at the instigation of low voices. A servant was standing by the hammock,—not the mysterious Japanese girl, but a black boy in a red fez. Aurelian looked toward Eveleth sleepily.

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"One is without and craves entrance," said he. "What shall I say to him? He has come as my guest; shall I receive him here?"

"Is he an 'Elect'?"

"No, he is not an 'Elect.'"

"A Philistine then."

"Neither a Philistine, wholly."

"What then?"

"A product of Philistinism, an Agitator."

Eveleth looked vaguely around over the silent room,—at Wentworth, throned in a stately chair of mahogany and brass that had belonged to the great Napoleon, still crowned with the garland of gold bay leaves he had placed on his head after dinner, half in defiance, half in jest, now sleeping, his chibouk lying between his knees; at the abandoned figures motionless about the bronze brazier; at Aurelian, clothed gloriously in a sleeveless gaberdine of blood-red silk over a white crêpe kimono heavy with embroidery; at his own figure half wrapped in a big mantle of rose-coloured damask. And everywhere the stillness of Oriental sleep. As he looked he said dubiously, "An agitator? Do you think an agitator would do—here? Isn't there rather too much to agitate?"

"Yes, and for that reason I will let him come; as it is, this is almost stagnation. He will amuse me, I feel,—I feel, that in a little while, I—might be bored." [Pg 15]

Eveleth sank back resignedly and not without curiosity. Aurelian nodded, and the servant glided away.

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"Hello, Aurelian!"

The words were like a stone dashed in the midst of a pool of brown water, still, under willows. Wentworth, looking like a Napoleonic *revenant*, shivered into wakefulness; Eveleth sat bolt upright with a start; even the opium-smokers, all but Enderby, turned their heavy heads, wakened from mysterious dreams.

The new-comer stopped in the door and stared,—stared mightily. He coughed and blinked in the smoky air. It was the clash of East and West, of a fictitious, exotic East, of a commonplace, hard-headed, practical West.

"Where are you?" McCann cried loudly, making his way through the twilight toward the sound of Aurelian's voice.

"I'm glad to see you at last," he said doubtfully, "but I'm not quite used to this sort of thing, you know; I feel as though I had drunk too much." His eyes fell on the confused heap of drowsy humanity around the brazier. "Aurelian," he said sternly, "is this a 'joint' I have happened on?"

"It is my house," said Aurelian, in his gentle voice, "wherein I have the honour to count you for the moment a guest." [Pg 16]

"I beg pardon," grimly; "but as I said, you must remember I am not familiar with this sort of thing. I think I had better wait until you are less busily engaged."

"My dear fellow, I am never busily engaged, and I am never more idle than now. You will stay, of course. Will you smoke?—I mean tobacco. I think you smoke narghilehs; shall Murad come and light you one?"

"Thanks, by your leave I will smoke my own," and McCann pulled out his brier bull-dog, filled it from his own pouch, and sat down constrainedly, his eyes fixed on the four men in their motley costumes, strewn on the floor.

At once Aurelian began to talk to him frankly and freely, as though nothing had changed since last master and pupil had spoken together, questioning him of his adventures in England and Germany while on his mission among the socialist leaders. McCann noted with surprise and with a feeling almost of reassurance that no detail of recent sociological events had escaped Aurelian; that he listened with equal interest to all that he told him; that he showed keen satisfaction at the outcome of two or three recent strikes in which the strikers had been victorious. But all the time the agitator's eyes were wandering over the dimly visible details of the strange treasure-house where he found himself. He looked on it all with growing resentment; it was hardly to be called socialistic, and there seemed to be a lack of harmony between these luxurious surroundings and the words that Aurelian was saying. There was something awfully wrong; but he shrunk from knowing what he feared to be the worst. [Pg 17]

After the first convulsion which his entrance had caused, the different men had all fallen back languidly in their places; but now Wentworth lifted himself lazily and came down toward Aurelian and the agitator. "Well, *citoyen*," he said, nothing abashed by his fantastic garb, which was far enough from being the same in which he generally met McCann, "Well, *citoyen*, you come as a visitant from another world, like the black steamers that crawl into the balmy vision known to the children of men as Venice,—in it, not of it. Can you bring a tale of the things without? Is there anything worthy of note in Philistia? How fare our friends the republics of the world, there in the outer darkness?"

"Oh," said McCann, with indifference, "there is another revolution on down in Guatemala, and one expected daily in Brazil, and one in the French Republic—"

"And the smoke not yet cleared away from the last revolution in Brazil, nor yet from the last in Chile, nor yet from the last in Honduras; wars in half the republics in South and Central America, rumours of wars in Mexico and all the rest; the French Republic counting the days that already are numbered by its dupes at length undeceived,—I know the whole grotesque story, and yet [Pg 18]

people talk about popular sovereignty and republics. And you yourselves, McCann, *bon citoyen*, you agitators and socialists, hug to yourselves the vain phantom of popular government. You ought to know better, for you know something of sociology if you *are* sweetly ignorant on politics. What was that Balzac said, Aurelian? Tell me."

"About popular government, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Why, he called it the only government that is irresponsible and whose tyranny will be unchecked because exercised under the name of law."

"Ah, this is it! Isn't that exact? '*A bas la République*,' the King shall come to his own again!" and he sung the words gaily to a fragment of an old Jacobite air. "Don't interrupt me, Aurelian, the spirit is on me and I must confound this blind leader." His tone changed and he put his hand on McCann's shoulder. "Malcolm, you know as we all know here that the present condition of this happy world is very like the Puritan idea of hell. You know, also, that the preserving factor, if not the original cause of this pleasant state of affairs, is the modern theory of economics and its resulting industrial and commercial systems. Now, what do you propose to substitute in place of this gigantic abortion, this debauching incubus?"

"State Socialism."

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"Exactly! Out of your own mouth have you condemned yourself. Man, man! what would your State Socialism be in the hands of such a State as we have now? In Chile? In Mexico? In any ring-ruled mob-ruled State in this unhealthy republic? Why, simply the biggest and most wholesale 'job,' the most arrant corruption, the most awful and omnipotent succubus that ever waxed fat on the blood of a dying nation. Malcolm, you and your ilk have made a dreary mistake; you think only of industrial reforms, while to make these of effect you must first have a political reform which will be in itself a revolution. Destroy the present system, build up an honourable State, and then it will be time to talk of State Socialism."

McCann had chafed furiously under this tirade, and as Wentworth threw himself down in a low chair, lighting his Dimitrino cigarette at the flames of the brazier, he burst out violently: "You are all wrong, you don't know what you are talking about when you say we don't want a political reform! We do, a radical reform."

Wentworth's eyes gleamed amusedly through the rings of white smoke as he said quietly, "How?"

"I would destroy the whole system of party and ring rule."

Wentworth smiled disdainfully. "My dear Malcolm," he said, blowing an ash from his cigarette, "I spare you the humiliation of trying to tell me how. Do you not realise that party and ring rule are the necessary results of three of your dearest idols?—idols that you would defend, I believe, with your life. They are these: Manhood suffrage, rotation in office, and representative government. Until you are content to destroy these in your political revolution your attempts to abolish ring and partisan rule will fail."

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"They will not fail, for we shall abolish those abuses through making the control of the people over their representatives more absolute and direct."

"The exact contrary of the result you hope for would follow from the course you suggest. I can't convince you of that now; grant the truth of your position for a moment, what would follow? You would simply substitute for the repulsive rule of the 'bosses' a dreary and fleeting government of emancipated slaves. We have seen the result of that in the South, where we made fatal error in giving the black slaves a measure of political power. You would do the same by giving the white slaves *all* political power. I say, emancipate them,—and govern them."

"By whom?"

"Their King and their peers."

"Where will you find them in this country?"

"Choose them."

"By whom?"

"The people."

"Aha! Then you lose your point."

"By no means, for the franchise should be a privilege, not a right, and while the people should choose, only their leaders should govern."

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"You are a monarchist!"

"Yes."

"Then you are a reactionist, an aristocrat; no socialist!"

"I am a monarchist and a vehement socialist."

"That is a paradox."

"So are most final truths, since a paradox is only a concise statement of the colour on each side of the shield; you remember the fable?"

"Then you mean to say that socialism and monarchism do not negative each other?"

"No more than the silver of one side of the shield negatives the gold of the other."

"You are a vain theorist!"

"It is you who are a vain theorist; my position is based on history. I know the record of the attempts to put the visionary theory of popular government into practice."

"We have never had a true popular government yet."

"I agree with you; but we have had true princes."

"Where?"

For answer Wentworth turned his head a little and raised his eyes toward a great picture hanging in the shadow. McCann followed his glance, and found himself looking at the sad face with the mournful eyes of Vandyke's portrait of King Charles I. of England. Curtains of old purple velvet wrought with Bourbon lilies of tarnished gold hung on either side, and from their midst the King seemed looking on them as in a vision. The picture annoyed McCann; it was the presentment of a King, a tyrant; he scowled at it ill-naturedly.

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"You keep that there because it is a good picture, I suppose," he said, turning to Aurelian, who had been listening silently.

"Because it is a copy of a good picture of a glorious King," replied Aurelian.

"A good *King!*"

"A glorious King and most noble man."

"You talk like a Jacobite."

"I *am* a Jacobite."

McCann took his pipe out of his mouth. "What do you talk like that for? You used to be a socialist."

"I am still a socialist."

"Are you bedevilled with Wentworth's theory that a man can be both a socialist and a royalist?"

"Certainly."

"How do you justify such nonsense?"

"By regarding both sides of the shield."

"I deny that socialism is one side of a shield, the other side of which is monarchism."

"Then you should study history more carefully," interrupted Wentworth.

"Will history prove to me that monarchism is not and has not been from the first the bitter enemy of the people?" cried the agitator, derisively, flashing his eyes savagely on the languid Wentworth.

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"That is exactly what it will prove," returned his tormentor, sweetly.

"Well, I have studied history for twenty years, and it has taught me exactly the reverse."

"*Histories*, you mean; but you must remember that there is very little history in histories."

McCann gasped in impotent rage, but Aurelian interposed with his low voice. "You will reach nothing by such argument, my children. You are both visionaries,—you, Malcolm, who dream of ideal, impossible republics surrounded by the tottering ruins of your fantastic fabrics, builded on the shifting sand of popular fancies; you, Strafford Wentworth, dear dupe of futile hopes, vainly watching for the King to come to his own again. Dreamers both of you! I alone am the practical man; I wait for that which the gods may give. In the mean time I stand with the 'divine Plato,' aside, under the wall, while the storm of dust goes by. Forsake your forlorn hope, Malcolm; stand to one side with me, and wait. And in the mean time"—he lifted a strange Japanese viol—"in the mean time, sing, and forget the imminent night. Malcolm, there is beauty still left, and a little art; it will last us through the twilight."

"Art will not quiet my conscience, nor blind my eyes to the sight of rotting slaves and foul fat drivers."

"You take things too seriously!" cried Wentworth, biting the heavy leaves one by one from a drooping rose. "It is like putting new wine into old bottles to try to pour seriousness into this decrepit and degenerate age."

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McCann laughed aloud. "I accept the omen; for the bottles, if I remember aright, were burst!"

"And you will spill your wine."

"The type of blood; and the blood of martyrs is the seed of the new Commonwealth!"

"But why not take new bottles and save your precious wine?"

"We have none, and the old are at hand."

"They are rotting fast."

"The world cannot wait,—mothers and children starve every day."

"If you die for them it is only a life for a life, and the guilty thrive."

"Some will go down with us to hades!"

Aurelian laughed softly, and rambled vaguely on over the strings of his samosen, making strange



music. "Now we will quarrel no more, for we are where we began. Malcolm, if you must go to your death, *Vale*, I will offer a kid and honey on the altar of Mnemosyne. Go your ways, and leave me to mine; I am weary of this servile and perishing world, rheumy and gibbering. Here I have my books of the Elect, my fading pictures, my treasures of dead civilisation. This is my monastery, like those of the old Faith that, during the night that came down on the world after the ruin of Rome, treasured as in an ark the seeds of the new life. Here I can gather my Children of Light and bar my doors against the Philistines without, among whom, dear Malcolm, force me not yet to number you. Be lenient with me, accept my hospitality; it will strengthen you for your fight with the windmill that forces the wind of God to grind men and women like grain. In the mean time, it is still the youth of the night, so I will give you more wine—or your favourite beer if you like; I have some good Bavarian. Those four decadents and the poor agnostic there on the floor are happy. I never take the black smoke myself, nor any of you: wise, all of you, but God forbid that I should refuse any guest of mine aught! They, sleeping in opium-dreams, have chosen their way. We will choose another for ourselves."

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### III.



HE night had grown old unnoticed, and now in the first dim twilight of coming dawn Aurelian and McCann were sitting on the wide terrace that stretched along the south side of the great house, smoking lazily and drinking the fine rare wines that Aurelian treasured as he treasured his precious books. Not far away the nightingales were singing in the thick wood; other sound there was none save the sweet rustle and stir of the awakening trees under the first thin wind of morning.

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At first McCann had raged inwardly at everything,—at the crowded treasures of art that filled the castle-like house, at the dominant luxury, at the opium, the wine, at all the unfamiliar splendour that surrounded Aurelian. He sat now listening unappreciatively to Aurelian's quiet voice discoursing lovingly of the Romanée Conti, which he himself could not have told from Mâcon. "There are not two dozen of this vintage in America outside of my own cellars," Aurelian had said, and the poor agitator heard him miserably. He did remember, indeed, when a slim glass of amber Madeira was placed on the Indian table by his side and its name given him, that some one had once told him that Constitution Madeira was last quoted in New York at seventy dollars a bottle, and so he drank his glass with a kind of distant wonder, but without pleasure; he thought it musty, he would have chosen Bass. Yet, even as he lay in the long Indian chair, the subtle influence of Aurelian's Lattakhia and of his ancient wine worked slowly in his system, and already he began to think with something approaching tolerance of his pupil's apostasy. He lay full length looking out over the carved balustrade through the silvery jasmine flowers amid their black leaves, to where the sky of blazing stars, already paling before the advancing day, ceased at the edge of the dark hills; and as he lay thus dreamily, he even wondered if he had realised all that there was in life, in his career of feverish action.

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Aurelian tossed the glowing end of his cigarette out through the jasmine leaves, watching it fall like a scarlet star. "Do you not see how it is?" he said; "I know to the full the grotesque hideousness of life as it is, and I long for revolution. But I have seen every man who is fired with desire to bring the change yield to the baleful influence of that which he would destroy until he has come to see no ideals save those of materialism. His ideal of life is a socialistic ideal of a dead, gross, physical ease and level uniformity; his ideal of government a democracy; his ideal of industry State factories with gigantic steam-engines,—his whole system but the present system with all its false ideals, deprived of its individualism. I have lived beyond this, I can see the futility of all these things. I believe only in art as the object of production,—art which shall glorify that which we eat, that wherewith we clothe ourselves, those things whereby we are sheltered; art which shall be this and more,—the ultimate expression of all that is spiritual, religious, and divine in the soul of man. I hate material prosperity, I refuse to justify machinery, I cannot pardon public opinion. I desire only absolute individuality and the triumph of idealism. I detest the republic, and long for the monarchy again."

"Aurelian," said McCann, "will you tell me straight what you mean when you say that, yet claim to be a socialist? I asked you once before that empty-headed Rip Van Winkle called Strafford Wentworth in the other room, and you made an evasive answer. Now, tell me, how do you reconcile the two?"

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"Because I believe that political socialism will destroy society and clear the ground for a new life; because it will annihilate the Republic, and make monarchical government possible."

"It will destroy neither, but reform them both."

"It cannot reform either, for the principles of each are false."

"What do you fancy those principles to be?"

"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

"Do you dare to call those principles false?"

"Liberty and equality false, fraternity impossible so long as the first two pretend to exist."

McCann sat bolt upright. "Look here, Aurelian," he said seriously, "I can't talk in this way, I am not that kind of man. What has come over you? I left you a socialist, and I come back and find you

an unreasoning royalist, incapable of talking sense, putting your defenceless fancies into the armour of paradox. What in the name of common-sense do you mean by it?"

Aurelian turned his handsome head and looked at the red-bearded agitator. "Malcolm," he said gently, "as you would say, we had best have it out. I have changed, but not exactly in the way you think. As I say, I am a socialist but also a royalist, as well as many other things you would think equally bad. I have done a good deal of reading of late, a good deal of thinking; so I have grown,—more than you, for you have only acted. And just that, if you don't mind my saying so, is precisely the trouble with most socialists. Look, this is the situation,"—he sat up with almost animation in his face. "The world is in a bad way, never worse; you taught me that, and the more I study life the more convinced I am of its eternal truth. Reform must come if we are to save this decrepit world from a vain repetition of history; that of course follows from the other assumption. Thus far we walk together; but then arises the question of means, and here we part, for you say reform may be won by agitation, I say man is helpless at the present juncture and can only wait."

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"Men have not waited before; they have acted and have won."

"Yes, for it was dawn and not the eleventh hour."

"What do you make of the French Revolution?"

"A reform undertaken at the eleventh hour, and therefore merging within three years into hideous deformity,—a reform that failed."

"You dare to say that it failed when it destroyed feudalism and the rotten monarchial system?"

"Yes, for in their places it made possible capitalism and the French Republic. Should your agitation succeed it would result in the French Revolution over again, together with all its corollaries,—anarchy, kakistocracy, a glorious tyranny on a false foundation, kakistocracy again, and chaos: a counter revolution, again a kakistocracy, and finally impotence, false and evil as the destroyed feudalism."

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"You are the worst pessimist I ever saw!"

"Of course, for I am an optimist; and one can't be an optimist touching the future without being a pessimist touching the present."

"But how can you be an optimist with regard to the future when you condemn not only the present but every effort toward rebellion and reform?"

"Because you are trying to turn back a tide that is almost at its full. Have patience, and the ebb will come."

A great Persian greyhound, with white silky hair, paced solemnly down the terrace and dropped its head on its master's knees, gazing at him with soft eyes. Aurelian stroked its nose gently.

"Malcolm," he said, "if you persist you will fail, either broken by the power you attack or through creating a condition more evil, more intolerable still. There is a depth of fall below the point the nineteenth century has now reached, and until that destiny is accomplished, you are helpless."

"You break my heart, Aurelian," said McCann, sadly. "When I went away you promised to fight with me in the battle for reform. I thought you understood me, followed me. And now—you lapse into awful luxury and vice,—opium and things. This is pretty bad, you force me to call you a recreant; here on the very eve of battle you forsake the cause, you go over to the enemy; and worse, you are a traitor, for you debauch my men,—you have North now in there drugged with opium. Last of all, you try to tempt me, you urge me to give up the fight; but I am not a deserter."

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"Malcolm, dear boy, I don't deserve quite all of that," said Aurelian, gently. "Yes, I have deserted as you say, for I see more clearly than you; the battle is already lost even before it is fought. I thought once when you filled me with ardour of war that we could win. I see further now. Dear Malcolm, you are waging war against the gods; you have mistaken the light that is on the horizon; you have waked from sleep, but the flush of light that is in your eyes is not the dawn,—it is sunset. You taught me that we lived in another Renaissance; I know it now to be another decadence, inevitable, implacable."

"You are wrong; the decadents have bedevilled you; they are but the froth of the wave that has broken on the shore: the wave of the New Life follows behind to sweep them into nothingness. Leave the simile: grant for the moment that you are right: are you a coward to forsake a good cause that may fail? Have you forgotten John Ball?"

"No, I have not forgotten John Ball, but I am not made of the stuff of martyrs. Malcolm, I love life and love, and the beautiful things still saved from the wreck of worlds. You would make me—an artist—forsake it all, and go shoulder a rifle, or carry a red flag. I have a life given me, let me live. I am not a fighter, let me be; let me live here in this happy oasis in the desert of men. I can't help you, I can only lay down my life on a barricade."

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"That is brute selfishness!"

"No, it is reason. I know myself: I am of no use to you; I thought I might be once, and I tried. Everything sickens me,—every detail of the life that is now, the stock exchange and newspapers, alleged art and trade, and the whole false principle that is under it all. I can't fight them, the contest sickens me. It is all wrong, the principle of your reform; you are wrong yourself. I can't have hope, and if I can't have hope I can't fight. How can I fight for a reform that, if it were carried, would only take the power out of the hands of a sordid gang of capitalists and throw it into the hands of a sordid gang of emancipated slaves? Life would be as hideous under their

*régime* as now. You would change the ownership of cities, but you would not destroy them. You would change the control of machinery, but you would not destroy it. You would, in a word, glorify the machine, magnify the details, ignore the soul of it all,—and the result? Stagnation. I have read your Utopias,—they are hopelessly Philistine; their remedies are stimulants that leave the disease untouched. Malcolm, you will fail, for you do not see far enough. 'Ill would change be at whiles, were it not for the change beyond the change.' They are the words of your own prophet; you will, if you succeed, bring in the change, and it will be ill indeed. I wait for 'the change beyond the change.'

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"I deny that the change that we shall bring will be ill; it will be the next step beyond where we are now. There is no turning back: the law of evolution drives us onward always; each new position won is nobler than the last."

"Ah, that 'law of evolution'—I knew you would quote it to me sooner or later. You hug the pleasant and cheerful theory to your hearts, and twist history to fit its fancied laws. You cannot see that the law of evolution works by a system of waves advancing and retreating; yet as you say the tide goes forward always. Civilisations have risen and fallen in the past as ours has risen and is falling now. Does not history repeat itself? Can you not see that this is one of the periods of decadence that alternate inevitably with the periods of advance? The tide—

*'Was once too at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long-withdrawing roar  
Retreating to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.'*

"Yes, it is the decadence, the Roman decadence over again. Were Lucian to come among us now he would be quite at ease—no, not that, for in one thing we are utterly changed; so sordid is our decadence, so gross, so contemptibly material, that we are denied the consolations of art vouchsafed to his own land. Even in the days of her death Rome could boast the splendour of a luxuriant literature, the glory of beauty of environment, the supremacy of an art-appreciation that blinded men's eyes to the shadow of the end. But for us, in the meanness of our fall, we have no rags of art wherewith to cover our nakedness. Wagner is dead, and Turner and Rossetti; Burne-Jones and Watts will go soon, and Pater will follow Newman and Arnold. The night is at hand."

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He lifted a small hammer and struck a velvet-voiced bell that stood on the Arabian table of cedar inlaid with nacre and ivory. Murad came out of the darkness, and at a gesture from Aurelian filled the great hookah of jade and amber with the tobacco mingled with honey and opium and cinnamon, placed a bright coal in the cup, and gave the curling stem wound with gold thread to his master.

Malcolm watched it all as in a midsummer dream; for once he was succumbing to the subtle influences that were seducing his yielding senses. He could not reply to Aurelian, he lacked now even the desire. The slow and musical voice, so delicately cadenced, had grown infinitely pleasing to his unfamiliar ears, strangely fascinating in its mellow charm. Wondering, he found himself yielding to it,—at first defiantly, then sulkily, then with careless enjoyment, forgetful of everything save his new delight in his strange surroundings.

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The rose-water gurgled and sobbed in the jade hookah; thin lines of odorous smoke rose sinuously to the silken awning that hung above the terrace, dead in the hot August night. For a time neither spoke; then at length Aurelian said, with a more sorrowful gravity than before,—

"Yes, the night is at hand, and the darkness at last will cover our shame. It is better so. I thought once that through art we might work revolution, and so win the world to clearness of sight again; that was because I did not know the nature of art. Art is a result, not an accident,—a result of conditions that no longer exist. We might as well work for the restoration of chivalry, of the House of Stuart, of the spirit of the Cinque-Cento, or any other equally desirable yet hopeless thing. What we are, that our art is also. Every school of art, every lecture on æsthetics, every art museum, is a waste and a vanity, their influence is nothing. Art can never happen again; we who love it and know it for what it is, the flowering of life, may only dream in the past, building for ourselves a stately pleasure-house in Xanadu on the banks of that river measureless to man that runs to a sunless sea.

"Individualism begot materialism, and materialism begot realism; and realism is the antithesis of art.

"What else could have been? Art is a result,—and a cause; at once the flower of life and the seed of the age to come. That age which through its meanness and poverty is barren of blooms leaves no seed for its own propagation. Good-night then to art; for the time its day is done. Intelligence and erudition may create a creditable archæology, and a blind generation may—nay, has—mistaken this for art. Well, its folly is fond and pitiful.

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"Do you not see, then, how the discovery of this thing must fill me with that despair which kills all effort? You will say, 'Rise then, gird thyself with the sword of scorn and invective, and strike with exaltation at the false civilisation which is the death of art and of all that is worthy in life.' Dear boy, our fathers in their fond, visionary idealism made for all time such warfare of no avail. By cunning schemes and crafty mechanism they, impelled by most honourable motives, have woven

a System which is now not alone the System of these United States but of that Europe which we have dragged to our level; a System which is now being accepted by that pure and happy civilisation, the last to yield to our importunity, Japan, and being accepted to its own damnation. And that System has made impossible forever any successful result; for so dominant is it, so subtle in its influence, so almighty in its power, that human strength is helpless before it. Moreover, it will, through its infinite craft, seem to yield now and then, yet only in form; for it will so debauch the reformers that they will think now and again their cause is won, yet will it have lost every element of desirability. Nevertheless 'the People' will shout with acclamation, 'Victory! glorious victory! won through the strength of our immortal and matchless institutions.' And all the while they are shouting for the shadow of revolution, for the dead body from which the soul has fled.

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"'What is this System,' do you say? I will tell you; it is the system of the nineteenth century, by which it will be known in the histories of times to come, should time continue,—the great three-fold system of Equality, The Freedom of the Press, and Public Opinion. You yourself do them honour, for that you yourself have yielded to their evil influence; until you have risen once for all superior to their plausible sophistry, every thought you have, every act you are guilty of, will be tainted by them and made of no avail. The whole world kneels before them now, confessing their dominion. So long as this is so, so long will reform be impossible.

"Democracy, Public Opinion, Freedom of the Press,—the idolatrous tritheism of a corrupt generation. Through the Institution of Democracy you have bound yourself with invincible chains to a political system which is the government of the best, by the worst, for the few,—in other words, the suppression of the intelligent few by the mob for the bosses. By the Institution of Public Opinion you have made Democracy permanent, preventing forever the rule of the 'saving remnant.' You have founded your unholy inquisition for the suppression of the martyrs to wisdom, and by your Institution of the Freedom of the Press you have raised a tyranny, an irresponsible hierarchy of godless demagogues, an impeccable final authority which will suppress, as it suppresses now, all honourable freedom of thought. You have broken and destroyed the power of the Church, and you are proud thereof; but beware! for in its place you have builded a Power, more widespread, more overwhelming, more irresistible. Though you crushed Democracy and discredited Public Opinion, yet so long as the Freedom of the Press remained in existence, Journalism would by its bull of deposition, its anathema of excommunication, extinguish your labour in a breath.

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"Here is your triple-headed Cerberus that bars your exit from this hades you have made. Until he is slain you may never escape. Slain? You cannot slay him; he is sheathed in an impenetrable hide, proof against all assaults. Listen, only in one way may you pass by him. Wait! In a little time his three horrid heads will growl with rising fury each to each, over the enormous spoils of decaying life. Wait! and the growls will grow fierce and more furious; and at last in mortal and horrible combat the beast will strive with *itself*, spreading chaos and death around. So will it disable itself; and when at last its triple head has collapsed in ghastly exhaustion, then will the time have come: pile upon it the hoary boulders of experience left by immemorial glaciers of time; raise them into a mountain, and though, like imprisoned Titan, the horrid beast bellows and thunders below, you may go forth fearlessly, and on the dread ruin he has wrought build a new civilisation, a new life."

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Aurelian's ardent eyes gazed on the man before him through the writhing smoke in the pallid dawn; his voice was like the voice of a velvet bell.

"Yes, it is the end of years; the era of action is over, night follows, blotting from sight the shame of a wasted world; but through the mute, unutterable night rises and brightens the splendour of the new day, the new life. Action has striven and failed, and wreck and ruin are the ending thereof; but across the desert of failure and despair bursts the flame of the Dawn; the far-forgotten spirit of the world rises toward dominion again,—the spirit of visions and dreams, the mighty Mother of worlds and men, the Soul of the Eternal East."

Aurelian had risen and stood facing McCann, his white face lighted by a flame of sudden vigour and inspiration; but even as he finished speaking it changed. His eyes grew soft, and he smiled gently. "Malcolm," he said, coming to the speechless agitator, and laying an arm lightly over his broad shoulders, "Malcolm, I shall hardly forgive you this. You have made me almost enthusiastic again; for a moment I could have believed once more there was virtue in action; that has passed, and I am myself again. And now, look!"

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The sun rose, and its level river of light swept through the valley. A mist like vaporious opals rose slowly from the winding river below them, curling in the amber air and brushing itself in thin plumes over the pale sky. Down from the terrace stretched the great garden, where multitudinous lilies flashed in the first light with iridescent dew. A splendid peacock swept flauntingly through the mazy walks and among the white statues until it reached the central fountain, where it spread itself in the sun. At the foot of the last terrace, where the marble steps turned to serpentine in the still water, a small white boat with prow of gilded fretwork lay motionless among the opening water-lilies and the great blooms of the lotos. The breath of honeysuckle and jasmine and day-lilies and tuberoses drifted slowly up in the first stirring wind. The river-mist lifted, showing the golden meadows with the slim elms here and there and the lofty hills fringed with dark forests beyond.

"Malcolm," said Aurelian, "beyond those fortress hills lies the world,—the nineteenth century, seething with impotent tumult,—festering towns of shoe factories and cotton-mills, lying tradesmen and legalised piracy; pork-packing, stock-brokers, quarrelling and snarling sectaries,

and railroads; politicians, mammonism, realism, and newspapers. Within my walls, which are the century-living pines, is the world of the past and of the future, of the fifteenth century and of the twentieth century. Here have I gathered all my treasures of art and letters; here may those I love find rest and refreshment when worn out with hopeless lighting. Suffer me to live here and forget, or live in a living dream of dreamless life. Against my hilly ramparts life may beat in vain, —it cannot enter. Here I am a King; humour my fancy, and give over your striving to make a poet into a warrior. There is other work before me. Even as in the monasteries of the sixth century the wise monks treasured the priceless records of a dead life until the night had passed and the white day of mediævalism dawned on the world, so suffer me to dream in my cloister through evil days; for the night has come when man may no longer work."

Here ends the Gospel of Inaction called the Decadent, which is privately issued for the Author by Copeland and Day, of Cornhill, Boston, in an edition limited to one hundred and ten copies on this yellow French handmade paper, and fifteen copies on thick Lalanne paper, which have been printed during October and November, MDCCCXCIII by John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, at the University Press. The Frontispiece and Initial letters are designed by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue and cut upon wood by John Sample, Jr.



### Transcriber's Notes:

Table of contents was added for this edition.  
Page 1, changed "agressive" to "aggressive".  
Page 17, changed "Guatamala" to "Guatemala".

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DECADENT: BEING THE GOSPEL OF INACTION \*\*\*

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