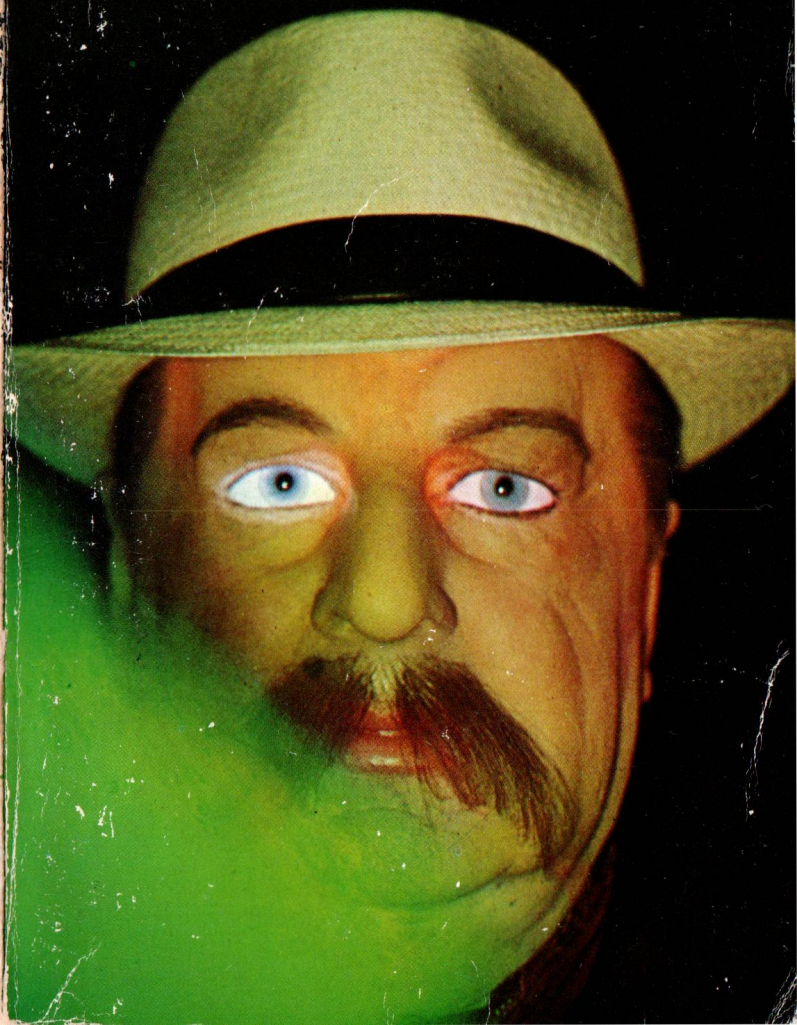




THE 3rd FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT

Ghost Stories

Malign tales of darkness by Somerset Maugham,
A. J. Alan, Hugh MacDiarmid, Oliver Onions and
others – selected by Robert Aickman.



**THE THIRD FONTANA BOOK OF
GREAT GHOST STORIES**

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The Third Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by Robert Aickman



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INTRODUCTION

There are perhaps two good reasons for selecting a ghost story to read; though several bad ones, of which the worst is the quest for a sadistic thrill, something that is better sought in a daily newspaper.

The first good reason is the need we all must feel for some degree of reconciliation with death. The second is vaguer but more continuously present in the consciousness of most of us: the need to escape, at least occasionally, from a mechanistic world, ever more definable, ever more predictable, and, therefore, ever more unsatisfying and frustrating. As an antidote to daily living in a compulsorily egalitarian society, a good ghost story, against all appearances, can bring real joy. The reader may actually depart from it singing.

In the Introduction to the first "Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories," I remarked that the successful ghost story is akin to poetry and seems to emerge from the same strata of the unconscious. I reminded the reader of these things in the Introduction to the second collection, and now venture to do so once more, because this affinity and this origin are at the heart of ghost story writing, reading, choice, and criticism. The successful ghost story does not close a door and leave inside it still another definition, a still further solution. On the contrary, it must open a door, preferably where no one had previously noticed a door to exist; and, at the end, leave it open, or, possibly, ajar. A door ajar is often, of course, more teasing to the imagination ("worse," as children put it) than a door wide open. We think we want certainty and security, but the steadily increasing popularity of ghost stories is only one of many contemporary indications that, in our "hearts," or our unconscious minds (ten times wider than our conscious, say the experts), we want no such stuff. Our unconscious knows full well that if this hard, tangible world of ubiquitous decay were all there is, we should every one of

us draw back at the threshold of it, and our odd race cease to exist. As so much more of us is unconscious than conscious, this means that *we* know it; and so continue to live.

For our allotted time, of course. The ghost story helps, in some small degree, to reconcile us with death, not only by suggesting that all of us, or many, or some, survive it, but also by justifying the death institution itself, illuminating it as an instrument of justice.

“A ministering angel shall my sister be
When thou liest howling.”

Thus the acceptable aspiration; but the ghost story, including the ghost story from which these lines were taken, provides visual and audible evidence of its truth. It may be a creepy business when, in the small hours, Uncle Joe makes his return and gazes, proud or distraught, upon us as we huddle between the sheets; but at least it suggests, first, that we too may not be obliterated when we die, and, second, that the chances and evils of the world are knitted up into justice at the end. . . . Justice is what most people seem to crave for (perhaps modified by mercy, but only slightly), and it is not for the present writer to inquire further into this aspect of the matter, for space would hardly permit.

Uncle Joe's return sounds like a rather commonplace affair, as these things go, though not necessarily the less reassuring for that, in the ways just indicated; but the unconscious, from which ghost stories rise, and, conceivably, ghosts too, is boundless, or at least mercifully unbounded by the present state of knowledge. The ghost story, therefore, can include ingredients from the totality of experience, as can poetry; mainly, once more, experience which is neither fully conscious nor a field for deliberate and prudent selection. *Only* poetry and the ghost story draw on a world so wide.

Wide is the world of ghosts in the more superficial sense also; wide as the surface of the globe. In the present collection, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch leads in a polar ghost, chillier than the night outside; Lady Eleanor Smith materialises a whole tropical island, with a picturesquely clad population,

as suddenly as a competent medium will materialise the white third finger of a lady who died young, with her very betrothal ring on it. Lady Eleanor's island is also the true fabric of wish-fulfilment in the western world, set down by the author with a strange, calm stare; and riddled with inconsistency as all wish-fulfilment must be. And this may be the moment to remind the reader of Quiller-Couch's novel, *Dead Man's Rock*: few novels contain such scenes of spiritual terror, and few show such confidence in the winding of fantastic incident. Only certain elements in the book would qualify as supernatural by the standard of a literal-minded editor, but the entire work glitters with unnatural phosphorescence, which, like phosphorous, enters the reader's blood. It contains the best face-at-the-window scene ever written. Quiller-Couch was a master of these effects. What more fearful place could there be for an unearthly intruder than the snowy waste of *The Seventh Man*?

Though it must be terrible to be so impossibly unable as in the Antarctic to call to strangers for help, it can be hardly better to be pursued by a ghost through a multitude of Malays, Chinese, and Dyaks, all either indifferent or, quite probably, on the ghost's side, as in *The End of the Flight* by Somerset Maugham, a distinguished writer and generous benefactor of other writers, who has himself been so infamously pursued and vulturised since his death by high-minded birds of prey.

There has been, in fact, no people and no culture without ghosts, except, perhaps, the Communist (so far), and no land without poltergeist disturbances from earliest times. But England is generally regarded as the metropolis of the supernatural, as of lyric poetry. In England you cannot gather together more than twenty random people without it transpiring that at least one of them has had a paranormal experience, and very likely seen an apparition. What is more, there will regularly be among the twenty a further person who has been through something considerably more upsetting than the tale told by the first speaker in the group; so upsetting that the person does not care to talk about it, except sometimes to a single individual of proven sympathy.

Those who have embarked upon serious psychic research will agree that what they find, though occasionally inexplicable and fascinating, tends to differ substantially from the poetical ghost stories of fiction. Many of the British stories in this book, however, derive palpably from quite common experience. The strangeness of Mr. MacDiarmid's rustic intruder is of the Dr. Fell order ("the reason why, I cannot tell"); perceptible only to that instant, almost clairvoyant, apprehension which, for those gifted with it, says so vastly more than careful feature-by-feature analysis can say to the rest of us. How many people have a recurring dream, which while it recurs, also shifts significantly, as does that of A. J. Alan; though few of us, even when asleep, have minds so elegant and orderly as to bring it to such a devastating up-shot, while ourselves escaping injury! *The Man Who Came Back* is the work of a beautiful and sensitive stylist: Mr. Gerhardt's *Of Mortal Love* is the finest hard-to-come-by book in English literature. Equally, *The Case of Mr. Lucraft* is the epitome of mid-nineteenth century London, and of its denizens' wild hopes and hidden fears. In it you can listen to the Strand, when it still *was* the Strand; smell the sausages and gas; be overcome by the mystery. If Besant and Rice ever wrote anything better in any field, I have never found it. As for *Negotium Perambulans*, by a writer for whom, as a son of the Archbishop of Canterbury, ghosts were in the family, what community in Cornwall lacks for at least one such tale as this, complete with horrid witness in blood or runes, for those who dare to look? Still, Cornwall is hardly England, as British Railways are currently confirming.

There remain two stories which are on a larger scale. Of my own, it would be indecorous to speak: I shall say only that it is closely based on fact, as must, I imagine, be plain, whatever else may be surmised. Of *The Beckoning Fair One*, it must be said that it is one of the (possibly) six great masterpieces in the field; constellated here with Algernon Blackwood's *The Wendigo* in the first collection, and Robert Hichens's *How Love Came to Professor Guildea* in the second. An almost perfect story, its perfection is the more impressive by reason of the unusual but indispensable length to which it is sus-

tained. The masterly characterisation, not by any means only of the bewitched hero (for who can forget the odious Barrett, and "I was arsking a blessing on our food"?); the slenderness of the ghostly mechanism, equalled only by its deadliness; the so skilfully kept balance, however fierce the odds, between Miss Bengough and her lethal rival; the author's disconcerting blend of worldly knowledge with unworldly lyricism: these are among the elements in a story which brings great power to the ninetiesish theme of the quest for perfection and the ruin to which the quest so regularly leads. To break through the common round is so often to find oneself surrounded.

The shortest ghost story in the world is said to run thus. There were two strangers alone in a railway compartment. "Do you believe in ghosts?" inquired the first, making conversation. "Yes," replied the second; and vanished. And so the present reader: seated after midnight, alone in the isolated manor or headland villa, while the last cinders drop, he or she hears the doorbell. After a longish period of no sound but heartbeat, the chain is attached, the door slightly opened. No one stands outside, or certainly no human being; nothing is visible but the dead tree, nothing audible but the rising wind, nothing tangible but the cold trickling in through the vertical crack. The reader returns slowly to the embers; unassured, and leaving the chain in position. So it is with most phantoms: nothing about them is so confirmatory as nothing.

Robert Aickman

NEGOTIUM PERAMBULANS . . .

E. F. Benson

The casual tourist in West Cornwall may just possibly have noticed, as he bowled along over the bare high plateau between Penzance and Land's End, a dilapidated signpost pointing down a steep lane and bearing on its battered finger the faded inscription "Polearn 2 miles," but probably very few have had the curiosity to traverse those two miles in order to see a place to which their guide-books award so cursory a notice. It is described there, in a couple of unattractive lines, as a small fishing village with a church of no particular interest except for certain carved and painted wooden panels (originally belonging to an earlier edifice) which form an altar-rail. But the church at St. Creed (the tourist is reminded) has a similar decoration far superior in point of preservation and interest, and thus even the ecclesiastically disposed are not lured to Polearn. So meagre a bait is scarce worth swallowing, and a glance at the very steep lane which in dry weather presents a carpet of sharp-pointed stones, and after a rain a muddy watercourse, will almost certainly decide him not to expose his motor or his bicycle to risks like these in so sparsely populated a district. Hardly a house has met his eye since he left Penzance, and the possible trundling of a punctured bicycle for half a dozen weary miles seems a high price to pay for the sight of a few painted panels.

Polearn, therefore, even in the high noon of the tourist season, is little liable to invasion, and for the rest of the year I do not suppose that a couple of folk a day traverse those two miles (long ones at that) of steep and stony gradient. I am not forgetting the postman in this exiguous estimate, for the days are few when, leaving his pony and cart at the top of the hill, he goes as far as the village, since but a few hundred yards down the lane there stands

a large white box, like a sea-trunk, by the side of the road, with a slit for letters and a locked door. Should he have in his wallet a registered letter or be the bearer of a parcel too large for insertion in the square lips of the sea-trunk, he must needs trudge down the hill and deliver the troublesome missive, leaving it in person on the owner, and receiving some small reward of coin or refreshment for his kindness. But such occasions are rare, and his general routine is to take out of the box such letters as may have been deposited there, and insert in their place such letters as he has brought. These will be called for, perhaps that day or perhaps the next, by an emissary from the Polearn post-office. As for the fishermen of the place, who, in their export trade, constitute the chief link of movement between Polearn and the outside world, they would not dream of taking their catch up the steep lane and so, with six miles farther of travel, to the market at Penzance. The sea route is shorter and easier, and they deliver their wares to the pier-head. Thus, though the sole industry of Polearn is sea-fishing, you will get no fish there unless you have bespoken your requirements to one of the fishermen. Back come the trawlers as empty as a haunted house, while their spoils are in the fish-train that is speeding to London.

Such isolation of a little community, continued, as it has been, for centuries, produces isolation in the individual as well, and nowhere will you find greater independence of character than among the people of Polearn. But they are linked together, so it has always seemed to me, by some mysterious comprehension: it is as if they had all been initiated into some ancient rite, inspired and framed by forces visible and invisible. The winter storms that batter the coast, the vernal spell of the spring, the hot, still summers, the season of rains and autumnal decay, have made a spell which, line by line, has been communicated to them, concerning the powers, evil and good, that rule the world, and manifest themselves in ways benignant or terrible . . .

I came to Polearn first at the age of ten, a small boy, weak and sickly, and threatened with pulmonary trouble. My father's business kept him in London, while for me

abundance of fresh air and a mild climate were considered essential conditions if I was to grow to manhood. His sister had married the vicar of Polearn, Richard Bolitho, himself native to the place, and so it came about that I spent three years, as a paying guest, with my relations. Richard Bolitho owned a fine house in the place, which he inhabited in preference to the vicarage, which he let to a young artist, John Evans, on whom the spell of Polearn had fallen, for from year's beginning to year's end he never left it. There was a solid roofed shelter, open on one side to the air, built for me in the garden, and here I lived and slept, passing scarcely one hour out of the twenty-four behind walls and windows. I was out on the bay with the fisher-folk, or wandering along the gorse-clad cliffs that climbed steeply to right and left of the deep combe where the village lay, or pottering about on the pier-head, or birds' nesting in the bushes with the boys of the village. Except on Sunday and for the few daily hours of my lessons, I might do what I pleased so long as I remained in the open air. About the lessons, there was nothing formidable; my uncle conducted me through flowering bypaths among the thickets of arithmetic, and made pleasant excursions into the elements of Latin grammar, and above all, he made me daily give him an account, in clear and grammatical sentences, of what had been occupying my mind or my movements. Should I select to tell him about a walk along the cliffs, my speech must be orderly, not vague, slip-shod notes of what I had observed. In this way, too, he trained my observation, for he would bid me tell him what flowers were in bloom, and what birds hovered fishing over the sea or were building in the bushes. For that I owe him a perennial gratitude, for to observe and to express my thoughts in the clear spoken word became my life's profession.

But far more formidable than my weekday tasks was the prescribed routine for Sunday. Some dark embers compounded of Calvinism and mysticism smouldered in my uncle's soul, and made it a day of terror. His sermon in the morning scorched us with a foretaste of the eternal fires reserved for unrepentant sinners, and he was hardly less

terrifying at the children's service in the afternoon. Well do I remember his exposition of the doctrine of guardian angels. A child, he said, might think himself secure in such angelic care, but let him beware of committing any of those numerous offences which would cause his guardian to turn his face from him, for as sure as there were angels to protect us, there were also evil and awful presences which were ready to pounce; and on them he dwelt with peculiar gusto. Well, too, do I remember in the morning sermon his commentary on the carved panels of the altar-rails to which I have already alluded. There was the angel of Annunciation there, and the angel of Resurrection, but not less was there the witch of Endor, and, on the fourth panel, a scene that concerned me most of all. This fourth panel (he came down from his pulpit to trace its time-worn features) represented the lych-gate of the church-yard at Polearn itself, and indeed the resemblance when thus pointed out was remarkable. In the entry stood the figure of a robed priest holding up a Cross, with which he faced a terrible creature like a gigantic slug, that reared itself up in front of him. That, so ran my uncle's interpretation, was some evil agency, such as he had spoken about to us children, of almost infinite malignity and power, which could alone be combated by firm faith and a pure heart. Below ran the legend "*Negotium perambulans in tenebris*" from the ninety-first Psalm. We should find it translated there, "the pestilence that walketh in darkness," which but feebly rendered the Latin. It was more deadly to the soul than any pestilence that can only kill the body: it was the Thing, the Creature, the Business that trafficked in the outer Darkness, a minister of God's wrath on the unrighteous . . .

I could see, as he spoke, the looks which the congregation exchanged with each other, and knew that his words were evoking a surmise, a remembrance. Nods and whispers passed between them, they understood to what he alluded, and with the inquisitiveness of boyhood I could not rest till I had wormed the story out of my friends among the fisher-boys, as, next morning, we sat basking and naked in the sun after our bathe. One knew one bit of it, one another,

but it pieced together into a truly alarming legend. In bald outline it was as follows:

A church far more ancient than that in which my uncle terrified us every Sunday had once stood not three hundred yards away, on the shelf of level ground below the quarry from which its stones were hewn. The owner of the land had pulled this down, and erected for himself a house on the same site out of these materials, keeping, in a very ecstasy of wickedness, the altar, and on this he dined and played dice afterwards. But as he grew old some black melancholy seized him, and he would have lights burning there all night, for he had deadly fear of the darkness. On one winter evening there sprang up such a gale as was never before known, which broke in the windows of the room where he had supped, and extinguished the lamps. Yells of terror brought in his servants, who found him lying on the floor with the blood streaming from his throat. As they entered some huge black shadow seemed to move away from him, crawled across the floor and up the wall and out of the broken window.

"There he lay a-dying," said the last of my informants, "and him that had been a great burly man was withered to a bag o' skin, for the critter had drained all the blood from him. His last breath was a scream, and he hollered out the same words as passon read off the screen."

"*Negotium perambulans in tenebris*," I suggested eagerly.

"Thereabouts. Latin anyhow."

"And after that?" I asked.

"Nobody would go near the place, and the old house rotted and fell in ruins till three years ago, when along come Mr. Dooliss from Penzance, and built the half of it up again. But he don't care much about such critters, nor about Latin, neither. He takes his bottle of whisky a day and gets drunk's a lord in the evening. Eh, I'm gwine home to my dinner."

Whatever the authenticity of the legend, I had certainly heard the truth about Mr. Dooliss from Penzance, who from that day became an object of keen curiosity on my part, the more so because the quarry-house adjoined my

uncle's garden. The Thing that walked in the dark failed to stir my imagination, and already I was so used to sleeping alone in my shelter that the night had no terrors for me. But it would be intensely exciting to wake at some timeless hour and hear Mr. Dooliss yelling, and conjecture that the Thing had got him.

But by degrees the whole story faded from my mind, overscored by the more vivid interests of the day, and, for the last two years of my out-door life in the vicarage gardens, I seldom thought about Mr. Dooliss and the possible fate that might await him for this temerity in living in the place where that Thing of darkness had done business. Occasionally I saw him over the garden fence, a great yellow lump of a man, with slow and staggering gait, but never did I set eyes on him outside his gate, either in the village street or down on the beach. He interfered with none, and no one interfered with him. If he wanted to run the risk of being the prey of the legendary nocturnal monster, or quietly drink himself to death, it was his affair. My uncle, so I gathered, had made several attempts to see him when first he came to live at Polearn, but Mr. Dooliss appeared to have no use for parsons, but said he was not at home and never returned the call.

After three years of sun, wind, and rain, I had completely outgrown my early symptoms and had become a tough, strapping youngster of thirteen. I was sent to Eton and Cambridge, and in due course ate my dinners and became a barrister. In twenty years from that time I was earning a yearly income of five figures, and had already laid by in sound securities a sum that brought me dividends which would, for one of my simple tastes and frugal habits, supply me with all the material comforts I needed on this side of the grave. The great prizes of my profession were already within my reach, but I had no ambition beckoning me on, nor did I want a wife and children, being, I must suppose, a natural celibate. In fact there was only one ambition which through these busy years had held the lure of blue and far-off hills to me, and that was to get back to Polearn,

and live once more isolated from the world with the sea and the gorse-clad hills for play-fellows, and the secrets that lurked there for exploration. The spell of it had been woven about my heart, and I can truly say that there had hardly passed a day in all those years in which the thought of it and the desire for it had been wholly absent from my mind. Though I had been in frequent communication with my uncle there during his lifetime, and, after his death, with his widow who still lived there, I had never been back to it since I embarked on my profession, for I knew that if I went there, it would be a wrench beyond my power to tear myself away again. But I had made up my mind that when once I had provided for my own independence, I would go back there not to leave it again. And yet I did leave it again, and now nothing in the world would induce me to turn down the lane from the road that leads from Penzance to Land's End, and see the sides of the combe rise steep above the roofs of the village and hear the gulls chiding as they fish in the bay. One of the things invisible, of the dark powers, leaped into light, and I saw it with my eyes.

The house where I had spent those three years of boyhood had been left for life to my aunt, and when I made known to her my intention of coming back to Polearn, she suggested that, till I found a suitable house or found her proposal unsuitable, I should come to live with her.

"The house is too big for a lone old woman," she wrote, "and I have often thought of quitting and taking a little cottage sufficient for me and my requirements. But come and share it, my dear, and if you find me troublesome, you or I can go. You may want solitude—most people in Polearn do—and will leave me. Or else I will leave you: one of the main reasons of my stopping here all these years was a feeling that I must not let the old house starve. Houses starve, you know, if they are not lived in. They die a lingering death; the spirit of them grows weaker and weaker, and at last fades out of them. Isn't this nonsense to your London notions? . . ."

Naturally I accepted with warmth this tentative arrange-

ment, and on an evening in June found myself at the head of the lane leading down to Polearn, and once more I descended into the steep valley between the hills. Time had stood still apparently for the combe, the dilapidated signpost (or its successor) pointed a rickety finger down the lane, and a few hundred yards farther on was the white box for the exchange of letters. Point after remembered point met my eye, and what I saw was not shrunk, as is often the case with the revisited scenes of childhood, into a smaller scale. There stood the post-office, and there the church and close beside it the vicarage, and beyond, the tall shrubberies which separated the house for which I was bound from the road, and beyond that again the grey roofs of the quarry-house damp and shining with the moist evening wind from the sea. All was exactly as I remembered it, and, above all, that sense of seclusion and isolation. Somewhere above the tree-tops climbed the lane which joined the main road to Penzance, but all that had become immeasurably distant. The years that had passed since last I turned in at the well-known gate faded like a frosty breath, and vanished in this warm, soft air. There were law-courts somewhere in memory's dull book which, if I cared to turn the pages, would tell me that I had made a name and a great income there. But the dull book was closed now, for I was back in Polearn, and the spell was woven around me.

And if Polearn was unchanged, so too was Aunt Hester, who met me at the door. Dainty and china-white she had always been, and the years had not aged but only refined her. As she sat and talked after dinner she spoke of all that had happened in Polearn in that score of years, and yet somehow the changes of which she spoke seemed but to confirm the immutability of it all. As the recollection of names came back to me, I asked her about the quarry-house and Mr. Dooliss, and her face gloomed a little as with a shadow of a cloud on a spring day.

"Yes, Mr. Dooliss," she said, "poor Mr. Dooliss, how well I remember him, though it must be ten years and more since he died. I never wrote to you about it, for it was

all very dreadful, my dear, and I did not want to darken your memories of Polearn. Your uncle always thought that something of the sort might happen if he went on in his wicked, drunken ways, and worse than that, and though nobody knew exactly what took place, it was the sort of thing that might have been anticipated."

"But what more or less happened, Aunt Hester?" I asked.

"Well, of course I can't tell you everything, for no one knew it. But he was a very sinful man, and the scandal about him at Newlyn was shocking. And then he lived, too, in the quarry-house . . . I wonder if by any chance you remember a sermon of your uncle's when he got out of the pulpit and explained that panel in the altar-rail, the one, I mean, with the horrible creature rearing itself up outside the lych-gate?"

"Yes, I remember perfectly," said I.

"Ah. It made an impression on you, I suppose, and so it did on all who heard him, and that impression got stamped and branded on us all when the catastrophe occurred. Somehow Mr. Dooliss got to hear about your uncle's sermon, and in some drunken fit he broke into the church and smashed the panel to atoms. He seems to have thought that there was some magic in it, and that if he destroyed that he would get rid of the terrible fate that was threatening him. For I must tell you that before he committed that dreadful sacrilege he had been a haunted man: he hated and feared darkness, for he thought that the creature on the panel was on his track, but that as long as he kept lights burning it could not touch him. But the panel, to his disordered mind, was the root of his terror, and so, as I said, he broke into the church and attempted—you will see why I said 'attempted'—to destroy it. It certainly was found in splinters next morning, when your uncle went into church for matins, and knowing Mr. Dooliss's fear of the panel, he went across to the quarry-house afterwards and taxed him with its destruction. The man never denied it; he boasted of what he had done. There he sat, though it was early morning, drinking his whisky.

"‘I’ve settled your Thing for you,’ he said, ‘and your sermon too. A fig for such superstitions.’

"Your uncle left him without answering his blasphemy, meaning to go straight into Penzance and give information to the police about this outrage to the church, but on his way back from the quarry-house he went into the church again, in order to be able to give details about the damage, and there in the screen was the panel, untouched and uninjured. And yet he had himself seen it smashed, and Mr. Dooliss had confessed that the destruction of it was his work. But there it was, and whether the power of God had mended it or some other power, who knows?"

This was Polearn indeed, and it was the spirit of Polearn that made me accept all Aunt Hester was telling me as attested fact. It had happened like that. She went on in her quiet voice.

"Your uncle recognised that some power beyond police was at work, and he did not go to Penzance or give information about the outrage, for the evidence of it had vanished."

A sudden spate of scepticism swept over me.

"There must have been some mistake," I said. "It hadn't been broken . . ."

She smiled.

"Yes, my dear, but you have been in London so long," she said. "Let me, anyhow, tell you the rest of my story. That night, for some reason, I could not sleep. It was very hot and airless; I dare say you will think that the sultry conditions accounted for my wakefulness. Once and again, as I went to the window to see if I could admit more air, I could see from it the quarry-house, and I noticed the first time that I left my bed that it was blazing with lights. But the second time I saw that it was all in darkness, and as I wondered at that, I heard a terrible scream, and the moment afterwards the steps of some one coming at full speed down the road outside the gate. He yelled as he ran; 'Light, light!' he called out. 'Give me light, or it will catch me!' It was very terrible to hear that, and I went to rouse my husband, who was sleeping in the dressing-room across the passage. He wasted no time, but by now

the whole village was aroused by the screams, and when he got down to the pier he found that all was over. The tide was low, and on the rocks at its foot was lying the body of Mr. Dooliss. He must have cut some artery when he fell on those sharp edges of stone, for he had bled to death, they thought, and though he was a big burly man, his corpse was but skin and bones. Yet there was no pool of blood round him, such as you would have expected. Just skin and bones as if every drop of blood in his body had been sucked out of him!"

She leaned forward.

"You and I, my dear, know what happened," she said, "or at least can guess. God has His instruments of vengeance on those who bring wickedness into places that have been holy. Dark and mysterious are His ways."

Now what I should have thought of such a story if it had been told me in London I can easily imagine. There was such an obvious explanation: the man in question had been a drunkard, what wonder if the demons of delirium pursued him? But here in Polearn it was different.

"And who is in the quarry-house now?" I asked. "Years ago the fisher-boys told me the story of the man who first built it and of his horrible end. And now again it has happened. Surely no one has ventured to inhabit it once more?"

I saw in her face, even before I asked that question, that somebody had done so.

"Yes, it is lived in again," she said, "For there is no end to the blindness . . . I don't know if you remember him. He was the tenant of the vicarage many years ago."

"John Evans," said I.

"Yes. Such a nice fellow he was too. Your uncle was pleased to get so good a tenant. And now——"

She rose.

"Aunt Hester, you shouldn't leave your sentences unfinished," I said.

She shook her head.

"My dear, that sentence will finish itself," she said. "But what a time of night! I must go to bed, and you too,

or they will think we have to keep lights burning here through the dark hours."

Before getting into bed I drew my curtains wide and opened all the windows to the warm tide of the sea air that flowed softly in. Looking out into the garden I could see in the moonlight the roof of the shelter, in which for three years I had lived, gleaming with dew. That, as much as anything, brought back the old days to which I had now returned, and they seemed of one piece with the present, as if no gap of more than twenty years sundered them. The two flowed into one like globules of mercury uniting into a softly shining globe, of mysterious lights and reflections. Then, raising my eyes a little, I saw against the black hill-side the windows of the quarry-house still alight.

Morning, as is so often the case, brought no shattering of my illusion. As I began to regain consciousness, I fancied that I was a boy again waking up in the shelter in the garden, and though, as I grew more widely awake, I smiled at the impression, that on which it was based I found to be indeed true. It was sufficient now as then to be here, to wander again on the cliffs, and hear the popping of the ripened seed-pods on the gorse-bushes; to stray along the shore to the bathing-cove, to float and drift and swim in the warm tide, and bask on the sand, and watch the gulls fishing, to lounge on the pier-head with the fisher-folk, to see in their eyes and hear in their quiet speech the evidence of secret things not so much known to them as part of their instincts and their very being. There were powers and presences about me; the white poplars that stood by the stream that babbled down the valley knew of them, and showed a glimpse of their knowledge sometimes, like the gleam of their white underleaves; the very cobbles that paved the street were soaked in it . . . All that I wanted was to lie there and grow soaked in it too; unconsciously, as a boy, I had done that but now the process must be conscious. I must know what stir of forces, fruitful and mysterious, seethed along the hill-side at noon, and sparkled at night on the sea. They could be known, they could even be controlled by those who were masters of the spell, but

never could they be spoken of, for they were dwellers in the innermost, grafted into the eternal life of the world. There were dark secrets as well as these clear, kindly powers, and to these no doubt belonged the *negotium perambulans in tenebris* which, though of deadly malignity, might be regarded not only as evil, but as the avenger of sacrilegious and impious deeds . . . All this was part of the spell of Polearn, of which the seeds had long lain dormant in me. But now they were sprouting, and who knew what strange flower would unfold on their stems?

It was not long before I came across John Evans. One morning, as I lay on the beach, there came shambling across the sand a man stout and middle-aged with the face of Silenus. He paused as he drew near and regarded me from narrow eyes.

"Why, you're the little chap that used to live in the parson's garden," he said. "Don't you recognise me?"

I saw who it was when he spoke: his voice, I think instructed me, and recognising it, I could see the features of the strong, alert young man in this gross caricature.

"Yes, you're John Evans," I said. "You used to be very kind to me: you used to draw pictures for me."

"So I did, and I'll draw you some more. Been bathing? That's a risky performance. You never know what lives in the sea, nor what lives on the land for that matter. Not that I heed them. I stick to work and whisky. God! I've learned to paint since I saw you, and drink too for that matter. I live in the quarry-house, you know, and it's a powerful thirsty place. Come and have a look at my things if you're passing. Staying with your aunt, are you? I could do a wonderful portrait of her. Interesting face; she knows a lot. People who live at Polearn get to know a lot, though I don't take much stock in that sort of knowledge myself."

I do not know when I have been at once so repelled and interested. Behind the mere grossness of his face there lurked something which, while it appalled, yet fascinated me. His thick lisping speech had the same quality. And his paintings, what would they be like? . . .

"I was just going home," I said. "I'll gladly come in, if you'll allow me."

He took me through the untended and overgrown garden into the house which I had never yet entered. A great grey cat was sunning itself in the window, and an old woman was laying lunch in a corner of the cool hall into which the door opened. It was built of stone, and the carved mouldings let into the walls, the fragments of gargoyles and sculptured images, bore testimony to the truth of its having been built out of the demolished church. In one corner was an oblong and carved wooden table littered with a painter's apparatus and stacks of canvases leaned against the walls.

He jerked his thumb towards a head of an angel that was built into the mantelpiece and giggled.

"Quite a sanctified air," he said, "so we tone it down for the purposes of ordinary life by a different sort of art. Have a drink? No? Well, turn over some of my pictures while I put myself to rights."

He was justified in his own estimate of his skill: he could paint (and apparently he could paint anything), but never have I seen pictures so inexplicably hellish. There were exquisite studies of trees, and you knew that something lurked in the flickering shadows. There was a drawing of his cat sunning itself in the window, even as I had just now seen it, and yet it was no cat but some beast of awful malignity. There was a boy stretched naked on the sands, not human, but some evil thing which had come out of the sea. Above all, there were pictures of his garden overgrown and jungle-like, and you knew that in the bushes were presences ready to spring out on you . . .

"Well, do you like my style?" he said as he came up, glass in hand. (The tumbler of spirits that he held had not been diluted.) "I try to paint the essence of what I see, not the mere husk and skin of it, but its nature, where it comes from and what gives it birth. There's much in common between a cat and a fuchsia-bush if you look at them closely enough. Everything came out of the slime of the pit, and it's all going back there. I should like to do a picture

of you some day. I'd hold the mirror up to Nature, as that old lunatic said."

After this first meeting I saw him occasionally throughout the months of that wonderful summer. Often he kept to his house and to his painting for days together, and then perhaps some evening I would find him lounging on the pier, always alone, and every time we met thus the repulsion and interest grew, for every time he seemed to have gone farther along a path of secret knowledge towards some evil shrine where complete initiation awaited him . . . And then suddenly the end came.

I had met him thus one evening on the cliffs while the October sunset still burned in the sky, but over it with amazing rapidity there spread from the west a great blackness of cloud such as I have never seen for denseness. The light was sucked from the sky, the dusk fell in ever thicker layers. He suddenly became conscious of this.

"I must get back as quick as I can," he said. "It will be dark in a few minutes, and my servant is out. The lamps will not be lit."

He stepped out with extraordinary briskness for one who shambled and could scarcely lift his feet, and soon broke out into a stumbling run. In the gathering darkness I could see that his face was moist with the dew of some unspoken terror.

"You must come with me," he panted, "for so we shall get the lights burning the sooner. I cannot do without light."

I had to exert myself to the full to keep up with him, for terror winged him, and even so I fell behind, so that when I came to the garden gate, he was already half-way up the path to the house. I saw him enter, leaving the door wide, and found him fumbling with matches. But his hand so trembled that he could not transfer the light to the wick of the lamp.

"But what's the hurry about?" I asked.

Suddenly his eyes focused themselves on the open door behind me, and he jumped from his seat beside the table which had once been the altar of God, with a gasp and a scream.

"No, no!" he cried. "Keep it off! . . ."

I turned and saw what he had seen. The Thing had entered and now was swiftly gliding across the floor towards him, like some gigantic caterpillar. A stale phosphorescent light came from it, for though the dusk had grown to darkness outside, I could see it quite distinctly in the awful light of its own presence. From it too there came an odour of corruption and decay, as from slime that has long lain below water. It seemed to have no head, but on the front of it was an orifice of puckered skin which opened and shut and slavered at the edges. It was hairless, and slug-like in shape and in texture. As it advanced its fore-part reared itself from the ground, like a snake about to strike, and it fastened on him. . . .

At that sight, and with the yells of his agony in my ears, the panic which had struck me relaxed into a hopeless courage, and with palsied, impotent hands I tried to lay hold of the Thing. But I could not: though something material was there, it was impossible to grasp it; my hands sunk in it as in thick mud. It was like wrestling with a nightmare.

I think that but a few seconds elapsed before all was over. The screams of the wretched man sank to moans and mutterings as the Thing fell on him: he panted once or twice and was still. For a moment longer there came gurglings and sucking noises, and then it slid out even as it had entered. I lit the lamp which he had fumbled with, and there on the floor he lay, no more than a rind of skin in loose folds over projecting bones.

THE END OF THE FLIGHT

W. Somerset Maugham

I shook hands with the skipper and he wished me good luck. Then I went down to the lower deck, crowded with natives, Malays, Chinese and Dyaks, and made my way to the ladder; looking over the ship's side I saw that my luggage was already in the boat. It was a large, clumsy-looking craft, with a great square sail of bamboo matting, and it was crammed full of gesticulating natives. I scrambled in and a place was made for me. We were about three miles from the shore and a stiff breeze was blowing. As we drew near I saw that the coco-nut trees in green abundance grew to the water's edge, and among them I saw the brown roofs of the village. A Chinese who spoke English pointed out to me a white bungalow as the residence of the District Officer; though he did not know it, it was with him I was going to stay. I had a letter of introduction to him in my pocket.

I felt somewhat forlorn when I landed and my bags were set down beside me on the glistening beach. This was a remote spot to find myself in, this little town on the north coast of Borneo, and I felt a trifle shy at the thought of presenting myself to a total stranger with the announcement that I was going to sleep under his roof, eat his food and drink his whisky, till another boat came in to take me to the port to which I was bound.

But I might have spared myself these misgivings, for the moment I reached the bungalow and sent in my letter, he came out, a sturdy, ruddy, jovial man, of thirty-five perhaps, and greeted me with heartiness. While he held my hand he shouted to a boy to bring drinks and to another to look after my luggage. He cut short my apologies.

"Good God, man, you have no idea how glad I am to see you. Don't think I'm doing anything for you in putting

you up. The boot's on the other leg. And stay as long as you damned well like. Stay a year."

I laughed. He put away his day's work, assuring me that he had nothing to do that could not wait till the morrow, and threw himself into a long chair. We talked and drank and talked. When the heat of the day wore off we went for a long tramp in the jungle and came back wet to the skin. A bath and a change were very grateful, and then we dined. I was tired out and though my host was plainly willing to go on talking straight through the night, I was obliged to beg him to allow me to go to bed.

"All right, I'll just come along to your room, and see everything's all right."

It was a large room with verandas on two sides of it, sparsely furnished, but with a huge bed protected by mosquito netting.

"The bed is rather hard," said my host. "Do you mind?"

"Not a bit. I shall sleep without rocking to-night."

My host looked at the bed reflectively.

"It was a Dutchman who slept in it last. Do you want to hear a funny story?"

I wanted chiefly to go to bed, but he *was* my host, and being at times somewhat of a humorist myself I know that it is hard to have an amusing story to tell and find no listener.

"He came on the boat that brought you, on its last journey along the coast; he came into my office and asked where the *dâk* bungalow was. I told him there wasn't one, but if he hadn't anywhere to go I didn't mind putting him up. He jumped at the invitation. I told him to have his kit sent along.

"'This is all I've got,' he said.

"He held out a little shiny black grip. It seemed a bit scanty, but it was no business of mine, so I told him to go along to the bungalow and I'd come as soon as I was through with my work. While I was speaking the door of my office was opened and my clerk came in. The Dutchman had his back to the door and it may be that my clerk opened it a bit suddenly. Anyhow the Dutchman gave a shout, jumped about two feet into the air, and whipped out a revolver.

" 'What the hell are you doing?' I said.

"When he saw it was the clerk, he collapsed. He leaned against the desk, panting, and upon my word he was shaking as though he'd got fever.

" 'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'It's my nerves. My nerves are terrible.'

" 'It looks like it,' I said.

"I was rather short with him. To tell you the truth, I wished I hadn't asked him to stop with me. He didn't look as though he'd been drinking a lot and I wondered if he was some fellow the police were after. If he were, I said to myself, he could hardly be such a fool as to walk right into the lion's den.

" 'You'd better go and lie down,' I said.

"He took himself off, and when I got back to my bungalow, I found him sitting quite quietly, but bolt upright, on the veranda. He'd had a bath and shaved, and put on clean things and he looked fairly presentable.

" 'Why are you sitting in the middle of the place like that?' I asked him. 'You'll be much more comfortable in one of the long chairs.'

" 'I prefer to sit up,' he said.

"Queer, I thought. But if a man in this heat would rather sit up than lie down, it's his own look out. He wasn't much to look at, tallish and heavily built, with a square head and close-cropped bristly hair. I should think he was about forty. The thing that chiefly struck me about him was his expression. There was a look in his eyes, blue eyes they were and rather small, that beat me altogether, and his face sagged as it were; it gave you the feeling he was going to cry. He had a way of looking quickly over his left shoulder as though he thought he heard something. By God, he was nervous. But we had a couple of drinks and he began to talk. He spoke English very well; except for a slight accent you'd never have known that he was a foreigner, and I'm bound to admit he was a good talker. He'd been everywhere and he'd read any amount. It was a treat to listen to him.

"We had three or four whiskies in the afternoon and

a lot of gin pahits later on, so that when dinner came along we were by way of being rather hilarious, and I'd come to the conclusion that he was a damned good fellow. Of course we had a lot of whisky at dinner and I happened to have a bottle of Benedictine, so we had some liqueurs afterwards. I can't help thinking we both got very tight.

"And at last he told me why he'd come. It was a rum story."

My host stopped and looked at me with his mouth slightly open as though, remembering it now, he was struck again with its rumness.

"He came from Sumatra, the Dutchman, and he'd done something to an Achinese and the Achinese had sworn to kill him. At first he made light of it, but the fellow tried two or three times and it began to be rather a nuisance, so he thought he'd better go away for a bit. He went over to Batavia and made up his mind to have a good time. But when he'd been there a week he saw the fellow slinking along a wall. By God, he'd followed him. It looked as though he meant business. The Dutchman began to think it was getting beyond a joke and he thought the best thing he could do would be to skip off to Soerabaya. You know how crowded the streets are there; he was strolling about one day when he happened to turn round and saw the Achinese walking quite quietly just behind him. It gave him a turn. It would give anyone a turn.

"The Dutchman went straight back to his hotel, packed his things, and took the next boat to Singapore. Of course he put up at the Van Wyck, all the Dutch stay there, and one day when he was having a drink in the courtyard of the hotel, the Achinese walked in as bold as brass, looked at him for a minute, and walked out again. The Dutchman told me he was just paralysed. The fellow could have stuck his kris into him there and then and he wouldn't have been able to move a hand to defend himself. The Dutchman knew he was just biding his time; that damned native was going to kill him, he saw it in his eyes, and he went all to pieces."

"But why didn't he go to the police?" I asked.

"I don't know. I expect it wasn't a thing he wanted the police to be mixed up in."

"But what had he done to the man?"

"I don't know that either. He wouldn't tell me. But by the look he gave when I asked him, I expect it was something pretty rotten. I have an idea he knew he deserved whatever the Achinese could do."

My host lit a cigarette.

"Go on," I said.

"The skipper of the boat that runs between Singapore and Kuching lives at the Van Wyck between trips and the boat was starting at dawn. The Dutchman thought it a grand chance to give the fellow the slip; he left his luggage at the hotel and walked down to the ship with the skipper, as if he were just going to see him off, and stayed on her when she sailed. His nerves were all anyhow by then. He didn't care about anything but getting rid of the Achinese. He felt pretty safe in Kuching. He got a room at the rest-house and bought himself a couple of suits and some shirts in the Chinese shops. But he told me he couldn't sleep. He dreamed of that man, and half a dozen times he awakened just as he thought a kris was being drawn across his throat. By God, I felt quite sorry for him. He just shook as he talked to me and his voice was hoarse with terror. That was the meaning of the look I had noticed. You remember, I told you he had a funny look on his face and I couldn't tell what it meant. Well, it was fear.

"And one day when he was in the club at Kuching he looked out of the window and saw the Achinese sitting there. Their eyes met. The Dutchman just crumpled up and fainted. When he came to, his first idea was to get out. Well, you know, there's not a hell of a lot of traffic at Kuching and this boat that brought you was the only one that gave him a chance to get away quickly. He got on her. He was positive the man was not on board."

"But what made him come here?"

"Well, the old tramp stops at a dozen places on the coast and the Achinese couldn't possibly guess he'd chosen this one because he only made up his mind to get off when

there was only one boat to take the passengers ashore, and there weren't more than a dozen people in it.

" 'I'm safe here for a bit at all events,' he said, 'and if I can only be quiet for a while I shall get my nerve back.'

" 'Stay as long as you like,' I said. 'You're all right here, at all events till the boat comes along next month, and if you like we'll watch the people who come off.'

"He was all over me. I could see what a relief it was to him.

"It was pretty late and I suggested to him that we should turn in. I took him to his room to see that it was all right. He locked the door of the bath-house and bolted the shutters, though I told him there was no risk, and when I left him I heard him lock the door I had just gone out of.

"Next morning when the boy brought me my tea I asked him if he'd called the Dutchman. He said he was just going to—I heard him knock and knock again. Funny, I thought. The boy hammered on the door, but there was no answer. I felt a little nervous, so I got up. I knocked too. We made enough noise to rouse the dead, but the Dutchman slept on. Then I broke down the door. The mosquito curtains were neatly tucked in round the bed. I pulled them open. He was lying there on his back with his eyes open. He was as dead as mutton. A kris lay across his throat, and say I'm a liar if you like, but I swear to God, there wasn't a wound about him anywhere. The room was empty.

"Funny, wasn't it?"

"Well, that all depends on your idea of humour," I replied.

My host looked at me quickly.

"You don't mind sleeping in that bed, do you?"

"N-no. But I'd just as soon you'd told me the story to-morrow morning."

THE BECKONING FAIR ONE

by Oliver Onions

I

The three or four "To Let" boards had stood within the low paling as long as the inhabitants of the little triangular "Square" could remember, and if they had ever been vertical it was a very long time ago. They now overhung the palings each at its own angle, and resembled nothing so much as a row of wooden choppers, ever in the act of falling upon some passers-by, yet never cutting off a tenant for the old house from the stream of his fellows. Not that there was ever any great "stream" through the square; the stream passed a furlong and more away, beyond the intricacy of tenements and alleys and byways that had sprung up since the old house had been built, hemming it in completely; and probably the house itself was only suffered to stand pending the falling-in of a lease or two, when doubtless a clearance would be made of the whole neighbourhood.

It was of bloomy old red brick, and built into its walls were the crowns and clasped hands and other insignia of insurance companies long since defunct. The children of the secluded square had swung upon the low gate at the end of the entrance-alley until little more than the solid top bar of it remained, and the alley itself ran past boarded basement windows on which tramps had chalked their cryptic marks. The path was washed and worn uneven by the spilling of water from the eaves of the encroaching next house, and cats and dogs had made the approach their own. The chances of a tenant did not seem such as to warrant the keeping of the "To Let" boards in a state of legibility and repair, and as a matter of fact they were not so kept.

For six months Oleron had passed the old place twice a day or oftener, on his way from his lodgings to the room, ten minutes' walk away, he had taken to work in; and for six months no hatchet-like notice-board had fallen across his path. This might have been due to the fact that he usually took the other side of the square. But he chanced one morning to take the side that ran past the broken gate and the rain-worn entrance-alley, and to pause before one of the inclined boards. The board bore, besides the agent's name, the announcement, written apparently about the time of Oleron's own early youth, that the key was to be had at Number Six.

Now Oleron was already paying, for his separate bedroom and workroom, more than an author who, without private means, habitually disregards his public, can afford; and he was paying in addition a small rent for the storage of the greater part of his grandmother's furniture. Moreover, it invariably happened that the book he wished to read in bed was at his working-quarters half a mile and more away, while the note or letter he had sudden need of during the day was as likely as not to be in the pocket of another coat hanging behind his bedroom door. And there were other inconveniences in having a divided domicile. Therefore Oleron, brought suddenly up by the hatchet-like notice-board, looked first down through some scanty privet-bushes at the boarded basement windows, then up at the blank and grimy windows of the first floor, and so up to the second floor and the flat stone coping of the leads. He stood for a minute thumbing his lean and shaven jaw; then, with another glance at the board, he walked slowly across the square to Number Six.

He knocked, and waited for two or three minutes, but, although the door stood open, received no answer. He was knocking again when a long-nosed man in shirt-sleeves appeared.

"I was arsking a blessing on our food," he said in severe explanation.

Oleron asked if he might have the key of the old house; and the long-nosed man withdrew again.

Oleron waited for another five minutes on the step; then the man, appearing again and masticating some of the food of which he had spoken, announced that the key was lost.

"But you won't want it," he said. "The entrance door isn't closed, and a push'll open any of the others. I'm an agent for it, if you're thinking of taking it——"

Oleron recrossed the square, descended the two steps at the broken gate, passed along the alley, and turned in at the old wide doorway. To the right, immediately within the door, steps descended to the roomy cellars, and the staircase before him had a carved rail, and was broad and handsome and filthy. Oleron ascended it, avoiding contact with the rail and wall, and stopped at the first landing. A door facing him had been boarded up, but he pushed at that on his right hand, and an insecure bolt or staple yielded. He entered the empty first floor.

He spent a quarter of an hour in the place, and then came out again. Without mounting higher, he descended and recrossed the square to the house of the man who had lost the key.

"Can you tell me how much the rent is?" he asked.

The man mentioned a figure, the comparative lowness of which seemed accounted for by the character of the neighbourhood and the abominable state of unrepair of the place.

"Would it be possible to rent a single floor?"

The long-nosed man did not know; they might . . .

"Who are they?"

The man gave Oleron the name of a firm of lawyers in Lincoln's Inn.

"You might mention my name—Barrett," he added.

Pressure of work prevented Oleron from going down to Lincoln's Inn that afternoon, but he went on the morrow, and was instantly offered the whole house as a purchase for fifty pounds down, the remainder of the purchase-money to remain on mortgage. It took him half an hour to disabuse the lawyer's mind of the idea that he wished anything more of the place than to rent a single floor of it. This made certain hums and haws of a difference, and the

lawyer was by no means certain that it lay within his power to do as Oleron suggested; but it was finally extracted from him that, provided the notice-board were allowed to remain up, and that, provided it was agreed that in the event of the whole house letting, the arrangement should terminate automatically without further notice, something might be done. That the old place should suddenly let over his head seemed to Oleron the slightest of risks to take, and he promised a decision within a week. On the morrow he visited the house again, went through it from top to bottom, and then went home to his lodgings to take a bath.

He was immediately taken with that portion of the house he had already determined should be his own. Scraped clean and repainted, and with that old furniture of Oleron's grandmother's, it ought to be entirely charming. He went to the storage warehouse to refresh his memory of his half-forgotten belongings, and to take measurements; and thence he went to a decorator's. He was very busy with his regular work, and could have wished that the notice-board had caught his attention either a few months earlier or else later in the year; but the quickest way would be to suspend work entirely until after his removal . . .

A fortnight later his first floor was painted throughout in a tender, elder-flower white, the paint was dry, and Oleron was in the middle of his installation. He was animated, delighted; and he rubbed his hands as he polished and made disposals of his grandmother's effects—the tall lattice-paned china cupboard with its Derby and Mason and Spode, the large folding Sheraton table, the long, low bookshelves (he had had two of them "copied"), the chairs, the Sheffield candlesticks, the riveted rose-bowls. These things he set against his newly painted elder-white walls—walls of wood panelled in the happiest proportions, and moulded and coffered to the low-seated window-recesses in a mood of gaiety and rest that the builders of rooms no longer know. The ceilings were lofty, and faintly painted with an old pattern of stars; even the tapering mouldings of his iron fireplace were as delicately designed as jewellery; and Oleron walked about rubbing his hands, frequently stopping for

the mere pleasure of the glimpses from white room to white room . . .

"Charming, charming!" he said to himself. "I wonder what Elsie Bengough will think of this!"

He bought a bolt and a Yale lock for his door, and shut off his quarters from the rest of the house. If he now wanted to read in bed, his book could be had for stepping into the next room. All the time, he thought how exceedingly lucky he was to get the place. He put up a hat-rack in the little square hall, and hung up his hats and caps and coats; and passers through the small triangular square late at night, looking up over the little serried row of wooden "To Let" hatchets, could see the light within Oleron's red blinds, or else the sudden darkening of one blind and the illumination of another, as Oleron, candlestick in hand, passed from room to room, making final settlements of his furniture, or preparing to resume the work that his removal had interrupted.

II

As far as the chief business of his life—his writing—was concerned, Paul Oleron treated the world a good deal better than he was treated by it; but he seldom took the trouble to strike a balance, or to compute how far, at forty-four years of age, he was behind his points on the handicap. To have done so wouldn't have altered matters, and it might have depressed Oleron. He had chosen his path, and was committed to it beyond possibility of withdrawal. Perhaps he had chosen it in the days when he had been easily swayed by something a little disinterested, a little generous, a little noble; and had he ever thought of questioning himself he would still have held to it that a life without nobility and generosity and disinterestedness was no life for him. Only quite recently, and rarely, had he even vaguely suspected that there was more in it than this; but it was no good anticipating the day when, he supposed, he would reach that maximum point of his powers beyond which he must inevitably decline,

and be left face to face with the question whether it would not have profited him better to have ruled his life by less exigent ideals.

In the meantime, his removal into the old house with the insurance marks built into its brick merely interrupted *Romilly Bishop* at the fifteenth chapter.

As this tall man with the lean, ascetic face moved about his new abode, arranging, changing, altering, hardly yet into the working-stride again, he gave the impression of almost spinster-like precision and nicety. For twenty years past, in a score of lodgings, garrets, flats, and rooms furnished and unfurnished, he had been accustomed to doing many things for himself, and he had discovered that it saves time and temper to be methodical. He had arranged with the wife of the long-nosed Barrett, a stout Welsh woman with a falsetto voice, the Merionethshire accent of which long residence in London had not perceptibly modified, to come across the square each morning to prepare his breakfast, and also to "turn the place out" on Saturday mornings; and for the rest, he even welcomed a little housework as a relaxation from the strain of writing.

His kitchen, together with the adjoining strip of an apartment into which a modern bath had been fitted, overlooked the alley at the side of the house; and at one end of it was a large closet with a door, and a square sliding hatch in the upper part of the door. This had been a powder-closet, and through the hatch the elaborately dressed head had been thrust to receive the click and puff of the powder-pistol. Oleron puzzled a little over this closet; then, as its use occurred to him, he smiled faintly, a little moved, he knew not by what . . . He would have to put it to a very different purpose from its original one; it would probably have to serve as his larder . . . It was in this closet that he made a discovery. The back of it was shelved, and, rummaging on an upper shelf that ran deeply into the wall, Oleron found a couple of mushroom-shaped old wooden wig-stands. He did not know how they had come to be there. Doubtless the painters had turned them up somewhere or other, and had put them there. But his five rooms, as a whole, were short

of cupboard and closet-room; and it was only by the exercise of some ingenuity that he was able to find places for the bestowal of his household linen, his boxes, and his seldom-used but not-to-be-destroyed accumulations of papers.

It was in the early spring that Oleron entered on his tenancy, and he was anxious to have *Romilly* ready for publication in the coming autumn. Nevertheless, he did not intend to force its production. Should it demand longer in the doing, so much the worse; he realised its importance, its crucial importance, in his artistic development, and it must have its own length and time. In the workroom he had recently left he had been making excellent progress; *Romilly* had begun, as the saying is, to speak and act of herself; and he did not doubt she would continue to do so the moment the distraction of his removal was over. This distraction was almost over; he told himself it was time he pulled himself together again; and on a March morning he went out, returned again with two great bunches of yellow daffodils, placed one bunch on his mantelpiece between the Sheffield sticks and the other on the table before him, and took out the half-completed manuscript of *Romilly Bishop*.

But before beginning work he went to a small rosewood cabinet and took from a drawer his cheque-book and pass-book. He totted them up, and his monk-like face grew thoughtful. His installation had cost him more than he had intended it should, and his balance was rather less than fifty pounds, with no immediate prospect of more.

"H'm! I'd forgotten rugs and chintz curtains and so forth mounted up so," said Oleron. "But it would have been a pity to spoil the place for the want of ten pounds or so . . . Well, *Romilly* simply *must* be out for the autumn, that's all. So here goes——"

He drew his papers towards him.

But he worked badly; or, rather, he did not work at all. The square outside had its own noises, frequent and new, and Oleron could only hope that he would speedily become accustomed to these. First came hawkers, with their carts and cries; at midday the children, returning from school,

trooped into the square and swung on Oleron's gate; and when the children had departed again for afternoon school, an itinerant musician with a mandoline posted himself beneath Oleron's window and began to strum. This was a not unpleasant distraction, and Oleron, pushing up his window, threw the man a penny. Then he returned to his table again . . .

But it was no good. He came to himself, at long intervals, to find that he had been looking about his room and wondering how it had formerly been furnished—whether a settee in buttercup or petunia satin had stood under the farther window, whether from the centre moulding of the light lofty ceiling had depended a glimmering crystal chandelier, or where the tambour-frame or the picquet-table had stood . . . No, it was no good; he had far better be frankly doing nothing than getting fruitlessly tired; and he decided that he would take a walk, but, chancing to sit down for a moment, dozed in his chair instead.

"This won't do," he yawned when he awoke at half-past four in the afternoon; "I must do better than this to-morrow——"

And he felt so deliciously lazy that for some minutes he even contemplated the breach of an appointment he had for the evening.

The next morning he sat down to work without even permitting himself to answer one of his three letters—two of them tradesmen's accounts, the third a note from Miss Bengough, forwarded from his old address. It was a jolly day of white and blue, with a gay noisy wind and a subtle turn in the colour of growing things; and over and over again, once or twice a minute, his room became suddenly light and then subdued again, as the shining white clouds rolled north-eastwards over the square. The soft fitful illumination was reflected in the polished surface of the table and even in the footworn old floor; and the morning noises had begun again.

Oleron made a pattern of dots on the paper before him, and then broke off to move the jar of daffodils exactly opposite the centre of a creamy panel. Then he wrote a sentence that ran continuously for a couple of lines, after which

it broke off into notes and jottings. For a time he succeeded in persuading himself that in making these memoranda he was really working; and then he rose and began to pace his room. As he did so, he was struck by an idea. It was that the place might possibly be a little better for more positive colour. It was, perhaps, a thought *too* pale—mild and sweet as a kind old face, but a little devitalised, even wan . . . Yes, decidedly it would bear a robuster note—more and richer flowers, and possibly some warm and gay stuff for cushions for the window-seats . . .

"Of course, I really can't afford it," he muttered, as he went for a two-foot and began to measure the width of the window-recesses . . .

In stooping to measure a recess, his attitude suddenly changed to one of interest and attention. Presently he rose again, rubbing his hands with gentle glee.

"Oho, oho!" he said. "These look to me very much like window-boxes, nailed up. We must look into this! Yes, those are boxes, or I'm . . . oho, this is an adventure!"

On that wall of his sitting-room there were two windows (the third was in another corner), and, beyond the open bedroom door, on the same wall, was another. The seats of all had been painted, repainted, and painted again; and Oleron's investigating finger had barely detected the old nail-heads beneath the paint. Under the ledge over which he stooped an old keyhole also had been puttied up. Oleron took out his penknife.

He worked carefully for five minutes, and then went into the kitchen for a hammer and chisel. Driving the chisel cautiously under the seat, he started the whole lid slightly. Again using the penknife, he cut along the hinged edge and outward along the ends; and then he fetched a wedge and a wooden mallet.

"Now for our little mystery——" he said.

The sound of the mallet on the wedge seemed, in that sweet and pale apartment, somehow a little brutal—nay, even shocking. The panelling rang and rattled and vibrated to the blows like a sounding-board. The whole house seemed to echo; from the roomy cellarage to the garrets above a flock

of echoes seemed to awake, and the sound got a little on Oleron's nerves. All at once he paused, fetched a duster, and muffled the mallet . . . When the edge was sufficiently raised he put his fingers under it and lifted. The paint flaked and starred a little; the rusty old nails squeaked and grunted; and the lid came up, laying open the box beneath. Oleron looked into it. Save for a couple of inches of scurf and mould and old cobwebs it was empty.

"No treasure there," said Oleron, a little amused that he should have fancied there might have been. "*Romilly* will still have to be out by the autumn. Let's have a look at the others."

He turned to the second window.

The raising of the two remaining seats occupied him until well into the afternoon. That of the bedroom, like the first, was empty; but from the second seat of his sitting-room he drew out something yielding and folded and furred over an inch thick with dust. He carried the object into the kitchen, and having swept it over a bucket, took a duster to it.

It was some sort of a large bag, of an ancient frieze-like material, and when unfolded it occupied the greater part of the small kitchen floor. In shape it was an irregular, a very irregular, triangle, and it had a couple of wide flaps, with the remains of straps and buckles. The patch that had been uppermost in the folding was of a faded yellowish brown; but the rest of it was of shades of crimson that varied according to the exposure of the parts of it.

"Now whatever can that have been?" Oleron mused as he stood surveying it . . . "I give it up. Whatever it is, it's settled my work for to-day, I'm afraid——"

He folded the object up carelessly and thrust it into a corner of the kitchen; then, taking pans and brushes and an old knife, he returned to the sitting-room and began to scrape and to wash and to line with paper his newly discovered receptacles. When he had finished, he put his spare boots and books and papers into them; and he closed the lids again, amused with his little adventure, but also a little anxious for the hour to come when he should settle fairly down to his work again.

III

It piqued Oleron a little that his friend, Miss Bengough, should dismiss with a glance the place he himself had found so singularly winning. Indeed she scarcely lifted her eyes to it. But then she had always been more or less like that—a little indifferent to the graces of life, careless of appearances, and perhaps a shade more herself when she ate biscuits from a paper bag than when she dined with greater observance of the conveniences. She was an unattached journalist of thirty-four, large, showy, fair as butter, pink as a dog-rose, reminding one of a florist's picked specimen bloom, and given to sudden and ample movements and moist and explosive utterances. She "pulled a better living out of the pool" (as she expressed it) than Oleron did; and by cunningly disguised puffs of drapers and haberdashers she "pulled" also the greater part of her very varied wardrobe. She left small whirlwinds of air behind her when she moved, in which her veils and scarves fluttered and spun.

Oleron heard the flurry of her skirts on his staircase and her single loud knock at his door when he had been a month in this new abode. Her garments brought in the outer air, and she flung a bundle of ladies' journals down on a chair.

"Don't knock off for me," she said across a mouthful of large-headed hatpins as she removed her hat and veil. "I didn't know whether you were straight yet, so I've brought some sandwiches for lunch. You've got coffee, I suppose?—No, don't get up—I'll find the kitchen——"

"Oh, that's all right, I'll clear these things away. To tell the truth, I'm rather glad to be interrupted," said Oleron.

He gathered his work together and put it away. She was already in the kitchen; he heard the running of water into the kettle. He joined her, and ten minutes later followed her back to the sitting-room with the coffee and

sandwiches on a tray. They sat down, with the tray on a small table between them.

"Well, what do you think of the new place?" Oleron asked as she poured out coffee.

"H'm! . . . Anybody'd think you were going to get married, Paul."

He laughed.

"Oh no. But it's an improvement on some of them, isn't it?"

"Is it? I suppose it is; I don't know. I liked the last place, in spite of the black ceiling and no water-tap. How's *Romilly*?"

Oleron thumbed his chin.

"H'm! I'm rather ashamed to tell you. The fact is, I've not got on very well with it. But it will be all right on the night, as you used to say."

"Stuck?"

"Rather stuck."

"Got any of it you care to read to me? . . ."

Oleron had long been in the habit of reading portions of his work to Miss Bengough occasionally. Her comments were always quick and practical, sometimes directly useful, sometimes indirectly suggestive. She, in return for his confidence, always kept all mention of her own work sedulously from him. His, she said, was "real work"; hers merely filled space, not always even grammatically.

"I'm afraid there isn't," Oleron replied, still meditatively dry-shaving his chin. Then he added, with a little burst of candour, "The fact is, Elsie, I've not written—not actually written—very much more of it—*any* more of it, in fact. But, of course, that doesn't mean I haven't progressed. I've progressed. I've progressed, in one sense, rather alarmingly. I'm now thinking of reconstructing the whole thing."

Miss Bengough gave a gasp. "Reconstructing!"

"Making *Romilly* herself a different type of woman. Somehow, I've begun to feel that I'm not getting the most out of her. As she stands, I've certainly lost interest in her to some extent."

"But—but——" Miss Bengough protested, "you had her so real, so *living*, Paul!"

Oleron smiled faintly. He had been quite prepared for Miss Bengough's disapproval. He wasn't surprised that she liked Romilly as she at present existed; she would. Whether she realised it or not, there was much of herself in his fictitious creation. Naturally Romilly would seem "real," "living," to her . . .

"But are you really serious, Paul?" Miss Bengough asked presently, with a round-eyed stare.

"Quite serious."

"You're really going to scrap those fifteen chapters?"

"I didn't exactly say that."

"That fine, rich love scene?"

"I should only do it reluctantly, and for the sake of something I thought better."

"And that beautiful, *beautiful* description of Romilly on the shore?"

"It wouldn't necessarily be wasted," he said a little uneasily.

But Miss Bengough made a large and windy gesture, and then let him have it.

"Really, you are *too* trying!" she broke out. "I do wish sometimes you'd remember you're human, and live in a world! You know I'd be the *last* to wish you to lower your standard one inch, but it wouldn't be lowering it to bring it within human comprehension. Oh, you're sometimes altogether too godlike! . . . Why, it would be a wicked, criminal waste of your powers to destroy those fifteen chapters! Look at it reasonably, now. You've been working for nearly twenty years; you've now got what you've been working for almost within your grasp; your affairs are at a most critical stage (oh, don't tell me; I know you're about at the end of your money); and here you are, deliberately proposing to withdraw a thing that will probably make your name, and to substitute for it something that ten to one nobody on earth will ever want to read—and small blame to them! Really, you try my patience!"

Oleron had shaken his head slowly as she had talked. It was an old story between them. The noisy, able, practical journalist was an admirable friend—up to a certain point; beyond that . . . well, each of us knows that point beyond which we stand alone. Elsie Bengough sometimes said that had she had one-tenth part of Oleron's genius there were few things she could not have done—thus making that genius a quantitatively divisible thing, a sort of ingredient, to be added to or subtracted from in the admixture of his work. That it was a qualitative thing, essential, indivisible, informing, passed her comprehension. Their spirits parted company at that point. Oleron knew it. She did not appear to know it.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said a little wearily, by and by, "practically you're quite right, entirely right, and I haven't a word to say. If I could only turn *Romilly* over to you you'd make an enormous success of her. But that can't be, and I, for my part, am seriously doubting whether she's worth my while. You know what that means."

"What does it mean?" she demanded bluntly.

"Well," he said, smiling wanly, "what *does* it mean when you're convinced a thing isn't worth doing? You simply don't do it."

Miss Bengough's eyes swept the ceiling for assistance against this impossible man.

"What utter rubbish!" she broke out at last. "Why, when I saw you last you were simply oozing *Romilly*; you were turning her off at the rate of four chapters a week; if you hadn't moved you'd have had her three-parts done by now. What on earth possessed you to move right in the middle of your most important work?"

Oleron tried to put her off with a recital of inconveniences, but she wouldn't have it. Perhaps in her heart she partly suspected the reason. He was simply mortally weary of the narrow circumstances of his life. He had had twenty years of it—twenty years of garrets and roof-chambers and dingy flats and shabby lodgings, and he was tired of dinginess and shabbiness. The reward was as far off as ever—or if it was not, he no longer cared as once he would have

cared to put out his hand and take it. It is all very well to tell a man who is at the point of exhaustion that only another effort is required of him; if he cannot make it he is as far off as ever . . .

"Anyway," Oleron summed up, "I'm happier here than I've been for a long time. That's some sort of a justification."

"And doing no work," said Miss Bengough pointedly.

At that a trifling petulance that had been gathering in Oleron came to a head.

"And why should I do nothing but work?" he demanded. "How much happier am I for it? I don't say I don't love my work—when it's done; but I hate doing it. Sometimes it's an intolerable burden that I simply long to be rid of. Once in many weeks it has a moment, one moment, of glow and thrills for me; I remember the days when it was all glow and thrill; and now I'm forty-four, and it's becoming drudgery. Nobody wants it; I'm ceasing to want it myself; and if any ordinary sensible man were to ask me whether I didn't think I was a fool to go on, I think I should agree that I was."

Miss Bengough's comely pink face was serious.

"But you knew all that, many, many years ago, Paul—and still you chose it," she said in a low voice.

"Well, and how should I have known?" he demanded. "I didn't know. I was told so. My heart, if you like, told me so, and I thought I knew. Youth always thinks it knows; then one day it discovers that it is nearly fifty——"

"Forty-four, Paul——"

"—forty-four, then—and it finds that the glamour isn't in front, but behind. Yes, I knew and chose, if *that's* knowing and choosing . . . but it's a costly choice we're called on to make when we're young!"

Miss Bengough's eyes were on the floor. Without moving them she said, "You're not regretting it, Paul?"

"Am I not?" he took her up. "Upon my word, I've lately thought I am! What *do* I get in return for it all?"

"You know what you get," she replied.

He might have known from her tone what else he could

have had for the holding up of a finger—herself. She knew, but could not tell him, that he could have done no better thing for himself. Had he, any time these ten years, asked her to marry him, she would have replied quietly, "Very well; when?" He had never thought of it . . .

"Yours is the real work," she continued quietly. "Without you we jackals couldn't exist. You and a few like you hold everything upon your shoulders."

For a minute there was a silence. Then it occurred to Oleron that this was common vulgar grumbling. It was not his habit. Suddenly he rose and began to stack cups and plates on the tray.

"Sorry you catch me like this, Elsie," he said, with a little laugh. ". . . No, I'll take them out; then we'll go for a walk if you like . . ."

He carried out the tray, and then began to show Miss Bengough round his flat. She made few comments. In the kitchen she asked what an old faded square of reddish frieze was, that Mrs. Barrett used as a cushion for her wooden chair.

"That? I should be glad if you could tell *me* what it is," Oleron replied as he unfolded the bag and related the story of its finding in the window-seat.

"I think I know what it is," said Miss Bengough. "It's been used to wrap up a harp before putting it into its case."

"By Jove, that's probably just what it was," said Oleron. "I could make neither head nor tail of it . . ."

They finished the tour of the flat, and returned to the sitting-room.

"And who lives in the rest of the house?" Miss Bengough asked.

"I dare say a tramp sleeps in the cellar occasionally. Nobody else."

"H'm! . . . Well, I'll tell you what I think about it, if you like."

"I should like."

"You'll never work here."

"Oh?" said Oleron quickly. "Why not?"

"You'll never finish *Romilly* here. Why, I don't know, but you won't. I know it. You'll have to leave before you get on with that book."

He mused for a moment, and then said:

"Isn't that a little—prejudiced, Elsie?"

"Perfectly ridiculous. As an argument it hasn't a leg to stand on. But there it is," she replied, her mouth once more full of the large-headed hatpins.

Oleron was reaching down his hat and coat. He laughed.

"I can only hope you're entirely wrong," he said, "for I shall be in a serious mess if *Romilly* isn't out in the autumn."

IV

As Oleron sat by his fire that evening, pondering Miss Bengough's prognostication that difficulties awaited him in his work, he came to the conclusion that it would have been far better had she kept her beliefs to herself. No man does a thing better for having his confidence damped at the outset, and to speak of difficulties is in a sense to make them. Speech itself becomes a deterrent act, to which other discouragements accrete until the very event of which warning is given is as likely as not to come to pass. He heartily confounded her. An influence hostile to the completion of *Romilly* had been born.

And in some illogical, dogmatic way women seem to have, she had attached this antagonistic influence to his new abode. Was ever anything so absurd! "You'll never finish *Romilly* here." . . . Why not? Was this her idea of the luxury that saps the springs of action and brings a man down to indolence and dropping out of the race? The place was well enough—it was entirely charming, for that matter—but it was not so demoralising as all that! No; Elsie had missed her mark that time . . .

He moved his chair to look round the room that smiled, positively smiled, in the firelight. He too smiled, as if pity was to be entertained for a maligned apartment. Even that

slight lack of robust colour he had remarked was not noticeable in the soft glow. The drawn chintz curtains—they had a flowered and trellised pattern, with baskets and oaten pipes—fell in long quiet folds to the window-seats; the rows of bindings in old bookcases took the light richly; the last trace of sallowness had gone with the daylight; and, if the truth must be told, it had been Elsie herself who had seemed a little out of the picture.

That reflection struck him a little, and presently he returned to it. Yes, the room had, quite accidentally, done Miss Bengough a disservice that afternoon. It had, in some subtle but unmistakable way, placed her, marked a contrast of qualities. Assuming for the sake of argument the slightly ridiculous proposition that the room in which Oleron sat was characterised by a certain sparsity and lack of vigour; so much the worse for Miss Bengough; she certainly erred on the side of redundancy and general muchness. And if one must contrast abstract qualities, Oleron inclined to the austere in taste . . .

Yes, here Oleron had made a distinct discovery; he wondered he had not made it before. He pictured Miss Bengough again as she had appeared that afternoon—large, showy, moistly pink, with that quality of the prize bloom exuding, as it were from her; and instantly she suffered in his thought. He even recognised now that he had noticed something odd at the time, and that unconsciously his attitude, even while she had been there, had been one of criticism. The mechanism of her was a little obvious; her melting humidity was the result of analysable processes; and behind her there had seemed to lurk some dim shape emblematic of mortality. He had never, during the ten years of their intimacy, dreamed for a moment of asking her to marry him; none the less, he now felt for the first time a thankfulness that he had not done so . . .

Then, suddenly and swiftly, his face flamed that he should be thinking thus of his friend. What! Elsie Bengough, with whom he had spent weeks and weeks of afternoons—she, the good chum, on whose help he would have counted had all the rest of the world failed him—she,

whose loyalty to him would not, he knew, swerve as long as there was breath in her—Elsie to be even in thought dissected thus! He was an ingrate and a cad . . .

Had she been there in that moment he would have abased himself before her.

For ten minutes and more he sat, still gazing into the fire, with that humiliating red fading slowly from his cheeks. All was still within and without, save for a tiny musical tinkling that came from his kitchen—the dripping of water from an imperfectly turned-off tap into the vessel beneath it. Mechanically he began to beat with his fingers to the faintly heard falling of the drops; the tiny regular movement seemed to hasten that shameful withdrawal from his face. He grew cool once more; and when he resumed his meditation he was all unconscious that he took it up again at the same point . . .

It was not only her florid superfluity of build that he had approached in the attitude of criticism; he was conscious also of the wide differences between her mind and his own. He felt no thankfulness that up to a certain point their natures had ever run companionably side by side; he was now full of questions beyond that point. Their intellects diverged; there was no denying it; and, looking back, he was inclined to doubt whether there had been any real coincidence. True, he had read his writings to her and she had appeared to speak comprehendingly and to the point; but what can a man do who, having assumed that another sees as he does, is suddenly brought up sharp by something that falsifies and discredits all that has gone before? He doubted all now . . . It did for a moment occur to him that the man who demands of a friend more than can be given to him is in danger of losing that friend, but he put the thought aside.

Again he ceased to think, and again moved his finger to the distant dripping of the tap . . .

And now (he resumed by and by), if these things were true of Elsie Bengough, they were also true of the creation of which she was the prototype—Romilly Bishop. And since he could say of Romilly what for very shame he could

not say of Elsie, he gave his thoughts rein. He did so in that smiling, firelighted room, to the accompaniment of the faintly heard tap.

There was no longer any doubt about it; he hated the central character of his novel. Even as he had described her physically she overpowered the senses; she was coarse-fibred, over-coloured, rank. It became true the moment he formulated his thought; Gulliver had described the Brobdingnagian maids-of-honour thus: and mentally and spiritually she corresponded—was unsensitive, limited, common. The model (he closed his eyes for a moment)—the model stuck out through fifteen vulgar and blatant chapters to such a pitch that, without seeing the reason, he had been unable to begin the sixteenth. He marvelled that it had only just dawned upon him.

And *this* was to have been his Beatrice, his vision! As Elsie she was to have gone into the furnace of his art, and she was to have come out the Woman all men desired! Her thoughts were to have been culled from his own finest, her form from his dearest dreams, and her setting wherever he could find one fit for her worth. He had brooded long before making the attempt; then one day he had felt her stir within him as a mother feels a quickening, and he had begun to write; and so he had added chapter to chapter.

And those fifteen sodden chapters were what he had produced!

Again he sat, softly moving his finger . . .

Then he bestirred himself.

She must go, all fifteen chapters of her. That was settled. For what was to take her place his mind was a blank; but one thing at a time; a man is not excused from taking the wrong course because the right one is not immediately revealed to him. Better would come if it was to come; in the meantime—

He rose, fetched the fifteen chapters, and read them over before he should drop them into the fire.

But instead of putting them into the fire he let them fall from his hand. He became conscious of the dripping of the tap again. It had a tinkling gamut of four or five notes,

on which it rang irregular changes, and it was foolishly sweet and dulcimer-like. In his mind Oleron could see the gathering of each drop, its little tremble on the lip of the tap, and the tiny percussion of its fall "Plink—plink," minimised almost to inaudibility. Following the lowest note there seemed to be a brief phrase, irregularly repeated; and presently Oleron found himself waiting for the recurrence of this phrase. It was quite pretty . . .

But it did not conduce to wakefulness, and Oleron dozed over his fire.

When he awoke again the fire had burned low and the flames of the candles were licking the rims of the Sheffield sticks. Sluggishly he rose, yawned, went his nightly round of door-locks and window-fastenings, and passed into his bedroom. Soon, he slept soundly.

But a curious little sequel followed on the morrow. Mrs. Barrett usually tapped, not at his door, but at the wooden wall beyond which lay Oleron's bed; and then Oleron rose, put on his dressing-gown, and admitted her. He was not conscious that as he did so that morning he hummed an air; but Mrs. Barrett lingered with her hand on the door-knob and her face a little averted and smiling.

"De-ar me!" her soft falsetto rose. "But that will be a very o-ald tune, Mr. Oleron! I will not have heard it this for-ty years!"

"What tune?" Oleron asked.

"The tune, indeed, that you was humming, sir."

Oleron had his thumb in the flap of a letter. It remained there.

"I was humming? . . . Sing it, Mrs. Barrett."

Mrs. Barrett prut-prutted.

"I have no voice for singing, Mr. Oleron; it was Ann Pugh was the singer of our family; but the tune will be very o-ald, and it is called 'The Beckoning Fair One'."

"Try to sing it," said Oleron, his thumb still in the envelope; and Mrs. Barrett, with much dimpling and confusion, hummed the air.

"They do say it was sung to a harp, Mr. Oleron, and it will be very o-ald," she concluded.

"And I was singing that?"

"Indeed you wass. I would not be likely to tell you lies."

With a "Very well—let me have breakfast," Oleron opened his letter; but the trifling circumstance struck him as more odd than he would have admitted to himself. The phrase he had hummed had been that which he had associated with the falling from the tap on the evening before.

V

Even more curious than that the commonplace dripping of an ordinary water-tap should have tallied so closely with an actually existing air was another result it had, namely, that it awakened, or seemed to awaken, in Oleron an abnormal sensitiveness to other noises of the old house. It has been remarked that silence obtains its fullest and most impressive quality when it is broken by some minute sound; and, truth to tell, the place was never still. Perhaps the mildness of the spring air operated on its torpid old timbers; perhaps Oleron's fires caused it to stretch its old anatomy; and certainly a whole world of insect life bored and burrowed in its baulks and joists. At any rate Oleron had only to sit quiet in his chair and to wait for a minute or two in order to become aware of such a change in the auditory scale as comes upon a man who, conceiving the midsummer woods to be motionless and still, all at once finds his ear sharpened to the crepitation of a myriad insects.

And he smiled to think of man's arbitrary distinction between that which has life and that which has not. Here, quite apart from such recognisable sounds as the scampering of mice, the falling of plaster behind his panelling, and the popping of purses or coffins from his fire, was a whole house talking to him had he but known its language. Beams settled with a tired sigh into their old mortices; creatures ticked in the walls; joints cracked, boards complained; with no palpable stirring of the air window-sashes changed their positions with a soft knock in their frames. And whether the place had life in this sense or not, it had at

all events a winsome personality. It needed but an hour of musing for Oleron to conceive the idea that, as his own body stood in friendly relation to his soul, so, by an extension and an attenuation, his habitation might fantastically be supposed to stand in some relation to himself. He even amused himself with the far-fetched fancy that he might so identify himself with the place that some future tenant, taking possession, might regard it as in a sense haunted. It would be rather a joke if he, a perfectly harmless author, with nothing on his mind worse than a novel he had discovered he must begin again, should turn out to be laying the foundation of a future ghost! . . .

In proportion, however, as he felt this growing attachment to the fabric of his abode, Elsie Bengough, from being merely unattracted, began to show a dislike of the place that was more and more marked. And she did not scruple to speak of her aversion.

"It doesn't belong to to-day at all, and for you especially it's bad," she said with decision. "You're only too ready to let go your hold on actual things and to slip into apathy; you ought to be in a place with concrete floors and a patent gas-meter and a tradesmen's lift. And it would do you all the good in the world if you had a job that made you scramble and rub elbows with your fellow-men. Now, if I could get you a job, for, say, two or three days a week, one that would allow you heaps of time for your proper work—would you take it?"

Somehow, Oleron resented a little being diagnosed like this. He thanked Miss Bengough, but without a smile.

"Thank you, but I don't think so. After all each of us has his own life to live," he could not refrain from adding.

"His own life to live! . . . How long is it since you were out, Paul?"

"About two hours."

"I don't mean to buy stamps or to post a letter. How long is it since you had anything like a stretch?"

"Oh, some little time perhaps. I don't know."

"Since I was here last?"

"I haven't been out much."

"And has *Romilly* progressed much better for your being cooped up?"

"I think she has. I'm laying the foundations of her. I shall begin the actual writing presently."

It seemed as if Miss Bengough had forgotten their tussle about the first *Romilly*. She frowned, turning half away, and then quickly turned again.

"Ah! . . . So you've still got that ridiculous idea in your head?"

"If you mean," said Oleron slowly, "that I've discarded the old *Romilly*, and am at work on a new one, you're right. I have still got that idea in my head."

Something uncordial in his tone struck her; but she was a fighter. His own absurd sensitiveness hardened her. She gave a "Pshaw!" of impatience.

"Where is the old one?" she demanded abruptly.

"Why?" asked Oleron.

"I want to see it. I want to show some of it to you. I want, if you're not wool-gathering entirely, to bring you back to your senses."

This time it was he who turned his back. But when he turned round again he spoke more gently.

"It's no good, Elsie. I'm responsible for the way I go, and you must allow me to go it—even if it should seem wrong to you. Believe me, I am giving thought to it . . . The manuscript? I was on the point of burning it, but I didn't. It's in that window-seat, if you must see it."

Miss Bengough crossed quickly to the window-seat, and lifted the lid. Suddenly she gave a little exclamation, and put the back of her hand to her mouth. She spoke over her shoulder:

"You ought to knock those nails in, Paul," she said. He strode to her side.

"What? What is it? What's the matter?" he asked. "I did knock them in—or, rather, pulled them out."

"You left enough to scratch with," she replied, showing her hand. From the upper wrist to the knuckle of the little finger a welling red wound showed.

"Good—gracious!" Oleron ejaculated . . . "Here, come to the bathroom and bathe it quickly——"

He hurried her to the bathroom, turned on warm water, and bathed and cleansed the bad gash. Then, still holding the hand, he turned cold water on it, uttering broken phrases of astonishment and concern.

"Good Lord, how did that happen! As far as I knew I'd . . . is this water too cold? Does that hurt? I can't imagine how on earth . . . there; that'll do——"

"No—one moment longer—I can bear it," she murmured, her eyes closed . . .

Presently he led her back to the sitting-room and bound the hand in one of his handkerchiefs; but his face did not lose its expression of perplexity. He had spent half a day in opening and making serviceable the three window-boxes, and he could not conceive how he had come to leave an inch and a half of rusty nail standing in the wood. He himself had opened the lids of each of them a dozen times and had not noticed any nail; but there it was . . .

"It shall come out now, at all events," he muttered, as he went for a pair of pincers. And he made no mistake about it that time.

Elsie Bengough had sunk into a chair, and her face was rather white; but in her hand was the manuscript of *Romilly*. She had not finished with *Romilly* yet. Presently she returned to the charge.

"Oh, Paul, it will be the greatest mistake you ever, *ever* made if you do not publish this!" she said.

He hung his head, genuinely distressed. He couldn't get that incident of the nail out of his head, and *Romilly* occupied a second place in his thoughts for the moment. But still she insisted; and when presently he spoke it was almost as if he asked her pardon for something.

"What can I say, Elsie? I can only hope that when you see the new version, you'll see how right I am. And if in spite of all you *don't* like her, well . . ." he made a hopeless gesture. "Don't you see that I *must* be guided by my own lights?"

She was silent.

"Come, Elsie," he said gently. "We've got along well so far; don't let us split on this."

The last words had hardly passed his lips before he regretted them. She had been nursing her injured hand, with her eyes once more closed; but her lips and lids quivered simultaneously. Her voice shook as she spoke.

"I can't help saying it, Paul, but you are so greatly changed."

"Hush, Elsie," he murmured soothingly; "you've had a shock; rest for a while. How could I change?"

"I don't know, but you are. You've not been yourself ever since you came here. I wish you'd never seen the place. It's stopped your work, it's making you into a person I hardly know, and it's made me horribly anxious about you. . . . Oh, how my hand is beginning to throb!"

"Poor child!" he murmured. "Will you let me take you to a doctor and have it properly dressed?"

"No—I shall be all right presently—I'll keep it raised——"

She put her elbow on the back of her chair, and the bandaged hand lightly on his shoulder.

At that touch an entirely new anxiety stirred suddenly within him. Hundreds of times previously, on their jaunts and excursions, she had slipped her hand within his arm as she might have slipped it into the arm of a brother, and he had accepted the little affectionate gesture as a brother might have accepted it. But now, for the first time, there rushed into his mind a hundred startling questions. Her eyes were still closed, and her head had fallen pathetically back; and there was a lost and ineffable smile on her parted lips. The truth broke in upon him. Good God! . . . And he had never divined it.

And stranger than all was that, now that he did see that she was lost in love of him, there came to him, not sorrow and humility and abasement, but something else that he struggled in vain against—something entirely strange and new, that, had he analysed it, he would have found to be petulance and irritation and resentment and ungentleness.

The sudden selfish prompting mastered him before he was aware. He all but gave it words. What was she doing there at all? Why was she not getting on with her own work? Why was she here interfering with his? Who had given her this guardianship over him that lately she had put forward so assertively?—"Changed"? It was she, not himself, who had changed . . .

But by the time she had opened her eyes again he had overcome his resentment sufficiently to speak gently, albeit with reserve.

"I wish you would let me take you to a doctor."

She rose.

"No, thank you, Paul," she said. "I'll go now. If I need a dressing I'll get one; take the other hand, please. Goodbye——"

He did not attempt to detain her. He walked with her to the foot of the stairs. Half-way along the narrow alley she turned.

"It would be a long way to come if you happened not to be in," she said; "I'll send you a postcard the next time." At the gate she turned again.

"Leave here, Paul," she said, with a mournful look. "Everything's wrong with this house."

Then she was gone.

Oleron returned to his room. He crossed straight to the window-box. He opened the lid and stood long looking at it. Then he closed it again and turned away.

"That's rather frightening," he muttered. "It's simply not possible that I should not have removed that nail . . ."

V I

Oleron knew very well what Elsie had meant when she had said that her next visit would be preceded by a postcard. She, too, had realised that at last, at last he knew—knew, and didn't want her. It gave him a miserable, pitiful pang, therefore, when she came again within a week, knocking

at the door unannounced. She spoke from the landing; she did not intend to stay, she said; and he had to press her before she would so much as enter.

Her excuse for calling was that she had heard of an inquiry for short stories that he might be wise to follow up. He thanked her. Then, her business over, she seemed anxious to get away again. Oleron did not seek to detain her; even he saw through the pretext of the stories; and he accompanied her down the stairs.

But Elsie Bengough had no luck whatever in that house. A second accident befell her. Half-way down the staircase there was the sharp sound of splintering wood, and she checked a loud cry. Oleron knew the woodwork to be old, but he himself had ascended and descended frequently enough without mishap . . .

Elsie had put her foot through one of the stairs.

He sprang to her side in alarm.

"Oh, I say! My poor girl!"

She laughed hysterically.

"It's my weight—I know I'm getting fat——"

"Keep still—let me clear these splinters away," he muttered between his teeth.

She continued to laugh and sob that it was her weight—she was getting fat——

He thrust downwards at the broken boards. The extrication was no easy matter, and her torn boot showed him how badly the foot and ankle within must be abraded.

"Good God—good God!" he muttered over and over again.

"I shall be too heavy for anything soon," she sobbed and laughed.

But she refused to reascend and to examine her hurt.

"No, let me go quickly—let me go quickly," she repeated.

"But it's a frightful gash!"

"No—not so bad—let me get away quickly—I'm—I'm not wanted."

At her word, that she was not wanted, his head dropped as if she had given him a buffet.

"Elsie!" he choked, brokenly and shocked.

But she too made a quick gesture, as if she put something violently aside.

"Oh, Paul, not *that*—not *you* of course I do mean that too in a sense—oh, you know what I mean! . . . But if the other can't be, spare me this now! I—I wouldn't have come, but—but oh, I did, I *did* try to keep away!"

It was intolerable, heartbreaking; but what could he do—what could he say? He did not love her . . .

"Let me go—I'm not wanted—let me take away what's left of me——"

"Dear Elsie—you are very dear to me——"

But again she made the gesture, as of putting something violently aside.

"No, not that—not anything less—don't offer me anything less—leave me a little pride——"

"Let me get my hat and coat—let me take you to a doctor," he muttered.

But she refused. She refused even the support of his arm. She gave another unsteady laugh.

"I'm sorry I broke your stairs, Paul . . . You will go and see about the short stories, won't you?"

He groaned.

"Then if you won't see a doctor, will you go across the square and let Mrs. Barrett look at you? Look, there's Barrett passing now——"

The long-nosed Barrett was looking curiously down the alley, but as Oleron was about to call him he made off without a word. Elsie seemed anxious for nothing so much as to be clear of the place, and finally promised to go straight to a doctor, but insisted on going alone.

"Good-bye," she said.

And Oleron watched her until she was past the hatchet-like "To Let" boards, as if he feared that even they might fall upon her and maim her.

That night Oleron did not dine. He had far too much on his mind. He walked from room to room of his flat, as if he could have walked away from Elsie Bengough's haunting cry that still rang in his ears. "I'm not wanted—don't

offer me anything less—let me take away what's left of me——”

Oh, if he could only have persuaded himself that he loved her!

He walked until twilight fell, then, without lighting candles, he stirred up the fire and flung himself into a chair.

Poor, poor Elsie! . . .

But even while his heart ached for her, it was out of the question. If only he had known! If only he had used common observation! But those walks, those sisterly takings of the arm—what a fool he had been! . . . Well, it was too late now. It was she, not he, who must now act—act by keeping away. He would help her all he could. He himself would not sit in her presence. If she came, he would hurry her out again as fast as he could . . . Poor, poor Elsie!

His room grew dark; the fire burned dead; and he continued to sit, wincing from time to time as a fresh tortured phrase rang again in his ears.

Then suddenly, he knew not why, he found himself anxious for her in a new sense—uneasy about her personal safety. A horrible fancy that even then she might be looking over an embankment down into dark water, that she might even now be glancing up at the hook on the door, took him. Women had been known to do those things . . . Then there would be an inquest, and he himself would be called upon to identify her, and would be asked how she had come by an ill-healed wound on the hand and a bad abrasion of the ankle. Barrett would say that he had seen her leaving his house . . .

Then he recognised that his thoughts were morbid. By an effort of will he put them aside, and sat for a while listening to the faint creakings and tickings and rattlings within his panelling . . .

If only he could have married her! . . . But he couldn't. Her face had risen before him again as he had seen it on the stairs, drawn with pain and ugly and swollen with tears. Ugly—yes, positively blubbered; if tears were women's weapons, as they were said to be, such tears were weapons turned against themselves . . . suicide again . . .

Then all at once he found himself attentively considering her two accidents.

Extraordinary they had been, both of them. He *could not* have left that old nail standing in the wood; why, he had fetched tools specially from the kitchen; and he was convinced that that step that had broken beneath her weight had been as sound as the others. It was inexplicable. If these things could happen, anything could happen. There was not a beam nor a jamb in the place that might not fall without warning, not a plank that might not crash inwards, not a nail that might not become a dagger. The whole place was full of life even now; as he sat there in the dark he heard its crowds of noises as if the house had been one great microphone . . .

Only half conscious that he did so, he had been sitting for some time identifying these noises, attributing to each crack or creak or knock its material cause; but there was one noise which, again not fully conscious of the omission, he had not sought to account for. It had last come some minutes ago; it came again now—a sort of soft sweeping rustle that seemed to hold an almost inaudibly minute crackling. For half a minute or so it had Oleron's attention; then his heavy thoughts were of Elsie Bengough again.

He was nearer to loving her in that moment than he had ever been. He thought how to some men their loved ones were but the dearer for those poor mortal blemishes that tell us we are but sojourners on earth, with a common fate not far distant that makes it hardly worth while to do anything but love for the time remaining. Strangling sobs, blurring tears, bodies buffeted by sickness, hearts and minds callous and hard with the rubs of the world—how little love there would be were these things a barrier to love! In that sense he did love Elsie Bengough. What her happiness had never moved in him her sorrow almost awoke . . .

Suddenly his meditation went. His ear had once more become conscious of that soft and repeated noise—the long sweep with the almost inaudible crackle in it. Again and again it came, with a curious insistence and urgency. It

quickened a little as he became increasingly attentive . . . it seemed to Oleron that it grew louder . . .

All at once he started bolt upright in his chair, tense and listening. The silky rustle came again; he was trying to attach it to something . . .

The next moment he had leapt to his feet, unnerved and terrified. His chair hung poised for a moment, and then went over, setting the fire-irons clattering as it fell. There was only one noise in the world like that which had caused him to spring thus to his feet . . .

The next time it came Oleron felt behind him at the empty air with his hand, and backed slowly until he found himself against the wall.

"God in heaven!" The ejaculation broke from Oleron's lips. The sound had ceased.

The next moment he had given a high cry.

"What is it? What's there? *Who's* there?"

A sound of scuttling caused his knees to bend under him for a moment; but that, he knew, was a mouse. That was not something that his stomach turned sick and his mind reeled to entertain. That other sound, the like of which was not in the world, had now entirely ceased; and again he called . . .

He called and continued to call; and then another terror, a terror of the sound of his own voice, seized him. He did not dare to call again. His shaking hand went to his pocket for a match, but found none. He thought there might be matches on the mantelpiece——

He worked his way to the mantelpiece round a little recess, without for a moment leaving the wall. Then his hand encountered the mantelpiece, and groped along it. A box of matches fell to the hearth. He could just see them in the firelight, but his hand could not pick them up until he had cornered them inside the fender.

Then he rose and struck a light.

The room was as usual. He struck a second match. A candle stood on the table. He lighted it, and the flame sank for a moment and then burned up clear. Again he looked round.

There was nothing.

There was nothing; but there had been something, and might still be something. Formerly, Oleron had smiled at the fantastic thought that, by a merging and interplay of identities between himself and his beautiful room, he might be preparing a ghost for the future; it had not occurred to him *that there might have been a similar merging and coalescence in the past*. Yet with this staggering impossibility he was now face to face. Something did persist in the house; it had a tenant other than himself; and that tenant, whatsoever or whosoever, had appalled Oleron's soul by producing the sound of a woman brushing her hair.

VII

Without quite knowing how he came to be there Oleron found himself striding over the loose board he had temporarily placed on the step broken by Miss Bengough. He was hatless, and descending the stairs. Not until later did there return to him a hazy memory that he had left the candle burning on the table, had opened the door no wider than was necessary to allow the passage of his body, and had sidled out, closing the door softly behind him. At the foot of the stairs another shock awaited him. Something dashed with a flurry up from the disused cellars and disappeared out of the door. It was only a cat, but Oleron gave a childish sob.

He passed out of the gate, and stood for a moment under the "To Let" boards, plucking foolishly at his lip and looking up at the glimmer of light behind one of his red blinds. Then, still looking over his shoulder, he moved stumbly up the square. There was a small public-house round the corner; Oleron had never entered it; but he entered it now, and put down a shilling that missed the counter by inches.

"B—b—bran—brandy," he said, and then stooped to look for the shilling.

He had the little sawdusted bar to himself; what com-

pany there was—carters and labourers and the small tradesmen of the neighbourhood—was gathered in the farther compartment, beyond the space where the white-haired landlady moved among her taps and bottles. Oleron sat down on a hardwood settee with a perforated seat, drank half his brandy and then, thinking he might as well drink it as spill it, finished it.

Then he fell to wondering which of the men whose voices he heard across the public-house would undertake the removal of his effects on the morrow.

In the meantime he ordered more brandy.

For he did not intend to go back to that room where he had left the candle burning. Oh no! He couldn't have faced even the entry and the staircase with the broken step—certainly not that pith-white, fascinating room. He would go back for the present to his old arrangement, of work-room and separate sleeping-quarters; he would go to his old landlady at once—presently—when he had finished his brandy—and see if she could put him up for the night. His glass was empty now . . .

He rose, had it refilled, and sat down again.

And if anybody asked his reason for removing again? Oh, he had reason enough—reason enough! Nails that put themselves back into wood again and gashed people's hands, steps that broke when you trod on them, and women who came into a man's place and brushed their hair in the dark, were reasons enough! He was querulous and injured about it all. He had taken the place for himself, not for invisible women to brush their hair in; that lawyer fellow in Lincoln's Inn should be told so, too, before many hours were out; it was outrageous, letting people in for agreements like that!

A cut-glass partition divided the compartment where Oleron sat from the space where the white-haired landlady moved; but it stopped seven or eight inches above the level of the counter. There was no partition at the farther bar. Presently Oleron, raising his eyes, saw that faces were watching him through the aperture. The faces disappeared when he looked at them.

He moved to a corner where he could not be seen from the other bar; but this brought him into line with the white-haired landlady.

She knew him by sight—had doubtless seen him passing and repassing; and presently she made a remark on the weather. Oleron did not know what he replied, but it sufficed to call forth the further remark that the winter had been a bad one for influenza, but that the spring weather seemed to be coming at last . . . Even this slight contact with the commonplace steadied Oleron a little; an idle nascent wonder whether the landlady brushed her hair every night, and, if so, whether it gave out those little electric cracklings, was shut down with a snap; and Oleron was better . . .

With his next glass of brandy he was all for going back to his flat. Not go back? Indeed, he would go back! They should very soon see whether he was to be turned out of his place like that! He began to wonder why he was doing the rather unusual thing he was doing at that moment, unusual for him—sitting hatless, drinking brandy, in a public-house. Suppose he were to tell the white-haired landlady all about it—to tell her that a caller had scratched her hand on a nail, had later had the bad luck to put her foot through a rotten stair, and that he himself, in an old house full of squeaks and creaks and whispers, had heard a minute noise and had bolted from it in fright—what would she think of him? That he was mad, of course . . . Pshaw! The real truth of the matter was that he hadn't been doing enough work to occupy him. He had been dreaming his days away, filling his head with a lot of moonshine about a new *Romilly* (as if the old one was not good enough), and now he was surprised that the devil should enter an empty head!

Yes, he would go back. He would take a walk in the air first—he hadn't walked enough lately—and then he would take himself in hand, settle the hash of that sixteenth chapter of *Romilly* (fancy, he had actually been fool enough to think of destroying fifteen chapters!) and thenceforward he would remember that he had obligations to his

fellow-men and work to do in the world. There was the matter in a nutshell.

He finished his brandy and went out.

He had walked for some time before any other bearing of the matter than that on himself occurred to him. At first, the fresh air had increased the heady effect of the brandy he had drunk; but afterwards his mind grew clearer than it had been since morning. And the clearer it grew, the less final did his boastful self-assurances become, and the firmer his conviction that, when all explanations had been made, there remained something that could not be explained. His hysteria of an hour before had passed; he grew steadily calmer; but the disquieting conviction remained. A deep fear took possession of him. It was a fear for Elsie.

For something in his place was inimical to her safety. Of themselves, her two accidents might not have persuaded him of this; but she herself had said it. "*I'm not wanted here . . .*" And she had declared that there was something wrong with the place. She had seen it before he had. Well and good. One thing stood out clearly: namely, that if this was so, she must be kept away for quite another reason than that which had so confounded and humiliated Oleron. Luckily she had expressed her intention of staying away; she must be held to that intention. He must see to it.

And he must see to it all the more that he now saw his first impulse, never to set foot in the place again, was absurd. People did not do that kind of thing. With Elsie made secure, he could not with any respect to himself suffer himself to be turned out by a shadow, nor even by a danger merely because it was a danger. He had to live somewhere, and he would live there. He must return.

He mastered the faint chill of fear that came with the decision, and turned in his walk abruptly. Should fear grow on him again he would, perhaps, take one more glass of brandy . . .

But by the time he reached the short street that led to the square he was too late for more brandy. The little public-house was still lighted, but closed, and one or two men were standing talking on the kerb. Oleron noticed that a sudden

silence fell on them as he passed, and he noticed further that the long-nosed Barrett, whom he passed a little lower down, did not return his good night. He turned in at the broken gates, hesitated merely an instant in the alley, and then mounted his stairs again.

Only an inch of candle remained in the Sheffield stick, and Oleron did not light another one. Deliberately he forced himself to take it up and to make the tour of his five rooms before retiring. It was as he returned from the kitchen across his little hall that he noticed that a letter lay on the floor. He carried it into his sitting-room, and glanced at the envelope before opening it.

It was unstamped, and had been put into the door by hand. Its handwriting was clumsy, and it ran from beginning to end without comma or period. Oleron read the first line, turned to the signature, and then finished the letter.

It was from the man Barrett, and it informed Oleron that he, Barrett, would be obliged if Mr. Oleron would make other arrangements for the preparing of his breakfasts and the cleaning-out of his place. The sting lay in the tail, that is to say, the postscript. This consisted of a text of Scripture. It embodied an allusion that could only be to Elsie Bengough . . .

A seldom-seen frown had cut deeply into Oleron's brow. So! That was it! Very well; they would see about that in the morrow . . . For the rest, this seemed merely another reason why Elsie should keep away . . .

Then his suppressed rage broke out . . .

The foul-minded lot! The devil himself could not have given a leer at anything that had ever passed between Paul Oleron and Elsie Bengough, yet this nosing rascal must be prying and talking! . . .

Oleron crumpled the paper up, held it in the candle flame, and then ground the ashes under his heel.

One useful purpose, however, the letter had served: it had created in Oleron a wrathful blaze that effectually banished pale shadows. Nevertheless, one other puzzling circumstance was to close the day. As he undressed, he chanced to glance at his bed. The coverlets bore an impress as if

somebody had lain on them. Oleron could not remember that he himself had lain down during the day—off-hand, he would have said that certainly he had not; but after all he could not be positive. His indignation for Elsie, acting possibly with the residue of the brandy in him, excluded all other considerations; and he put out his candle, lay down, and passed immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep, which, in the absence of Mrs. Barrett's morning call, lasted almost once round the clock.

VIII

To the man who pays heed to that voice within him which warns him that twilight and danger are settling over his soul, terror is apt to appear an absolute thing, against which his heart must be safeguarded in a twink unless there is to take place an alteration in the whole range and scale of his nature. Mercifully, he has never far to look for safeguards. Of the immediate and small and common and momentary things of life, of usages and observances and modes and conventions, he builds up fortifications against the powers of darkness. He is even content that, not terror only, but joy also, should for working purposes be placed in the category of the absolute things; and the last treason he will commit will be that breaking down of terms and limits that strikes, not at one man, but at the welfare of the souls of all.

In his own person, Oleron began to commit this treason. He began to commit it by admitting the inexplicable and horrible to an increasing familiarity. He did it insensibly, unconsciously, by a neglect of the things that he now regarded it as an impertinence in Elsie Bengough to have prescribed. Two months before, the words "a haunted house," applied to his lovely bemusing dwelling, would have chilled his marrow; now, his scale of sensation becoming depressed, he could ask "Haunted by what?" and remain unconscious that horror, when it can be proved to be relative, by so much

loses its proper quality. He was setting aside the landmarks. Mists and confusion had begun to enwrap him.

And he was conscious of nothing so much as of a voracious inquisitiveness. He wanted to *know*. He was resolved to know. Nothing but the knowledge would satisfy him; and craftily he cast about for means whereby he might attain it.

He might have spared his craft. The matter was the easiest imaginable. As in time past he had known, in his writing, moments when his thoughts had seemed to rise of themselves and to embody themselves in words not to be altered afterwards, so now the questions he put himself seemed to be answered even in the moment of their asking. There was exhilaration in the swift, easy processes. He had known no such joy in his own power since the days when his writing had been a daily freshness and a delight to him. It was almost as if the course he must pursue was being dictated to him.

And the first thing he must do, of course, was to define the problem. He defined it in terms of mathematics. Granted that he had not the place to himself; granted that the old house had inexpressibly caught and engaged his spirit; granted that, by virtue of the common denominator of the place, this unknown co-tenant stood in some relation to himself: what next? Clearly, the nature of the other numerator must be ascertained.

And how? Ordinarily this would not have seemed simple, but to Oleron it was now pellucidly clear. The key, of course, lay in his half-written novel—or rather, in both *Romillys*, the old and the proposed new one.

A little while before Oleron would have thought himself mad to have embraced such an opinion; now he accepted the dizzying hypothesis without a quiver.

He began to examine the first and second *Romillys*.

From the moment of his doing so the thing advanced by leaps and bounds. Swiftly he reviewed the history of the *Romilly* of the fifteen chapters. He remembered clearly now that he had found her insufficient on the very first

morning on which he had sat down to work in his new place. Other instances of his aversion leaped up to confirm his obscure investigation. There had come the night when he had hardly forborne to throw the whole thing into the fire; and the next morning he had begun the planning of the new *Romilly*. It had been on that morning that Mrs. Barrett, overhearing him humming a brief phrase that the dripping of a tap the night before had suggested, had informed him that he was singing some air he had never in his life heard before, called "The Beckoning Fair One"

. . .

The Beckoning Fair One! . . .

With scarcely a pause in thought he continued:

The first *Romilly* having been definitely thrown over, the second had instantly fastened herself upon him, clamouring for birth in his brain. He even fancied now, looking back, that there had been something like passion, hate almost, in the supplanting, and that more than once a stray thought given to his discarded creation had—(it was astonishing how credible Oleron found the almost unthinkable idea)—had offended the supplanter.

Yet that a malignancy almost homicidal should be extended to his fiction's poor moral prototype . . .

In spite of his inuring to a scale in which the horrible was now a thing to be fingered and turned this way and that, a "Good God!" broke from Oleron.

This intrusion of the first *Romilly's* prototype into his thought again was a factor that for the moment brought his inquiry into the nature of his problem to a termination; the mere thought of Elsie was fatal to anything abstract. For another thing, he could not yet think of that letter of Barrett's, nor of a little scene that had followed it, without a mounting of colour and a quick contraction of the brow. For, wisely or not, he had had that argument out at once. Striding across the square on the following morning, he had bearded Barrett on his own doorstep. Coming back again a few minutes later, he had been strongly of opinion that he had only made matters worse. The man had been

vagueness itself. He had not been able to be either challenged or brow-beaten into anything more definite than a muttered farrago in which the words "Certain things . . . Mrs. Barrett . . . respectable house . . . if the cap fits . . . proceedings that shall be nameless," had been constantly repeated.

"Not that I make any charge——" he had concluded.

"Charge!" Oleron had cried.

"I 'ave my idears of things, as I don't doubt you 'ave yours——"

"Ideas—mine!" Oleron had cried wrathfully, immediately dropping his voice as heads had appeared at windows of the square. "Look you here, my man; you've an unwholesome mind, which probably you can't help, but a tongue which you can help, and shall! If there is a breath of this repeated . . ."

"I'll not be talked to on my own doorstep like this by anybody . . ." Barrett had blustered . . .

"You shall, and I'm doing it . . ."

"Don't you forget there's a Gawd above all, Who 'as said . . ."

"You're a low scandalmonger! . . ."

And so forth, continuing badly what was already badly begun. Oleron had returned wrathfully to his own house, and thenceforward, looking out of his windows, had seen Barrett's face at odd times, lifting blinds or peering round curtains, as if he sought to put himself in possession of Heaven knew what evidence, in case it should be required of him.

The unfortunate occurrence made certain minor differences in Oleron's domestic arrangements. Barrett's tongue, he gathered, had already been busy; he was looked at askance by the dwellers of the square; and he judged it better, until he should be able to obtain other help, to make his purchases of provisions a little farther afield rather than at the small shops of the immediate neighbourhood. For the rest, housekeeping was no new thing to him, and he would resume his old bachelor habits . . .

Besides, he was deep in certain rather abstruse investigations, in which it was better that he should not be disturbed.

He was looking out of his window one midday rather tired, not very well, and glad that it was not very likely he would have to stir out of doors, when he saw Elsie Bengough crossing the square towards his house. The weather had broken; it was a raw and gusty day; and she had to force her way against the wind that set her ample skirts bellying about her opulent figure and her veil spinning and streaming behind her.

Oleron acted swiftly and instinctively. Seizing his hat, he sprang to the door and descended the stairs at a run. A sort of panic had seized him. She must be prevented from setting foot in the place. As he ran along the alley he was conscious that his eyes went up to the eaves as if something drew them. He did not know that a slate might not accidentally fall . . .

He met her at the gate, and spoke with curious volubleness.

"This is really too bad, Elsie! Just as I'm urgently called away! I'm afraid it can't be helped though, and that you'll have to think me an inhospitable host." He poured it out just as it came into his head.

She asked if he was going to town.

"Yes, yes—to town," he replied. "I've got to call on—on Chambers. You know Chambers, don't you? No, I remember you don't; a big man you once saw me with . . . I ought to have gone yesterday, and"—this he felt to be a brilliant effort—"and he's going out of town this afternoon. To Brighton. I had a letter from him this morning."

He took her arm and led her up the square. She had to remind him that his way to town lay in the other direction.

"Of course—how stupid of me!" he said, with a little loud laugh. "I'm so used to going the other way with you—of course; it's the other way to the bus. Will you come along with me? I am so awfully sorry it's happened like this . . ."

They took the street to the bus terminus.

This time Elsie bore no sign of having gone through

interior struggles. If she detected anything unusual in his manner she made no comment, and he, seeing her calm, began to talk less recklessly through silences. By the time they reached the bus terminus, nobody, seeing the pallid-faced man without an overcoat and the large ample-skirted girl at his side, would have supposed that one of them was ready to sink on his knees for thankfulness that he had, as he believed, saved the other from a wildly unthinkable danger.

They mounted to the top of the bus, Oleron protested that he should not miss his overcoat, and that he found the day, if anything, rather oppressively hot. They sat down on a front seat.

Now that this meeting was forced upon him, he had something else to say that would make demands upon his tact. It had been on his mind for some time, and was, indeed, peculiarly difficult to put. He revolved it for some minutes, and then, remembering the success of his story of a sudden call to town, cut the knot of his difficulty with another lie.

"I'm thinking of going away for a little while, Elsie," he said.

She merely said, "Oh?"

"Somewhere for a change. I need a change. I think I shall go to-morrow, or the day after. Yes, to-morrow, I think."

"Yes," she replied.

"I don't quite know how long I shall be," he continued.

"I shall have to let you know when I am back."

"Yes, let me know," she replied in an even tone.

The tone was, for her, suspiciously even. He was a little uneasy.

"You don't ask me where I'm going," he said, with a little cumbrous effort to rally her.

She was looking straight before her, past the bus-driver.

"I know," she said.

He was startled. "How, you know?"

"You're not going anywhere," she replied.

He found not a word to say. It was a minute or so before she continued in the same controlled voice she had employed from the start.

"You're not going anywhere. You weren't going out this morning. You only came out because I appeared; don't behave as if we were strangers, Paul."

A flush of pink had mounted to his cheeks. He noticed that the wind had given her the pink of early rhubarb. Still he found nothing to say.

"Of course, you ought to go away," she continued. "I don't know whether you look at yourself often in the glass, but you're rather noticeable. Several people have turned to look at you this morning. So, of course, you ought to go away. But you won't, and I know why."

He shivered, coughed a little, and then broke silence.

"Then if you know, there's no use in continuing this discussion," he said curtly.

"Not for me, perhaps, but there is for you," she replied. "Shall I tell you what I know?"

"No," he said in a voice slightly raised.

"No?" she asked, her round eyes earnestly on him.

"No."

Again he was getting out of patience with her; again he was conscious of the strain. Her devotion and fidelity and love plagued him; she was only humiliating both herself and him. It would have been bad enough had he ever, by word or deed, given her cause for thus fastening herself on him . . . but there; that was the worst of that kind of life for a woman. Women such as she, business women, in and out of offices all the time, always, whether they realised it or not, made comradeship a cover for something else. They accepted the unconventional status, came and went freely, as men did, were honestly taken by men at their own valuation—and then it turned out to be the other thing after all, and they went and fell in love. No wonder there was gossip in shops and squares and public-houses! In a sense the gossipers were in the right of it. Independent, yet not efficient; with some of womanhood's graces foregone, and yet with all the woman's hunger and need; half sophisticated, yet not wise; Oleron was tired of it all . . .

And it was time he told her so.

"I suppose," he said tremblingly, looking down between

his knees, "I suppose the real trouble is in the life women who earn their own living are obliged to lead."

He could not tell in what sense she took the lame generality; she merely replied, "I suppose so."

"It can't be helped," he continued, "but you do sacrifice a good deal."

She agreed: a good deal; and then she added after a moment, "What, for instance?"

"You may or may not be gradually attaining a new status, but you're in a false position to-day."

It was very likely, she said; she hadn't thought of it much in that light—

"And," he continued desperately, "you're bound to suffer. Your most innocent acts are misunderstood; motives you never dreamed of are attributed to you; and in the end it comes to"—he hesitated a moment and then took the plunge,—"to the sidelong look and the leer."

She took his meaning with perfect ease. She merely shivered a little as she pronounced the name.

"Barrett?"

His silence told her the rest.

Anything further that was to be said must come from her. It came as the bus stopped at a stage and fresh passengers mounted the stairs.

"You'd better get down here and go back, Paul," she said. "I understand perfectly—perfectly. It isn't Barrett. You'd be able to deal with Barrett. It's merely convenient for you to say it's Barrett. I know what it is . . . but you said I wasn't to tell you that. Very well. But before you go let me tell you why I came up this morning."

In a dull tone he asked her why. Again she looked straight before her as she replied:

"I came to force your hand. Things couldn't go on as they have been going, you know; and now that's all over."

"All over," he repeated stupidly.

"All over. I want you now to consider yourself, as far as I'm concerned, perfectly free. I make only one reservation."

He hardly had the spirit to ask her what that was.

"If I merely need *you*," she said, "please don't give that a thought; that's nothing; I shan't come near for that. But," she dropped her voice, "if *you're* in need of *me*, Paul—I shall know if you are, *and you will be*—then I shall come at no matter what cost. You understand that?"

He could only groan.

"So that's understood," she concluded. "And I think that's all. Now go back. I should advise you to walk back, for you're shivering—good-bye——"

She gave him a cold hand, and he descended. He turned on the edge of the kerb as the bus started again. For the first time in all the years he had known her she parted from him with no smile and no wave of her long arm.

IX

He stood on the kerb plunged in misery, looking after her as long as she remained in sight; but almost instantly with her disappearance he felt the heaviness lift a little from his spirit. She had given him his liberty; true, there was a sense in which he had never parted with it, but now was no time for splitting hairs; he was free to act, and all was clear ahead. Swiftly the sense of lightness grew on him: it became a positive rejoicing in his liberty; and before he was half-way home he had decided what must be done next.

The vicar of the parish in which his dwelling was situated lived within ten minutes of the square. To his house Oleron turned his steps. It was necessary that he should have all the information he could get about this old house with the insurance marks and the sloping "To Let" boards, and the vicar was the person most likely to be able to furnish it. This last preliminary out of the way, and—aha! Oleron chuckled—things might be expected to happen!

But he gained less information than he had hoped for. The house, the vicar said, was old—but there needed no vicar to tell Oleron that; it was reputed (Oleron pricked up his ears) to be haunted—but there were few old houses about which some such rumour did not circulate among the

ignorant; and the deplorable lack of Faith of the modern world, the vicar thought, did not tend to dissipate these superstitions. For the rest, his manner was the soothing manner of one who prefers not to make statements without knowing how they will be taken by his hearer. Oleron smiled as he perceived this.

"You may leave my nerves out of the question," he said. "How long has the place been empty?"

"A dozen years, I should say," the vicar replied.

"And the last tenant—did you know him—or her?" Oleron was conscious of a tingling of his nerves as he offered the vicar the alternative sex.

"Him," said the vicar. "A man. If I remember rightly, his name was Madley; an artist. He was a great recluse; seldom went out of the place, and——" the vicar hesitated and then broke into a little gush of candour "—and since you appear to have come for this information, and since it is better that the truth should be told than that garbled versions should get about, I don't mind saying that this man Madley died there, under somewhat unusual circumstances. It was ascertained at the post-mortem that there was not a particle of food in his stomach, although he was found to be not without money. And his frame was simply worn out. Suicide was spoken of, but you'll agree with me that deliberate starvation is, to say the least, an uncommon form of suicide. An open verdict was returned."

"Ah!" said Oleron . . . "Does there happen to be any comprehensive history of this parish?"

"No; partial ones only. I myself am not guiltless of having made a number of notes on its purely ecclesiastical history, its registers and so forth, which I shall be happy to show you if you would care to see them; but it is a large parish, I have only one curate, and my leisure, as you will readily understand . . ."

The extent of the parish and the scantiness of the vicar's leisure occupied the remainder of the interview, and Oleron thanked the vicar, took his leave, and walked slowly home.

He walked slowly for a reason, twice turning away from the house within a stone's-throw of the gate and taking

another turn of twenty minutes or so. He had a very ticklish piece of work now before him; it required the greatest mental concentration; it was nothing less than to bring his mind, if he might, into such a state of unpreoccupation and receptivity that he should see the place as he had seen it on that morning when, his removal accomplished, he had sat down to begin the sixteenth chapter of the first *Romilly*.

For, could he recapture that first impression, he now hoped for far more from it. Formerly he had carried no end of mental lumber. Before the influence of the place had been able to find him out at all, it had had the inertia of those dreary chapters to overcome. No results had shown. The process had been one of slow saturation, charging, filling up to a brim. But now he was light, unburdened, rid at last both of that *Romilly* and of her prototype. Now for the new unknown, coy, jealous, bewitching, Beckoning Fair! . . .

At half-past two of the afternoon he put his key into the Yale lock, entered, and closed the door behind him . . .

His fantastic attempt was instantly and astonishingly successful. He could have shouted with triumph as he entered the room; it was as if he had *escaped* into it. Once more, as in the days when his writing had had a daily freshness and wonder and promise for him, he was conscious of that new ease and mastery and exhilaration and release. The air of the place seemed to hold more oxygen; as if his own specific gravity had changed, his very tread seemed less ponderable. The flowers in the bowls, the fair proportions of the meadowsweet-coloured panels and mouldings, the polished floor, and the lofty and faintly starred ceiling, fairly laughed their welcome. Oleron actually laughed back, and spoke aloud.

"Oh, you're pretty, pretty!" he flattered it.

Then he lay down on his couch.

He spent that afternoon as a convalescent who expected a dear visitor might have spent it—in a delicious vacancy, smiling now and then as if in his sleep, and ever lifting drowsy and contented eyes to his alluring surroundings. He

lay thus until darkness came, and, with darkness, the nocturnal noises of the old house . . .

But if he waited for any specific happening, he waited in vain.

He waited similarly in vain on the morrow, maintaining, though with less ease, that sensitised-plate-like condition of his mind. Nothing occurred to give it an impression. Whatever it was which he so patiently wooed, it seemed to be both shy and exacting.

Then on the third day he thought he understood. A look of gentle drollery and cunning came into his eyes, and he chuckled.

"Oho, oho! . . . Well, if the wind sits in *that* quarter we must see what else there is to be done. What is there, now? . . . No, I won't send for Elsie; we don't need a wheel to break the butterfly on; we won't go to those lengths, my butterfly . . ."

He was standing musing, thumbing his lean jaw, looking aslant; suddenly he crossed to his hall, took his hat, and went out.

"My lady is coquettish, is she? Well, we'll see what a little neglect will do," he chuckled as he went down the stairs.

He sought a railway station, got into a train, and spent the rest of the day in the country. Oh yes; Oleron thought *he* was the man to deal with Fair Ones who beckoned, and invited, and then took refuge in shyness and hanging back!

He did not return until after eleven that night.

"*Now*, my Fair Beckoner!" he murmured as he walked along the alley and felt in his pocket for his keys . . .

Inside his flat, he was perfectly composed, perfectly deliberate, exceedingly careful not to give himself away. As if to intimate that he intended to retire immediately, he lighted only a single candle; and as he set out with it on his nightly round he affected to yawn. He went first into his kitchen. There was a full moon, and a lozenge of moonlight, almost peacock-blue by contrast with his candle-flame, lay on the floor. The window was uncurtained, and

he could see the reflection of the candle, and, faintly, that of his own face, as he moved about. The door of the powder-closet stood a little ajar, and he closed it before sitting down to remove his boots on the chair with the cushion made of the folded harp-bag. From the kitchen he passed to the bathroom. There, another slant of blue moonlight cut the window-sill and lay across the pipes on the wall. He visited his seldom-used study, and stood for a moment gazing at the silvered roofs across the square. Then, walking straight through his sitting-room, his stockinged feet making no noise, he entered his bedroom and put the candle on the chest of drawers. His face all this time wore no expression save that of tiredness. He had never been wilier nor more alert.

His small bedroom fireplace was opposite the chest of drawers on which the mirror stood, and his bed and the window occupied the remaining sides of the room. Oleron drew down his blind, took off his coat, and then stooped to get his slippers from under the bed.

He could have given no reason for the conviction, but that the manifestation that for two days had been withheld was close at hand he never for an instant doubted. Nor, though he could not form the faintest guess of the shape it might take, did he experience fear. Startling or surprising it might be; he was prepared for that; but that was all; his scale of sensation had become depressed. His hand moved this way and that under the bed in search of his slippers . . .

But for all his caution and method and preparedness, his heart all at once gave a leap and a pause that was almost horrid. His hand had found the slippers, but he was still on his knees; save for this circumstance he would have fallen. The bed was a low one; the groping for the slippers accounted for the turn of his head to one side; and he was careful to keep the attitude until he had partly recovered his self-possession. When presently he rose there was a drop of blood on his lower lip where he had caught at it with his teeth, and his watch had jerked out of the pocket

of his waistcoat and was dangling at the end of its short leather guard . . .

Then, before the watch had ceased its little oscillation, he was himself again.

In the middle of his mantelpiece there stood a picture, a portrait of his grandmother; he placed himself before this picture, so that he could see in the glass of it the steady flame of the candle that burned behind him on the chest of drawers. He could see also in the picture-glass the little glancings of light from the bevels and facets of the objects about the mirror and candle. But he could see more. These twinklings and reflections and re-reflections did not change their position; but there was one gleam that had motion. It was fainter than the rest, and it moved up and down through the air. It was the reflection of the candle on Oleron's black vulcanite comb, and each of its downward movements was accompanied by a silky and crackling rustle.

Oleron, watching what went on in the glass of his grandmother's portrait, continued to play his part. He felt for his dangling watch and began slowly to wind it up. Then, for a moment ceasing to watch, he began to empty his trouser pockets and to place methodically in a little row on the mantelpiece the pennies and halfpennies he took from them. The sweeping, minutely electric noise filled the whole bedroom, and had Oleron altered his point of observation he could have brought the dim gleam of the moving comb so into position that it would almost have outlined his grandmother's head.

Any other head of which it might have been following the outline was invisible.

Oleron finished the emptying of his pockets; then, under cover of another simulated yawn, not so much summoning his resolution as overmastered by an exorbitant curiosity, he swung suddenly round. That which was being combed was still not to be seen, but the comb did not stop. It had altered its angle a little, and had moved a little to the left. It was passing, in fairly regular sweeps, from a point

rather more than five feet from the ground, in a direction roughly vertical, to another point a few inches below the level of the chest of drawers.

Oleron continued to act to admiration. He walked to his little washstand in the corner, poured out water, and began to wash his hands. He removed his waistcoat, and continued his preparations for bed. The combing did not cease, and he stood for a moment in thought. Again his eyes twinkled. The next was very cunning—

"Mm! . . . *I think I'll read for a quarter of an hour,*" he said aloud . . .

He passed out of the room.

He was away a couple of minutes; when he returned again the room was suddenly quiet. He glanced at the chest of drawers; the comb lay still, between the collar he had removed and a pair of gloves. Without hesitation Oleron put out his hand and picked it up. It was an ordinary eighteen-penny comb, taken from a card in a chemist's shop, of a substance of a definite specific gravity, and no more capable of rebellion against the Laws by which it existed than are the worlds that keep their orbits through the void. Oleron put it down again; then he glanced at the bundle of papers he held in his hand. What he had gone to fetch had been the fifteen chapters of the original *Romilly*.

"Hm!" he muttered as he threw the manuscript into a chair. . . . "As I thought . . . She's just blindly, ragingly, murderously jealous."

On the night after that, and on the following night, and for many nights and days, so many that he began to be uncertain about the count of them, Oleron, courting, cajoling, neglecting, threatening, beseeching, eaten out with unappeased curiosity and regardless that his life was becoming one consuming passion and desire, continued his search for the unknown co-numerator of his abode.

X

As time went on, it came to pass that few except the postman mounted Oleron's stairs; and since men who do not write letters receive few, even the postman's tread became so infrequent that it was not heard more than once or twice a week. There came a letter from Oleron's publishers, asking when they might expect to receive the manuscript of his new book; he delayed for some days to answer it, and finally forgot it. A second letter came, which also he failed to answer. He received no third.

The weather grew bright and warm. The privet bushes among the chopper-like notice-boards flowered, and in the streets where Oleron did his shopping the baskets of flower-women lined the kerbs. Oleron purchased flowers daily; his room clamoured for flowers, fresh and continually renewed; and Oleron did not stint its demands. Nevertheless, the necessity for going out to buy them began to irk him more and more, and it was with a greater and ever greater sense of relief that he returned home again. He began to be conscious that again his scale of sensation had suffered a subtle change—a change that was not restoration to its former capacity, but an extension and enlarging that once more included terror. It admitted it in an entirely new form. *Lux orco, tenebrae Jovi*. The name of this terror was agoraphobia. Oleron had begun to dread air and space and the horror that might pounce upon the unguarded back.

Presently he so contrived it that his food and flowers were delivered daily at his door. He rubbed his hands when he had hit upon this expedient. That was better! Now he could please himself whether he went out or not . . .

Quickly he was confirmed in his choice. It became his pleasure to remain immured.

But he was not happy—or, if he was, his happiness took an extraordinary turn. He fretted discontentedly, could sometimes have wept for mere weakness and misery; and yet he was dimly conscious that he would not have exchanged his

sadness for all the noisy mirth of the world outside. And speaking of noise: noise, much noise, now caused him the acutest discomfort. It was hardly more to be endured than that new-born fear that kept him, on the increasingly rare occasions when he did go out, sidling close to walls and feeling friendly railings with his hand. He moved from room to room softly and in slippers, and sometimes stood for many seconds closing a door so gently that not a sound broke the stillness that was in itself a delight. Sunday now became an intolerable day to him, for, since the coming of the fine weather, there had begun to assemble in the square under his windows each Sunday morning certain members of the sect to which the long-nosed Barrett adhered. These came with a great drum and large brass-bellied instruments; men and women uplifted anguished voices, struggling with their God; and Barrett himself, with upraised face and closed eyes and working brows, prayed that the sound of his voice might penetrate the ears of all unbelievers—as it certainly did Oleron's. One day, in the middle of one of these rhapsodies, Oleron sprang to his blind and pulled it down, and heard as he did so his own name made the object of a fresh torrent of outpouring.

And sometimes, but not as expecting a reply, Oleron stood still and called softly. Once or twice he called "Romilly!" and then waited; but more often his whispering did not take the shape of a name.

There was one spot in particular of his abode that he began to haunt with increasing persistency. This was just within the opening of his bedroom. He had discovered one day that by opening every door in his place (always excepting the outer one, which he only opened unwillingly) and by placing himself on this particular spot, he could actually see to a greater or less extent into each of his five rooms without changing his position. He could see the whole of his sitting-room, all of his bedroom except the part hidden by the open door, and glimpses of his kitchen, bathroom, and of his rarely used study. He was often in this place, breathless and with his finger on his lips. One day, as he stood there, he suddenly found himself wondering

whether Madley, of whom the vicar had spoken, had ever discovered the strategic importance of the bedroom entry.

Light, moreover, now caused him greater disquietude than did darkness. Direct sunlight, of which, as the sun passed daily round the house, each of his rooms had now its share, was like a flame in his brain; and even diffused light was a dull and numbing ache. He began, at successive hours of the day, one after another, to lower his crimson blinds. He made short and daring excursions in order to do this; but he was ever careful to leave his retreat open, in case he should have sudden need of it. Presently this lowering of the blinds had become a daily methodical exercise, and his rooms, when he had been his round, had the blood-red half-light of a photographer's dark-room.

One day, as he drew down the blind of his little study and backed in good order out of the room again, he broke into a soft laugh.

"*That* bilks Mr. Barrett!" he said; and the baffling of Barrett continued to afford him mirth for an hour.

But on another day, soon after, he had a fright that left him trembling also for an hour. He had seized the cord to darken the window over the seat in which he had found the harp-bag, and was standing with his back well protected in the embrasures, when he thought he saw the tail of a black-and-white check skirt disappear round the corner of the house. He could not be sure—had he run to the window of the other wall, which was blinded, the skirt must have been already past—but he was almost sure that it was Elsie. He listened in an agony of suspense for her tread on the stair . . .

But no tread came, and after three or four minutes he drew a long breath of relief.

"By Jove, but that would have compromised me horribly!" he muttered. . . .

And he continued to mutter from time to time, "Horribly compromising . . . *no* woman would stand that . . . not *any* kind of woman . . . oh, compromising in the extreme!"

Yet he was not happy. He could not have assigned the cause of the fits of quiet weeping which took him sometimes; they came and went, like the fitful illumination of

the clouds that travelled over the square; and perhaps, after all, if he was not happy, he was not unhappy. Before he could be unhappy something must have been withdrawn, and nothing had yet been withdrawn from him, for nothing had been granted. He was waiting for that granting, in that flower-laden, frightfully enticing apartment of his, with the pith-white walls tinged and subdued by the crimson blinds to a blood-like gloom.

He paid no heed to it that his stock of money was running perilously low, nor that he had ceased to work. Ceased to work? He had not ceased to work. They knew very little about it who supposed that Oleron had ceased to work! He was in truth only now beginning to work. He was preparing such a work . . . such a work . . . such a Mistress was a-making in the gestation of his Art . . . let him but get this period of probation and poignant waiting over and men should see . . . How *should* men know her, this Fair One of Oleron's, until Oleron himself knew her? Lovely radiant creations are not thrown off like How-d'ye-do's. The men to whom it is committed to father them must weep wretched tears, as Oleron did, must swell with vain presumptuous hopes, as Oleron did, must pursue, as Oleron pursued, the capricious, fair, mocking, slippery, eager Spirit that, ever eluding, ever sees to it that the chase does not slacken. Let Oleron but hunt this Huntress a little longer . . . he would have her sparkling and panting in his arms yet . . . Oh no: they were very far from the truth who supposed that Oleron had ceased to work!

And if all else was falling away from Oleron, gladly he was letting it go. So do we all when our Fair Ones beckon. Quite at the beginning we wink, and promise ourselves that we will put Her Ladyship through her paces, neglect her for a day, turn her own jealous wiles against her, flout and ignore her when she comes wheedling; perhaps there lurks within us all the time a heartless sprite who is never fooled; but in the end all falls away. She beckons, beckons, and all goes . . .

And so Oleron kept his strategic post within the frame of his bedroom door, and watched, and waited, and smiled,

with his finger on his lips . . . It was his duteous service, his worship, his troth-plighting, all that he had ever known of Love. And when he found himself, as he now and then did, hating the dead man Madley, and wishing that he had never lived, he felt that that, too, was an acceptable service . . .

But, as he thus prepared himself, as it were, for A Marriage, and moped and chafed more and more that the Bride made no sign, he made a discovery that he ought to have made weeks before.

It was through a thought of the dead Madley that he made it. Since that night when he had thought in his greenness that a little studied neglect would bring the lovely Beckoner to her knees, and had made use of her own jealousy to banish her, he had not set eyes on those fifteen discarded chapters of *Romilly*. He had thrown them back into the window-seat, forgotten their very existence. But his own jealousy of Madley put him in mind of hers of her jilted rival of flesh and blood, and he remembered them . . . Fool that he had been! Had he, then, expected his Desire to manifest herself while there still existed the evidence of his divided allegiance? What, and she with a passion so fierce and centred that it had not hesitated at the destruction, twice attempted, of her rival? Fool that he had been! . . .

But if *that* was all the pledge and sacrifice she required she should have it—ah, yes, and quickly!

He took the manuscript from the window-seat, and brought it to the fire.

He kept his fire always burning now; the warmth brought out the last vestige of odour of the flowers with which his room was banked. He did not know what time it was; long since he had allowed his clock to run down—it had seemed a foolish measurer of time in regard to the stupendous things that were happening to Oleron; but he knew it was late. He took the *Romilly* manuscript and knelt before the fire.

But he had not finished removing the fastening that held the sheets together before he suddenly gave a start, turned his head over his shoulder, and listened intently. The sound

he had heard had not been loud—it had been, indeed, no more than a tap, twice or thrice repeated—but it had filled Oleron with alarm. His face grew dark as it came again.

He heard a voice outside on his landing.

"Paul! . . . Paul! . . ."

It was Elsie's voice.

"Paul! . . . I know you're in . . . I want to see you . . ."

He cursed her under his breath, but kept perfectly still. He did not intend to admit her.

"Paul! . . . You're in trouble . . . I believe you're in danger . . . at least come to the door! . . ."

Oleron smothered a low laugh. It somehow amused him that she, in such danger herself, should talk to him of *his* danger! . . . Well, if she was, serve her right; she knew, or said she knew, all about it . . .

"Paul! . . . Paul! . . ."

"*Paul! . . . Paul! . . .*" He mimicked her under his breath.

"Oh, Paul, it's *horrible!* . . ."

Horrible, was it? thought Oleron. Then let her get away

. . .

"I only want to help you, Paul . . . I didn't promise not to come if you needed me . . ."

He was impervious to the pitiful sob that interrupted the low cry. The devil take the woman! Should he shout to her to go away and not come back? No: let her call and knock and sob. She had a gift for sobbing; she mustn't think her sobs would move him. They irritated him, so that he set his teeth and shook his fist at her, but that was all. Let her sob.

"*Paul . . . Paul! . . .*"

With his teeth hard set, he dropped the first page of *Romilly* into the fire. Then he began to drop the rest in, sheet by sheet.

For many minutes the calling behind his door continued; then suddenly ceased. He heard the sound of her feet slowly descending the stairs. He listened for the noise of a fall or a cry or a crash of a piece of the handrail of the upper landing; but none of these things came. She was spared. Apparently her rival suffered her to crawl abject

and beaten away. Oleron heard the passing of her steps under his window; then she was gone.

He dropped the last page into the fire, and then, with a low laugh rose. He looked fondly round his room.

"Lucky to get away like that," he remarked. "She wouldn't have got away if I'd given her as much as a word or a look! What devils these women are! . . . But no; I oughtn't to say that; one of 'em showed forbearance . . ."

Who showed forbearance? And what was forborene? Ah, Oleron knew! . . . Contempt, no doubt, had been at the bottom of it, but that didn't matter; the pestering creature had been allowed to go unharmed. Yes, she was lucky; Oleron hoped she knew it . . .

And now, now, now for his reward!

Oleron crossed the room. All his doors were open; his eyes shone as he placed himself within that of his bedroom.

Fool that he had been, not to think of destroying the manuscript sooner! . . .

How, in a household of shadows, should he know his own Shadow? How, in a household of noises, distinguish the summons he felt to be at hand? Ah, trust him! He would know! The place was full of a jugglery of dim lights. The blind as his elbow that allowed the light of a street lamp to struggle vaguely through—the glimpse of greeny blue moonlight seen through the distant kitchen door—the sulky glow of the fire under the black ashes of the burnt manuscript—the glimmering of the tulips and the moon-daisies and narcissi in the bowls and jugs and jars—these did not so trick and bewilder his eyes that he would not know his Own! It was he, not she, who had been delaying the shadowy Bridal; he hung his head for a moment in mute acknowledgment; then he bent his eyes on the deceiving, puzzling gloom again. He would have called her name had he known it—but now he would not ask her to share even a name with the other . . .

His own face, within the frame of the door, glimmered white as the narcissi in the darkness . . .

A shadow, light as fleece, seemed to take shape in the

kitchen (the time had been when Oleron would have said that a cloud had passed over the unseen moon). The low illumination on the blind at his elbow grew dimmer (the time had been when Oleron would have concluded that the lamp-lighter going his rounds had turned low the flame of the lamp). The fire settled, letting down the black and charred papers; a flower fell from a bowl, and lay indistinct upon the floor; all was still; and then a stray draught moved through the old house, passing before Oleron's face . . .

Suddenly, inclining his head, he withdrew a little from the door-jamb. The wandering draught caused the door to move a little on its hinges. Oleron trembled violently, stood for a moment longer, and then, putting his hand out to the knob, softly drew the door to, sat down on the nearest chair, and waited, as a man might await the calling of his name that should summon him to some weighty, high and privy Audience . . .

XI

One knows not whether there can be human compassion for anaemia of the soul. When the pitch of Life is dropped, and the spirit is so put over and reversed that that only is horrible which before was sweet and worldly and of the day, the human relation disappears. The sane soul turns appalled away, lest not merely itself, but sanity should suffer. We are not gods. We cannot drive out devils. We must see selfishly to it that devils do not enter into ourselves.

And this we must do even though Love so transfuse us that we may well deem our nature to be half divine. We shall but speak of honour and duty in vain. The letter dropped within the dark door will lie unregarded, or, if regarded for a brief instant between two unspeakable lapses, left and forgotten again. The telegram will be undelivered, nor will the whistling messenger (wiselier guided than he knows to whistle) be conscious as he walks away of the drawn blind that is pushed aside an inch by a finger and

then fearfully replaced again. No: let the miserable wrestle with his own shadows; let him, if indeed he be so mad, clip and strain and enfold and couch the succubus; but let him do so in a house into which not an air of Heaven penetrates, nor a bright finger of the sun pierces the filthy twilight. The lost must remain lost. Humanity has other business to attend to.

For the handwriting of the two letters that Oleron, stealing noiselessly one June day into his kitchen to rid his sitting-room of an armful of foetid and decaying flowers, had seen on the floor within his door, had had no more meaning for him than if it had belonged to some dim and far-away dream. And at the beating of the telegraph-boy upon the door, within a few feet of the bed where he lay, he had gnashed his teeth and stopped his ears. He had pictured the lad standing there, just beyond his partition, among packets of provisions and bundles of dead and dying flowers. For his outer landing was littered with these. Oleron had feared to open his door to take them in. After a week, the errand lads had reported that there must be some mistake about the order, and left no more. Inside, in the red twilight, the old flowers turned brown and fell and decayed where they lay.

Gradually his power was draining away. The Abomination fastened on Oleron's power. The steady sapping sometimes left him for many hours of prostration gazing vacantly up at his red-tinged ceiling, idly suffering such fancies as came of themselves to have their way with him. Even the strongest of his memories had no more than a precarious hold upon his attention. Sometimes a flitting half-memory, of a novel to be written, a novel it was important that he should write, tantalised him for a space before vanishing again; and sometimes whole novels, perfect, splendid, established to endure, rose magically before him. And sometimes the memories were absurdly remote and trivial, of garrets he had inhabited and lodgings that had sheltered him, and so forth. Oleron had known a good deal about such things in his time, but all that was now past. He had at last found a place which he did not intend to leave until they fetched him out—a place that some might have thought a little

on the green-sick side, that others might have considered to be a little too redolent of long-dead and morbid things for a living man to be mewed up in, but ah, so irresistible, with such an authority of its own, with such an associate of its own, and a place of such delights when once a man had ceased to struggle against its inexorable will! A novel? Somebody ought to write a novel about a place like that! There must be lots to write about in a place like that if one could but get to the bottom of it! It had probably already been painted, by a man called Madley who had lived there . . . but Oleron had not known this Madley—had a strong feeling that he wouldn't have liked him—would rather he had lived somewhere else—really couldn't stand the fellow—hated him, Madley, in fact. (Aha! That was a joke!) He seriously doubted whether the man had led the life he ought; Oleron was in two minds sometimes whether he wouldn't tell that long-nosed guardian of the public morals across the way about him; but probably he knew, and had made his praying hullabaloo for him also. That was his line. Why, Oleron himself had had a dust-up with him about something or other . . . some girl or other . . . Elsie Bengough her name was, he remembered . . .

Oleron had moments of deep uneasiness about this Elsie Bengough. Or rather, he was not so much uneasy about her as restless about the things she did. Chief of these was the way in which she persisted in thrusting herself into his thoughts; and, whenever he was quick enough, he sent her packing the moment she made her appearance there. The truth was that she was not merely a bore; she had always been that; it had now come to the pitch when her very presence in his fancy was inimical to the full enjoyment of certain experiences . . . She had no tact; really ought to have known that people are not at home to the thoughts of everybody all the time; ought in mere politeness to have allowed him certain seasons quite to himself; and was monstrously ignorant of things if she did not know, as she appeared not to know, that there were certain hours when a man's veins ran with fire and daring and power, in which . . . well, in which he had a reasonable right to

treat folk as he had treated that prying Barrett—to shut them out completely . . . But no: up she popped, the thought of her, and ruined all. Bright towering fabrics, by the side of which even those perfect, magical novels of which he dreamed were dun and grey, vanished utterly at her intrusion. It was as if a fog should suddenly quench some fair-beaming star, as if at the threshold of some golden portal prepared for Oleron a pit should suddenly gape, as if a bat-like shadow should turn the growing dawn to mirk and darkness again . . . Therefore, Oleron strove to stifle even the nascent thought of her.

Nevertheless, there came an occasion on which this woman Bengough absolutely refused to be suppressed. Oleron could not have told exactly when this happened; he only knew by the glimmer of the street lamp on his blind that it was some time during the night, and that for some time she had not presented herself.

He had no warning, none, of her coming; she just came—was there. Strive as he would, he could not shake off the thought of her nor the image of her face. She haunted him.

But for her to come at *that* moment of all moments! . . . Really, it was past belief! How *she* could endure it, Oleron could not conceive! Actually, to look on, as it were, at the triumph of a Rival . . . Good God! It was monstrous! Tact—reticence—he had never credited her with an overwhelming amount of either: but he had never attributed mere—oh, there was no word for it! Monstrous—monstrous! Did she intend thenceforward . . . Good God! To look on! . . .

Oleron felt the blood rush up to the roots of his hair with anger against her.

"Damnation take her!" he choked . . .

But the next moment his heat and resentment had changed to a cold sweat of cowering fear. Panic-stricken, he strove to comprehend what he had done. For though he knew not what, he knew he had done something, something fatal, irreparable, blasting. Anger he had felt, but not *this* blaze of ire that suddenly flooded the twilight of

his consciousness with a white infernal light. *That* appalling flash was not his—not his *that* open rift of bright and searing Hell—not his, not his! His had been the hand of a child, preparing a puny blow; but what was *this other* horrific hand that was drawn back to strike in the same place? Had *he* set that in motion? Had *he* provided the spark that had touched off the whole accumulated power of that formidable and relentless place? He did not know. He only knew that that poor igniting particle in himself was blown out, that—Oh, impossible!—a clinging kiss (how else to express it?) had changed on his very lips to a gnashing and a removal, and that for very pity of the awful odds he must cry out to her against whom he had lately raged to guard herself . . . guard herself . . .

"*Look out!*" he shrieked aloud.

The revulsion was instant. As if a cold slow billow had broken over him, he came to to find that he was lying in his bed, that the mist and horror that had for so long enwrapped him had departed, that he was Paul Oleron, and that he was sick, naked, helpless, and unutterably abandoned and alone. His faculties, though weak, answered at last to his calls upon them; and he knew that it must have been a hideous nightmare that had left him sweating and shaking thus.

Yes, he was himself, Paul Oleron, a tired novelist, already past the summit of his best work, and slipping downhill again empty-handed from it all. He had struck short in his life's aim. He had tried too much, had over-estimated his strength, and was a failure, a failure . . .

It all came to him in the single word, enwrapped and complete; it needed no sequential thought; he was a failure. He had missed . . .

And he had missed not one happiness, but two. He had missed the ease of this world, which men love, and he had missed also that other shining prize for which men forgo ease, the snatching and holding and triumphant bearing up aloft of which is the only justification of the mad adventurer who hazards the enterprise. And there was no second

attempt. Fate has no morrow. Oleron's morrow must be to sit down to profitless, ill-done, unrequired work again, and so on the morrow after that, and the morrow after that, and as many morrows as there might be . . .

He lay there, weakly yet sanely considering it . . .

And since the whole attempt had failed, it was hardly worth while to consider whether a little might not be saved from the general wreck. No good would ever come of that half-finished novel. He had intended that it should appear in the autumn; was under contract that it should appear; no matter; it was better to pay forfeit to his publishers than to waste what days were left. He was spent; age was not far off; and paths of wisdom and sadness were the properest for the remainder of the journey . . .

If only he had chosen the wife, the child, the faithful friend at the fireside, and let them follow an *ignis fatuus* that list! . . .

In the meantime it began to puzzle him exceedingly why he should be so weak, that his room should smell so overpoweringly of decaying vegetable matter, and that his hand, chancing to stray to his face in the darkness, should encounter a beard.

"Most extraordinary!" he began to mutter to himself. "Have I been ill? Am I ill now? And if so, why have they left me alone? . . . Extraordinary! . . ."

He thought he heard a sound from the kitchen or bathroom. He rose a little on his pillow, and listened . . . Ah! He was not alone, then! It certainly would have been extraordinary if they had left him ill and alone—Alone? Oh no. He would be looked after. He wouldn't be left, ill, to shift for himself. If everybody else had forsaken him, he could trust Elsie Bengough, the dearest chum he had, for that . . . bless her faithful heart!

But suddenly a short, stifled, spluttering cry rang sharply out:

"Paul!"

It came from the kitchen.

And in the same moment it flashed upon Oleron, he knew

not how, that two, three, five, he knew not how many minutes before, another sound, unmarked at the time but suddenly transfixing his attention now, had striven to reach his intelligence. This sound had been the slight touch of metal on metal—just such a sound as Oleron made when he put his key into the lock.

"Hallo! . . . who's that?" he called sharply from his bed.

He had no answer.

He called again. "Hallo! . . . Who's there? . . . Who is it?"

This time he was sure he heard noises, soft and heavy, in the kitchen.

"This is a queer thing altogether," he muttered. "By Jove, I'm as weak as a kitten too . . . Hallo, there! Somebody called, didn't they? . . . Elsie! Is that you? . . ."

Then he began to knock with his hand on the wall at the side of his bed.

"Elsie! . . . Elsie! . . . You called, didn't you? . . . Please come here, whoever it is! . . ."

There was a sound as of a closing door, and then silence. Oleron began to get rather alarmed.

"It may be a nurse," he muttered; "Elsie'd have to get me a nurse, of course. She'd sit with me as long as she could spare the time, brave lass, and she'd get a nurse for the rest. . . . But it was awfully like her voice . . . Elsie, or whoever it is! . . . I can't make this out at all. I must go and see what's the matter . . ."

He put one leg out of bed. Feeling its feebleness, he reached with his other hand for the additional support of the wall . . .

But before putting out the other leg he stopped and considered, picking at his new-found beard. He was suddenly wondering whether he *dared* go into the kitchen. It was such a frightfully long way; no man knew what horror might not leap and huddle on his shoulders if he went so far; when a man has an overmastering impulse to get back into bed he ought to take heed of the warning and obey it. Besides,

why should he go? What was there to go for? If it was that Bengough creature again, let her look after herself; Oleron was not going to have things cramp themselves on his defenceless back for the sake of such a spoil-sport as *she*! . . . If she was in, let her let herself out again, and the sooner the better for her! Oleron simply couldn't be bothered. He had his work to do. On the morrow, he must set about the writing of a novel with a heroine so winsome, capricious, adorable, jealous, wicked, beautiful, inflaming, and altogether evil, that men should stand amazed. She was coming over him now; he knew by the alteration of the very air of the room when she was near him; and that soft thrill of bliss that had begun to stir in him never came unless she was beckoning, beckoning . . .

He let go the wall and fell back into bed again as—oh, unthinkable!—the other half of that kiss that a gnash had interrupted was placed (how else convey it?) on his lips, robbing him of very breath . . .

XII

In the bright June sunlight a crowd filled the square, and looked up at the windows of the old house with the antique insurance marks in its walls of red brick and the agents' notice-boards hanging like wooden choppers over the paling. Two constables stood at the broken gate of the narrow entrance-alley, keeping folk back. The women kept to the outskirts of the throng, moving now and then as if to see the drawn red blinds of the old house from a new angle, and talking in whispers. The children were in the houses, behind closed doors.

A long-nosed man had a little group about him, and he was telling some story over and over again; and another man, little and fat and wide-eyed, sought to capture the long-nosed man's audience with some relation in which a key figured.

" . . . and it was revealed to me that there'd been something that very afternoon," the long-nosed man was saying. "I

was standing there, where Constable Saunders is—or rather, I was passing about my business, when they came out. There was no deceiving me, oh, no deceiving *me*! I saw her face . . .”

“What was it like, Mr. Barrett?” a man asked.

“It was like hers whom our Lord said to, ‘Woman, doth any man accuse thee?’—white as paper, and no mistake! Don’t tell *me*! . . . And so I walks straight across to Mrs. Barrett, and ‘Jane,’ I says, ‘this must stop, and stop at once; we are commanded to avoid evil,’ I says, ‘and it must come to an end now; let him get help elsewhere.’ And she says to me, ‘John,’ she says, ‘it’s four-and-sixpence a week’—them was her words. ‘Jane,’ I says, ‘If it was forty-six thousand pounds it should stop’ . . . and from that day to this she hasn’t set foot inside that gate.”

There was a short silence: then,

“Did Mrs. Barrett ever . . . *see* anything, like?” somebody vaguely inquired.

Barrett turned austerely on the speaker.

“What Mrs. Barrett saw and Mrs. Barrett didn’t see shall not pass these lips; even as it is written, ‘keep thy tongue from speaking evil’,” he said.

Another man spoke.

“He was pretty near canned up in the *Waggon and Horses* that night, weren’t he, Jim?”

“Yes, ‘e ‘adn’t ‘alf copped it . . .”

“Not standing treat much, neither; he was in the bar, all on his own . . .”

“So ‘e was; we talked about it . . .”

The fat, scared-eyed man made another attempt.

“She got the key off of me—she ‘ad the number of it—she come into my shop of a Tuesday evening . . .”

Nobody heeded him.

“Shut your heads,” a heavy labourer commented gruffly, “she hasn’t been found yet. ‘Ere’s the inspectors; we shall know more in a bit.”

Two inspectors had come up and were talking to the constables who guarded the gate. The little fat man ran eagerly forward, saying that she had bought the key off him. “I

remember the number, because of its being three one's and three three's—111333!" he exclaimed excitedly.

An inspector put him aside.

"Nobody's been in?" he asked of one of the constables.

"No, sir."

"Then you, Brackley, come with us; you, Smith, keep the gate. There's a squad on its way."

The two inspectors and the constable passed down the alley and entered the house. They mounted the wide carved staircase.

"This don't look as if he'd been out much lately," one of the inspectors muttered as he kicked aside a litter of dead leaves and paper that lay outside Oleron's door. "I don't think we need knock—break a pane, Brackley."

The door had two glazed panels; there was a sound of shattered glass; and Brackley put his hand through the hole his elbow had made and drew back the latch.

"Faugh!" . . . choked one of the inspectors as they entered. "Let some light and air in, quick. It stinks like a hearse
—"

The assembly out in the square saw the red blinds go up and the windows of the old house flung open.

"That's better," said one of the inspectors, putting his head out of a window and drawing a deep breath . . . "That seems to be the bedroom in there; will you go in, Simms, while I go over the rest? . . ."

They had drawn up the bedroom blind also, and the waxy-white, emaciated man on the bed had made a blinker of his hand against the torturing flood of brightness. Nor could he believe that his hearing was not playing tricks with him, for there were two policemen in his room, bending over him and asking where "she" was. He shook his head.

"This woman Bengough . . . goes by the name of Miss Elsie Bengough . . . d'ye hear? Where is she? . . . No good, Brackley; get him up; be careful with him; I'll just shove my head out of the window, I think . . ."

The other inspector had been through Oleron's study and had found nothing, and was now in the kitchen, kicking

aside an ankle-deep mass of vegetable refuse that cumbered the floor. The kitchen window had no blind, and was overshadowed by the blank end of the house across the alley. The kitchen appeared to be empty.

But the inspector, kicking aside the dead flowers, noticed that a shuffling track that was not of his making had been swept to a cupboard in the corner. In the upper part of the cupboard was a square panel that looked as if it slid on runners. The door itself was closed.

The inspector advanced, put out his hand to the little knob, and slid the hatch along its groove.

Then he took an involuntary step back again.

Framed in the aperture, and falling forward a little before it jammed again in its frame, was something that resembled a large lumpy pudding, done up in a pudding-bag of faded brown red frieze.

"Ah!" said the inspector.

To close the hatch again he would have had to thrust that pudding back with his hand; and somehow he did not quite like the idea of touching it. Instead, he turned the handle of the cupboard itself. There was weight behind it, so much weight that, after opening the door three or four inches and peering inside, he had to put his shoulder to it in order to close it again. In closing it he left sticking out, a few inches from the floor, a triangle of black and white check skirt.

He went into the small hall.

"All right!" he called.

They had got Oleron into his clothes. He still used his hands as blinkers, and his brain was very confused. A number of things were happening that he couldn't understand. He couldn't understand the extraordinary mess of dead flowers there seemed to be everywhere; he couldn't understand why there should be police officers in his room; he couldn't understand why one of these should be sent for a four-wheeler and a stretcher; and he couldn't understand what heavy article they seemed to be moving about in the kitchen—his kitchen . . .

"What's the matter?" he muttered sleepily . . .

Then he heard a murmur in the square, and the stopping of a four-wheeler outside. A police officer was at his elbow again, and Oleron wondered why, when he whispered something to him, he should run off a string of words—something about "used in evidence against you." They had lifted him to his feet, and were assisting him towards the door . . .

No, Oleron couldn't understand it at all.

They got him down the stairs and along the alley. Oleron was aware of confused angry shoutings; he gathered that a number of people wanted to lynch somebody or other. Then his attention became fixed on a little fat frightened-eyed man who appeared to be making a statement that an officer was taking down in a notebook.

"I'd seen her with him . . . they was often together . . . she came into my shop and said it was for him . . . I thought it was all right . . . 111333 the number was," the man was saying.

The people seemed to be very angry; many police were keeping them back; but one of the inspectors had a voice that Oleron thought quite kind and friendly. He was telling somebody to get somebody else into the cab before something or other was brought out; and Oleron noticed that a four-wheeler was drawn up at the gate. It appeared that it was himself who was to be put into it; and as they lifted him up he saw that the inspector tried to stand between him and something that stood behind the cab, but was not quick enough to prevent Oleron seeing that this something was a hooded stretcher. The angry voices sounded like a sea; something hard, like a stone, hit the back of the cab; and the inspector followed Oleron in and stood with his back to the window nearer the side where the people were. The door they had put Oleron in at remained open, apparently till the other inspector should come; and through the opening Oleron had a glimpse of the hatchet-like "To Let" boards among the privet-trees. One of them said that the key was at Number Six . . .

Suddenly the raging of voices was hushed. Along the

entrance-alley shuffling steps were heard, and the other inspector appeared at the cab door.

"Right away," he said to the driver.

He entered, fastened the door after him, and blocked up the second window with his back. Between the two inspectors Oleron slept peacefully. The cab moved down the square, the other vehicle went up the hill. The mortuary lay that way.

THE DREAM

by A. J. Alan

They've asked me to tell you about another of my experiences, and I think it wouldn't be a bad idea to try to describe to you a dream I often have.

My mind has been very much exercised as to the propriety of doing this. I don't mean *that* kind of propriety—It's simply that I know from bitter experience that it's going to annoy quite a lot of my lady listeners—and readers—and they'll write and abuse me. Why they should is utterly beyond me; but the sad fact remains. Perhaps they will bear in mind that it is only a dream, and that I do now humbly apologise—in advance.

Very well then.

Before describing the dream itself it may be as well to explain a few things about it.

First of all, I've had it some fifteen or twenty times altogether, at quite irregular intervals. Sometimes it gives me a miss for two years, at others it will happen twice in six months. There's no knowing.

It began—to visit me—when I was eight or nine years old, and I used to think then that it was just the same dream each time, but it wasn't, and it isn't. The general setting or *locale* is the same, but there's a gradual moving forward of events which makes it somewhat interesting—to me, at any rate—and just a bit creepy.

It always begins in exactly the same way. I am walking up a broad flight of stairs in a very large house. The carpet is dark blue and very thick, so thick that you sink right in.

The walls are all white.

The time, as a rule, is between eleven and twelve at night. That, however, depends on what time I have gone to sleep.

It's evidently a party I'm coming to, and I'm rather late

for it. My left forefinger is poking a piece of paper down into my waistcoat pocket, and I'm aware in some occult way that it's the ticket for my hat and coat.

The whole place seems deserted except for me, not even anyone to take my name and announce me. In fact, I'm not *rather* late, I'm *very* late.

At the top of the stairs there's a broad sort of landing place, and, immediately facing me, a very massive mahogany door with a large cut-glass knob. Through this door I go.

In my very young days I used to have quite a job to push it open, but now it's merely heavy and solid.

There's a screen inside the door which cuts me off from the rest of the room, and it just gives me the opportunity to pull down my waistcoat. You know how badly they wash them nowadays, and there's always the chance of the points having got bent up in the cab.

Anyway, having finally pulled myself together, I walk, with a certain amount of diffidence, round the screen. It's a great big room—very high and brilliantly lighted. The walls are white and the carpet blue—like the stairs—and the furniture is very dark oak.

The scene is rather peculiar. There must be at least forty or fifty men in the room, and they are all sitting on chairs in front of a little platform against the far wall. They aren't sitting in rows, but just anyhow. It looks as though they've drawn up their chairs as near the platform as they can get. I expect that's what happens, really, but I've never got there early enough to see.

They are all much of the same class, as far as general appearance goes; but their ages are widely different. They range from twenty or less right up to seventy or more.

I used to wonder, many years ago, what it was all about, but now I realise that all these people are watching, with very great interest, a conversation which is taking place between a man and woman. Incidentally, she is the only woman in the room.

These two are sitting on chairs on the dais or platform. It's quite a low platform really—not more than a foot high.

I say they're watching the conversation because I'm sure

that unless one happens to be in the very front row it isn't possible to catch more than a word here and there.

The *man* on the platform doesn't call for any particular remark—at least, I don't know—it *is* rather funny about him.

He is evidently just one of the audience who has been invited up, as it were, and I've usually seen him a few times before in the body of the room. But the thing is that once a man has spent the evening on the platform he never appears again.

Now we come to the lady. I must tell you about her, even at the risk of boring you, because she's the central figure, so to speak.

She is very beautiful—almost too beautiful to be respectable. In fact, if one didn't actually know—However, when I say respectable, I don't mean that she would faint clean away if anyone said damn; but one would hesitate before digging her in the ribs on short acquaintance.

As far as I can tell, she's on the tall side, and very graceful. I've never seen her standing up. She looks as though she could dance well. By dance, I mean waltz, of course. She has lovely copper-coloured hair, and she's had the sense not to cut it off. She apparently believes in looking like a woman and not like an ungainly boy. Most unfashionable—but then you must remember that this is a dream.

She's usually dressed in a simple black evening-frock and a hat. The hat is rather of the—I think it's called the turban type. It's a little difficult to describe. It's got a sort of asprey—no, osprey—thing that points backwards and downwards, rather like the tail of a comet does. I think Miss Lily Elsie wore something like that in the *Merry Widow* (if she doesn't mind my dragging her in).

When I say she's wearing a *simple* black frock, I mean one of those simple little frocks which you can pick up anywhere for fifty or sixty guineas.

And it's never the same dress twice.

If I could only draw I could earn a couple of thousand a year by making sketches of them. They aren't *quite* like the things you see about just now, but they may be fashionable some day—who knows?

While she's sitting down she isn't having a perpetual struggle to make her skirt cover her knees. Not that I've any quarrel with knees—*qua* knees—but those rows of bony excrescences which stick out at you in the Tube, well, surely some of them might be left to the imagination. In fact, if things go on as they are doing now, one won't want an imagination at all, and then what?

And while we are on the subject of horrors, I'm sure she would never wear Bolshie boots; she wouldn't flaunt her political opinions to that extent, whatever they were. Quite apart from that, she wouldn't have to wear such things, because her ankles are perfect. I won't refer to light-coloured stockings because they—well—*de mortuis*.

To go back to the lady's hat for a moment. I must confess that it rather beats me—why she's wearing one at all, that is—because she must be in her own house.

You can tell that from the way she behaves—I mean, that she's obviously acting as hostess, and her manner is a treat to watch.

She sits quietly in her chair without looking as though she'd been spilt in it, and she doesn't fidget. She hasn't any of those irritating little affectations which one so often sees. She doesn't drag out a repair outfit every two minutes and plaster a lot of stuff on her face. Perhaps she doesn't have to. I don't believe she'd even powder her nose in public. In fact, I'm quite sure she wouldn't. Oh, I know that on this subject I'm only a locust crying in the wilderness, but it *is* refreshing to see anyone who isn't ashamed of her complexion.

I've mentioned before that the conversation, or whatever it is, between the good lady and the man on the platform is so quiet that I've never been able to hear her voice, but there's no doubt in my mind that it's the kind that anyone vulgar, who wished to be extra offensive, would describe as a "refained voice"; but he wouldn't be there, so it doesn't matter.

I've racked my brains trying to imagine what on earth they can be talking about for such a long time. In the early part she seems to be asking questions and getting very deferential

answers. Perhaps she's applying some form of test. Later on it's more as though she is giving information or instructions, and he just puts in a word here and there.

At about half-past twelve she usually lights a cigarette. Between you and me, I think it's a signal as much as anything to tell all the rest of us that we can smoke if we like. Some of us do.

Now, it's rather a funny thing about the time. More often than not the place where I'm standing gives me a view of a clock there is on the mantelpiece. It's one of those clocks which pretend they haven't got any works, like the women of the present day. You know them—er—the clocks. All you can see is a sheet of plate-glass with the figures and hands on it, and the hands go round in some mysterious way. This clock goes and it's right. *How* do I know it's right—let's see—how *do* I know it's right? Oh, yes, because it always indicates the time of about one hour after I've got to sleep, and that may vary quite a lot. I think that more or less proves it.

It's also a peculiar thing about the smoking. I didn't begin to smoke in real life until I was twenty-three, but I always smoked in this dream, even when I was at school, and it used to give me a horrible taste in my mouth next morning. Oh, it's a vivid dream all right.

As regards the age of the lady—well, it's a little hard to say. In my extreme youth she was about as old as an aunt. When I was grown up she seemed more like a sister, and now I'm blowed if I know how old she is. Early thirties probably. It's rather unusual to grow *past* anyone.

She has a fan—forgive me for going on about her—but she *has* a fan—it's a big ostrich feather one; she knows how to use it, and she doesn't wield it like a tennis racket. In fact, altogether, I give her full marks.

I think I said at the beginning that there aren't quite enough chairs for everyone, and those who come late—like me—have to stand up at the back. All the same, it becomes apparent every now and then during the evening that there *is* a vacant chair a little way in. It's always a mystery to me *how* this happens, because no one ever seems to

go out (only a blind man would), but when it *does* happen one of the men standing at the back sort of tiptoes in and takes it.

We just settle it among ourselves who—like you do in the Tube—"That's all right, I'm getting out at the next station"—you know. A man who has once sat down always has a chair after that, so you see there's a process going on all through the years whereby everyone gradually works forward to the front and eventually finishes up on the platform. It has often, undoubtedly, been my turn to take a vacant chair, but some instinct has always warned me not to. Even our hostess has noticed it, and she's occasionally looked at me as though to say: "Aren't you going to sit down?" but I've always half-shaken my head and let someone else have it—the chair, that is. Then she has just given a slight, very slight, shrug of the shoulders, and I've felt rather ungracious and left it at that. I know *now* why I don't sit down, and I'll tell you about that presently.

It's extremely difficult to give you the facts about this dream in their proper order, because there isn't a proper order, and it differs in so many ways from ordinary dreams. There are none of the mad things in it that you usually get. For instance, only the other night—the night before last—I had a real beauty. Let's see—how did it begin?—oh, yes.

There'd been an earthquake, and after it was all over I'd gone back to look for my opera hat. It was day-time, with a biting east wind blowing, and the whole landscape, as far as the eye could see, was completely covered with huge round boulders—presumably thrown up by the earthquake. These boulders were jammed so close together that you couldn't walk between them, and they were all covered with green slime so that you couldn't go jumping along the tops. I tried it exactly once. Frightfully slippery. So it was a case of scrambling up one side and slithering down the other the whole time. It would be an exaggeration to say that the going was at all easy.

The only other person in sight, besides me, was a horrible old beggar woman, and she *would* follow me about. She was

wheeling a bicycle—she would be, of course—and I was continually having to help her with it over the more difficult places. She had a ghastly ingratiating smile, and whenever she did smile you could see that she had no teeth at all—just two rows of nothing. Most repulsive. All the time we were going along looking for my hat, I kept on finding half-crowns in the—what's the right word—interstices—between the boulders—any amount of them. But whenever I came across one she vowed and declared it was hers. "Surely the kind gentleman wouldn't rob a poor old woman," and so on. I don't believe it *was* her money really, but she seemed so certain about it that one gave in to avoid a fuss.

I was getting very bored with her. I said, "Why can't you pick 'em up yourself?"

But she didn't seem to, somehow. I was having a perfectly dreadful time with the bicycle, too. (There was no doubt about sitting down in *this* dream. My goodness!) And I said, "Look here, my good woman, what is the use of lugging this great thing about? You can't ride it, the country isn't a bit suitable, and it's a man's machine. Why not park it?" Oh, no, that wouldn't suit her at all, she might want it.

She finally became so exasperating that I chucked it and began to scramble away from her. She immediately put up a fearful moan about my leaving her in the lurch, and how she couldn't possibly manage by herself. Old liar, she could manage perfectly well. I hadn't gone fifty yards before she nipped on to her bicycle and rode it—rode it, mark you!—*after* me at no end of a lick. She came skimming along the tops of the rocks like a seaplane just taking off. It made me so angry—the way I'd been done—that it woke me up.

Now you know where you are with a dream like that. It follows the proper rules. But the one I'm really telling you about is so abnormally normal. For example, I recognise it the moment I'm going up the stairs, and say "Here's this jolly old dream again." Also, it never comes to a definite end, but just fades out after I've been in the room for about an hour, and next morning every single detail is as clearly

in my mind as if it had actually happened—more clearly, if anything. In fact, I could write it all down, only it would take so long. I also have the impression that these "doings" often take place when I'm not there. It's like reading a book with half the pages missing.

The one constantly variable factor is the man on the platform, and it's rotten bad luck that I've always been too late to see how he comes to be chosen out of all the others. He was once just sitting down, but that's the nearest I've ever got.

It used to strike me what a rag it would be if only I could recognise anyone there. After all, it stands to reason that all these other people must be dreaming, too—and then we could compare notes next day.

Well, one night the man on the platform was a man, a rather famous man, whom I knew very well. When I say I knew him very well, I really mean that I knew his secretary very well, which is infinitely better, believe me. So next morning I rang her up—the secretary—and said, "I say, I wish you'd fix up an appointment with the old man some time during the day, because I want to see him very particularly." And she said, "I'm afraid you can't, because he was found dead in bed this morning."

Quite a nasty thing to have put across you without any warning.

Wasn't it just my luck? Fearful hard lines on him, too, of course, but it absolutely dished my chance of finding out what the dream meant. If it meant anything, that is.

However, the Fates were kind. Three or four years ago I again saw a man on the platform whom I knew perfectly well. His name was Ribblechick, but he couldn't help that, poor chap. He recognised me, too, and we grinned at each other, and I thought now it's all right—he'll have heard her speak, and will be able to tell me what she is—if not who.

So next morning I trotted round—they lived quite near us—and will you believe me, the whole house was upside down. He, poor old Ribblechick, had been found dead in bed, too. Heart-failure, they said it was.

Please don't think that I'm suggesting for a moment that it was anything but the purest coincidence that these two unfortunate people happened to die in the same way. But all the same, each time I dream my dream nowadays, and a chair does fall vacant, I still let someone else have it, and the good lady still shrugs her shoulders.

THE STRANGER

by Hugh MacDiarmid

"All I can say is that he wasn't born of man and woman any more than the man in the moon," said old Ben, wiping his whiskers and relighting his pipe.

"But how could you possibly know that, even if it were true," replied young Jake.

"Just the same," said old Ben tartly, "as most of us can tell that a horse is a horse and a cabbage a cabbage and a man a man."

"I don't see that," said young Jake.

"You wouldn't," said old Ben. "You've never even been married."

"But that's not to say," Peter interposed, "that he doesn't know the difference between a man and a woman."

"Or," added young Jake, nettled, "that all the rest of us are so blind that if there's an equal or greater difference between him and a mere human being, we can't see it—and you can."

"What I can't see," said George, "no matter what he is—and to my eyes he looks just as human as any of us, which isn't saying much—is why you refused to have a beer with him when he offered it to you."

"I am not the man to say no, when anyone offers to stand treat," replied old Ben, "and the beer would have been just the same paid for by him or anyone here. All I can say is, that I had better not. It's a queer thing—but it goes to prove that I mean what I say. Otherwise I wouldn't have refused the beer. Surely that's plain enough."

"Well," said George, "he's a fine free-handed creature whatever he is and all the rest of us drank with him and aren't suffering any ill effects—as far as I can see."

"So far as I can see," repeated old Ben, "it all comes back

to that. But it's a good proverb that warns us never to judge by appearances."

"Dammit!" said Philip, "he belongs to the next village to my own home town, and I know his father and mother."

"That settles it," said young Jake.

"Pardon me, but it does nothing of the sort," said old Ben. "The world has been quarrelling about a very similar problem for the last two thousand years. I have no doubt all sorts of people knew Jesus Christ's father and mother. A fat lot that mattered!"

"Here! here!" said the landlord. "None of that now, this argument has gone far enough. I served the man and he paid me in the ordinary way, and as the responsible party in this licensed-house, I say that he was a stranger, but otherwise just an ordinary sober human being, fit to be served in any well-conducted bar. An argument's an argument but when it runs into blasphemy I'll have none of it here."

"Blasphemy be damned!" said old Ben, "it's a well-known fact that Jesus Christ wasn't born of man or woman in the ordinary way, and all I am saying is that the same thing applies to the gentleman in question."

"Well," said the landlord, "I don't care a sniff whether that's true or not, but I've warned you. No names, no pack-drill. Argue away as you like as long as you don't get too rowdy, but to mention Jesus Christ by name is blasphemy, and if you do it again, out you go."

"The only thing to do," said Philip, "is to ask him point blank if he comes in again."

"You and he seemed to get on particularly well," said old Ben, to the landlord.

"I liked him," said the landlord. "I could do with a lot more customers like him these days. He seemed to have plenty of money and be of very lavish disposition."

"Yes," said old Ben, "I understand all that, but I was thinking of something quite different."

"You would be," retorted the landlord. "What was it?"

"Just that his kind seem to have one thing in common—a curious predilection for the company of publicans and sinners."

"You're just trying to be blasphemous again in a less direct way, you nasty old man," said the landlord, "but I haven't noticed that the gentleman in question was any different in that respect from anyone else here—and you're all human enough, God knows."

"Who's being blasphemous now?" asked old Ben.

"Here he comes again at any rate," said George.

"Well, I'll ask him plump and plain," said Philip, and as the stranger came forward, rose and said, "We've just been having a friendly argument about you. Do you mind if I ask you a simple, straightforward question?"

"Not in the least," said the stranger, "but let's have a drink first. Landlord, drinks round, please, on me."

They all filled up except old Ben, who refused.

"Why won't you have a drink with me?" asked the stranger.

"Because I don't think it is right," said old Ben.

"What?" asked the stranger, "the beer? There's nothing the matter with it. It's damned good beer. The landlord knows his business all right. Besides, he's drinking the same in any case."

"No," said old Ben. "Not the beer. You."

"What's the matter with me?" asked the stranger.

"It's like this," said Philip, "we've just been having a little argument, as I said. The question I want to ask you is this—were you born in the ordinary way of a man or a woman, or were you not?"

"What an extraordinary question," said the stranger. "How in the world did it arise?"

"Old Ben says you weren't," said Philip, "that's why he won't drink with you."

"It doesn't say very much for old Ben's experience in the world, to refuse a perfectly good drink, no matter whether he's right about my birth or no," said the stranger, "but I am sure the idea did not originate with old Ben himself. Who started this hare?"

"You're right there," said old Ben. "It was my missus told me. She saw you across the jug-counter here the last time you were in."

"How did she know?"

"Well, it's hardly for me to say seeing she is my missus," said old Ben. "I'm the last man in the world to base much on women's nonsense as a rule. But one of the others will perhaps tell you that what my missus says is a good deal more worth paying attention to in such connections than most folk's talk."

"Yes," said George, "we're bound to admit that his missus is a very remarkable woman. She sees far into the future. Time and again, to the knowledge of all present, she has prophesied rightly."

"There's no question about that," said the landlord.

"Does she drink?" asked the stranger.

"Keep your insulting remarks to yourself," said old Ben.

"I meant no insult," said the stranger. "I wasn't inferring that her predictions were the by-products of fuddling. I only asked in a perfectly friendly way. Does she like a drink? The bearing of my question on the argument will be clear as soon as it is answered—in the affirmative, as I am sure it will be."

"She's very fond of a bottle of stout," said the landlord.

"Well," said the stranger, opening his wallet, and laying a ten shilling note on the counter, "will you kindly supply her with stout to the value of ten shillings with my compliments and best wishes?" He glanced at his wristwatch. "Good gracious! Is that the time? I must be off. Good night, all."

"Good night. Good night."

"Just a moment," said Philip. "The point is, was Ben's missus right or wrong?"

The stranger had passed out, his hand on the handle of the swing door.

"Right," said the stranger, and was gone.

THE CASE OF MR. LUCRAFT

by Sir Walter Besant and James Rice

I have often told the story of the only remarkable thing which has happened to me in the course of a longish life. No one has ever believed me; I wish, therefore, to leave behind me a truthful record, in which everything shall be set down, as near as I can remember it, just as it happened. I am sure I need not add a single fact. The more I consider the story, the more I realise to myself my wonderful escape and the frightful consequences which a providential accident averted from my head, the more reason I feel to be grateful and humble.

I have read of nothing similar to my own case. I have consulted books on apparitions, witchcraft, and the power of the devil as manifested in authentic history, but I have found absolutely nothing that can in any way compare with my own case. If there be any successor to Mr. Grumbelow, possessed of his unholy powers, endowed with his fiendish and diabolical iniquity of selfishness, this plain and simple narrative may serve as a warning to young men situated as I was in the year 1823. Except as a moral example, indeed, I see no use in telling the story at all.

I have never been a rich man, but I was once very poor, and it is of this period that I have to write.

As for my parentage, that matters nothing, enough that it was quite obscure. My mother died when I was still a boy; and my father, who was not a man to be proud of as a father, had long before run away from her and disappeared. He was a sailor by profession, and I have heard it rumoured he possessed a wife in every port, besides a few who lived, like my mother, inland; so that he would vary the surroundings when he wished. All properly married in church too, and honest women, every one of them. What became of him I never knew, nor did I ever inquire.

I went through a pretty fair number of adventures before I settled down to my first serious profession. I was travelling companion and drudge to an itinerant tinker, who treated me as kindly as could be expected when he was sober. When he was drunk he used to throw the pots and pans at my head. Then I became cabin-boy, but only for a single voyage, on board a collier. The ship belonged to a philanthropist, who was too much occupied with the wrongs of the niggers to think about the rights of his own sailors; so his ships, insured far above their real value, were sent to sea to sink or swim as it might please Providence. I suppose no cabin-boy ever had so many kicks and cuffs in a single voyage as I had. However, my ship carried me safely from South Shields to the port of London. There I ran away, and I heard afterwards that on her return voyage the *Spanking Sally* foundered with all hands. In the minds of those who knew the captain and his crew, there were doubtless, as in mine, grave fears as to their ultimate destination. After that I became steward in an Atlantic packet for a couple of years; then clerk to a bogus auctioneer in New York; cashier to a store; all sorts of things, but nothing long. Then I came back to England, and not knowing what to do with myself, joined a strolling company of actors in the general utility line. It was not exactly promotion, but I liked the life; I liked the work; I liked the applause; I liked wandering about from town to town; I even liked, being young and a fool, the precarious nature of the salary. Heaven knows mine was small enough; but we were a cheery company, and one or two members subsequently rose to distinction. If we had known any history, which we did not, we might have remembered that Molière himself was once a stroller through France. Some people think it philosophical to reflect, when they are hard up, how many great men have been hard up too. It would have brought no comfort to me. Practically I felt little inconvenience from poverty, save in the matter of boots. We went share and share alike, most of us, and there was always plenty to eat even for my naturally gigantic appetite. Juliet, a delicate eater, always used to reckon me as equal to four.

Juliet was the manager's daughter—Juliet Kerrans, acting as Miss Juliet Albanley. She was eighteen and I was twenty-three, an inflammable and romantic time of life. We were thrown a good deal together too, not only off the stage but on it. I was put into parts to play up to her. I was Romeo when she played her namesake, a part sustained by her mother till even she herself was bound to own that she was too fat to play it any longer; she was Lady Teazle and I was Charles Surface; she was Rosalind and I Orlando; she was Angelina and I Sir Harry Wildair. We were a pair, and looked well in love scenes. Looking back dispassionately on our performances, I suppose they must have been as bad as stage-acting could well be. At least, we had no training, and nothing but a few fixed rules to guide us; these, of course, quite stagey and conventional. Juliet had been on the stage all her life, and did not want in assurance; I, however, was nervous and uncertain. Then we were badly mounted and badly dressed; we were ambitious, we ranted, and we tore a passion to rags. But we had one or two good points—we were young and lively. Juliet had the most charming of faces and the most delicious figure—mind you, in the year 1823, girls had a chance of showing their figures without putting on a page's costume. Then she had a soft, sweet voice, and pretty little coquettish ways, which came natural to her, and broke through all the clumsy stage artificialities. She drew full houses; wherever we performed, the men, especially young officers, used to come after her. They wrote her notes, they lay in wait for her, they sent her flowers; but what with old Kerrans and myself, to say nothing of the other members of the company, they might as well have tried to get at the Peri in Paradise. I drew pretty well too. I was—a man of seventy and more may say so—I was a good-looking young fellow; you would hardly believe what quantities of letters and *billets-doux* came to me. I had dozens, but Juliet found them and tore them all up. There they were; the note on rose-coloured note-paper with violet ink, beginning with "Handsomest and noblest of men," and ending with "Your fair unknown, Araminta." There was the letter from the middle-aged widow

with a taste for the drama and an income; and there was the vilely spelled note from the foolish little milliner who had fallen in love with the Romeo of a barn. Perhaps ladies are more sensible now. At all events, their letters were thrown away upon me, because I was in love, head over ears, with Juliet.

Juliet handed over her notes to her father, who found out their writers, and made them take boxes and bespeak plays. So that all Juliet's lovers got was the privilege of paying more than other people, for the girl was as good as she was pretty—a rarer combination of qualities on the stage fifty years ago than now. She was tall and, in those days, slender. Later on she took after her mother; but who would have thought that so graceful a girl would ever arrive at fourteen stone? Her eyes and hair were black—eyes that never lost their lustre; and hair which, though it turned grey in later years, was then like a silken net, when it was let down, to catch the hearts of lovers. Of course she knew that she was pretty; what pretty woman does not? And of course, too, she did not know and would not understand the power of her own beauty; what pretty woman does? And because it was the very worst thing she could do for herself, she fell in love with me.

Her father knew it and meant to stop it from the beginning: but he was not a man to do things in a hurry, and so we went on in a fool's paradise, enjoying the stolen kisses, and talking of when we should be married. One night—I was Romeo—I was so carried away with passion that I acted for once naturally and unconventionally. There was a full house; the performance was so out of the common that it took away the breath of the people, and they even forgot to applaud.

Unluckily old Kerrans was in the front, looking on. Of course he saw that it was not play-acting at all, but reality, between us, and made up his mind what to do at once.

The next day was Saturday. When I went into the treasury I found the good old fellow with a red face, and a little hesitation of manner.

"Look here," he said, handing me the money, "you are a good young fellow, Lucraft, and a likely actor. There's merit in you. But I can't have you spoiling my Juliet for the stage. So I'm going to put her up without you. After a bit I dare say I shall find another Romeo. You get away to London and find another engagement—there's a week's pay in advance—and when Juliet is married, or when you get rich, or when anything happens to make things different, why, you see, we shall all be glad to see you back. You needn't say good-bye to Juliet, because I've had it out with her this morning. A tough job it was too. Good-bye, my boy, and good luck to you."

Good luck! Had he known the kind of luck that was coming to me!

I took my dismissal though with a heavy heart, and that afternoon climbed outside the night-coach to London.

I spent the first fortnight trying to get an engagement.

There were only two or three theatres then in London, and in them there was not even room for a super.

I tried the Greenwich and the Richmond theatres, but in vain. Then I tried the country managers, but either no answer came or a refusal. All this time the little money that I had was melting away. I held my lodgings from week to week, paid in advance. And one morning, after paying the rent, I found myself without a penny.

I had one or two things which I could pawn—a watch, a waistcoat, a few odds and ends in the way of a wardrobe, and a few books—on the proceeds of them I lived for a whole week; and then, one morning, after spending twopence in the purchase of a penny loaf and a saveloy for breakfast, I was penniless, and also without the means of procuring another penny at all, because I had nothing left to pawn.

Many a young fellow has found himself in a similar predicament, but I doubt whether any one ever became so desperately hungry as I did on that day. I recollect that, having rashly eaten up my sausage at eight, I felt a sinking towards twelve; it was aggravated by the savoury smell of roast meat which steamed from the cookshops and dining-rooms as

I walked along the streets. Towards one o'clock I gazed with malignant envy on the happy clerks who could go in and order platefuls of the roast and boiled which smoked in the windows, and threw a perfume more delicious than the sweetest strains of music into the streets where I lingered and looked. About two I observed the diners come out again, walking more slowly, but with an upright and satisfied air, while I—the sinking had been succeeded by a dull gnawing pain—was slowly doubling up. At half-past two I felt as if I could bear it no longer. I had been walking about, trying different offices for a clerkship. I might as well have asked for a partnership. But I could walk no more. I leaned against a post—it was in Bucklersbury—opposite a dining-room, where hares, fowls, and turkeys were piled in the window among a boundless prodigality and wealth of carrots, turnips, and cauliflowers, till my senses swam at the contemplation. I longed for a cauldron in which to put the whole contents of the shop front, and eat them at one Gargantuan repast. My appetite, already alluded to, was hereditary; one of the few things I can remember of my mother was a constant complaint that my father used to eat her out of house and home. To be sure, from other scraps of information handed down by tradition, I have reason to believe that the word eating was used as a figure of speech—the part for the whole—and included drinking. I was good at both, and as a trencherman I had been unsurpassed, as I said above, in the company, the dear old company among whom I had so often eaten beefsteak and fried onions with Juliet. The door of the restaurant opened now and then to let a hungry man enter or a full man go out, and I caught voices from within, stifled voices, as those sent up a pipe, calling for roast beef with plenty of brown—good heavens! plenty of brown; roast mutton, underdone—I love my mutton underdone; boiled beef with suet pudding and fat—I always took a great deal of pudding and fat with my boiled beef; roast veal and bacon with stuffing—a dish for the gods; calves' head for two—I could have eaten calves' head for a dozen; with orders pointing to things beyond my hungry imagination—hunger limits the boundaries of

fancy—puddings, fish, soup, cheese, and such delicacies. Alas! I wanted the solids. I felt myself growing feebler; I became more and more doubled up; I had thoughts of entering this paradise of the hungry, and, after eating till I could eat no longer, calmly laying down my knife and fork and informing the waiter that I had no money. There was a farce in which I had once played where the comic actor sent for the landlord, after a hearty meal, and asked him what he would do in case a stranger, after ordering and eating his dinner, should declare his inability to pay. "Do, sir?" cried the host; "I should kick him across the street." "Landlord," said the low comedian, and it always told—"Landlord," he used to rise up slowly as he spoke, and solemnly draw aside his coat-tails, turning his face in the direction of the street-door—"landlord, I'll trouble you." I used to play the landlord.

It struck half-past three; the dead gnawing of hunger was followed by a sharp pain, irritating and much more unpleasant. The crowd of those who entered had been followed by the crowd of those who came out, and the heaven of hungry men was nearly empty again. I gazed still upon the turkeys and the hares, but with a lack-lustre eye, for I was nearly fainting.

Presently there came down the street an elderly gentleman, bearing before him, like a Lord Mayor in a French tale, his enormous abdomen: he had white hair, white eyebrows, white whiskers, and a purple face. He walked very slowly, as if the exertion might prove apoplectic, and leaned upon a thick stick. As he passed the shop he looked in at the window and wagged his head. At that moment I groaned involuntarily. He turned round and surveyed me. I suppose I presented a strange appearance, leaning against the post, with stooping figure and tightly-buttoned coat. He had big projecting eyes flushed with red veins that gave him a wolfish expression.

"Young man," he said, not benignantly at all, but severely, "you look ill. Have you been drinking?"

I shook my head.

"I am only hungry," I said; telling the truth because

I was too far gone to hide it. "I am only hungry; that is all that's the matter with me."

He planted his stick on the ground, supporting both his hands upon the gold head, and wagged his head again from side to side with a grunting sound in his throat like the sawing of bones.

Grunt! "Here's a pretty fellow for you!" Grunt: "Hungry, and he looks miserable." Grunt! "Hungry, and he groans." Grunt! "Hungry—the most enviable position a man can be in—and he dares to repine at his lot." Grunt! "What are the lower classes coming to next, I wonder? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Aren't you a model of everything that is ungrateful and"—grunt!—"and flying in the face of Providence? He lives in a land of victuals. London is a gigantic caravan, full of the most splendid things which it only wants an appetite to eat; and he's got that, and he laments!"

"What is the use if you have no money?"

Grunt! "Is it a small appetite, as a rule, or is it a large appetite?"

"Large," I replied. "It is an awkward thing for a poor beggar like me to have such a devil of a twist. I was born with it. Very awkward just now."

"Come with me, young man," he grunted. "Go before me. Don't talk, because that may interfere with the further growth of your appetite. Walk slowly and keep your mouth shut."

He came behind me, walking with his chuckle and grunt.

"So. What a fine young fellow it is!" Grunt! "What room for the development of the Alderman's Arch! What a backbone for the support of a stomach. What shoulders for a dinner-table, and what legs to put under it! Heavens! what a diner might be made of this boy if he only had money." Grunt! "Youth and appetite—health and hunger—and all thrown away upon a pauper! What a thing, what a thing! This way, young man."

Turning down a court leading out of Bucklersbury, he guided me to a door, a little black portal, at which he

stopped; then stooping to a keyhole of smaller size than was generally used in those days, he seemed to me to blow into it with his mouth; this was absurd, of course, but it seemed so to me. The door opened. He led the way into a passage, which, when the door shut behind us, as it did of its own accord, was pitch dark. We went up some stairs, and on the first landing the old gentleman, who was wheezing and puffing tremendously, opened another door, and led me into a room. It was a large room, resplendent with the light of at least forty wax candles. The centre was occupied by a large dining-table laid for a single person. Outside it was broad daylight, for it was not yet four o'clock.

"Sit down, young man, sit down," puffed my host. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! Sit down, do. I wish I was as hungry as you."

I sat down in the nearest chair, and looked round the room. The first thing I remarked was that I could not see the door by which we had been admitted. The room was octagonal, and on every side stood some heavy piece of furniture; a table with glass, a case of bookshelves, a sofa, but no door. My head began to go round as I continued my observations. There was no window either, nor was there any fireplace. Then I felt a sudden giddiness, and I suppose I fell backwards on my chair. It was partly the faintness of hunger, but partly it was the strange room, and that old man glaring at me with his great wolfish eyes.

When I recovered I was lying on a sofa, and soft cold fingers were bathing my head, and pressing a perfumed handkerchief to my lips. I opened my eyes suddenly and sat up completely recovered. At the foot of the sofa stood my entertainer.

"Easy with him, *Boule-de-neige*; make him rest for a moment. Perhaps we have been too much for him."

I turned to see who *Boule-de-neige* was. He was a Negro of the blackest type, as ancient and withered as some old ourang of the tropical woods; his cheeks hung in folds, and his skin seemed too much for his attenuated body; his wool was white, and his gums were toothless; and his nose so flattened with age as to be almost invisible, looking at him as I was

looking, in profile. His hands were as soft as any woman's, but icy cold; and his eyes were red and fiery.

"Boule-de-neige, what do you think of him?"

"Him berry fine young man, massa: him beautiful young man; got lubly abbatite develoffed, I think; him last long time, much longer time dan last oder young man. Cluck! Him poor trash, dat young man; dam poor trash; use up and go to de debbil in a month. Cluck! Dis young man got lubly stumjack, strong as bull. Cluck-cluck! How much you tink him eat to-night?"

"We shall see, Boule-de-neige. We will try him with dinner first, and then pronounce on his performances. Young men do not always come up to their professions. But he looks well, and perhaps, Boule-de-neige—perhaps—Ah!" He nodded with a deep sigh.

"What time massa dine himself?"

"I don't know," the old gentleman answered, with another heavy sigh. "Perhaps not till nine o'clock; perhaps not, then. Vanish, Boule-de-neige, and serve."

There was evidently something in my host's mind by the way he sighed. Did Boule-de-neige go through the floor? Did the table sink when he disappeared, and come up loaded with dishes? It seemed so.

I sprang from the couch. The sight and smell of the food brought back my raging hunger.

"Let me eat!" I cried.

"You shall. One moment first—only a single moment. Young man, tell me again and explicitly the nature and extent of your appetite. Be truthful, O be truthful! Our little tongues should never lie for mutton-chop or apple-pie. You know the hymn."

"I've got a devil of an appetite. What is there to lie about?"

"My dear young friend, there are many kinds of appetites. Yours may be fierce at first and promise great things, and then end in a miserably small performance. I have known such. Is it a lasting appetite, now? Is it steady through a long dinner? Is it regular in its recurrence?"

"You shall see something of my performance," I laughed,

insensate wretch. "You shall see. I never had a long dinner in my life. It is steady through a good many pounds of steak, and as regular as a clock."

"That is always something. Steak is as healthy a test as I know. Is it, secondly, an appetite that recovers itself quickly? That is very important. Is it a day-by-day or an hour-by-hour appetite? Is it good at all times of the day?"

"Alas, I wish it were not!"

"Hush, young man; do not blaspheme! Tell me, if you eat your fill now—it is half-past four—when do you think you might be ready again?" His eyes glistened like a couple of great rubies in the candlelight, and his hands trembled.

"I should say about eight. But I might do something light at seven, I dare say. Just now I feel as if I could eat a mountain."

"He feels as if he could eat a mountain! Wonderful are the gifts of Providence! My dear young friend, I am very thankful—deeply thankful—that I met you. Sit down, and let me take the covers off for you; I long to see you eat. This is a blessed day, a truly blessed day! I will wait upon you myself. No one else. *Boule-de-neige*, vanish!"

I was too hungry to wonder what he meant, and sat down. He began to help me, talking as he went on: "Plover's eggs—he has eaten the whole six! Turtle soup—gently, my young friend, gently. Ah, impetuous youth! More? Stay—green fat. Humour, humour your appetite; don't drive it; calipash and calipee. It's really sinful to eat so fast. He takes all down without tasting it. No—no more." He put the soup aside, and took the cover off another dish. "Salmon—with cucumber. Lobster-sauce—bless me, it's like a dream of fairyland! Fillet of sole—a beautiful dream to see him; he's a Julius Caesar the Conqueror. *Croquet de volaille*—gone like a cloud from the sky. Don't wolf the food, my friend; taste it. *Ris de veau*—smiles of the dear little innocent, confiding calf—a little more bread with it? *Mauviettes en caisse*, larks in baskets—sweet, rapturous, singing larks, toothsome cockyolly larks. He eats them up, bones and all. Pause, my dear sir, and drink something. Here

are champagne, hock, and santerne; never touch sherry, it's a made-up wine, even the best of it. Come, a little champagne."

"I generally take draught-beer, sir," I replied modestly; "but, if you please, a little fizz will be acceptable."

I drank three glasses in rapid succession, and found them good. He meanwhile nodded and winked with an ever-increasing delight which I failed to understand.

"Now, my Nero, my Paris of Troy, my Judas Maccabaeus"—he mixed up his names, but it mattered nothing—"here is saddle of mutton, with potatoes, cauliflower, currant-jelly. More champagne? It's worth *sums* of money to see him. Curry? More champagne? Curry of chicken? Cabob curry of chicken, young Alexander the Great? Plenty of rice? Ho, ho, ho! Plenty of rice, he said; why, he is a Goliath—a Goliath of Gath, this young man!"

He really grew so purple that I thought he would have a fit of some kind. But the flattery pleased me all the same.

"Quail or *bécassine*—snipe, that is? He takes both, like Pompey. More champagne? Jelly, my Heliogabalus, my modern Caracalla, apricot-jelly? Cabinet pudding? He has two helpings of the pudding. King Solomon in all his glory never—More champagne? A little hock to finish with? He takes his hock in a tumbler, this young Samson. Cheese—Brie—and celery. A glass of port with the cheese. He takes that in a tumbler too, like Og, King of Bashan."

I was really overwhelmed with the splendour of the dinner, the classical and biblical flattery, and the extraordinary gratification which my really enormous hunger caused this remarkable old gentleman. He clapped his hands; he nodded his head; he slapped his legs; he winked and grinned; he smacked his lips; he evinced every sign of the most unbounded delight. When I had quite finished eating, he gave me a bottle of claret, and watched me while I rapidly disposed of it. Then he produced from a sideboard, where I certainly had not seen it a moment before, a small cup of strong black coffee with a tiny glass of liqueur. As for my own part, I hope I have made it clear that I dined extremely well; in fact, I had never even dreamed of such a dinner in my life.

It was not only that I was half-starved, but that the things were so good.

"How do you feel now?" my host asked, a shade of anxiety crossing his brow.

II

There was still the strange look in my host's eyes, a sort of passionate and eager longing.

"I am very well, thank you, sir, and more grateful than I can tell you."

"Hang the gratitude! Tell me if you feel any sense of repletion? Does the blood seem mounting in the head? Are you quite free from giddiness? No thickness in the speech? It's wonderful, it's providential, my finding you. Such a windfall; and just when I most wanted it. Our blessings truly come when we least expect them."

This was strange language, but the whole proceedings were so strange that I hardly noticed it. Besides, I was extremely comfortable after my dinner, and disposed to rest.

"Now," he went on, "while you are digesting—by the way, the digestion is, I trust, unimpaired by drink or excess? Quite so; and what I expected in so good and so gifted a young man. Like an ostrich as you say. Ho, ho! ha, ha! like an ostrich! It is, indeed, too much. Tell me, now, something, gently and dispassionately, so as not to injure your digestion, about your history."

I told him all. While I related my simple story he interrupted now and then with some fresh question on the growth, the endurance, the regularity of my appetite, to which I gave satisfactory answers. It seemed to me that he took no kind of interest in what I told him, and was chiefly anxious about my appetite. When I had quite finished he went to the table—I noticed then that all traces of the dinner had disappeared—and laid out a document, by which he placed a pen. Then he drew a chair, sat down in front of me, and assumed a serious air.

"Come," he said, "to business."

I had not the smallest notion what the business was, but

I bowed and waited. Perhaps he was going to offer me a clerkship. Visions of a large salary, to suit my expansive appetite, came across my brain.

"In your case," he began, "the possession of so great an appetite must be attended with serious inconveniences. You have no money; in a few hours you will be hungry again; you will endure great pain and suffering, greater than is felt by men less largely endowed with the greatest blessing—I mean with appetite."

"Yes," I said, "it is a great trouble to me, this twist of mine, especially when I am hard up."

He almost jumped out of his chair.

"Why, there," he cried, "what is the use of words? We are agreed already. Nothing could be more fortunate. Let us have no more beating about the bush. Young man, I will rid you of this nuisance; I will buy your appetite off you."

I only stared. Was the old gentleman mad?

"It is a strange offer, I know," he went on, "a strange offer and you have probably never heard a more remarkable one. But it is genuine. I will buy your appetite off you."

"Buy my—buy my appetite?"

"Nothing easier. Read this."

He gave me the paper which he had laid on the table, prepared in readiness, I suppose, for me. It was as follows:

"I, Luke Lucraft, being in sound mind and in good health, and of the mature age of twenty-four, do voluntarily and of my own free will and accord agree and promise to resign my appetite entirely and altogether for the use of Ebenezer Grumbelow from the day and hour of execution of this deed. In return whereof I agree a monthly allowance of £30, also to date from the moment of signature, with a sum of £50, to be placed in my hands. I promise also that I will carefully study to preserve my regular habits and exercise the gift of a generous appetite; that I will not work immoderately, sit up late, practise vicious courses, or do anything that may tend to impair the regular recurrence of a healthy and vigorous hunger."

Then followed a place for the signature and one for the witnesses.

"You see," he went on, "I ask no unpleasant condition. I give you a free life, coupled with the simple condition of ordinary care. Do you agree?"

"I hardly know; it is so sudden."

"Come, come"—he spoke with a harshness quite new—"come, let us have no nonsense. Do you agree?"

I read it over again.

"Give me a little time," I said. "Let me reflect till to-morrow."

"Reflect!" his face flushed purple, and his bloodshot eyes literally glared. "Reflect! What the devil does the boy want to reflect about? Has he got a penny, a friend, or a chance in the whole world? I will give you five minutes—come." He rose up and stood before me. As I looked in his face a curious dismay came over my eyes; he seemed to recede before me; he disappeared altogether. When I heard him speak again his voice sounded far, far off, but thin and clear, as if it came through some long tube. "Luke Lucraft," it said, "see yourself."

Yes; I saw myself, and though *outside* of what I saw, I felt the same emotions as if I had had the actual performer in the scenes I witnessed.

I was starving, and with feelings of bitter shame I begged for money of the passers-by. A woman gave me a shilling, and I hurried away to buy something to eat.

I was sleeping among the stalks, straw, and vegetable refuse of Covent Garden Market. I awoke hungry and miserable. I begged again, and got nothing. Then—then—then I stole. I was not detected, and I stole again. The second time I was not detected. There came the third time when I was seen and apprehended. The misery and shame of the hour when I stood before the magistrate, in that horrible vision of a possible future, I cannot even yet forget. With this a constant sense of unsatisfied and craving hunger; a feeling as if hunger was the greatest evil in the whole world; a longing to get rid of it. Last scene of all, I was lying dead, starved to death with hunger and cold, in a miserable, bare, and naked garret.

By what black art did the old man delude my senses? It was

a lie, and he knew it. I should have got some honest work, if only to wheel bricks or carry loads.

"There is your future, young man"—there came up from the distance the voice of the tempter—"a gloomy prospect; a miserable life, a wretched ending. Now look at the other side."

The scene changed. I saw myself, in another guise. My hunger had vanished; I felt it no more.

I was well dressed, cheerful, and light-hearted. I was dancing in a room full of pretty girls; I was singing and playing; I was wandering among the woods and flowers; I was reading on a sofa; I was lying in the sunshine; I was looking at pictures; I was at the theatre; I was riding in the Park; I was following the hounds; I was making love to Juliet.

The pictures changed as fast as my fancy wandered from one thing to another. In all I was the same—free from the downward and earthly pressure of want and hunger, relieved from anxiety, with plenty of money, and full of all sweet and innocent fancies.

Lies again. But by what power could this necromancer so cheat and gull my brain?

"Very different scenes these, my dear young friend," he said in a winning voice, "are they not? Now," he went on, and his voice was quite close to me, "you have had your five minutes."

The cloud passed from my eyes. I was sitting again in the octagonal room, the old man before me, watch in hand, as if he was counting the seconds.

"Five minutes and a quarter," he growled. "Now choose."

"I have chosen," I replied. "I accept your offer."

The influence of the things I had seen was too strong on me. I could neither reason nor reflect.

"I accept your offer."

"Why, that's brave," he said, with a gigantic sigh of relief. "That's what I expected of you. *Boule-de-neige*—*Boule-de-neige*!"

He clapped his hands.

Instantly the horrible old Negro appeared behind his

master's chair, as if he had sprung up from the ground. I believe he had. He looked more like a devil than ever, grinning from ear to ear, and his two eyes glowing in the candlelight like two great coals. The light fell, too, upon the seams and wrinkles of his face, bringing them out like the hills and valleys in a raised map. Strange as it all was to me, this ancient servitor produced the strangest effect upon me of anything.

"Boule-de-neige is witness for us," said the old gentleman. "Boule-de-neige, this young gentleman, Mr. Luke Lucraft, is about to sign a little deed, to which, as a matter of form, we require your signature too as witness."

"Cluck!" said the Negro. "Dis young gegleman berry lucky—him berry lucky. What time massa take him dinner?"

"When do you think you shall be fairly hungry again?" he asked me. "Now, no boastings—no false pretence and pride—because it will be the worse for you. Answer truthfully. It is now six."

"I should say that at nine I should certainly be able to take some supper, and at ten I shall certainly be hungry again. You see I have taken such an immense dinner."

"Good." He turned to Boule-de-neige. "You see the young man is modest and promises fairly. I shall have supper—a plentiful supper—at ten punctually. Mr. Lucraft will now sign."

I advanced to the table and took up the pen, but there was no ink.

"Cluck!" said the infernal Negro, with another grin—"cluck! Massa wait lilly bit."

He took my left hand in his soft and cold paw. I felt a sharp prick at my wrist.

"You will dip the pen," said the old gentleman, "in the blood. It is a mere form."

"Cluck!" said Boule-de-neige.

"A mere form, because we have no ink handy."

"Cluck-cluck!"

I signed my name as desired, and, following the directions of the old gentleman, placed my finger on the red wafer at the margin, saying, "I declare this my act and deed."

Then I gave the pen to Boule-de-neige. He signed after me, in a firm flowing hand, "Boule-de-neige." As I looked, the letters seemed somehow to shape themselves into "Beelzebub." I looked at him with a kind of terror. The creature grinned in my face as if he divined my thought, and gave utterance to one of his hideous "clucks."

Then I began to feel the same faintness which I had at first experienced. It mounted upwards from my feet slowly, so that I heard the old gentleman's voice, though I saw nothing. It grew gradually fainter.

"Supper at ten, Boule-de-neige," he was saying; "I feel myself getting hungry already. What shall I do with myself till ten o'clock? I am certainly getting hungry. I think I can have it served at half-past nine. O, blessed day! O, thankful blessed day! Boule-de-neige, it must be supper for three—for four—for five. I shall have champagne—the Perrier Jouet—the curaçao punch afterwards. Curaçao punch—I haven't tasted it for three months and more. O, what a blessed—blessed—blessed——"

I heard no more because my senses failed me altogether, and his voice died away in my ears.

When I came to myself I was leaning against the post in Bucklersbury, where I had met the old man.

A whiff of cooked meat from the restaurant, which caught me as I opened my eyes, produced a singular feeling of disgust. "Pah," I muttered, "roast mutton!" and moved from the spot. My hunger was gone, that was quite certain. I felt a quietness about those regions, wherever they may be, which belong to appetite; I was almost dreamy in the repose which followed a morning so stormy. I walked quietly away homewards in a kind of daze, trying to make out something of what had happened. The first thing I found I could not remember was the name of the old gentleman. When that came back to me and under what circumstances I will tell you as we get along. Bit by bit I recalled the whole events of the afternoon, one after the other. I saw the old man, with his purple face and bloodshot eyes and white hair; I saw the wrinkled and seamed old Negro; I saw the octagonal room without doors or windows; the

splendid dinner; the host watching my every gesture; I remembered everything except the name of the man to whom I had sold—my appetite.

It was so strange that I laughed when I thought of it. I must have been drunk: he gave me a good dinner and I took too much wine; but, then, how was it that I remembered clearly every, even the smallest, detail?

On the bed in the one room which constituted my lodgings I found a letter. It was from a firm of lawyers, dated that evening at half-past six—half an hour after I signed the paper—stating that they were empowered by a client, whose name was not mentioned, to give me the sum of £30 monthly, to begin from that day, and to be paid to me personally. How did they get their instructions then? And it was all true!

I was too tired with the day's adventures to think any more; and, though it was only nine o'clock, I went to bed and fell fast asleep. In an hour I awoke again, with a choking sensation, as if I was eating too much. I knew instantly what was going on, and by a kind of prophetic insight. The old man was taking his supper, and taking more than was good—for me. I sprang from the bed, gasping for breath. Presently, as I gathered, he began to drink too much as well. My brain went round and round. I laughed, sang, and danced; and soon after, with a heavy fall, I rolled senseless on the carpet, and remembered nothing more.

It was early in the morning when I awoke, still lying on the floor. I had a splitting headache. I had fallen against some corner of the furniture and blackened one eye. I had broken two chairs somehow or other. I was cold, ill, and shaken. I got into bed, and tried to remember what had happened. Clearly I must have made a drunken beast of myself over the dinner, and reeled home with my head full of fancies and dreams; perhaps the dinner itself was a dream and a hallucination too; if so, the pangs of hunger would soon recommence. But they did not. Then I fell asleep, and did not awake again until the sun was high and the clock striking ten. How ill and wretched I felt as I

dressed! My hand shook, my eyes were red, my face swollen. Surely I must have been intoxicated. I had been, up to that day at least, a temperate man, partly, no doubt, from the very wholesome reason which keeps so many of us sober—the necessity of poverty; but of course I had not arrived at four and twenty years and seen so much of the world without recognising the signs of too much drink. I had them, every one; and, as most men know too well, they are all summed up in the simple expression, "hot coppers." Alas! I was destined to become only too familiar with the accursed symptoms. Involuntarily, when I had dressed, I put my hands in my pockets; there was money, gold—sovereigns—my pocket was full of them. I counted them in a stupor. Forty-nine, and one rolled into the corner—fifty; it was part of the sum for which I had sold my appetite; and on the table lay the letter from Messrs. Crackett Charges, inviting me to draw thirty pounds a month.

Then it was all true!

I sat down, and, with my throbbing temples and feverish pulse, tried to make it out. Everything became plain except the name of the purchaser—Mr.—Mr.—I remembered Boule-de-neige, the house, the room, and the dinner, but not the name of that arch-deceiver, the whole of whose villainy I was far from realising yet; and until it was told me later on I never did remember the name.

It was strange. Men are said to have sold their souls to the devil for money, bartering away an eternity of happiness for a few years of pleasure; but as for me, I had exchanged, as it seemed at first sight, nothing but the inconvenience of a healthy appetite with nothing to eat for the means of living comfortably without it. There could be no sin in such a transaction; it was on a different level altogether from the bargain made by Faust. And there were the broad, the benevolent facts, so to speak—my pocket full of sovereigns; and the letter instructing me to call at an office for thirty pounds monthly.

Benevolent facts I thought them. You shall see. No sin could be laid to my door for the transaction. You shall judge. No harm could follow so simple a piece of business. You

shall read. On my way out I met the landlady, who gave me notice to quit at the end of the week.

"I thought you were a quiet and a sober young man," she said. "Ah, never will I trust to good looks again. Me and the lodgers kept awake till two in the morning with your singing and dancing, let alone banging the floor with the chairs. Not an hour after your week's up, if you was to pray on your knees, shall you stay. And next door threatening the police; and me a quiet woman for twenty years."

My heart sank again. But, after all, perhaps it was I myself, not the good old gentleman, my kind patron and benefactor, at all, who was the cause of this disturbance. It was undoubtedly true that I had drunk a great quantity of wine. I begged her pardon humbly, and passed out.

It was now eleven o'clock, but I felt no desire for breakfast. That was an experience quite novel to me. Still, I went to a coffee-house, according to habit, and ordered some tea and a rasher. When they came I discovered, with a horrid foreboding of worse misfortune, that my taste was gone. Except that one thing was solid and the other liquid, I distinguished nothing. Nor did my sense of smell assist me; as I found later, my nose was affected agreeably or disagreeably, but I had no other use for it. Gunpowder, sulphuretted hydrogen gas, and tobacco offended my nose. So did certain smells belonging to cookery. On the other hand, certain flowers, tea, and claret pleased me, but I was unable to distinguish between them. Not only could I not taste things, but I had no gratification in eating them. I ate and drank mechanically, because I knew that the body must be kept going on something.

All this knowledge, however, and more, came by degrees. After making a forced breakfast I bent my steps to the lawyers', who had an office in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The letter was received by a conceited young clerk in shiny black habiliments, and a self-satisfied manner.

"Ha," he said, "I thought you would soon come round to us after the letter. Sign that. You haven't been long. None of them are."

It was a receipt, and I was on the point of asking if it was to be signed in blood, when he settled the question by giving me ink.

"There, Luke Lucraft, across the eightpenny stamp. I'm not allowed to answer any questions you may put, Mr. Lucraft, nor to ask you any; so take your money, and good morning to you. I suppose, like the rest of them, you don't know the name of your benefactor, and would like to—yes; but you needn't ask *me*; and I've orders not to admit you to see either Mr. Charges or Mr. Crackett. They'd trouble enough with the last but one. He broke into their office once, drunk, and laid about him with the ruler."

I burst into a cold dew of terror.

"However, Mr. Lucraft, I hope you will be more fortunate than your predecessors."

"Where are they? Who are they?"

"I do not know where they are, not for a certainty," he replied with a grin. "But we may guess. Dead and buried they are, all of them. Gone to kingdom come; all died of the same thing, too. Delicious Trimmings killed them. Poor old gentleman! He's too good for this world, as everybody knows, and the more he's taken in the more he's deceived. Anyhow, he's very unlucky in his pensioners. He did say when the last went off that he would have no more; he wept over it, and declared that his bounty was always abused; but there never was such a benevolent old chap. I only wish he'd take a fancy to me."

"What did you say is his name, by the way?"

The clerk looked at me with a cunning wink.

"If you don't know, I am sure I do not," he said. "Here is the cheque, Mr. Lucraft, and I hope you will continue to come here and draw it a good deal longer than the other chaps. But there's a blight on the pensioners. Lord, what a healthy chap Tom Kirby—he was a Monmouth man—looked when he first came for his cheques! As strong as a bull and as fresh as a lark."

"A good appetite had he?"

"No; couldn't eat anything after a bit; said he fancied nothing. He pined away and died in a galloping consumption

before the third month was due. Nobody ever saw him drinking, but he was drunk every night like the rest. Perhaps it's only coincidence. Better luck to *you*, Mr. Lucraft."

The conversation did not reassure me, and I determined to go over to Bucklersbury at once and see my patron. I found the post against which I was leaning when he accosted me; there was no doubt about that, for the hares and cauliflowers were still in the shop-window, only they looked disgusting to me this morning. I found the street into which he had led me, and then—then—it was the most extraordinary thing, I could not find the door by which we entered. Not only was there no door, but there seemed no place where such a door as I remembered could exist in this little winding narrow street. I went up and down twice. I looked at all the windows. I asked a policeman if he had ever seen an old gentleman about the street such as I described, or such a Negro as *Boule-de-neige*; but he could give me no information. Only as I prowled slowly along the pavement I heard distinctly—it gave me a nervous shock that I could not account for—the infernal "Cluck-cluck!" of the Negro with the cold soft hands, the wrinkled skin, and the fiery eyes. He was chuckling at me from some hiding-place of his own, where he was safe. He had done me no harm that I knew of, but I hated him at that moment.

I was by this time not at all elated at my good fortune. I even craved to have back again what I had sold. I felt heavy at heart, and had a presentiment of fresh trouble before me. I thought of the fate of those unknown and unfortunate predecessors, all dead in consequence of drink, evil courses, and D.T. Heavens! Was I too to die miserably with delirium tremens, after I had sold my taste, and could only tell brandy from water, like the cask which might hold either, by the smell?

At half-past one, the luncheon time for all who have appetites, the sense of being gorged came upon me again, but this time without the giddiness. I went to a cigar divan in the Strand, and fell sound asleep. When I awoke at six the oppression had passed away. And now I began to realise something of the consequences of my act; I say

something, because worse, far worse, remained behind. I was doomed, I saw clearly, to be the victim of the old man's gluttony. He would eat, and I should suffer. Already, as I guessed from the clerk's statements, he had killed three strong men before me. I was to be the fourth. I went again to Bucklersbury, and sought in every house for something that might give me a clue. I loitered in the quiet City streets in the hope of finding my tormentor, and forcing him to give me back my bond. There was no clue, and I did not meet him. But I felt him. He began dinner, as nearly as I could feel, about seven o'clock; he took his meal with deliberation, judging from the gradual nature of my sensations; but he took an amazing quantity, and by eight o'clock the weight upon me was so great that I could scarcely breathe. How I cursed my folly! How I impotently writhed under the burden I had wantonly laid upon myself! And then he began to drink. The fiend, the scoundrel! I felt the fumes mount to my head; there was no exhilaration, no forgetfulness of misery; none of the pleasant graduation of excitement, hope, and confidence, through which men are accustomed to pass before arriving at the final stage, the complete oblivion, of intoxication. I felt myself getting gradually but hopelessly drunk. I struggled against the feeling, but in vain; the houses went round and round with me; my speech, when I tried to speak, became thick; the flags of the pavement flew up and struck me violently on the forehead, and I became unconscious of what happened afterwards.

III

In the morning I found myself lying on a stone bench in a small whitewashed room. My brows were throbbing and my throat was parched, and in my brain was ringing, I do not know why, the infernal "Cluck-cluck!" of the Negro with derisive iteration. I had not long to meditate; the door opened, and a constable appeared. "Now then," he said roughly, "if you can stand upright by this time, come along."

It was clear enough to me now what had happened: I was in custody, in a police-cell, and I was going before the magistrate.

I dream of that ignominy still, though forty years have passed since I was placed in the dock and asked what I had to say for myself. "Drunk and disorderly." There was nothing to say, I gave a false name, paid my fine, and was allowed to go away. Then I went to my lodgings, and tried to face the position.

It was clear that the demon to whom I had sold myself was incapable of the slightest consideration towards me. He would eat and drink as much as he felt disposed to do, careless of any consequences that might befall me. It was equally evident that he intended to make the most of his bargain, to eat enormously every day, and to drink himself drunk every night. And I was powerless. Meantime it was becoming evident that the consequences to me would be as serious as if I were myself guilty of these excesses. One drop of comfort alone remained: my appetite would fail, and my tormentor would be punished where he would feel it most. I lay down and waited till luncheon time; no sense of repletion came over me; it was clear, therefore, that he was already suffering a vicarious punishment, so to speak, for yesterday's debauch. In the afternoon I crept out, fearful at every step of meeting some one who had seen my shame in the morning, and took in my regular allowance of food—it was horrible to think that the night's excesses made no difference whatever in my capacity for food, which now remained at a steady quantity. In fact I was a human engine which at stated times required water and fuel. In the evening I returned early, in order to avoid a repetition of last night's disgrace, and locked myself in.

At seven dinner began again; at eight I was gorged and choking; at nine I was drunk. I thought the best course would be for me to hide myself altogether. I took a little roadside cottage north of Islington, put in some furniture, and retired there to live entirely by myself. In the calmness of despair I doomed my life to solitude. Within the walls of one place at least I was secure. And here, night after

night, I awaited with trembling the attacks of gluttony, surfeit and drunkenness; for my master had no pity.

As for my meals, I bought them ready prepared. They consisted almost wholly of bread and cold mutton. You may judge of the absolutely tasteless condition to which I was reduced, when I write calmly and truthfully that cold mutton was as agreeable to me as any other form of food. I found, after repeated trials, that mutton forms the best fuel—it is better than either beef or pork—and keeps the human engine at work for the longest time. So I had mutton. As I discovered also that bulk was necessary, and that only a certain amount of animal food was wanted, I used to have cold potatoes always ready. I stoked twice a day, at eleven in the morning and about five in the afternoon. Thus fortified, I got through the miserable hours as best I could.

I look back now on that period as one of unmitigated misery and despair. I was daily growing more bloated, fatter, and flabbier in the cheeks. My hands trembled in the morning. I seemed to be losing the power of connected thought. My very lips were thickening.

I hope I can make it clear what was the effect of my bargain on myself—I mean without reference to the sufferings inflicted on me by my tyrant. People, however, never can know, unless they happen to be like myself, which is unlikely, how great a part eating and drinking take in the conduct of life. Between the rest of the world and me there was a great gulf fixed. They could enjoy, I could not; they could celebrate every joyful event with something additional to eat; they could make a little festival of every day; they could give to happiness an outward and tangible form. Alas, not only was I debarred from this, but I was cut off even from joy itself; for, if you look at it steadily, you will find that most of human joy or suffering is connected with the senses. I had bartered away a good half of mine, and the rest seemed in mourning for the loss of their fellows. As for my pale and colourless life, it was as monotonous as the clock. If I neglected to stoke, the usual feebleness would follow. There was no gracious looking forward to a

pleasant dinner; no trembling anticipations in hope and fear of what might be preparing; no cheerful contemplation of the joint while the carver sharpens his knife; no discussions of flavour and richness; no modestly-hazarded conclusions as to more currants; no rolling of the wine-glass in the fingers to the light, and smacking of lips over the first sip—all these things were lost to me. Reader, if haply this memoir ever sees a posthumous light, think what would happen to yourself if eating and drinking, those perennial joys of humanity, which last from the infantine pap to the senile Revelenta Arabica, were taken away.

All things tasted alike, as I have said, and cold mutton formed my staple dish. As I could only distinguish between beer, wine, coffee, and tea by the look, I drank water. If I ventured, which was seldom, to take my dinner in a restaurant I would choose my *pièce de résistance* by the look, by some fancied grace in the shape, but not by taste or smell. The brown of roast beef might attract me one day and repel me the next. I was pleased with the comeliness of a game-pie, or tickled by some inexplicable external charm of a beefsteak-pudding. But three quarters of my life were gone, and with them all my happiness.

If you have no appetite for eating, you can enjoy nothing in the whole world. That is an axiom. I could not taste, therefore my eye ceased to feel delight in pleasant sights, and my ear in pleasant sounds. It was not with me as in the case of a blind man, that an abnormal development of some other sense ensued; quite the contrary. In selling one, I seem to have sold them all. For, as I discovered, man is one and inseparable; you cannot split him up; and when my arch-deceiver bought my appetite, he bought me out and out. A wine-merchant might as well pretend to sell the bouquet of claret and preserve the body; or a painter the colour of his picture and preserve the drawing; or a sculptor the grace of his group and keep the marble. The thing was simple, and all was lost.

The time lasted for about four months. On the first of each month I went to receive my pay—the wages of sin—from the clerk, who surveyed me critically, but said noth-

ing till the morning of the fourth month. Then, while he handed me my money, he whispered confidentially across the table:

"Look here, old fellow, you know; you're going it, worse than poor Tom Kirby. Why don't you stop it? What *is* the good of a feller's drinking himself to death? The old gentleman was here yesterday, asking me how you looked, and if you continued steady. Pull up, old man, and knock it off."

I took the money in my trembling hands and slunk away abashed. When I got home again, I am not ashamed to say that I cried like a child.

Delirium tremens! That would begin soon, and then the end would not be far off. It was too awful. Think of my position. I was but four-and-twenty. Not only was I deprived of the pleasure—mind you, a very real pleasure—of eating and drinking; was the most temperate man in the world, though that was no great credit to myself, considering; and yet I bore in my face and my appearance, and felt in my very brain, all the marks and signs of confirmed drunkenness and the hopelessness of it. That hardened old voluptuary, that demon of gluttony, that secret murderer, would have no pity. He must have felt by the falling-off of the splendid appetite which he was doing his utmost to ruin, that things were getting worse, and he was resolved—I had suspected this for some time—to kill me off by drinking me to death.

I believe I should have been dead in another week, but for a blessed respite, due, I afterwards discovered, to my demon being laid up with so violent a sore throat that he could not even swallow. What was my joy at being able to go to bed sober, to wake without a headache, to feel my bad symptoms slowly disappearing, to recover my nerves! For a whole fortnight I was happy—so happy that I even believed the improvement would last and that the old man was penitent. One day, after fourteen days of veritable earthly paradise, I was walking along the Strand—for I was no longer afraid of venturing out—and met my old manager, Juliet's father. He greeted me with a warmth that was quite touching under all the circumstances.

"My dear boy, I have been longing to know your where-

about. Come and tell me all about it. Have you dined? Let us have some dinner together."

I excused myself, and asked after Juliet.

"Juliet is but so-so. Ah do you know, Lucraft, sometimes I think that I did wrong to part you. And yet, you know, you had no money. Make some, my boy, and come back to us."

This was hearty. I forgot my troubles and my state of bondage and everything, except Juliet.

"I—I—I have money," I said. "I have come into a little money unexpectedly."

"Have you?" he replied, clasping me by the hand. "Then come down and see Juliet. Or—stay; no. The day after tomorrow is Juliet's ben. We are playing at Richmond. We have one of your own parts—you shall be Sir Harry Wildair. I will alter the bills. You are sure to come?"

"Sure to come," I said with animation. "Capital! I know every line in the part. Tell Juliet that an old friend will act with her."

We made a few new arrangements and parted. I bought a copy of the play at Lacy's, and studied the part over again.

Next day I drove to Richmond, and found my Juliet in an impatience that went to my heart. She had grown thin and pale; I, on the other hand, fat and red-faced, though a fortnight's respite had done wonders to restore me.

"I don't think you are looking so well as you used," said the dear girl. "Mr. Mould"—Mr. Mould was the dresser—"says that you look as if you had been drinking."

I laughed, but felt a little uneasy.

We rang up at seven.

I began with all my former fire and vigour, because I was acting again with Juliet. The old life came back to me; I forgot my troubles; I was really happy, and I believe I acted well. At all events, the house applauded. Between the first and second act a sudden terror seized me. I felt that the old man was eating again. That passed off, because he ate very little. But then he began to drink, and to drink fast.

It was no use fighting against it. I believe the villain must have been drinking raw brandy, because I was drunk in five

minutes. I staggered and reeled about on the stage, I laughed wildly and sang foolishly, and then I tumbled down in a heap and could not get up again. The last thing I remember is the angry roar of poor old Kerrans, beside himself with passion, telling the carpenters to carry that drunken beast away and throw him into the road. I heard afterwards that they were obliged to drop the curtain, and that the *éclat* of poor Juliet's benefit was entirely spoiled. As for myself, the carpenters carried me out to the middle of Richmond Green, where they were going to leave me, only one of them had compassion, and wheeled me to his own house in a barrow.

I was quite crushed by this blow. For the first time I felt tempted to commit suicide and end it all. To be sure I ought to have foreseen this, and all the other dreadful things. Directly my master, my owner, got able to swallow, though he could not eat, he could drink, and ordered the most fiery liquor he could procure, with a view to kill me off and begin with another victim.

But Providence ruled otherwise.

One evening, a few days after my disgrace at the Richmond Theatre, I was sitting in my lonely cottage, expectant of the usual drunken bout, when I felt a curious agitation within me, an internal struggle, as if through all my veins a tempestuous wave was surging and rushing. I lay down.

"This is some new devilry of the old man," I said to myself. "Let him do his worst; at least, I must try to bear it with resignation." I began to speculate on my inevitable and approaching end, and to wonder curiously what proportion of the sin of all this drunkenness would be laid to my charge.

To my astonishment nothing more followed. The tumult of my system gradually subsided, and I fell asleep.

In the morning I awoke late, and missed the usual headache. I had, therefore, I was surprised to find, actually not been drunk the night before. I rose with my customary depression, and was astonished to discover that my nerves were steadier and spirits higher than I had known for a long time.

I mechanically went to the cupboard and pulled out my cold mutton and potatoes. Who can picture my joy when I found that I could taste the meat again, and that it was nasty? I hardly believed my senses; in fact, I had lost them for so long that it was difficult to understand that they had come back to me. I tried the potatoes. Heavens, what a horrible thing to a well-regulated palate is a cold boiled potato!

At first, as I said, I could not believe that I had recovered my taste; then, as the truth forced itself upon me, and I found that I could not only taste, but was actually hungry, I jumped and danced, and was beside myself with joy. Think of a convict suddenly released, and declared guiltless of the charges brought against him. Think of a prisoner on the very ladder of the gallows-tree, with the rope round his neck, reprieved and pardoned. Think of one doomed to death by his physician receiving the assurance that it was all a mistake, and that he would gather up long years of life as in a sheaf. And think that such joy as these would feel, I felt—and more!

I went to the nearest coffee-shop and ordered bacon, eggs, and tea, offering up a short grace with every plate as it came. And then, because I felt sure that my old tormentor must be dead, I repaired to my lawyer's, and saw the clerk.

"Ah," he said, "the poor old man's gone at last! Went out like the snuff of a candle. His illness was only twenty-four hours. Well, he's gone to heaven, if ever man did."

"What did he die of—too much eating and drinking?"

"Mr. Lucraft," said the clerk severely, "this is not the tone for *you* to adopt towards that distinguished man, your benefactor. He died, sir—being a man of moral, temperate, and even abstemious life, though of full habit—of apoplexy."

"Oh!" I said, careless what the clerk said, but glad to be quite sure that the diabolical old villain was really dead. I suppose never was such joy over repentance of any sinner as mine over the death of that murdering glutton, for whom no words of hatred were too strong.

"I think you've got to see our senior partner," said the clerk. "Step this way."

He led me to a room where I found a grave and elderly gentleman sitting at a table.

"Mr. Lucraft?" he said. "I was expecting you. I saw your late patron's Negro this morning. He told me that you would call."

I stared, but said nothing.

"I have a communication to make to you, on the part of our departed friend, Mr. Ebenezer Grumbelow. It is dated a few weeks since, and is to the effect that a sum of money which I hold was to be placed in your hands in case of death. This, it appears, he anticipated, for some reason or other."

"Ebenezer Grumbelow." That was the name which had so long escaped my memory—"Ebenezer Grumbelow."

I said nothing, but stared with all my eyes.

"My poor friend," the lawyer went on, "after remarking that unless you change your unfortunate habits you will come to no good, gave me this money himself—here is the cheque—so that it will not appear in his last will and testament."

I took it in silence.

"Well, sir,"—he looked at me in some surprise—"have you no observation to make, or remark to offer, on this generosity?"

"None," I said.

"I do not know," he continued; "I do not know—your signature here, if you please—what reason Mr. Grumbelow had in taking you up, or what claim you possessed upon his consideration; but I think, sir, I do think, that some expression, some sense of regret, is due."

I buttoned up the cheque in my pocket.

"Mr. Grumbelow was a philanthropist, I believe, sir?"

"He was. As a philanthropist, as a supporter of charities, as a public donor of great amount, Mr. Grumbelow's name stands in the front. So much we all know."

"A religious man, too?"

"Surely, surely; one of our most deeply religious men. A man who was not ashamed of his saintly profession."

"Cluck-cluck!"

It was the familiar face of Boule-de-neige at the door.

"You know, I suppose," said the lawyer, "Mr. Grumbelow's body-servant, a truly Christian Negro?"

"Was there," I asked, "any clause in Mr. Grumbelow's letter—any conditions attached to this gift?"

"None whatever. It is a free gift. Stay, there is a post-script which I ought to have read to you. You will perhaps understand it. In it Mr. Grumbelow says that as to the services rendered by him to you, and by you to him, it will be best for your own sake to keep them secret."

I bowed.

"I may now tell you, Mr. Lucraft, without at all wishing to break any confidence that may have existed between you and the deceased, that a friend of Mr. Grumbelow's—no other, indeed, than the Rev. Jabez Jumbles, a name doubtless known to you—intends to write the biography of this distinguished and religious man, as an example to the young. Any help you can afford to so desirable an end will be gratefully received. Particularly, Mr. Lucraft, any communication on the subject of his continual help given to young men, who regularly disappointed him and died of drink."

I bowed again and retired.

Did any one ever hear of such a wicked old man?

Outside the office I was joined by the Negro.

"What have you got to say to me, detestable wretch?" I cried, shaking my fist in his withered old face.

"Cluck-cluck! Massa not angry with poor old Boule-de-neige. How young massa? Young massa pretty well? How de lubly abbadide of de young gegleman? How his strong stumjack? Cluck-cluck?"

He kept at a safe distance from me. I think I should have killed him if I had ever clutched him by the throat.

"Ole massa him always ask, 'How dat young debble? Go and see, Boule-de-neige.' I go to young massa's cottage daraway, and come back. 'Him berry dam bad, sir.' I say; 'him going to de debble berry fast, just like dem oders. De folk all say he drink too much for his berry fine constitution.' Cluck-cluck! Ole massa he only say ebberry night, 'Bring de brandy, Boule-de-neige; let's finish him.' Cluck-cluck!"

Here was a Christian Negro for you!

"Tell me, what did your master die of?"

"Apple perplexity, massa."

"Ah! what else? Come, Boule-de-neige, I know a good deal; tell me more."

"Massa's time up," he whispered, coming close to me. "Time quite up, and him berry much 'fraid. Massa Lucraft want servant? Boule-de-neige berry good servant. Cook lubly dinner; make massa rich, like Massa Grumbelow."

"I'd rather hire the devil!" I exclaimed.

"Cluck-cluck-cluck!" grinned the creature; and really he looked at the moment as much like the devil as one could wish. "Cluck! dat massa can do if massa like."

I rushed away, too much excited by the recovery of my freedom to regard what he said.

I was free! What next?

Mr. Kerrans next. I found him in that state of mind which becomes the heavy father outraged in his best and tenderest feelings. I had to give him a good deal of brandy-and-water; but I succeeded at length in winning him to my way of thinking, and he gave me an interview with Juliet.

The dear girl forgave me.

I have only to add that, a month after our union, I told my wife the whole story.

She asked if I took her for a fool.

Since then I have told it to a great many persons, not one of whom ever believed it, except one old lady perhaps; a dear old lady in many respects, only she believes in Joanna Southcott as well as in my story, and mixes up the prophetess with my old murderer. And to the day of her death Juliet never allowed me the key of the spirit-case. There was no telling, she said, when a man might break out again.

THE SEVENTH MAN

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

In a one-roomed hut, high within the Arctic Circle, and only a little south of the eighteenth parallel, six men were sitting—much as they had sat, evening after evening, for months. They had a clock, and by it they divided the hours into day and night. As a matter of fact, it was always night. But the clock said half-past eight, and they called the time evening.

The hut was built of logs, with an inner skin of rough match-boarding, daubed with pitch. It measured seventeen feet by fourteen; but opposite the door four bunks—two above and two below—took a yard off the length, and this made the interior exactly square. Each of these bunks had two doors, with brass latches on the inner side; so that the owner, if he chose, could shut himself up and go to sleep in a sort of cupboard. But as a rule, he closed one of them only—that by his feet. The other swung back, with its brass latch showing. The men kept these latches in a high state of polish.

Across the angle of the wall, to the left of the door, and behind it when it opened, three hammocks were slung, one above another. No one slept in the uppermost.

But the feature of the hut was its fireplace; and this was merely a square hearth-stone, raised slightly above the floor, in the middle of the room. Upon it, and upon a growing mountain of soft grey ash, the fire burned always. It had no chimney, and so the men lost none of its warmth. The smoke ascended steadily and spread itself under the blackened beams and room-boards in dense blue layers. But about eighteen inches beneath the spring of the roof there ran a line of small trap-doors with sliding panels, to admit the cold air, and below these the room was almost clear of smoke. A newcomer's eyes might have smarted, but

these men stitched their clothes and read in comfort. To keep the up-draught steady they had plugged every chink and crevice in the match-boarding below the trap-doors with moss, and payed the seams with pitch. The fire they fed from a stack of drift and wreck-wood piled to the right of the door, and fuel for the fetching strewed the frozen beach outside—whole trees notched into lengths by lumberers' axes and washed thither from they knew not what continent. But the wreck-wood came from their own ship, the *J. R. MacNeill*, which had brought them from Dundee.

They were Alexander Williamson, of Dundee, better known as the Gaffer; David Faed, also of Dundee; George Lashman, of Cardiff; Long Ede, of Hayle, in Cornwall; Charles Silchester, otherwise the Snipe, of Ratcliff Highway or thereabouts; and Daniel Cooney, shipped at Tromsø six weeks before the wreck, an Irish-American by birth and of no known address.

The Gaffer reclined in his bunk, reading by the light of a smoky and evil-smelling lamp. He had been mate of the *J. R. MacNeill*, and was now captain as well as patriarch of the party. He possessed three books—the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and an odd volume of *The Turkish Spy*. Just now he was reading *The Turkish Spy*. The lamplight glinted on the rim of his spectacles and on the silvery hairs in his beard, the slack of which he had tucked under the edge of his blanket. His lips moved as he read, and now and then he broke off to glance mildly at Faed and the Snipe, who were busy beside the fire with a greasy pack of cards; or to listen to the peevish grumbling of Lashman in the bunk below him. Lashman had taken to his bed six weeks before with scurvy, and complained incessantly; and, though they hardly knew it, these complaints were wearing his comrades' nerves to fiddle-strings—doing the mischief that cold and bitter hard work and the cruel loneliness had hitherto failed to do. Long Ede lay stretched by the fire in a bundle of skins, reading in his only book, the Bible, open now at the Song of Solomon. Cooney had finished patching a pair of trousers, and rolled himself in his hammock, whence he stared at the roof and the moonlight streaming up there

through the little trap-doors and chivying the layers of smoke. Whenever Lashman broke out into fresh quaverings of self-pity, Cooney's hands opened and shut again, till the nails dug hard into the palm. He groaned at length, exasperated beyond endurance.

"Oh, stow it, George! Hang it all, man! . . ."

He checked himself, sharp and short: repentant, and rebuked by the silence of the others. They were good seamen all, and tender dealing with a sick shipmate was part of their code.

Lashman's voice, more querulous than ever, cut into the silence like a knife:

"That's it. You've thought it for weeks, and now you say it. I've knowed it all along. I'm just an encumbrance, and the sooner you're shut of me the better, says you. You needn't fret. I'll be soon out of it; out of it—out there, alongside of Bill——"

"Easy there, matey." The Snipe glanced over his shoulder and laid his cards face downward. "Here, let me give the bed a shake up. It'll ease yer."

"It'll make me quiet, you mean. Plucky deal you care about easin' me, any of yer!"

"Get out with yer nonsense! Dan didn't mean it." The Snipe slipped an arm under the invalid's head and rearranged the pillow of skins and gunnybags.

"He didn't, didn't he? Let him say it then . . ."

The Gaffer read on, his lips moving silently. Heaven knows how he had acquired this strayed and stained and filthy little demi-octavo with the arms of Saumarez on its book-plate—"The Sixth Volume of Letters writ by a Turkish Spy, who liv'd Five-and-Forty Years Undiscovered at Paris: Giving an Impartial Account to the *Divan* at *Constantinople* of the most remarkable Transactions of Europe. And discovering several *Intrigues* and *Secrets* of the *Christian* Courts (especially of that of *France*)," etc., etc. "Written originally in *Arabick*. Translated into *Italian*, and from thence into *English* by the Translator of the First Volume. The Eleventh Edition, London: Printed for G. Strahan, S. Ballard"—and a score

of booksellers—"MDCCXLI." Heaven knows why he read it, since he understood about one-half, and admired less than one-tenth. The Oriental reflections struck him as mainly blasphemous. But the Gaffer's religious belief marked down nine-tenths of mankind for perdition; which perhaps made him tolerant. At any rate, he read on gravely between the puffs of his short clay—

"On the 19th of this Moon, the King and the whole Court were present at a Ballet, representing the grandeur of the French monarchy. About the Middle of the Entertainment, there was an Antique Dance perform'd by twelve Masqueraders, in the suppos'd form of Daemons. But before they advanc'd far in their Dance, they found an Interloper amongst 'em, who by encreasing the Number to thirteen, put them quite out of their Measure: For they practise every Step and Motion beforehand, till they are perfect. Being abash'd therefore at the unavoidable Blunders the thirteenth Antique made them commit they stood still like Fools, gazing at one another: None daring to unmask, or speak a Word; for that would have put all the Spectators into a Disorder and Confusion. Cardinal Mazarini (who was the chief Contriver of these Entertainments, to divert the King from more serious Thoughts) stood close by the young Monarch, with the Scheme of the Ballet in his Hand. Knowing therefore that this Dance was to consist but of twelve Antiques, and taking notice that there were actually thirteen, he at first imputed it to some Mistake. But, afterwards, when he perceived the Confusion of the Dancers, he made a more narrow Enquiry into the Cause of this Disorder. To be brief, they convinced the Cardinal that it could be no Error of theirs, by a kind of Demonstration, in that they had but twelve Antique Dresses of that sort, which were made on purpose for this particular Ballet. That which made it seem the greater Mystery was, that when they came behind the Scenes to uncase, and examine the Matter, they found but twelve Antiques, whereas on the Stage there were thirteen . . ."

"Let him say it. Let him say he didn't mean it, the rotten Irishman!"

Cooney flung a leg wearily over the side of his hammock, jerked himself out, and shuffled across to the sick man's berth.

"Av coorse I didn' mane it. It just took me, ye see, lyin' up yondher and huggin' me thoughts in this—wilderness. I swear to ye, George: and ye'll just wet your throat to show there's no bad blood, and that ye belave me." He took up a pannikin from the floor beside the bunk, pulled a hot iron from the fire, and stirred the frozen drink. The invalid turned his shoulder pettishly. "I didn't mane it," Cooney repeated. He set down the pannikin, and shuffled wearily back to his hammock.

The Gaffer blew a long cloud and stared at the fire; at the smoke mounting and the grey ash dropping; at David Faed dealing the cards and licking his thumb between each. Long Ede shifted from one cramped elbow to another and pushed his Bible near the blaze, murmuring, "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil our vines."

"Full hand," the Snipe announced.

"Ay," David Faed rolled the quid in his cheek. The cards were so thumbled and tattered that by the backs of them each player guessed pretty shrewdly what the other held. Yet they went on playing night after night; the Snipe shrilly blessing or cursing his luck, the Scotsman phlegmatic as a bolster.

"Play away, man. What ails ye?" he asked.

The Snipe had dropped both hands to his thighs and sat up, stiff and listening.

"Whist! Outside the door . . ."

All listened. "I hear nothing," said David, after ten seconds.

"Hush, man—listen! There, again . . ."

They heard now. Cooney slipped down from his hammock, stole to the door and listened, crouching, with his ear close to the jamb. The sound resembled breathing—or so he thought for a moment. Then it seemed rather as if some creature were softly feeling about the door—fumbling its coating of ice and frozen snow.

Cooney listened. They all listened. Usually, as soon as

they stirred from the scorching circle of the fire, their breath came from them in clouds. It trickled from them now in thin wisps of vapour. They could almost hear the soft grey ash dropping on the hearth.

A log spluttered. Then the invalid's voice clattered in:

"It's the bears—the bears! They've come after Bill, and next it'll be my turn. I warned you—I told you he wasn't deep enough. O Lord, have mercy . . . mercy . . .!" He pattered off into a prayer, his voice and teeth chattering.

"Hush!" commanded the Gaffer gently; and Lashman choked on a sob.

"It ain't bears," Cooney reported, still with his ear to the door. "Leastways . . . we've had bears before. The foxes, maybe . . . let me listen."

Long Ede murmured: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes . . ."

"I believe you're right," the Gaffer announced cheerfully. "A bear would sniff louder—though there's no telling. The snow was falling an hour back, and I dessay 'tis pretty thick outside. If 'tis a bear, we don't want him fooling on the roof, and I misdoubt the drift by the north corner is pretty tall by this time. Is he there still?"

"I felt something then . . . through the chink, here . . . like a warm breath. It's gone now. Come here, Snipe, and listen."

"'Breath,' eh? Did it *smell* like bear?"

"I don't know . . . I didn't smell nothing, to notice. Here, put your head down, close."

The Snipe bent his head. And at that moment the door shook gently. All stared; and saw the latch move up, up . . . and falteringly descend on the staple. They heard the click of it.

The door was secured within by two stout bars. Against these there had been no pressure. The men waited in a silence that ached. But the latch was not lifted again.

The Snipe, kneeling, looked up at Cooney. Cooney shivered and looked at David Faed. Long Ede, with his back to the fire, softly shook his feet free of the rugs. His eyes searched for the Gaffer's face. But the old man had drawn

back into the gloom of his bunk, and the lamplight shone only on a grey fringe of beard. He saw Long Ede's look, though, and answered it quietly as ever.

"Take a brace of guns aloft, and fetch us a look round. Wait, if there's a chance of a shot. The trap works. I tried it this afternoon with the small chisel."

Long Ede lit his pipe, tied down the ear-pieces of his cap, lifted a light ladder off its staples, and set it against a roof-beam; then, with the guns under his arm, quietly mounted. His head and shoulders wavered and grew vague to sight in the smoke-wreaths. "Heard anything more?" he asked. "Nothing since," answered the Snipe. With his shoulder Long Ede pushed up the trap. They saw his head framed in a panel of moonlight, with one frosty star above it. He was wriggling through. "Pitch him up a sleeping-bag, somebody," the Gaffer ordered, and Cooney ran with one. "Thank'ee, mate," said Long Ede, and closed the trap.

They heard his feet stealthily crunching the frozen stuff across the roof. He was working towards the eaves overlapping the door. Their breath tightened. They waited for the explosion of his gun. None came. The crunching began again; it was heard down by the very edge of the eaves. It mounted to the blunt ridge overhead; then it ceased.

"He will not have seen aught," David Faed muttered.

"Listen, you. Listen by the door again." They talked in whispers. Nothing; there was nothing to be heard. They crept back to the fire, and stood there warming themselves, keeping their eyes on the latch. It did not move. After a while Cooney slipped off to his hammock; Faed to his bunk, alongside Lashman's. The Gaffer had picked up his book again. The Snipe laid a couple of logs on the blaze, and remained beside it, cowering with his arms stretched out as if to embrace it. His shapeless shadow wavered up and down on the bunks behind him; and, across the fire, he still stared at the latch.

Suddenly the sick man's voice quavered out:

"It's not him they want—it's Bill. They're after Bill, out there! That was Bill trying to get in . . . Why didn't yer open? It was Bill, I tell yer!"

At the first word the Snipe had wheeled right-about-face, and stood now, pointing and shaking like a man with ague.

"Matey . . . for the love of God . . ."

"I won't hush. There's something wrong here to-night. I can't sleep. It's Bill, I tell yer. See his poor hammock up there shaking . . ."

Cooney tumbled out with an oath and a thud. "Hush it, you white-livered swine! Hush it, or by——" His hand went behind him to his knife-sheath.

"Dan Cooney"—the Gaffer closed his book and leaned out—"go back to your bed."

"I won't, sir. Not unless——"

"Go back."

"Flesh and blood——"

"Go back." And for the third time that night Cooney went back.

The Gaffer leaned a little farther over the ledge, and addressed the sick man.

"George, I went to Bill's grave not six hours ago. The snow on it wasn't even disturbed. Neither beast nor man, but only God, can break up the hard earth he lies under. I tell you that, and you may lay to it. Now go to sleep."

Long Ede crouched on the frozen ridge of the hut, with his feet in the sleeping-bag, his knees drawn up, and the two guns laid across them. The creature, whatever its name, that had tried the door, was nowhere to be seen; but he decided to wait a few minutes on the chance of a shot; that is, until the cold should drive him below. For the moment the clear tingling air was doing him good. The truth was Long Ede had begun to be afraid of himself, and the way his mind had been running for the last forty-eight hours upon green fields and visions of spring. As he put it to himself, something inside his head was melting. Biblical texts chattered within him like running brooks, and as they dected he could almost smell the blown meadow-scent. "Take us the foxes, the little foxes . . . for our vines have tender grapes. . . . A fountain of gardens, a wall of living waters, and streams from Lebanon . . . Awake, O

north wind, and come, thou south . . . blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out . . .” He was light-headed, and he knew it. He must hold out. They were all going mad; were, in fact, three parts crazed already, all except the Gaffer. And the Gaffer relied on him as his right-hand man. One glimpse of the returning sun—one glimpse only—might save them yet.

He gazed out over the frozen hills, and northward across the ice-pack. A few streaks of pale violet—the ghost of the Aurora—fronted the moon. He could see for miles. Bear or fox, no living creature was in sight. But who could tell what might be hiding behind any one of a thousand hummocks? He listened. He heard the slow grinding of the ice-pack off the beach: only that. “Take us the foxes, the little foxes . . .”

This would never do. He must climb down and walk briskly, or return to the hut. Maybe there was a bear, after all, behind one of the hummocks, and a shot, or the chance of one, would scatter his head of these tom-fooling notions. He would have a search round.

What was that, moving . . . on a hummock, not five hundred yards away? He leaned forward to gaze.

Nothing now: but he had seen something. He lowered himself to the eaves by the north corner, and from the eaves to the drift piled there. The drift was frozen solid, but for a treacherous crust of fresh snow. His foot slipped upon this, and down he slid of a heap.

Luckily he had been careful to sling the guns tightly at his back. He picked himself up, and unstrapping one, took a step into the bright moonlight to examine the nipples; took two steps: and stood stock-still.

There, before him, on the frozen coat of snow, was a footprint. No: two, three, four—many footprints: prints of a naked human foot: right foot, left foot, both naked, and blood in each print—a little smear.

It had come, then. He was mad for certain. He saw them: he put his fingers in them; touched the frozen blood. The snow before the door was trodden thick with them—some going, some returning.

"The latch . . . lifted . . ." Suddenly he recalled the figure he had seen moving upon the hummock, and with a groan he set his face northward and gave chase. Oh, he was mad for certain! He ran like a madman—floundering, slipping, plunging in his clumsy moccasins. "Take us the foxes, the little foxes . . . My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him . . . I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem . . . I charge you . . . I charge you . . ."

He ran thus for three hundred yards maybe, and then stopped as suddenly as he had started.

His mates—they must not see these footprints, or they would go mad too, mad as he. No, he must cover them up, all within sight of the hut. And to-morrow he would come alone, and cover those farther afield. Slowly he retraced his steps. The footprints—those which pointed towards the hut and those which pointed away from it—lay close together; and he knelt before each, breaking fresh snow over the hollows and carefully hiding the blood. And now a great happiness filled his heart; interrupted once or twice as he worked by a feeling that someone was following and watching him. Once he turned northwards and gazed, making a telescope of his hands. He saw nothing, and fell again to his long task.

Within the hut the sick man cried softly to himself. Faed, the Snipe, and Cooney slept uneasily, and muttered in their dreams. The Gaffer lay awake, thinking. After Bill, George Lashman; and after George . . .? Who next? And who would be the last—the unburied one? The men were weakening fast; their wits and courage coming down at the end with a rush. Faed and Long Ede were the only two to be depended on for a day. The Gaffer liked Long Ede, who was a religious man. Indeed he had a growing suspicion that Long Ede, in spite of some amiable laxities of belief, was numbered among the Elect: or might be, if interceded for. The Gaffer began to intercede for him silently; but experience had taught him that such "wrestlings," to be effective,

must be noisy, and he dropped off to sleep with a sense of failure. . . .

The Snipe stretched himself, yawned, and awoke. It was seven in the morning: time to prepare a cup of tea. He tossed an armful of logs on the fire, and the noise awoke the Gaffer, who at once inquired for Long Ede. He had not returned. "Go you up on the roof. The lad must be frozen." The Snipe climbed the ladder, pushed open the trap and came back, reporting that Long Ede was nowhere to be seen. The old man slipped a jumper over his suits of clothing—already three deep—reached for a gun, and moved to the door. "Take a cup of something warm to fortify," the Snipe advised. "The kettle won't be five minutes boiling." But the Gaffer pushed up the heavy bolts and dragged the door open.

"What in the . . . ! Here, bear a hand, lads!"

Long Ede lay prone before the threshold, his outstretched hands almost touching it, his moccasins already covered out of sight by the powdery snow which ran and trickled incessantly—trickled between his long, dishevelled locks, and over the back of his gloves, and ran in a thin stream past the Gaffer's feet.

They carried him in and laid him on a heap of skins by the fire. They forced rum between his clenched teeth and beat his hands and feet, and kneaded and rubbed him. A sigh fluttered on his lips: something between a sigh and a smile, half seen, half heard. His eyes opened, and his comrades saw that it was really a smile.

"Wot cheer, mate?" It was the Snipe who asked.

"I—I seen . . ." The voice broke off, but he was smiling still.

What had he seen? Not the sun, surely! By the Gaffer's reckoning the sun would not be due for a week or two yet: how many weeks he could not say precisely, and sometimes he was glad enough that he did not know.

They forced him to drink a couple of spoonfuls of rum, and wrapped him up warmly. Each man contributed some of his own bedding. Then the Gaffer called to morning prayers,

and the three sound men dropped on their knees with him. Now, whether by reason of their joy at Long Ede's recovery, or because the old man was in splendid voice, they felt their hearts uplifted that morning with a cheerfulness they had not known for months. Long Ede lay and listened dreamily while the passion of the Gaffer's thanksgiving shook the hut. His gaze wandered over their bowed forms—"The Gaffer, David Faed, Dan Cooney, the Snipe, and—and George Lashman in his bunk, of course—and me." But, then, *who was the seventh?* He began to count. "There's myself—Lashman, in his bunk—David Faed, the Gaffer, the Snipe, Dan Cooney . . . One, two, three, four—well but that made *seven*. Then who was the seventh? Was it George who had crawled out of bed and was kneeling there? Decidedly there were five kneeling. No: there was George, plain enough, in his berth, and not able to move. Then who was the stranger? Wrong again: there was no stranger. He knew all these men—they were his mates. Was it—Bill? No, Bill was dead and buried: none of these was Bill, or like Bill. Try again—One, two, three, four, five—and us two sick men, seven. The Gaffer, David Faed, Dan Cooney—have I counted Dan twice? No, that's Dan, yonder to the right, and only one of him. Five men kneeling, and two on their backs: that makes seven every time. Dear God—suppose——"

The Gaffer ceased, and, in the act of rising from his knees, caught sight of Long Ede's face. While the others fetched their breakfast-cans, he stepped over, and bent and whispered:

"Tell me. Ye've seen what?"

"Seen?" Long Ede echoed.

"Ay, seen what? Speak low—was it the sun?"

"The s—" But this time the echo died on his lips, and his face grew full of awe uncomprehending. It frightened the Gaffer.

"Ye'll be the better of a snatch of sleep," said he; and was turning to go, when Long Ede stirred a hand under the edge of his rugs.

"Seven . . . count . . ." he whispered.

"Lord have mercy upon us!" the Gaffer muttered to his beard as he moved away. "Long Ede; gone crazed!"

And yet, though an hour or two ago this had been the worst that could befall, the Gaffer felt unusually cheerful. As for the others, they were like different men, all that day and through the three days that followed. Even Lashman ceased to complain, and, unless their eyes played them a trick, had taken a turn for the better. "I declare, if I don't feel like pitching to sing!" the Snipe announced on the second evening, as much to his own wonder as to theirs. "Then why in thunder don't you strike up?" answered Dan Cooney, and fetched his concertina. The Snipe struck up, then and there—"Villikins and his Dinah!" What is more, the Gaffer looked up from his *Paradise Lost*, and joined in the chorus.

By the end of the second day, Long Ede was up and active again. He went about with a dazed look in his eyes. He was counting, counting to himself, always counting. The Gaffer watched him furtively.

Since his recovery, though his lips moved frequently, Long Ede had scarcely uttered a word. But towards noon on the fourth day he said an extraordinary thing:

"There's that sleeping-bag I took with me the other night. I wonder if 'tis on the roof still. It will be froze pretty stiff by this. You might nip up and see, Snipe, and"—he paused—"if you find it, stow it up yonder on Bill's hammock."

The Gaffer opened his mouth, but shut it again without speaking. The Snipe went up the ladder.

A minute passed; and then they heard a cry from the roof—a cry that fetched them all trembling, choking, weeping, cheering, to the foot of the ladder.

"Boys! boys—the Sun!"

Months later—it was June, and even George Lashman had recovered his strength—the Snipe came running with news of the whaling fleet. And on the beach, as they watched the vessels come to anchor, Long Ede told the Gaffer his story: "It was a hall—a hallu—what d'ye call it, I reckon. I was crazed, eh?" The Gaffer's eyes wandered from a brambling

hopping about the lichen-covered boulders, and away to the sea-fowl wheeling above the ships: and then came into his mind a tale he had read once in *The Turkish Spy*. "I wouldn't say just that," he answered slowly.

"Anyway," said Long Ede, "I believe the Lord sent a miracle to save us all."

"I wouldn't say just that, either," the Gaffer objected. "I doubt it was meant just for you and me, and the rest were presairved, as you might say incidentally."

NO SHIPS PASS

Lady Eleanor Smith

"I am glad," thought Patterson, "that I've always been a damned good swimmer . . ." and he continued to plough his way grimly through the churning, tumbled argent of the breakers. It seemed hours, although it was actually moments, since the yacht had disappeared in one brief flash of huge and bluish flame; now the seas tossed, untroubled, as though the yacht had never been; and the boat containing his comrades had vanished, too, he noticed, glancing over his shoulder—had vanished with such swiftness as to make him think that it must have been smudged by some gigantic sponge from the flat, greenish expanse of the ocean. The strange part was that he was able, as he swam, to think with a complete, detached coherence; he was conscious of no panic; on the contrary, as he strove with all his might to gain the strip of land dancing before his eyes, his mind worked with a calm and resolute competence.

"I always thought we'd have a fire with all that petrol about . . . Curse all motor-yachts . . . I wonder if the others have been drowned? . . . Good job I gave the boat a miss . . ."

He was not even conscious of much regret as he thought of the probable fate of his comrades—his employer, his employer's son, the members of the crew. Already, as he swam on and on through gently lapping waves, the yacht and those who belonged to it had become part of the past, remote and half-forgotten. The present and the future lay ahead, where a long line of sand shimmered like silver before his eyes. Yet it was funny, he mused; there had been no sign of land from aboard the yacht, and it was not until the actual panic of the fire that he had noticed the dim shape of this island, "near enough to swim to," as he had cried to the others, but they swarmed into the boat,

taking no notice of his cries. And so he had embarked alone upon this perilous adventure.

He was a strong swimmer, but he was growing tired. Were his limbs suddenly heavier, or had the sea become less buoyant? He clenched his teeth, striking out desperately, then floated for a while, lying on his back, the huge arch of the sky towering a million miles above him like some gigantic bowl, all fierce hydrangea-blue. When he turned to swim again, he was refreshed, but more sensible of the terrors of his situation. And yet, was it his fancy, or had the shores of the island loomed nearer during the moments of this brief rest? At first he believed himself to be suffering from hallucination, then, as he looked again, he realised that he was making remarkable progress . . . He was now so near that the beach glittered like snow in the tropical sunshine before his eyes, and the sands dazzled him, yet he could perceive, lapping against them, a line of softly creaming surf, and above the sands there blazed the vivid jewel-green of dense foliage. The gulls wheeled bright-winged against the brighter silver of sea and sand. Then he was prepared to swear that his ears distinguished, sounding from the shore, a harsh and murmurous cry that might have been—for he was very weary—something in the nature of a welcome for the creature trying so desperately to gain this sparkling and gaudy sanctuary.

And then exhaustion descended upon him like a numbing cloak, and his ears sang and his brain whirled. His limbs seemed weighted, and his heart pumped violently and he thought he must drown, and groaned, for at that moment life seemed sweet and vivid, since life was represented by the island, and the seas were death.

"Well, now for death," he thought, and as he sank, his foot touched bottom.

He realised afterwards that he must have sobbed aloud as he staggered ashore. For a moment, as he stood, ankle-deep in warm, powdery sand, with the sun pouring fiercely upon his drenched body, the surf curdling at his feet and the cool greenness of a thickly matted forest cresting the slope above his head, he still thought that he must be

drowning, and that this land was mirage. Then the silence was shattered by a shrill scream; and a glowing parrot, rainbow-bright, flew suddenly from amidst the blood-red shower of a tall hibiscus-bush, to wheel, gorgeous and discordant, above his head. Beating wings of ruby and emerald and sapphire. Dripping fire-coloured blossom. Loud, jangling, piercing cries. The island was real.

Patterson fainted, flopping like a heap of old clothes upon the smooth, hard silver of the sand . . .

When he came to himself, the sun was lower and the air fragrant with a scented coolness that seemed the very perfume of dusk itself. For a moment he lay motionless, his mind blank, then, as complete consciousness returned to him and he rolled over on his face, he became aware of a black, human shadow splashed across the sands within a few inches of where he lay. The island, then, must obviously be inhabited. He raised his eyes defiantly.

He could not have explained what he had expected to see—some grinning, paint-raddled savage, perhaps, or else the prim, concerned face of a missionary in white ducks, or, perhaps, a dark-skinned native girl in a wreath of flowers. He saw actually none of these, his gaze encountering a shorter, stranger form—that of an elderly, dwarfish man in what he at first supposed to be some sort of fancy dress. Comical clothes! He gaped at the short, jaunty jacket, the nankeen trousers, the hard, round hat, and, most singular of all, a thin and ratty pigtail protruding from beneath the brim of this same hat. The little man returned his scrutiny calmly, with an air of complete nonchalance; he revealed a turnip face blotched thick with freckles, a loose mouth that twitched mechanically from time to time, and little piggish, filmy blue eyes.

"Good God," said Patterson at length, "who are you, and where did you appear from?"

The little man asked, in a rusty voice proceeding from deep in his throat:

"Have you tobacco?"

"If I had it'd be no use to you. Do you realise I swam here?"

"You swam? From where?"

There was silence for a moment, a silence broken only by the breaking of the surf and by the harsh cry of birds, as Patterson, more exhausted than he had first supposed, tried idiotically to remember to what strange port the yacht, *Seagull*, had been bound.

He said at length:

"I—we were on our way to Madeira. The Southern Atlantic. The yacht—a petrol-boat—caught fire. And so I swam ashore."

"Petrol?" the man replied, puzzled. "I know nothing of that. As for the Southern Atlantic, I myself was marooned on these shores deliberate, many and many a year ago, when bound for Kingston, Jamaica."

"Rather out of your course, weren't you?"

The little man was silent, staring reflectively out to sea. Patterson, naturally observant, was immediately struck by the look in those small, filmy blue eyes—a singular fixed immobility of regard, at once empty and menacing, a glassy, almost dead expression in which was reflected all the vast space of the ocean on which he gazed, and something else, too, more elusive, harder to define, some curious quality of concentration that, refusing to be classified, nevertheless repelled. He asked:

"What's your name?"

"Heywood. And yours?"

"Patterson. Are you alone here?"

The narrow blue eyes shifted, slipped from the sea to Patterson's face, and then dropped.

"Alone? No; there are four of us."

"And were they also marooned?"

As he uttered this last word he was conscious that it reflected the twentieth century even less than did the costume of his companion. Perhaps he was still light-headed after his ordeal. He added quickly:

"Were they also bound for Jamaica?"

"No," Heywood answered briefly.

"And how long," Patterson pursued laboriously, "have you been on the island?"

"That," said his companion, after a pause, "is a mighty big question. Best wait before you ask it. Or, better still, ask it, not of me, but of the Captain."

"You're damned uncivil. Who's the Captain?"

"Another castaway, like ourselves. And yet not, perhaps, so much alike. Yonder, behind the palms on the cliff, is his hut."

"I wouldn't mind going there. Will you take me?"

"No," said Heywood in a surly tone.

"Good God!" exclaimed Patterson. "I shall believe you if you tell me they marooned you for your ill-manners. I've swum about eight miles, and need rest and sleep. If you've a hut, then take me to it."

"The Captain'll bide no one in his hut but himself and one other person. That person is not myself."

"Then where do you sleep? In the trees, like the baboons I hear chattering on the hill?"

"No," Heywood answered, still looking out to sea. "I've a comrade in my hut, which is small, since I built it for myself. A comrade who was flung ashore here when a great ship struck an iceberg."

"An iceberg?" Patterson's attention was suddenly arrested. "An iceberg in these regions? Are you trying to make a fool of me, or have you been here so long that your wits are going? And, by the way, tell me this: how do you try to attract the attention of passing ships? Do you light bonfires, or wave flags?"

"No ships pass," said Heywood.

There was another silence. It was almost dark; already the deep iris of the sky was pierced by stars, and it was as though a silver veil had been dragged across the glitter of the ocean. Behind them, on the cliffs, two lights winked steadily. Patterson judged these to proceed from the huts mentioned by his companion. Then came the sound of soft footsteps, and they were no longer two shadows there on the dusky sands, but three.

"Hallo, stranger!" said a casual voice.

Patterson turned abruptly to distinguish in the greyness a sharp, pale face with a shock of tousled hair. A young

man, gaunt-looking and eager, clad normally enough in a dark sweater and trousers.

"And this is a hell of a nice island, I don't think," the stranger pursued, thrusting his hands into his pockets. He had a strong Cockney accent. Patterson was enchanted by the very prosaicness of his appearance; he brought with him sanity; walking as he did on faery, moon-drenched shores he was blessed, being the essence of the commonplace.

"Name of Judd. Dicky Judd. I suppose you're all in. Been swimming, ain't you?"

"Yes. And this fellow Heywood won't take me to his hut. Says it's full. Can you do anything about it?"

"You bet," said Judd. "Follow me, and I'll give you a bite of supper and a doss for the night. This way—the path up the cliff. We'll leave Heywood to the moon. Come on."

Ten minutes later, Patterson was eating fried fish and yams in a log-hut, with an open fireplace and two hammocks swung near the rude doorway. He had noticed, as they climbed the slope together, a grander, more commodious hut built a few hundred yards away amongst some shady palms. This, he surmised, must be the home of the elusive Captain. No sound came from it, but a light burned in the narrow window. As he ate his food he speedily forgot the existence of these fellow-castaways. He asked instead, gulping down water and wishing it were brandy:

"How did you come here, Judd? With the others?"

Judd eyed him swiftly. For one second Patterson imagined that he detected in the merry greenish eyes of his companion the fixed, almost petrified expression that had so much perplexed him in the gaze of Heywood. If he was right, this expression vanished in a flash, yet Judd seemed to withdraw himself, to become curiously remote, as he answered coolly:

"Not I. I came here after them—some time after."

"Do you mean that, like me, you were the only survivor from your ship?"

"That's about it," Judd answered, with his mouth full.

"Tell me about it."

"Oh . . . there's nothing much to tell. She was a great

liner—I had a berth aboard her—and she struck an iceberg in mid-Atlantic. There was not room for me in the boats, so I jumped . . . But she was a lovely ship, and big as a city. *Titanic*, they called her."

"You're pulling my leg. And for Heaven's sake chuck it—I've had about enough for one day."

"Strewth, I'm not!" Judd told him energetically. "But no matter. You don't have to believe it."

And he whistled, picking his teeth.

Patterson asked with a shiver:

"Look here, joking apart, do you mean to tell me that you honestly believe you were cast ashore here from the wreck of the *Titanic*?"

"On my oath," said Judd. He added, jumping up: "Bugs is bad here to-night. Wait while I swat a few."

"Just answer this," Patterson interrupted. "Why in Heaven's name, when you think you were wrecked in mid-Atlantic, should you have landed here on a tropical island off the African coast? Bit of a miracle that, wasn't it?"

Judd was silent for a moment, flicking at the mosquitoes with a palm-leaf fan. He said at length, sucking his teeth:

"Not being a seafaring man, I take it, you don't happen to have heard a fairy-story told among sailor-boys all the world over—story of a mirage island that floats about the seas near wrecks bent on collecting castaways?"

Patterson thought desperately.

"This man's as mad as Heywood, and that's saying a lot . . . And I've got to live with them . . ." Aloud he said: "No, I've never heard that one. But there's one other thing I want to ask you . . . Who's this Captain that Heywood was talking about? Has he been here for many years?"

"I'll give you this goatskin for a blanket," said Judd, "and you can doss near the doorway, where it's cooler. So you know about the Captain?"

"I've only heard his name. I asked you, has he been here for very long?"

"Many years," answered Judd, with a peculiar inflection.

"Tell me more about him."

Judd laughed.

"You don't want to know much, do you? You'll clap eyes to-morrow on Captain Thunder, late of the barque, *Black Joke*, well known (he's always boasting) from Barbados to Trinidad and back again. But you may whistle for the Captain to-night!"

Patterson was sleepy.

"Sounds like a buccaneer," he muttered into the goatskin, and was soon unconscious, oblivious even of Heywood's noisy entry into the hut.

By early morning the island's beauty seemed more exotic even than the radiant plumage of the parakeets darting to and fro in the dim green light of airy tree-tops. Patterson was refreshed after a good night's sleep, and consequently less depressed. He bathed with Judd, leaving Heywood snoring in his hammock. The beach was a shining snowdrift, the sea a vast tapestry of hyacinth veined and streaked with foam, glowing, glittering in the brilliant sunlight.

They swam for twenty minutes and then lay basking on the sands.

"Hungry?" Judd inquired.

So delicious was the morning that Patterson had quite forgotten the eccentricity manifested by his comrades the previous evening. Rolling over on his stomach, he was about to reply in an enthusiastic affirmative, when he surprised once more in his companion's gaze that bleak, fey look that had already disconcerted him. He could not understand it, yet it was as though a sombre shadow fled across the beach, obscuring this gay and vivid world of amber sunshine, creaming surf, tossing sea and glowing, brilliant blossom. Beauty was blotted out when Judd, the commonplace, looked like that; he felt suddenly lonely, humble and scared.

"Judd," he said suddenly, and Judd wrenched away his eyes from the horizon.

"Judd, listen and please tell me the truth. Just what are our chances of getting away from here?"

Judd eyed him thoughtfully.

"If you want the truth, we haven't any. Sorry, and all that, but there it is."

"Rubbish!" said Patterson. "A ship will surely pass one day. Just because you've had bad luck . . ."

"No ships pass," Judd told him.

"Rubbish again! Look how close mine came yesterday. The trouble with you, Judd, is that you've been here too long, and got into a rut. I don't believe you care much whether you're rescued or not. Now, I do. And I'll tell you my plans——"

"Listen a minute," said Judd. He propped himself up on his elbow, avoided his companion's eyes, and resumed: "You might as well hear it now. No sense in keeping it from you, although you'll think I'm nutty. Listen, then, Patterson. We're here for keeps. Get that? Look at the Captain and his friend; look at Heywood. If I told you how long they'd been here you wouldn't swallow it, and I'd not blame you. But you've got to know some time—we're here *for ever*. Now I feel better."

Patterson shuddered in the blazing sunshine.

"Do you really think we've got to stick this until we die?"

Judd flung a pebble at a pearly cloud of seagulls.

"Worse than that, Patterson. Worse by a long chalk. I told you last night this island was mirage, magic. Stands to reason it is, floating round the world picking survivors from shipwrecks in all the Seven Seas. Well, there's something worse than that—much worse—and I'm going to tell you what it is. There's no death on this island. Death forgets us. We're here for all eternity."

Patterson laughed nervously.

"You should be in Bedlam, Judd. I suppose a few years' desert-island does that to one. But look here, now I've come to join you, we'll get away somehow, I promise you that."

Judd slipped on his trousers.

"You don't believe me, and small blame to you. I was like that once. But it's true. I swear to God it is. There's no death here. For the animals and birds, yes, or we should

starve. But not for us. We're here for all eternity, and you may as well make the best of it."

Patterson, trying to dress himself, found that his hands were trembling. Yet he tried to be reasonable.

"Look here, Judd, what put this crazy idea into your head?"

"Do you know," Judd replied, "how long Heywood's been here? Of course you don't; I'll tell you. He was marooned in eighteen twenty-five. It's nineteen thirty-two now, isn't it? Add that up for yourself. As for the Captain, he's had a long spell. He was a pirate, one of those Spanish Main fellows I read about when I was a kid. His crew mutinied in July, seventeen ninety-five. Another sum for you, if you're quick at figures."

"Very interesting," Patterson commented idiotically.

"Don't you imagine," Judd continued, "that we haven't all of us tried to escape in the past? We've built rafts and boats—they've always been chucked back here on the beach by mysterious tidal waves or tempests. Then we've tried to kill ourselves and one another—we've been wounded and lain sick for weeks with mosquitoes battenning on our wounds, and our wounds have festered, but we've pulled through. Now we don't do that any more. Too much pain for nothing. You always pull through in the end. We've tried to drown, and swallowed quarts of water, but always we've been flung back on the sands here. Death's not for us—we've jolly well found that out. And so we make the best of it. It's all right after a time. You live for eating and sleeping, and you blooming well don't think. Sometimes you go mad, but in the long run you get sane again. And you kowtow to the Captain, who's got twice the guts of anyone. And, oh, yes, your clothes last just as you last. Funny, isn't it?"

"What about breakfast?" suggested Patterson.

"I knew you'd think me loopy," said Judd. "All right, come on back to the hut."

They scrambled to their feet, and there was an awkward constraint between them. Then Patterson pulled Judd's arm.

"What's that? Look, over there! Is that another confounded mirage?"

Judd screwed up his eyes. Beside the rocks, where seaweed flourished like green moss, a woman stood, skirts kilted in her hand. She was barefoot, and sprang from one rock to another, with the grace and agility of a deer. She was gathering mussels. As she worked she sang, and the drowsy, bell-like sweetness of her voice was wafted faintly to their ears all mingled with the cry of seagulls.

"Oh, that," said Judd. "Well, you'd better remember to act respectful when she's about. That's Doña Inés, the Captain's girl. She was his prisoner; he had her with him on his boat when the crew of the *Black Joke* mutinied, and they were cast up here together. At least, they both say so. First she hated him, then loved him for forty years or so, and since then, for about a hundred years, she's been fed up, but he's still keen on her. So keep away, that's my advice. Once Heywood went snooping after her, and the Captain cut his throat. He'd have died elsewhere, of course, and he suffered the tortures of hell, he told me. He'll show you the scar if you're interested."

"Wait," said Patterson, "you've given me a turn with your crazy talk, and she's coming towards us. There's no harm, I suppose, in speaking to her?"

"None, as long as you're respectful."

They waited there on the beach while the woman approached them. She was young, about twenty, and extremely handsome. She wore a stiff, flowing skirt of burning crimson, and a little jacket of orange. Her dark, rippling hair hung like a black plume down her back, and her oval, vivid face was delicately modelled, with high cheek-bones, a mouth like red blossom, and immense velvety-brown eyes. She was Spanish, of course, and well bred; her wrists were fragile, exquisite, her bare feet slender and arched. Her body was lithe, graceful and voluptuous; she moved swiftly, as though she danced, and as she drew near to the two men, a sudden soft breeze blew a lock of floating ebony hair across the fire and sweetness of her mouth.

Patterson was dazed; he had encountered much superstition during the course of the morning, his stomach was empty, and he was but ill-prepared for such beauty.

Doña Inés said gaily, speaking fluent, attractive English :

"Good morning to you, *señor*. I heard last night of your arrival, but was not allowed to greet you, as I so much desired. Please forgive my execrable manners. We shall see so much of one another that it would be as well to start our acquaintance on friendly terms."

Patterson pulled himself together and kissed her hand, a long delicate hand all dusky-tanned with the sun. A large diamond glared from the third finger.

"Morning, Inés," said Judd casually. "Where's the Captain?"

"Micah?" She became suddenly indifferent. "Waiting for his breakfast, I suppose. I must go to him. Shall we walk up the hill together?"

And so they went, and the Doña Inés moved lightly between them, all bright and flaming in her gaudy clothes, and told Patterson that he must accustom himself to this idea of eternity. After the first hundred years these things mattered little enough.

"As well be here, laughing and walking in the sunshine as in our graves. Don't you think so, *señor*? And I, who am talking to you, have so much experience of these things. Why, haven't I lived here with Micah Thunder for near on a hundred and forty years? And it might be yesterday that he sacked Santa Ana, he and his fleet, and took me prisoner when I was on my knees at Mass, and swore that I should be his woman. And so I was, both here and on his ship. But I have almost forgot the ship, and Santa Ana, too. Now there is only the island, and yet I am not a stricken woman, am I, nor yet a day older than when cast up on these shores?"

And so she prattled, her dark eyes flashing like jewels, until she and the two men came to the clearing where were the two huts, and there, in front of the smaller one, sat Heywood, surly as ever, eating.

"Good-bye, *señor*," said Doña Inés. "We will meet later, when I have fed my Captain."

Patterson sat down on the ground and said nothing.

"Here's orange-juice," said Judd, "and custard-apples,

and some cornbread I baked myself. No butter—we don't rise to that—but, all the same, we'll dine on oysters."

Patterson ate in silence. He supposed himself to be hungry. And he thought that he was in a nightmare, and would wake soon with the steward shaking him, and find himself once more in a gay, chintz-hung cabin of the *Seagull*, with bacon and eggs waiting in the dining-saloon. But he did not wake.

"I'll help you rig up a tent after breakfast," said Judd. "I've got some sailcloth. It'll last you for a few days, and then you can build a hut for yourself."

Heywood, eating ravenously, said nothing, but eyed him in silence.

"I wish," he thought desperately, "they wouldn't stare like that."

And suddenly he knew of what their fixed eyes reminded him. They were like dead men in the way they gazed. Glassy and vacant, their eyes were as the eyes of corpses. Perhaps their fantastic stories were true, and he had in reality been cast for all eternity upon a mirage island.

"Oh, Lord," he thought, "I'm getting as crazy as the rest of them. And yet the woman, the Spanish woman, seemed sane enough, and she believes their tales."

After breakfast he worked at putting up his tent, sweating in the copper glare of the sun, while Heywood went fishing and Judd vanished into the woods with a bow and arrow. No sound came from the other hut. When he had finished erecting his tent, Patterson lay down in the shade inside it, and found himself craving for a cigarette with a passionate, abnormal longing. It was stuffy in the tent, and mosquitoes clustered round his hot face. He shut his eyes and tried to sleep, but sleep evaded him. And then, as he lay quietly in the oppressive darkness, his instincts, already sharpened by twenty-four hours' adventure, warned him that someone was watching him. He opened his eyes.

Outside, regarding him impassively, stood a small, slim man in dainty, dandified clothes of green-blue shot taffeta. These garments, consisting of a full-skirted, mincing coat and close-fitting breeches, were smeared with dirt, and seemed to Patterson highly unsuited to desert-island life. The little

man wore cascades of grubby lace dripping from his wrists, and rusty buckles on his pointed shoes. He bore himself like a dancing-master, and had no wig, which seemed odd to Patterson, who gaped at a gingery, close-shaven head revealing glimpses of bare skull like pinkish silk. The face of this man was long and narrow and candle-pale, with thin, dry lips and pointed ears. His flickering, expressionless eyes were green as flames; he blinked them constantly, showing whitish, sandy lashes. His hands were long, blanched, and delicate, more beautiful than a woman's, and he wore on one finger a huge diamond ring, the twin to that other stone blazing upon the finger of Doña Inés. Patterson, disconcerted by the cold, unwavering eyes, scrambled to his feet and held out his hand. It was ignored, but the Captain bowed gracefully.

"Captain Micah Thunder, late of the *Black Joke*, and at your service."

He spoke in a high, affected, mincing voice.

"I have already," Patterson told him, "heard talk of you, Captain Thunder, and am, therefore, delighted to have this opportunity of meeting you."

"You're a damned liar," replied Captain Thunder, with a giggle. "My fame, I understand, has not, through some absurd mischance, been handed down throughout the ages, or so Judd informs me. They talk, I hear, of Flint and Kidd—even of Blackbeard, most clumsy bungler of all—but not of Thunder. And that, you know, is mighty odd, for without any desire to boast, I can only assure you, my young friend, that in the three years preceding the mutiny of my crew I was dreaded in all ports as the Avenger of the Main, and, indeed, I recollect taking during that period more than thirty merchantmen."

He sighed, giggled once more, and shook out the lace ruffles of his cuffs.

"Indeed, sir?" said Patterson respectfully. To himself he thought, in a sudden panic: "I must humour this man; he's worse than any of them."

For the Captain, his conical, shaven head, his long, pale face, his deprecating giggle, his cold, greenish eyes

and high, affected voice, seemed as he minced there in the sunshine most terribly like an animated corpse coquetting, grotesquely enough, in all the parrot-sheen of silken taffetas and frothing lace. This creature, this little strutting jackan-apes, so bleached and frozen and emasculated, looked, indeed, as though a hundred and more years of living on the island had drained away his very life-blood, leaving a dummy, a vindictive posturing dummy, clad in fine raiment, staring perpetually out to sea with greenish, fishy eyes. And something, perhaps the very essence of evil itself, a breath of cold and effortless vice, emanated from him to stink in Patterson's nostrils like a rank and putrid smell. The odour of decay, perhaps; the very spirit of decay, for surely, in spite of sanity and common sense, this man should long ago have rotted, not in a coffin, but rather from a gibbet on Execution Dock.

And Doña Inés, creeping up softly behind him, seemed brighter, gayer than a humming bird, in contrast to her pale pirate. Receiving a signal from her eye, he knew that he must make no mention of an earlier meeting.

"My mistress, Doña Inés Samaniegos, of Santa Ana," announced the Captain, with a flourish.

And the lady, very grave and beautiful, ran her hand lightly over the Captain's sleeve and swept a curtsy, deep and billowing. She was not merry now, neither was she bare-foot; she seemed haughty, and had shod herself in high-heeled, red shoes.

"This flower," said Captain Thunder casually, indicating his paramour with a flick of white finger, "springs from a proud and splendid Castilian family. Is it not so, my heart? I took her when my fleet sacked Santa Ana, finding her myself, when my hands were steeped in blood above the wrists, praying in terror before a waxen, tinselled image of the Virgin. She was sixteen, and very timid, being fresh from convent. Before I wooed I was forced to tame her. When I had tamed her, I was still enamoured, and for four years she sailed the Main as queen of my fleet. The *Black Joke*, my ship, and the Black Lady, as they called my woman

(being accustomed to flaxen peasant maids from Devon), those were all I prized in life. My ship they took, my woman I have kept, and will continue to keep whilst we remain here."

The drawling voice was icy now, and the light eyes had become green stones. Patterson realised that he was being warned. He answered lightly:

"And may I congratulate you, Captain, upon a lovely and most glorious prize?"

"Do you mind," said the Captain to Doña Inés, "when that little ape, Heywood, tried to take you, and I slit his throat?"

She nodded, her eyes very dark and lustrous.

The Captain turned to Patterson.

"There is no death on this island, sir, as you will discover for yourself, but it is possible to fight, and fighting, to inflict wounds. A sorry business, very. I declare I regretted it, when I saw the poor creature gurgling in mortal agony. He was sick for many days. But, sooner or later, we all heal. However, I'm soft-hearted, once my rage is appeased. And now you will pray excuse me, while I seek the shade. I'll leave madam here to entertain you for ten minutes. A change for her, a pleasant interlude for yourself. In ten minutes, then, my dove?"

Bowing, he retreated, walking away with pointed toes, more like a dancing-master than ever.

When he was out of earshot Patterson said impulsively:

"I'm not enamoured of your Captain!"

"And I," she said thoughtfully, "was once enamoured of him for forty years."

"And now?" Patterson wanted to know.

"Now?" She scooped up some sand and let it sift through her fingers. "Oh, my poor young man, does anyone remain in love for all eternity? Do you really believe that pretty legend?"

"Then you hate him?"

"Hate? No. You can neither hate nor love for a hundred years. I have suffered both, so I know, and tried to

kill myself three times. Oh, yes, there is not much that I cannot tell you about love. One does not live as long as I have lived without learning wisdom."

"And please tell me, Doña Inés," begged Patterson, "what you have learned about life in a hundred and forty years."

"A hundred and sixty," she corrected. "I was twenty when cast up here. What have I learned? One thing above all—to live without emotion. Love, hate, tedium, those are all words, very unimportant words. They are nothing. I like to eat when I am hungry, sleep when I am tired, swim when the sun is hot. All that is good, because it is just enough. I used to think—I never think now. I was mad, you know, for a little time, five years or so, because I thought too much. But soon I was cured. That was when, having loved Micah and hated him, at last he sickened me. I imagined I could not bear that. But you see I was wrong."

She laughed, shaking back a tress of hair, and he knew that, with death, she had also lost her soul and her humanity. She was, as she had said, empty, drained of all emotion; she was as sterile mentally, this lovely lady, as the parakeets chattering above her head. But she was very beautiful.

"And the Captain?" he inquired. "Is it rude to ask what are his feelings towards you?"

"Indeed, no!" And she laughed again. "The Captain is still a man, although he should have been dead long ago. Being a man, he has need of a woman sometimes. Being a man, he is determined that other men shall not take that woman. That is all. Apart from that, like us all, he is petrified."

And then, although the ten minutes were not up, she heard Judd coming up the hill and slipped like a bright shadow to her own hut.

Days passed slowly on the island. One day was like another. Always the sun poured brilliantly upon sapphire seas, gleaming sands, jewelled foliage. Macaws flashed like darting rainbows through the dusky green of jungle arches, the fruit hung coral-bright from trees whose blossoms flung out trailing creepers gayer, more gaudy, than the patterns of

vivid Spanish shawls. And yet it seemed to Patterson after two months that all this radiant beauty was evil and poisoned, like a sweet fruit rotten at the core. What should have been paradise was only a pretty hell. Slowly, reluctantly he had been forced to accept the island for what it was according to his comrades. He now believed, although shamefacedly, that Thunder and Doña Inés had lived there since the mutiny of the *Black Joke*, that Heywood had been marooned in the last century for insubordination, that Judd had emerged from the wreck of the *Titanic*. And yet, obstinately, he still clung to the idea of escape. One day he would escape. And then, once away from the island's shores, he would regain mortality, he would wrap mortality about him like a cloak.

Meanwhile, he noticed one or two curious facts. His clothes, after eight weeks' rough living, were almost as good as new. It was no longer necessary for him to shave more than once a week. And, once, Judd, climbing a palm in search of coco-nuts, had slipped, crashing on to his head to what seemed certain death fifty feet below and had been picked up suffering from nothing worse than slight concussion. This accident shook his faith more than anything else that he saw.

They lived comfortably enough on fish, home-baked bread, fruit, coco-nuts, and the flesh of young pigs found in the jungle. Patterson learned to shoot with a bow and arrow, and to tell the time by the sun and stars. He learned to be patient with Heywood, who was half-witted, and he learned to search for turtles' eggs in a temperature of ninety-nine in the shade. He learned, too, to treat Captain Thunder with respect and Doña Inés with formality.

Sometimes, the Captain, a reserved, sour-tempered man, would unbend, and, fingering his cutlass, tell stories of his life as a buccaneer on the Spanish Main. Terrible stories, these, vile, filthy, sadistic stories of murder and vice, plunder and torture, and fiendish, cold-blooded, ferocious revenge. Told in his drawling, affected voice, they became nauseous, and yet Doña Inés listened peacefully enough, her dark eyes soft and velvety, her red, silken mouth calmer than an angel's. Sometimes she would look up and nod, and say:

"Oh, yes, Micah; I remember that, don't I? I was with you then, wasn't I?"

"You were, my dove, my heart. If you remember, I burnt your hand in the flame of my candle until you swooned, because you affronted me by asking mercy for those dogs."

And she would laugh.

"I was foolish, was I not, Micah? For what did it matter?"

Patterson, loathing these conversations, was, nevertheless, forced to listen because at night there was really nothing else to do. Always before in his life he had accepted books without question as being quite naturally part of his life; now that he had none, the lack of them appalled him. He tried to write, scratching a diary on strips of bark, but the effort was not successful. Nor did his companions do much to ameliorate the loneliness of his situation. He preferred Judd to the others because Judd was young and gay, and comparatively untouched by the sinister, dragging life of the island, yet there were times when even Judd seemed to withdraw himself, to become watchful, remote, secretive. Patterson learned to recognise these as the interludes when his friend, pitifully afraid, thought in a panic of the future that lay ahead for him.

Heywood was sulky and monosyllabic. The Captain, so cynical and depraved, with his vicious mind, his giggle, and his will of iron, had revolted Patterson from the first. Only Doña Inés, with her vivid face and her beautiful, empty, animal mind, seemed to him restful and gracious, like some handsome, well-behaved child, in this crazy world of sunshine and plenty and despair. For this reason she began to haunt him at night, so that he was unable to sleep, and he longed, not so much to make love to her as to rest his head against her and to feel her cool hand upon his forehead, soothing him, that he might forget for a few hours. But Doña Inés was watched so carefully that it seemed impossible to speak to her alone.

And then one day, when he had been on the island for more than three months and was in a mood of black depression, he encountered her in the woods.

He had wandered there in search of shade, aimless,

solitary, and discontented. She was gathering moss, on her knees, her bright skirts kilted. Stars of sunlight, dripping through the green and matted tent of foliage, cast flickering, dappled shadows upon the amber of her neck and arms. When she heard his footsteps, she turned to look at him, smiling very wisely, her head turned to one side.

"May I speak to you," he asked her, "without being snarled at by the Captain?"

"But of course," she said. "Micah and Heywood went out an hour ago to fish on the other side of the island."

He sat down beside her on the green froth of the moss.

"Inés," he began, and he had never called her by her name before. "I wonder if you will be patient and listen to me for a moment?"

She nodded, saying nothing; she was never very glib of words.

"It's this," he said, encouraged; "perhaps, being so much wiser, you can help me . . . It's a bad day with me; I've got the horrors. To-day I believe all your crazy stories, and, try as I will, I can't escape from them . . . To-day I feel the island shutting me in, and I want to run away from the island. What am I to do?"

"You must begin," she told him, "by making yourself more stupid than you are. Oh, it was easy for Heywood, more easy even for Judd. For you it is very difficult. Can you not think only of to-day? Must you let your mind race on ahead?"

Her voice was murmurous and very soft. He said, after a pause:

"It would be easier, I think, if I might talk to you more often. Time, the time of the island, has touched you scarcely at all. With you one almost ceases to feel the horror."

"If it were not for Micah I would talk to you, yes, whenever you want. But you know how I am situated."

"Oh, don't think I'm trying to make love to you," he told her impatiently, "it's not that. It's only that you bring me peace—you're so beautiful, so restful."

Dofia Inés was silent. He said, after another pause:

"Perhaps that wasn't very polite of me. In fact, it was clumsily expressed. Let me try once more—listen, Inés, you're sanity, loveliness, a bright angel in a mad world. I respect you as I would respect a saint. But I want to be with you, I want to talk to you. I'm lonely when you're not there—I need your protection."

Doña Inés looked away from him towards the green twilight of the trees. His eyes devoured her dark clear-cut profile. She said at length, speaking very slowly in her grave, beautiful voice:

"*Mi querido*, I can't grant your request. I am too afraid of Micah, and perhaps I am afraid of something else . . . Listen, if I saw much of you, I might forget that I should be a dead woman. I might forget that my heart is cold and my mind empty. I might wake up again, and I don't want to wake up. I am afraid of life, after so many years. And already you are making my sleep a little restless."

She turned her face towards him and he saw that the red flower of her mouth was trembling. A bright drop, that might have been a tear, save that she never wept, hung like a jewel upon the shadow of her lashes. Yet her face was radiant, transfigured, more sparkling than the sunshine.

Straightway, Patterson forgot about respect and saints and Captain Thunder, and kissed her on the lips.

For one enchanted moment she was acquiescent, then pushed him away, hiding her face in her hands. And he, realising the horror that lay ahead for both, felt more like weeping than rejoicing.

"Go away," she whispered, "go away before you make me hate you for what you are doing. A moment ago you talked of peace: do you realise that you are stealing mine?"

He stammered, scarcely knowing what he said:

"There are better dreams."

"Not here," she told him; "here there are no dreams but bad ones, and so it is safer not to dream at all. Please, please, go away."

"Inés," he said eagerly, "I *will* go away—we'll both go away. If I build a boat, or a raft, and provision her, will

you trust yourself to me? We'll escape—we may drown, but I promise you——”

He stopped. In her tired yet vivid eyes he had suddenly surprised, for the first time, the dead, haunted look that so much disconcerted him when he glimpsed it in the other's gaze. It was as if she retreated very far away, drawing down a blind.

She said, patiently, as one speaking to a child:

“Oh, my friend, please don't be so foolish . . . I have tried, we have all tried, so many times. And it hurts, to fail so often.”

“Then you won't come?”

She climbed slowly to her feet, brushing moss from her bright skirts. Then she shook her black, silken head twice, very emphatically.

“No. I will not come with you.”

“Then,” said Patterson, “since I can't stay here to watch you with the Captain, I shall escape alone. Won't you change your mind?”

She came near to him and put her hand for one moment upon his shoulder.

“No. I'll not change my mind.”

And with a swishing of silk, that sounded strange enough in that tropical, emerald glade, she left him to his thoughts, and his thoughts were agony.

For weeks he slaved in secret to build a great rakish-looking solid raft that grew slowly into shape as it lay concealed amid the dusky green of overhanging branches. He had told no one save Doña Inés of his resolution to escape. The reason was simple; in his heart of hearts he dreaded their bitter mockery, their cynical disbelief in any possible salvation from the trap of the island. Yet he still had faith; once aboard his raft and he would be for ever borne away from these perilous and beckoning shores; he might find death, but this he did not really mind, although he much preferred the thought of life, human life, life with Inés. And then he had to remind himself that the Spanish woman was a

thing of dust, to crumble away at the first contact with normal humanity, and that he would, in any event, be better without her, since she meant another mouth to feed.

But he still desired her, and it was as though the Captain knew, for she was very seldom left alone. And so he toiled in secret, and in his spare time nursed Judd, who lay sick of a poisonous snake-bite that swelled his foot, and turned it black, and would have meant death in any other land.

Once, when his raft was nearly completed, he caught Inés alone on the beach, where, against a background of golden rock, she fed a swirling silver mass of seagulls. The birds wheeled, crying harshly, and Doña Inés smiled. She wore a knot of scarlet passion-flowers in the dark satin of her hair. Patterson, determined not to miss a second alone with her, advanced triumphantly across the sands. The seagulls scattered.

"Look, you've frightened my birds," she complained indignantly.

"Never mind the birds—they can see you whenever they want. I can't. Inés, haven't you changed your mind about coming with me?"

She shook her head.

"Inés, please, *please* listen! Even if we drown out there together, wouldn't it be better than this?"

"Oh, yes, if we drowned. But we should not drown. We should come back here—to Micah—and then our lives would not be worth living."

"My life," he said, "isn't worth living now, not while I have to see you with that creature night and day."

"Be quiet," she warned in a low voice.

Patterson turned, followed her eyes. Behind, only just out of earshot, stood the Captain, watching them sardonically. The breeze lifted the skirts of his green taffeta coat, ballooning them about his slender body. The green, too, seemed reflected in his face, so pale was it; paler, more waxen, even, than a corpse-candle.

"Are you also feeding the birds, Patterson?" inquired the Captain softly.

"No. I am looking for turtles' eggs."

"How many have you found?" the Captain wanted to know.

Patterson felt rather foolish.

"None—yet."

"Then you had better make haste, unless you wish to fast for dinner. Come, my rose."

And Captain Thunder turned away indifferently, followed by Doña Inés, who walked behind him obediently, her head bent, with no backward look.

That night Patterson thought he heard weeping in the hut that lay only a few hundred yards from his own, and he crouched, perspiring, sleepless, for many hours, until it was dark no longer, and bars of rose and lemon streaked the sky. Then he got up and went forth to the woods to complete his preparations for escape.

He had rigged up a sail upon his raft and had already floated her on a narrow lagoon that led towards the sea. He was taking with him three barrels of water, a barrel of bread, his fishing-tackle, a blanket, and a flint and tinder. He knew he would not starve, since fish were plentiful, but he was aware that he would, probably, unless he were fortunate enough to end in a shark's belly, die of a thirst that must endure for many days of torment in a pitiless and scorching heat.

Yet he could not wait; he must start at once, before the sun was up, before the first signs of life from that hut nestling on the cliffs behind him. And so, at a moment's notice, he took his departure, nervous and weary and taut with anxiety, drifting with his raft like some dark bird against the misty violet-blue of the lagoon at dawn.

Everything was silent; trees and cliff and sky, the limpid reflection of these in the glassy waters of the lagoon; even the monkeys and the chattering parakeets, all were frozen into a breathless silence that seemed to watch, aghast, the reckless departure of this creature determined at all costs to break away from their sorrowful eternity.

Soon it was daylight, and the sun beat gilded wings, and Patterson drew near to the sea. A curve in the lagoon showed him the tawny cliff, and above it the huts. From the Captain's

hut came a finger of blue smoke that climbed, very straight, into the bright clearness of the air.

"Good-bye, Inés."

And he was surprised to find how little pain there was for him in this parting. He reminded himself once more that she was a ghost, a creature of dust.

He passed the rocks and was soon outside, away from the island, on the sea itself. The ripples danced, white-crested, as though laced with silver. Patterson fished with success. He tried to fry his breakfast and, failing, devoured it half-raw, with a hunch of bread. It was very appetising. After breakfast he lay watching, with ecstasy, a stiff breeze swell his sail.

Already the island seemed to have receded. Patterson gazed with exultation at the coral-whiteness of its strand, the radiant green foliage of its trees. An hour before, and these had been loathsome to him; now that they belonged to the past he grimaced at them and waved his hand.

The raft drifted on.

The sea was kind to him that day, he thought, so innocent and gay and tinted like forget-me-nots. Despite himself, despite his almost certain death, he found his mind flitting towards England, and his life there, as though he were fated to be saved.

He turned towards the island, gleaming in the distance.

"Farewell!"

It was a cry of defiance.

And, then, in a moment, like thunder splintering from the sky, came sudden and shattering catastrophe. He was never very clear as to what actually occurred. All he knew was that from peace and beauty there emerged swift chaos. A wall of water, all towering solid green and ribbed with foam, reared suddenly from the tranquil seas to bar his path like some great ogre's castle arisen by magic, huge, destructive, carven of emerald. Then there was darkness and a tremendous roaring sound, and the raft seemed to back like a frightened horse. He heard the ripping of his sail and then he was pitched through the air and something seemed to split his head and he knew no more.

When he awoke, the sun beat hot upon his temples. He felt sick, his limbs ached, and he groaned. He lay still, his eyes closed, and tried to remember what had happened. And then he heard a sound that might have been some dirge sighed by the breeze, a soft murmuring music that seemed to him familiar. He knew, then, that he was back upon the island. He had no need to open his eyes.

"Oh, God," he sighed.

And the sweat trickled down his face.

And then, inevitably, sounding close in his ear, the sneering, hateful voice of Captain Thunder.

"Home so soon, my young friend? No, you would not believe, would you? You knew too much . . ."

Patterson made no sign of life. Back once more on the island. For all eternity . . . the island . . . and then the murmuring song swelled louder, louder, mocking him, laughing a little, as Inés had laughed when he had told her that he was going to escape. The song of the island! And he must hear it for ever! He opened his eyes to find the Captain looking at him cynically.

"Now that you understand there is no escape," said the Captain, "perhaps you will not take it amiss if I venture to criticise your manner towards Madam Inés . . ."

But Patterson was not listening.

THE MAN WHO CAME BACK

William Gerbardi

I had been asked to tea by a very beautiful woman, but her old father was so intent and intellectually active that his daughter, I regret to say, all but fades out of the picture. They lived in a white villa in the pine woods by the sea at the far end of an isthmus which was reached in half an hour by boat from Toulon. He came in a moment or so after my arrival, I remember, a very old, sick man, with a drooping moustache, and shuffling along in bedroom slippers and a sort of padded jacket buttoned up to the neck. Learning that I was a novelist, he conceived it a necessary courtesy to discourse on literature, which took the form of airing his knowledge in one continuous flow which nothing could stop or interrupt. His wife, who claimed to be a poetess, made pathetic little attempts to show me the favourable Press notices she had received. It was useless. He had so much to say, and he wasn't going to have his opportunity of airing his knowledge before a literary visitor spoilt by his wife's vanity about her poems, which, he made me understand, were poor stuff. He was terribly ill. One could see it was a strain for him to talk at all. But he couldn't help himself. His false teeth chattered perilously as he spoke, and every now and then he would clutch at his heart and say, "Excuse me if I lie down for a moment. I will be myself again presently." Then it was that his wife jumped in with her poems. But not for long. The old man had dragged down his legs to a sitting position on the sofa and was saying: "Another Elizabethan I am very fond of . . ." And his wife's brief spell was over.

His knowledge was amazing. It covered the literature of every country, and it began very early and ended with our own days. In English literature his knowledge ranged from

Chaucer to Mr. David Garnett. And the extraordinary thing about it was that he could not speak a word of English and, while understanding everything he read, he could not pronounce the words, or if he did, pronounced them wrongly, accentuating the *ed*'s in words like "asked," "called," for example. His knowledge struck me as very accurate and his critical estimations as just, but, owing to the vast range of material, they took the form of tracing influences, rather than valuing an author for himself.

Touching mystical poetry, I asked him whether he believed in some form of immortality. He paused. It was his first pause in a sitting position, and his wife immediately said, "I have tried in my poems . . ." But he submerged her by his intensity.

"No," he said thoughtfully, "I don't." He reflected deeply. "No. I can't say I do. I regret it, but I don't. I regret that all this laboriously accumulated knowledge should be wasted with my death. For I have neither written, nor lectured, nor during my long career in the French Consular Service have I had many opportunities to impart my knowledge to anyone intelligent enough to retain it. Not a word of it will be left. I regret it. But there it is, I bow to the inevitable. Yet I can't stop. I still read, because I have a thirst for knowledge. It is the only luxury that I can afford myself in old age. I read, though I know my days are coming to an end. Because I know my time is short, I read more; I am in a desperate hurry to keep up with the vast volume of knowledge still sealed to me. I read myself to sleep. I read on waking in the morning, and all through the day. And sometimes I ask myself, seeing that I cannot have more than a year or two to live, can it be that all this reading of mine is in vain?"

When I saw him again a year later he was so ill that he would beg to be allowed to continue his discourse in a lying position. Suddenly he would stop, clutching at his heart, and lie still for a long time. "It has passed," he would say and go on: "The Comedy of Humours, though crude, undoubtedly, was treading the right path in divining that individuality of character asserts itself through repetition, and

subtle writers such as Tchekov knew how to re-create subtle characters by means of subtle repetitions . . ."

"Rest," his wife would say, "and let me read that Hindu lyric I've translated. I am sure Mr.——"

But he would go on: "... While Shelley's poetry is metaphysical I place Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven* in the category of the mystical; while Spenser's *Faery Queen* . . ." He clutched at his heart and lay silent for ten minutes.

When he recovered he said, pointing with his chin to the bookshelves, "My library is complete. How it pains me to think that I must leave it behind. The books in it that I haven't read yet! Night and day I am reading my books, reading against time. It is a sort of greediness, if you like. But I cannot bear the thought of leaving any book of mine behind unread. They are like human beings to me." He sucked back vehemently his false teeth which threatened at every moment to fly out, like some rebellious bird that he was trying to shut in, and said: "If there is any personal immortality in store for us I hope that heaven for each one of us is shaped after his heart's desire, and that mine contains large, well-aired rooms with innumerable books, an infinity of libraries, so that I may read, read, read into eternity and never be hard-pressed for time."

"But what sort of books?" I asked. "These books?"

"Ah! I hope so. For there are books here I won't have read before I go. Time," he said, "time is getting short."

As I was going, "Persian poetry," he pointed at a parcel on the table.

"Good?"

"Don't know. Haven't opened the parcel yet," he said eagerly. "Let you know next time."

But the next time I called, on a rainy night (for I had been invited to a party of some friends who lived on the isthmus, and had mistaken the date and missed the last boat back to Toulon), the maid told me that both ladies were away in town and would not be back till after midnight. I resolved to wait for them in the library. I took a book and began to read. I was startled an hour or so afterwards by the

sound of approaching steps. But it was only the old man shuffling in his bedroom slippers and the padded jacket, bleak like a ghost in the moonlight which streamed in through the glass veranda, come down from his bedroom to look for a book in the library. I stood up. He paused, looked at me; his mouth moved convulsively, but no sound came. He went over to the shelf, took down two large volumes and went out through the door.

He couldn't have seen me, I thought; or he was dreaming, or walking in his sleep, or his ill-health had impaired his eyesight.

"Your husband came down for books, but evidently did not recognise me," I told his wife on her returning in the morning with her daughter from Toulon.

She stared at me with amazement.

"He died three weeks ago on Friday."

I stared at her. "But I saw him. He came down for some books and took away two volumes."

We went into the library and she at once noticed the gap. She looked up in the catalogue and ascertained the names of the books. They were: *Letters of Lord Byron*, Volumes I and II.

It is not for me to explain, but to report the facts and circumstances. If you think I am mad, let a doctor examine me; and should the doctor, on finding me sane, be himself suspected of hallucination, let him be scrutinised by a professor.

THE VISITING STAR*

Robert Aickman

The first time that Colvin, who had never been a frequent theatre-goer, ever heard of the great actress Arabella Rokeby, was when he was walking past the Hippodrome one night and Malnik, the Manager of the Tabard Players, invited him into his office.

Had Colvin not been awarded a Grant, remarkably insufficient for present prices, upon which to compose, collate, and generally scratch together a book upon the once thriving British industries of lead and plumbago mining, he would probably never have set eyes upon this bleak town. Tea was over (to-day it had been pilchard salad and chips); and Colvin had set out from the Emancipation Hotel, where he boarded, upon his regular evening walk. In fifteen or twenty minutes he would be beyond the gaslights, the granite setts, the nimbus of the pits. (Lead and plumbago mining had long been replaced by coal, as the town's main industry.) There had been no one else for Tea and Mrs. Royd had made it clear that the trouble he was causing had not passed unnoticed.

Outside it was blowing as well as raining, so that Palmerston Street was almost deserted. The Hippodrome (called, when built, the Grand Opera House) stood at the corner of Palmerston Street and Aberdeen Place. Vast, ornate, the product of an unfulfilled aspiration that the town would increase in size and devotion to the Muses, it had been for years unused and forgotten. About it like rags, when Colvin first beheld it, had hung scraps of posters: "Harem Nights. Gay! Bright!! Alluring!!!" But a few weeks ago, the Hippodrome had reopened to admit The Tabard Players ("In Association With The Arts Council"); and, it was hoped, their audiences. The Tabard Players offered soberer

* © Robert Aickman, 1966

joys: a new and respectable play each week, usually a light comedy or West End crook drama; but, on one occasion, "Everyman." Malnik, their Manager, a youngish bald man, was an authority on the British Drama of the Nineteenth Century, upon which he had written an immense book, bursting with carefully verified detail. Colvin had met him one night in the Saloon Bar of the Emancipation Hotel; and, though neither knew anything of the other's subject, they had exchanged cultural lifebelts in the ocean of apathy and incomprehensible interests which surrounded them. Malnik was lodging with the sad-faced Rector, who let rooms.

To-night, having seen the curtain up on Act I, Malnik had come outside for a breath of the wind. There was something he wanted to impart; and, as he regarded the drizzling and indifferent town, Colvin obligingly came into sight. In a moment, he was inside Malnik's roomy but crumbling office.

"Look," said Malnik.

He shuffled a heap of papers on his desk and handed Colvin a photograph. It was yellow, and torn at the edges. The subject was a wild-eyed young man with much dark curly hair and a blobby face. He was wearing a high stiff collar, and a bow like Chopin's.

"John Nethers," said Malnik. Then, when no light of rapture flashed from Colvin's face, he said "Author of *Cornelia*."

"Sorry," said Colvin, shaking his head.

"John Nethers was the son of a chemist in this town. Some books say a miner, but that's wrong. A chemist. He killed himself at twenty-two. But before that I've traced that he'd written at least six plays. *Cornelia*, which is the best of them, is one of the great plays of the nineteenth century."

"Why did he kill himself?"

"It's in his eyes. You can see it. *Cornelia* was produced in London with Arabella Rokeby. But never here. Never in the author's own town. I've been into the whole thing closely. Now we're going to do *Cornelia* for Christmas."

"Won't you lose money?" asked Colvin.

"We're losing money all the time, old man. Of course we are. We may as well do something we shall be remembered by."

Colvin nodded. He was beginning to see that Malnik's life was a single-minded struggle for the British Drama of the Nineteenth Century and all that went with it.

"Besides I'm going to do *As You Like It* also. As a fill-up." Malnik stooped and spoke close to Colvin's ear as he sat in a bursting leather armchair, the size of a judge's seat. "You see Arabella Rokeby's coming."

"But how long is it since——"

"Better not be too specific about that. They say it doesn't matter with Arabella Rokeby. She can get away with it. Probably in fact she can't. Not altogether. But all the same, think of it. Arabella Rokeby in *Cornelia*. In my theatre."

Colvin thought of it.

"Have you ever seen her?"

"No, I haven't. Of course she doesn't play regularly nowadays. Only special engagements. But in this business one has to take a chance sometimes. And golly what a chance!"

"And she's willing to come? I mean at Christmas," Colvin added, not wishing to seem rude.

Malnik did seem slightly unsure. "I have a contract," he said. Then he added: "She'll love it when she gets here. After all: *Cornelia*! And she must know that the nineteenth century theatre is my subject." He had seemed to be reassuring himself, but now he was glowing.

"But *As You Like It*?" said Colvin, who had played Touchstone at his preparatory school. "Surely she can't manage Rosalind?"

"It was her great part. Happily you can play Rosalind at any age. Wish I could get old Ludlow to play Jacques. But he won't." Ludlow was the company's veteran.

"Why not?"

"He played with Rokeby in the old days. I believe he's afraid she'll see he isn't the Grand Old Man he should be.

He's a good chap, but proud. Of course he may have other reasons. You never know with Ludlow."

The curtain was down on Act I.

Colvin took his leave and resumed his walk.

Shortly thereafter Colvin read about the Nethers Gala in the local evening paper ("this forgotten poet," as the writer helpfully phrased it), and found confirmation that Miss Rokeby was indeed to grace it ("the former London star"). In the same issue of the paper appeared an editorial to the effect that widespread disappointment would be caused by the news that the Hippodrome would not be offering a pantomime at Christmas in accordance with the custom of the town and district.

"She can't 'ardly stop 'ere, Mr. Colvin," said Mrs. Royd, when Colvin, thinking to provide forewarning, showed her the news, as she lent a hand behind the Saloon Bar. "This isn't the Cumberland. She'd get across the staff."

"I believe she's quite elderly," said Colvin soothingly.

"If she's elderly, she'll want special attention, and that's often just as bad."

"After all, where she goes is mainly a problem for her, and perhaps Mr. Malnik."

"Well, there's nowhere else in town for her to stop, is there?" retorted Mrs. Royd with fire. "Not nowadays? She'll just 'ave to make do. We did for theatricals in the old days. Midgets once. Whole troupe of 'em."

"I'm sure you'll make her very comfortable."

"Can't see what she wants to come at all for really. Not at Christmas."

"Miss Rokeby needs no *reason* for her actions. What she does is sufficient in itself. You'll understand that, dear lady, when you meet her." The speaker was a very small man, apparently of advanced years, white-haired, and with a brown sharp face, like a Levantine. The Bar was full, and Colvin had not previously noticed him, although he was conspicuous enough, as he wore an overcoat with a fur collar and a scarf with a large black pin in the centre. "I wonder

if I could beg a roof for a few nights," he went on. "I assure you I'm no trouble at all."

"There's only Number Twelve A. It's not very comfortable," replied Mrs. Royd sharply.

"Of course you must leave room for Miss Rokeby."

"Nine's for her. Though I haven't had a word from her."

"I think she'll need two rooms. She has a companion."

"I can clear our Greta's old room upstairs. If she's a friend of yours, you might ask her to let me know when she's coming."

"Not a friend," said the old man smiling. "But I follow her career."

Mrs. Royd brought a big red book from under the Bar.

"What name, please?"

"Mr. Superbus," said the little old man. He had yellow expressionless eyes.

"Will you register?"

Mr. Superbus produced a gold pen, long and fat. His writing was so curvilinear that it seemed purely decorative, like a design for ornamental ironwork. Colvin noticed that he paused slightly at the "Permanent Address" column, and then simply wrote (although it was difficult to be sure) what appeared to be "North Africa."

"Will you come this way?" said Mrs. Royd, staring suspiciously at the newcomer's scrollwork in the visitors' book. Then, even more suspiciously, she added: "What about luggage?"

Mr. Superbus nodded gravely. "I placed two bags outside."

"Let's hope they're still there. They're rough in this town, you know."

"I'm sure they're still there," said Mr. Superbus.

As he spoke the door opened suddenly and a customer almost fell into the Bar. "Sorry Mrs. Royd," he said with a mildness which in the circumstances belied Mrs. Royd's words. "There's something on the step."

"My fault, I'm afraid," said Mr. Superbus. "I wonder—have you a porter?"

"The porter works evenings at the Hippodrome nowadays. Scene-shifting and that."

"Perhaps I could help?" said Colvin.

On the step outside were what appeared to be two very large suitcases. When he tried to lift one of them, he understood what Mr. Superbus had meant. It was remarkably heavy. He held back the Bar door, letting in a cloud of cold air. "Give me a hand someone," he said.

The customer who had almost fallen volunteered, and a short procession, led by Mrs. Royd, set off along the little dark passage to Number Twelve A. Colvin was disconcerted when he realised that Twelve A was the room at the end of the passage, which had no number on its door and had never, he thought, been occupied since his arrival; the room, in fact, next to his.

"Better leave these on the floor," said Colvin, dismissing the rickety luggage stand.

"Thank you," said Mr. Superbus, transferring a coin to the man who had almost fallen. He did it like a conjurer unpalming something.

"I'll send Greta to make up the bed," said Mrs. Royd. "Tea's at six."

"At six?" said Mr. Superbus, gently raising an eyebrow. "Tea?" Then, when Mrs. Royd and the man had gone, he clutched Colvin very hard on the upper part of his left arm. "Tell me," inquired Mr. Superbus, "are you in love with Miss Rokeby? I overheard you defending her against the impertinence of our hostess."

Colvin considered for a moment.

"Why not admit it?" said Mr. Superbus, gently raising the other eyebrow. He was still clutching Colvin's arm much too hard.

"I've never set eyes on Miss Rokeby."

Mr. Superbus let go. "Young people nowadays have no imagination," he said with a whinny, like a wild goat.

Colvin was not surprised when Mr. Superbus did not appear at Tea (luncheon meat and chips that evening).

After Tea Colvin, instead of going for a walk, wrote to

his Mother. But there was little to tell her, so that at the end of the letter he mentioned the arrival of Mr. Superbus. "There's a sort of sweet blossomy smell about him like a meadow," he ended. "I think he must use scent."

When the letter was finished, Colvin started trying to construct tables of output from the lead and plumbago mines a century ago. The partitions between the bedrooms were thin, and he began to wonder about Mr. Superbus's nocturnal habits.

He wondered from time to time until the time came for sleep; and wondered a bit also as he dressed the next morning and went to the bathroom to shave. For during the whole of this time no sound whatever had been heard from Number Twelve A, despite the thinness of the plywood partition; a circumstance which Colvin already thought curious when, during breakfast, he overheard Greta talking to Mrs. Royd in the kitchen. "I'm ever so sorry, Mrs. Royd. I forgot about it with the crowd in the Bar." To which Mrs. Royd simply replied: "I wonder what 'e done about it. 'E could 'ardly make do without sheets or blankets, and this December. Why didn't 'e ask?" And when Greta said "I suppose nothing ain't happened to him?" Colvin put down his porridge spoon and unobtrusively joined the party which went to find out.

Mrs. Royd knocked several times upon the door of Number Twelve A, but there was no answer. When they opened the door, the bed was bare as Colvin had seen it the evening before, and there was no sign at all of Mr. Superbus except that his two big cases lay on the floor, one beside the other.

"What's he want to leave the window open like that for?" inquired Mrs. Royd. She shut it with a crash. "Someone will fall over those cases in the middle of the floor."

Colvin bent down to slide the heavy cases under the bed. But the pair of them now moved at a touch.

Colvin picked one case up and shook it slightly. It emitted a muffled flapping sound, like a bat in a box. Colvin nearly spoke, but stopped himself, and stowed the cases, end on, under the unmade bed in silence.

"Make up the room, Greta," said Mrs. Royd. "It's no

use standing about." Colvin gathered that it was not altogether unknown for visitors to the Emancipation Hotel to be missing from their rooms all night.

But there was a further little mystery. Later that day in the Bar, Colvin was accosted by the man who had helped to carry Mr. Superbus's luggage.

"Look at that." He displayed, rather furtively, something which lay in his hand.

It was a sovereign.

"He gave it me last night."

"Can I see it?" It had been struck in Queen Victoria's reign, but gleamed like new.

"What d'you make of that?" asked the man.

"Not much," replied Colvin, returning the pretty piece.

"But, now I come to think of it, *you* can make about forty-five shillings."

When this incident took place, Colvin was on his way to spend three or four nights in another town where lead and plumbago mining had formerly been carried on, and where he needed to consult an invaluable collection of old records which had been presented to the Public Library at the time the principal mining company went bankrupt.

On his return he walked up the hill from the station through a thick mist, laden with coal dust and sticky smoke, and apparently in no way diminished by a bitter little wind, which chilled while hardly troubling to blow. There had been snow, and little archipelagoes of slush remained on the pavements, through which the immense boots of the miners crashed noisily. The male population wore heavy mufflers and were unusually silent. Many of the women wore shawls over their heads in the manner of their grandmothers.

Mrs. Royd was not in the Bar, and Colvin hurried through it to his old room, where he put on a thick sweater before descending to Tea. The only company consisted in two commercial travellers, sitting at the same table and eating through a heap of bread and margarine but saying nothing. Colvin wondered what had happened to Mr. Superbus.

Greta entered as usual with a pot of strong tea and a plate of bread and margarine.

"Good evening, Mr. Colvin. Enjoy your trip?"

"Yes thank you, Greta. What's for Tea?"

"Haddock and chips." She drew a deep breath. "Miss Rokeby's come. . . . I don't think she'll care for haddock and chips, do you Mr. Colvin?" Colvin looked up in surprise. He saw that Greta was trembling. Then he noticed that she was wearing a thin black dress, instead of her customary casual attire.

Colvin smiled up at her. "I think you'd better put on something warm. It's getting colder every minute."

But at that moment the door opened and Miss Rokeby entered.

Greta stood quite still, shivering all over, and simply staring at her. Everything about Greta made it clear that this was Miss Rokeby. Otherwise the situation was of a kind which brought to Colvin's mind the cliché about there being some mistake.

The woman who had come in was very small and slight. She had a triangular gazelle-like face, with very large dark eyes, and a mouth which went right across the lower tip of the triangle, making of her chin another, smaller triangle. She was dressed entirely in black, with a high-necked black silk sweater, and wore long black earrings. Her short dark hair was dressed like that of a faun; and her thin white hands hung straight by her side in a posture resembling some Indian statuettes which Colvin recalled but could not place.

Greta walked towards her, and drew back a chair. She placed Miss Rokeby with her back to Colvin.

"Thank you. What can I eat?" Colvin was undecided whether Miss Rokeby's voice was high or low: it was like a bell beneath the ocean.

Greta was blushing. She stood, not looking at Miss Rokeby, but at the other side of the room, shivering and reddening. The tears began to pour down her cheeks in a cataract. She dragged at a chair, made an unintelligible sound, and ran into the kitchen.

Miss Rokeby half turned in her seat, and stared after

Greta. Colvin thought she looked quite as upset as Greta. Certainly she was very white. She might almost have been eighteen. . . .

"Please don't mind. It's nerves, I think." Colvin realised that his own voice was far from steady, and that he was beginning to blush also, he hoped only slightly.

Miss Rokeby had risen to her feet and was holding on to the back of her chair.

"I didn't say anything which could frighten her."

It was necessary to come to the point, Colvin thought.

"Greta thinks the menu unworthy of the distinguished company."

"What?" She turned and looked at Colvin. Then she smiled. "Is that it?" She sat down again. "What is it? Fish and chips?"

"Haddock. Yes." Colvin smiled back, now full of confidence.

"Well. There it is." Miss Rokeby made the prospect of haddock sound charming and gay. One of the commercial travellers offered to pour the other a fourth cup of tea. The odd little crisis was over.

But when Greta returned, her face seemed set and a trifle hostile. She had put on an ugly custard-coloured cardigan.

"It's haddock and chips."

Miss Rokeby merely inclined her head, still smiling charmingly.

Before Colvin had finished, Miss Rokeby, with whom further conversation had been made difficult by the fact that she had been seated with her back to him, and by the torpid watchfulness of the commercial travellers, rose, bade him "Good-evening," and left.

Colvin had not meant to go out again that evening, but curiosity continued to rise in him, and in the end he decided to clear his thoughts by a short walk, taking in the Hippodrome. Outside it had become even colder; the fog was thicker, the streets emptier.

Colvin found that the entrance to the Hippodrome had

been transformed. From frieze to floor, the walls were covered with large photographs. The photographs were not framed, but merely mounted on big sheets of pasteboard. They seemed to be all the same size. Colvin saw at once that they were all portraits of Miss Rokeby.

The entrance hall was filled with fog, but the lighting within had been greatly reinforced since Colvin's last visit. To-night the effect was mistily dazzling. Colvin began to examine the photographs. They depicted Miss Rokeby in the widest variety of costume and make-up, although in no case was the name given of the play or character. In some Colvin could not see how he recognised her at all. In all she was alone. The number of the photographs, their uniformity of presentation, the bright swimming light, the emptiness of the place (for the Box Office had shut) combined to make Colvin feel that he was dreaming. He put his hands before his eyes, inflamed by the glare and the fog. When he looked again, it was as if all the Miss Rokebys had been so placed that their gaze converged upon the spot where he stood. He closed his eyes tightly and began to feel his way to the door and the dimness of the street outside. Then there was a flutter of applause behind him; the evening's audience began to straggle out, grumbling at the weather; and Malnik was saying, "Hallo, old man. Nice to see you."

Colvin gesticulated uncertainly. "Did she bring them all with her?"

"Not a bit of it, old man. Millie found them when she opened up."

"Where did she find them?"

"Just lying on the floor. In two whacking great parcels. Rokeby's agent, I suppose, though she appeared not to have one. Blessed if I know really. I myself could hardly shift one of the parcels, let alone two."

Colvin felt rather frightened for a moment; but he only said: "How do you like her?"

"Tell you when she arrives."

"She's arrived."

Malnik stared.

"Come back with me and see for yourself."

Malnik seized Colvin's elbow. "What's she look like?"

"Might be any age."

All the time Malnik was bidding Good night to patrons, trying to appease their indignation at being brought out on such a night.

Suddenly the lights went, leaving only a pilot. It illumined a photograph of Miss Rokeby holding a skull.

"Let's go," said Malnik. "Lock up, Frank, will you?"

"You'll need a coat," said Colvin.

"Lend me your coat, Frank."

On the short cold walk to the Emancipation Hotel, Malnik said little. Colvin supposed that he was planning the encounter before him. Colvin did ask him whether he had ever heard of a Mr. Superbus, but he hadn't.

Mrs. Royd was, it seemed, in a thoroughly bad temper. To Colvin it appeared that she had been drinking; and that she was one whom drink soured rather than mellowed. "I've got no one to send," she snapped. "You can go up yourself, if you like. Mr. Colvin knows the way." There was a roaring fire in the Bar, which after the cold outside seemed very overheated.

Outside Number Nine, Colvin paused before knocking. Immediately he was glad he had done so, because inside were voices speaking very softly. All the evening he had been remembering Mr. Superbus's reference to a "companion."

In dumb show he tried to convey the situation to Malnik, who peered at his efforts with a professional's dismissal of the amateur. Then Malnik produced a pocket book, wrote in it, and tore out the page, which he thrust under Miss Rokeby's door. Having done this, he prepared to return with Colvin to the Bar, and await a reply. Before they had taken three steps, however, the door was open, and Miss Rokeby was inviting them in.

To Colvin she said "We've met already," though without inquiring his name.

Colvin felt gratified; and at least equally pleased when he saw that the fourth person in the room was a tall, frail

looking girl with long fair hair drawn back into a tight bun. It was not the sort of companion he had surmised.

"This is Myrrha. We're never apart."

Myrrha smiled slightly, said nothing, and sat down again. Colvin thought she looked positively wasted. Doubtless by reason of the cold, she wore heavy tweeds, which went oddly with her air of fragility.

"How well do you know the play?" asked Malnik at the earliest possible moment.

"Well enough not to play in it." Colvin saw Malnik turn grey. "Since you've got me here, I'll play Rosalind. The rest was lies. Do you know," she went on, addressing Colvin, "that this man tried to trick me. You're not in the theatre, are you?"

Colvin, feeling embarrassed, smiled and shook his head.

"*Cornelia's* a masterpiece," said Malnik furiously. "Nethers was a genius."

Miss Rokeby simply said "Was" very softly, and seated herself on the arm of Myrrha's armchair, the only one in the room. It was set before the old fashioned gas fire.

"It's announced. Everyone's waiting for it. People are coming from London. They're even coming from Cambridge." Myrrha turned away her head from Malnik's wrath.

"I was told—Another English Classic. Not an outpouring by Little Jack Nethers. I won't do it."

"*As You Like It* is only a fill-up. What more is it ever? *Cornelia* is the whole point of the Gala. Nethers was *born* in this town. Don't you understand?"

Malnik was so much in earnest that Colvin felt sorry for him. But even Colvin doubted whether Malnik's was the best way to deal with Miss Rokeby.

"Please play for me. Please."

"Rosalind only." Miss Rokeby was swinging her legs. They were young and lovely. There was more than one thing about this interview which Colvin did not care for.

"We'll talk it over in my office to-morrow." Colvin identified this as a customary admission of defeat.

"This is a horrid place, isn't it?" said Miss Rokeby conversationally to Colvin.

"I'm used to it," said Colvin smiling. "Mrs. Royd has her softer side."

"She's put poor Myrrha in a cupboard."

Colvin remembered about Greta's old room upstairs.

"Perhaps she'd like to change rooms with me? I've been away and haven't even unpacked. It would be easy."

"How kind you are! To that silly little girl! To me! And now to Myrrha! May I see?"

"Of course."

Colvin took her into the passage. It seemed obvious that Myrrha would come also, but she did not. Apparently she left it to Miss Rokeby to dispose of her. Malnik sulked behind also.

Colvin opened the door of his room and switched on the light. Lying on his bed and looking very foolish was his copy of Bull's "Graphite and Its Uses." He glanced round for Miss Rokeby. Then for the second time that evening, he felt frightened.

Miss Rokeby was standing in the ill-lit passage, just outside his doorway. It was unpleasantly apparent that she was terrified. Formerly pale, she was now quite white. Her hands were clenched, and she was breathing unnaturally deeply. Her big eyes were half shut, and to Colvin it seemed that it was something she *smelt* which was frightening her. This impression was so strong that he sniffed the chilly air himself once or twice, unavailingly. Then he stepped forward, and his arms were around Miss Rokeby, who was palpably about to faint. Immediately Miss Rokeby was in his arms, such emotion swept through him as he had never before known. For what seemed a long moment, he was lost in the wonder of it. Then he was recalled by something which frightened him more than anything else, though for less reason. There was a sharp sound from Number Twelve A. Mr. Superbus must have returned.

Colvin supported Miss Rokeby back to Number Nine. Upon catching sight of her, Myrrha gave a small but jarring cry, and helped her on to the bed.

"It's my heart," said Miss Rokeby. "My absurd heart."

Malnik now looked more black than grey. "Shall we send

for a doctor?" he inquired, hardly troubling to mask the sarcasm.

Miss Rokeby shook her head once. It was the sibling gesture to her nod.

"Please don't trouble about moving," she said to Colvin.

Colvin, full of confusion, looked at Myrrha, who was being resourceful with smelling salts.

"Good night," said Miss Rokeby, softly but firmly. And as Colvin followed Malnik out of the room, she touched his hand.

Colvin passed the night almost without sleep, which was another new experience for him. A conflict of feelings about Miss Rokeby, all of them strong, was one reason for insomnia; another was the sequence of sounds from Number Twelve A. Mr. Superbus seemed to spend the night in moving things about and talking to himself. At first it sounded as if he were rearranging all the furniture in his room. Then there was a period, which seemed to Colvin timeless, during which the only noise was of low and unintelligible muttering, by no means continuous, but broken by periods of silence, and then resumed as before just as Colvin was beginning to hope that all was over. Colvin wondered whether Mr. Superbus was saying his prayers. Ultimately the banging about recommenced. Presumably Mr. Superbus was still dissatisfied with the arrangement of the furniture; or perhaps was returning it to its original dispositions. Then Colvin heard the sash window thrown sharply open. He remembered the sound from the occasion when Mrs. Royd had sharply shut it. After that, silence continued. In the end Colvin turned on the light and looked at his watch. It had stopped.

At breakfast, Colvin asked when Mr. Superbus was expected down. "He doesn't come down," replied Greta. "They say he has all his meals out."

Colvin understood that rehearsals began that day, but Malnik had always demurred at outsiders being present. Now, moreover, he felt that Colvin had seen him at an unfavourable moment, so that his cordiality was much abated. The next two weeks, in fact, were to Colvin heavy with anti-

climax. He saw Miss Rokeby only at the evening meal, which, however, she was undeniably in process of converting from Tea into Dinner, by expending charm, will-power, and cash. Colvin participated in this improvement, as did even such few of the endless commercial travellers as wished to do so; and from time to time Miss Rokeby exchanged a few pleasant generalities with him, though she did not ask him to sit at her table, nor did he, being a shy man, dare to invite her. Myrrha never appeared at all; and when on one occasion Colvin referred to her interrogatively, Miss Rokeby simply said "She pines, poor lamb," and plainly wished to say nothing more. Colvin remembered Myrrha's wasted appearance, and concluded that she must be an invalid. He wondered if he should again offer to change rooms. After that single disturbed night, he had heard no more of Mr. Superbus. But from Mrs. Royd he had gathered that Mr. Superbus had settled for several weeks in advance. Indeed for the first time in years the Emancipation Hotel was doing good business.

It continued as cold as ever during all the time Miss Rokeby remained in the town; with repeated little snow storms every time the streets began to clear. The miners would stamp as they entered the Bar until they seemed likely to go through to the cellar beneath; and all the commercial travellers caught colds. The two local papers, morning and evening, continued their efforts to set people against Malnik's now diminished Gala. When *Cornelia* was no longer offered, the two editors pointed out (erroneously, Colvin felt) that even now it was not too late for a pantomime; but Malnik seemed to have succeeded in persuading Miss Rokeby to reinforce *As You Like It* with a piece entitled *A Scrap of Paper* which Colvin had never heard of, but which an elderly citizen whom the papers always consulted upon matters theatrical, described as "very old fashioned." Malnik cause further comment by proposing to open on Christmas Eve, when the unfailing tradition had been Boxing Night.

The final week of rehearsal was marred by an exceedingly

distressing incident. It happened on the Tuesday. Coming in that morning from a cold visit to the Technical Institute Library, Colvin found in the stuffy little Saloon Bar a number of the Tabard Players. The Players usually patronised an establishment nearer to the Hippodrome; and the fact that the present occasion was out of the ordinary was emphasised by the demeanour of the group, who were clustered together and talking in low serious voices. Colvin knew none of the Players at all well, but the group looked so distraught that, partly from curiosity and partly from compassion, he ventured to inquire of one of them, a middle-aged actor named Shillitoe to whom Malnik had introduced him, what was the matter. After a short silence, the group seemed collectively to decide upon accepting Colvin among them, and all began to enlighten him in short strained bursts of over-eloquence. Some of the references were not wholly clear to Colvin, but the substance of the story was simple.

Colvin gathered that when the Tabard Players took possession of the Hippodrome, Malnik had been warned that the "grid" above the stage was undependable, and that scenery should not be "flown" from it. This restriction had caused grumbling, but had been complied with until during a rehearsal of *A Scrap of Paper*, the producer had rebelled and asked Malnik for authority to use the grid. Malnik had agreed; and two stage hands began gingerly to pull on some of the dusty lines which disappeared into the almost complete darkness far above. Before long one of them had cried out that there was "something up there already." At these words, Colvin was told, everyone in the theatre fell silent. The stage hand went on paying out line, but the stage was so ample and the grid so high that an appreciable time passed before the object came slowly into view.

The narrators stopped, and there was a silence which Colvin felt must have been like the silence in the theatre. Then Shillitoe resumed: "It was poor old Ludlow's body. He'd hanged himself right up under the grid. Eighty feet above the floor of the stage. Some time ago too. He wasn't

in the Christmas plays, you know, or in this week's play. We all thought he'd gone home."

Colvin learnt that the producer had fainted right away; and, upon tactful inquiry, that Miss Rokeby had fortunately not been called for that particular rehearsal.

On the first two Sundays after her arrival, Miss Rokeby had been no more in evidence than on any other day; but on the morning of the third Sunday Colvin was taking one of his resolute lonely walks across the windy fells which surrounded the town, when he saw her walking ahead of him through the snow. The snow lay only an inch or two deep upon the hillside ledge along which the path ran; and Colvin had been wondering for some time about the small footsteps which preceded him. It was the first time he had seen Miss Rokeby outside the Emancipation Hotel, but he had no doubt that it was she he saw, and his heart turned over at the sight. He hesitated; then walked faster, and soon had overtaken her. As he drew near, she stopped, turned, and faced him. Then, when she saw who it was, she seemed unsurprised. She wore a fur coat with a collar which reached almost to the tip of her nose; a fur hat; and elegant boots which laced to the knee.

"I'm glad to have a companion," she said gravely, sending Colvin's thoughts to her other odd companion. "I suppose you know all these paths well?"

"I come up here often to look for lead workings. I'm writing a dull book on lead and plumbago mining."

"I don't see any mines up here." She looked round with an air of grave bewilderment.

"Lead mines aren't like coal mines. They're simply passages in hillsides."

"What do you do when you find them?"

"I mark them on a large-scale map. Sometimes I go down them."

"Don't the miners object?"

"There are no miners."

A shadow crossed her face.

"I mean not any longer. We don't mine lead any more."

"Don't we? Why not?"

"That's a complicated story."

She nodded. "Will you take me down a mine?"

"I don't think you'd like it. The passages are usually both narrow and low. One of the reasons why the industry's come to an end is that people would no longer work in them. Besides, now the mines are disused, they're often dangerous."

She laughed. It was the first time he had ever heard her do so. "Come on." She took hold of his arm. "Or aren't there any mines on this particular hillside?" She looked as concerned as a child.

"There's one about a hundred feet above our heads. But there's nothing to see. Only darkness."

"Only *darkness*," cried Miss Rokeby. She implied that no reasonable person could want more. "But you don't go down all these passages only to see darkness?"

"I take a flashlight."

"Have you got it now?"

"Yes." Colvin never went to the fells without it.

"Then that will look after *you*. Where's the mine? Conduct me."

They began to scramble together up the steep snow-covered slope. Colvin knew all the workings round here; and soon they were in the entry.

"You see," said Colvin. "There's not even room to stand, and a fat person couldn't get in at all. You'll ruin your coat."

"I'm not a fat person." There was a small excited patch in each of her cheeks. "But you'd better go first."

Colvin knew that this particular working consisted simply in a long passage, following the vein of lead. He had been to the end of it more than once. He turned on his flashlight. "I assure you there's nothing to see," he said. And in he went.

Colvin perceived that Miss Rokeby seemed indeed to pass along the adit without even stooping or damaging her fur hat. She insisted on their going as far as possible, although

near the end Colvin made a quite strenuous effort to persuade her to let them return.

"What's that?" inquired Miss Rokeby when they had none the less reached the extremity of the passage.

"It's a big fault in the limestone. A sort of cave. The miners chucked their debris down it."

"Is it deep?"

"Some of these faults are supposed to be bottomless."

She took the light from his hand, and, squatting down on the brink of the hole, flashed it round the depths below.

"Careful," cried Colvin. "You're on loose shale. It could easily slip." He tried to drag her back. The only result was that she dropped the flashlight, which went tumbling down the great hole like a meteor, until after many seconds they heard a faint crash. They were in complete darkness.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Rokeby's voice. "But you did push me."

Trying not to fall down the hole, Calvin began to grope his way back. Suddenly he had thought of Malnik, and the irresponsibility of the proceedings upon which he was engaged appalled him. He begged Miss Rokeby to go slowly, test every step, and mind her head; but her unconcern seemed complete. Colvin tripped and toiled along for an endless period of time, with Miss Rokeby always close behind him, calm, sure of foot, and unflagging. As far into the earth as this, it was both warm and stuffy. Colvin began to fear that bad air might overcome them, forced as they were to creep so laboriously and interminably. He broke out in heavy perspiration.

Suddenly he knew that he would have to stop. He could not even pretend that it was out of consideration for Miss Rokeby. He subsided upon the floor of the passage and she seated herself near him, oblivious of her costly clothes. The blackness was still complete.

"Don't feel unworthy," said Miss Rokeby softly. "And don't feel frightened. There's no need. We shall get out."

Curiously enough, the more she said, the worse Colvin

felt. The strange antecedents to this misadventure were with him; and, even more so, Miss Rokeby's whole fantastic background. He had to force his spine against the stone wall of the passage if he were not to give way to panic utterly and leap up screaming. Normal speech was impossible.

"Is it me you are frightened of?" asked Miss Rokeby, with dreadful percipience.

Calvin was less than ever able to speak.

"Would you like to know more about me?"

Colvin was shaking his head in the dark.

"If you'll promise not to tell anyone else."

But, in fact, she was like a child, unable to contain her secret.

"I'm sure you won't tell anyone else. . . . It's my helper. He's the queer one. Not me."

Now that the truth was spoken Colvin felt a little better.

"Yes," he said in a low, shaken voice, "I know."

"Oh, you know. . . . I don't see him or," she paused, "or encounter him, often for years at a time. Years."

"But you encountered him the other night?"

He could feel her shoulder. "Yes . . . You've seen him?"

"Very briefly . . . How did you . . . encounter him first?"

"It was years ago. Have you any idea how many years?"

"I think so."

Then she said something which Colvin never really understood; not even later, in his dreams of her. "You know I'm not here at all really. Myrrha's me. That's why she's called Myrrha. That's how I act."

"How?" said Colvin. There was little else to say.

"My helper took my own personality out of me. Like taking a nerve out of a tooth. Myrrha's my personality."

"Do you mean your soul?" asked Colvin.

"Artists don't have souls," said Miss Rokeby. "Personality's the word. . . . I'm anybody's personality. Or everybody's. And when I lost my personality, I stopped growing older. Of course I have to look after Myrrha, because if anything happened to Myrrha—well, you do see," she concluded.

"But Myrrha looks as young as you do."

"That's what she *looks*."

Colvin remembered Myrrha's wasted face.

"But how can you live without a personality? Besides," added Colvin, "you seem to me to have a very strong personality."

"I have a mask for every occasion."

It was only the utter blackness, Colvin felt, which made this impossible conversation possible.

"What do you do in exchange? I suppose you must repay your helper in some way?"

"I suppose I must. . . . I've never found out what way it is."

"What else does your helper do for you?"

"He smooths my path. Rids me of people who want to hurt me. He rid me of little Jack Nethers. Jack was mad, you know. You can see it even in his photograph."

"Did he rid you of this wretched man Ludlow?"

"I don't know. You see I can't remember Ludlow. I think he often rids me of people that I don't know want to hurt me."

Colvin considered.

"Can you be rid of him?"

"I've never really tried."

"Don't you *want* to be rid of him?"

"I don't know. He frightens me terribly whenever I come near him, but otherwise . . . I don't know . . . But for him I should never have been down a lead mine."

"How many people know all this?" asked Colvin after a pause.

"Not many. I only told you because I wanted you to stop being frightened."

As she spoke the passage was filled with a strange sound. Then they were illumined with icy December sunshine. Colvin perceived that they were almost at the entry to the working, and supposed that the portal must have been temporarily blocked by a miniature avalanche of melting snow. Even now there was, in fact, only a comparatively small hole, through which they would have to scramble.

"I told you we'd get out," said Miss Rokeby. "Other people haven't believed a word I said. But now *you'll* believe me."

Not the least strange thing was the matter of fact manner in which all the way back Miss Rokeby questioned Colvin about his researches into lead and plumbago mining, with occasionally, on the perimeter of their talk, flattering inquiries about himself; although equally strange, Colvin considered, was the matter of fact manner in which he answered her. Before they were back in the town he was wondering how much of what she had said in the darkness of the mine had been meant only figuratively; and after that he wondered whether Miss Rokeby had not used the circumstances to initiate an imaginative and ingenious boutade. After all, he reflected, she was an actress. Colvin's hypothesis was, if anything, confirmed when at their parting she held his hand for a moment and said: "Remember! *No one.*"

But he resolved to question Mrs. Royd in a business-like way about Mr. Superbus. An opportunity arose when he encountered her after luncheon (at which Miss Rokeby had not made an appearance) reading *The People* before the fire in the Saloon Bar. The Bar had just closed, and it was, Mrs. Royd explained, the only warm spot in the house. In fact it was, as usual, hot as a kiln.

"Couldn't say I'm sure," replied Mrs. Royd to Colvin's firm inquiry, and implying that it was neither her business nor his. "Anyway 'e's gone. Went last Tuesday. Didn't you notice, with 'im sleeping next to you?"

After the death of poor Ludlow (the almost inevitable verdict was suicide while of unsound mind), it was as if the papers felt embarrassed about continuing to carp at Malnik's plans; and by the opening night the editors seemed ready to extend the Christmas spirit even to Shakespeare. Colvin had planned to spend Christmas with his Mother; but when he learned that Malnik's first night was to be on Christmas Eve, had been unable to resist deferring his departure until after it, despite the perils of a long and intricate

railway journey on Christmas Day. With Miss Rokeby, however, he now felt entirely unsure of himself.

On Christmas Eve the town seemed full of merriment. Colvin was surprised at the frankness of the general rejoicing. The shops, as is usual in industrial districts, had long been offsetting the general drabness with drifts of Christmas Cards and whirlpools of tinsel. Now every home seemed to be decorated and all the shops to be proclaiming bonus distributions and bumper share-outs. Even the queues which were a prominent feature of these celebrations looked more sanguine, Colvin noticed, when he stood in one of them for about half an hour in order to send Miss Rokeby some flowers, as he felt the occasion demanded. By the time he set out for the Hippodrome, the more domestically-minded citizens were everywhere quietly toiling at preparations for the morrow's revels; but a wilder minority, rebellious or homeless, were inaugurating such a carouse at the Emancipation Hotel as really to startle the comparatively retiring Colvin. He suspected that some of the bibbers must be Irish.

Sleet was slowly descending as Colvin stepped out of the sweltering Bar in order to walk to the Hippodrome. A spot of it sailed gently into the back of his neck, chilling him in a moment. But, notwithstanding the weather, notwithstanding the claims of the season and the former attitude of the press, there was a crowd outside the Hippodrome such as Colvin had never previously seen there. To his great surprise some of the audience were in evening dress; many of them had expensive cars, and one party, it appeared, had come in a closed carriage with two flashing black horses. There was such a concourse at the doors that Colvin had to stand a long time in the slowly falling sleet before he was able to join the throng which forced its way, like icing on to a cake, between the countless glittering photographs of beautiful Miss Rokeby. The average age of the audience, Colvin observed, seemed very advanced, and especially of that section of it which was in evening dress. Elderly white haired men with large noses and carnations in their buttonholes spoke in eloquent Edwardian voices to the witch-like ladies on their arms, most of whom wore hothouse gardenias.

Inside, however, the huge and golden Hippodrome looked as it was intended to look when it was still named the Grand Opera House. From his gangway seat in the stalls Colvin looked backwards and upwards at the gilded satyrs and bacchantes who wantoned on the dress circle balustrade; and at the venerable and orchidaceous figures who peered above them. The small orchestra was frenziedly playing selections from *L'Etoile du Nord*. In the gallery distant figures, unable to find seats, were standing watchfully. Even the many boxes, little used and dusty, were filling up. Colvin could only speculate how this gratifying assembly had been collected. But then he was on his feet for the National Anthem, and the faded crimson and gold curtain, made deceptively splendid by the footlights, was about to rise.

The play began, and then: "Dear Celia, I show more mirth than I am mistress of, and would you yet I were merrier? Unless you could teach me to forget a banished father, you must not learn me how to remember any extraordinary pleasure."

Colvin realised that in his heart he had expected Miss Rokeby to be good, to be moving, to be lovely; but the revelation he now had was something he could never have expected because he could never have imagined it; and before the conclusion of Rosalind's first scene in boy's attire in the Forest, he was wholly and terribly bewitched.

No one coughed, no one rustled, no one moved. To Colvin it seemed as if Miss Rokeby's magic had strangely enchanted the normally journeyman Tabard Players into miracles of judgment. Plainly her spell was on the audience also; so that when the lights came up for the interval, Colvin found that his eyes were streaming, and felt not chagrin, but pride.

The interval was an uproar. Even the bells of fire engines pounding through the wintry night outside could hardly be heard above the din. People spoke freely to unknown neighbours, groping to express forgotten emotions. "What a prelude to Christmas!" everyone said. Malnik was proved right in one thing.

During the second half, Colvin, failing of interest in Sir Oliver Martext's scene, let his eyes wander round the auditorium. He noticed that the nearest Dress Circle box, previously unoccupied, appeared to be unoccupied no longer. A hand, which, being only just above him, he could see was gnarled and hirsute, was tightly gripping the box's red velvet curtain. Later, in the scene between Silvius and Phebe (Miss Rokeby having come and gone meanwhile), the hand was still there, and still gripping tightly; as it was (after Rosalind's big scene with Orlando) during the Forester's song. At the beginning of Act V, there was a rush of feet down the gangway, and someone was crouching by Colvin's seat. It was Greta. "Mr. Colvin! There's been a fire. Miss Rokeby's friend jumped out of the window. She's terribly hurt. Will you tell Miss Rokeby?"

"The play's nearly over," said Colvin. "Wait for me at the back." Greta withdrew whimpering.

After Rosalind's Epilogue the tumult was millennial. Miss Rokeby, in Rosalind's white dress, stood for many seconds not bowing but quite still and unsmiling, with her hands by her sides as Colvin had first seen her. Then as the curtain rose and revealed the rest of the company, she began slowly to walk backwards upstage. Doorkeepers and even stage-hands, spruced up for the purpose, began to bring armfuls upon armfuls of flowers, until there was a heap, a mountain of them in the centre of the stage, so high that it concealed Miss Rokeby's small figure from the audience. Suddenly a bouquet flew through the air from the dress circle box. It landed at the very front of the heap. It was a hideous dusty laurel wreath, adorned with an immense and somewhat tasteless purple bow. The audience were yelling for Miss Rokeby like Dionysians; and the company, flagging from unaccustomed emotional expenditure, and plainly much scared, were looking for her; but in the end the Stage Manager had to lower the Safety Curtain and give orders that the house be cleared.

Back at the Emancipation Hotel, Colvin, although he had little title, asked to see the body.

"You wouldn't never recognise her," said Mrs. Royd. Colvin did not pursue the matter.

The snow, falling ever more thickly, had now hearsed the town in silence.

"She didn't 'ave to do it," wailed on Mrs. Royd. "The brigade had the flames under control. And to-morrow Christmas Day!"

THE END

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