

THE 6th FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT

Ghost Stories

Strange, haunting stories by J. B. Priestley,
H. G. Wells, Vernon Lee and others,
selected by Robert Aickman.



**The Sixth Fontana Book
of Great Ghost Stories**

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The Sixth Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by Robert Aickman



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CONTENTS

CLARIMONDE	<i>Théophile Gautier</i>	7
THE GREY ONES	<i>J. B. Priestley</i>	39
THE DOOR IN THE WALL	<i>H. G. Wells</i>	56
PRISCILLA AND EMILY LOFFT	<i>George Moore</i>	73
SORWORTH PLACE	<i>Russell Kirk</i>	88
WHERE THEIR FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED	<i>May Sinclair</i>	107
OKE OF OKEHURST	<i>Vernon Lee</i>	128
THE LIPS	<i>Henry S. Whitehead</i>	178

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CLARIMONDE (*La Morte Amoureuse*)

THEOPHILE GAUTIER

Translated by Lafcadio Hearn

Brother, you ask me if I have ever loved. Yes. My story is a strange and terrible one; and though I am sixty-six years of age, I scarcely dare even now to disturb the ashes of that memory. To you I can refuse nothing; but I should not relate such a tale to any less experienced mind. So strange were the circumstances of my story, that I can scarcely believe myself to have ever actually been a party to them. For more than three years I remained the victim of a most singular and diabolic illusion. Poor country priest though I was, I led every night in a dream—would to God it had been all a dream!—a most worldly life, a damning life, a life of Sardanapalus. One single look too freely cast upon a woman well-nigh caused me to lose my soul; but finally by the grace of God and the assistance of my patron saint, I succeeded in casting out the evil spirit that possessed me. My daily life was long interwoven with a nocturnal life of a totally different character. By day I was a priest of the Lord, occupied with prayer and sacred things; by night, from the instant that I closed my eyes I became a young nobleman, a connoisseur of women, dogs, and horses; gambling, drinking, and blaspheming, and when I awoke at early daybreak, it seemed to me, on the other hand, that I had been sleeping, and had only dreamed that I was a priest. Of this somnambulistic life there now remains to me only the recollection of certain scenes and words which I cannot banish from my memory; but although I never actually left the walls of my presbytery, one would think to hear me speak that I were a man who, weary of all worldly pleasures, had become a religious, seeking to end a tempestuous life in the service of God, rather than a humble seminarist who has grown old in this obscure curacy, situated in the depths of the woods and even isolated from the life of the century.

Yes, I have loved as none in the world ever loved—with an

insensate and furious passion—so violent that I am astonished it did not cause my heart to burst asunder. Ah, what nights—what nights!

From my earliest childhood I had felt a vocation to the priesthood, so that all my studies were directed with that idea in view. Up to the age of twenty-four my life had been only a prolonged novitiate. Having completed my course of theology I successively received all the minor orders, and my superiors judged me worthy, in spite of my youth, to pass the last awful degree. My ordination was fixed for Easter week.

I had never gone into the world. My world was confined by the walls of the college and the seminary. I knew in a vague sort of way that there was something called Woman, but I never permitted my thoughts to dwell on such a subject, and I lived in a state of perfect innocence. Twice a year only I saw my infirm and aged mother, and in those visits were comprised my sole relations with the outer world.

I regretted nothing; I felt not the least hesitation at taking the last irrevocable step; I was filled with joy and impatience. Never did a betrothed lover count the slow hours with more feverish ardour; I slept only to dream that I was saying mass; I believed there could be nothing in the world more delightful than to be a priest; I would have refused to be a king or a poet in preference. My ambition could conceive of no loftier aim.

I tell you this in order to show you that what happened to me could not have happened in the natural order of things, and to enable you to understand that I was the victim of an inexplicable fascination.

At last the great day came. I walked to the church with a step so light that I fancied myself sustained in air, or that I had wings upon my shoulders. I believed myself an angel, and wondered at the sombre and thoughtful faces of my companions, for there were several of us. I had passed all the night in prayer, and was in a condition well-nigh bordering on ecstasy. The bishop, a venerable old man, seemed to be God the Father leaning over his Eternity, and I beheld Heaven through the vault of the temple.

You well know the details of that ceremony—the benediction, the communion under both forms, the anointing of the

palms of the hands with the Oil of Catechumens, and then the holy sacrifice concelebrated with the bishop.

Ah, truly spake Job when he declared that the imprudent man is one who hath not made a covenant with his eyes! I accidentally lifted my head, which until then I had kept down, and beheld before me, so close that it seemed that I could have touched her—although she was actually a considerable distance from me and on the farther side of the sanctuary railing—a young woman of extraordinary beauty, and attired with royal magnificence. It seemed as though scales had suddenly fallen from my eyes. I felt like a blind man who unexpectedly recovers his sight. The bishop, so radiantly glorious but an instant before, suddenly vanished away, the tapers paled upon their golden candlesticks like stars in the dawn, and a vast darkness seemed to fill the whole church. The young woman appeared in bright relief against the background of that darkness, like some angelic revelation. She seemed herself radiant, and radiating light rather than receiving it.

I lowered my eyelids, firmly resolved not to open them again, that I might not be influenced by external objects, for distraction had gradually taken possession of me until I hardly knew what I was doing.

In another minute, nevertheless, I reopened my eyes, for through my eyelashes I still beheld her, all sparkling with prismatic colours, and surrounded with such a purple penumbra as one beholds in gazing at the sun.

Oh, how beautiful she was! The greatest painters, who followed ideal beauty into heaven itself, and thence brought back to earth the true portrait of the Madonna, never in their delineations even approached that wildly beautiful reality which I saw before me. Neither the verses of the poet nor the palette of the artist could convey any conception of her. She was rather tall, with a form and bearing of a goddess. Her hair, of a soft blonde hue, was parted in the midst and flowed back over her temples in two rivers of rippling gold; she seemed a diademed queen. Her forehead, bluish-white in its transparency, extended its calm breadth above the arches of her eyebrows, which by a strange singularity were almost black, and admirably relieved the effect of sea-green eyes of

unsustainable vivacity and brilliancy. What eyes! With a single flash they could have decided a man's destiny. They had a life, a limpidity, an ardour, a light that I have never seen in human eyes; they shot forth rays like arrows, which I could distinctly *see* enter my heart. I know not if the fire which illumined them came from heaven or from hell, but assuredly it came from one or the other. That woman was either an angel or a demon, perhaps both. Assuredly she never sprang from Eve, our common mother. Teeth of the most lustrous pearl gleamed in her smile, and at every inflection of her lips little dimples appeared in the satiny rose of her adorable cheeks. There was a delicacy and pride in the regal outline of her nostrils bespeaking noble blood. Agate gleams played over the smooth lustrous skin of her half-bare shoulders, and strings of great blonde pearls—almost equal to her neck in beauty of colour—descended upon her bosom. From time to time she elevated her head with the undulating grace of a startled serpent or peacock, thereby imparting a quivering motion to the high lace ruff which surrounded it like a silver trellis-work.

She wore a robe of orange-red velvet, and from her wide ermine-lined sleeves there peeped forth patrician hands of infinite delicacy, and so ideally transparent that, like the fingers of Aurora, they permitted the light to shine through them.

All these details I can recollect at this moment as plainly as though they were of yesterday, for notwithstanding I was greatly troubled at the time, nothing escaped me; the faintest touch of shading, the little dark speck at the point of the chin, the almost imperceptible down at the corners of the lips, the velvety floss upon the brow, the quivering shadow of the eyelashes upon the cheeks, I could notice everything with astonishing lucidity of perception.

And gazing I felt opening within me gates that had until then remained closed; outlets long obstructed became all clear, permitting glimpses of unfamiliar perspectives within; life suddenly made itself visible to me under a totally novel aspect. I felt as though I had just been born into a new world and a new order of things. A frightful anguish began to torture my heart as with red-hot pincers. Every successive minute seemed to me at once but a second and yet a century.

Meanwhile the ceremony was proceeding, and I shortly found myself transported far from that world of which my newly-born desires were furiously besieging the entrance. Nevertheless I answered 'Yes' when I wished to say 'No,' though all within me protested against the violence done to my soul by my tongue. Some occult power seemed to force the words from my throat against my will. Thus it is, perhaps, that so many young girls walk to the altar firmly resolved to refuse in a startling manner the husband imposed upon them, and that yet not one ever fulfils her intention. Thus it is, doubtless, that so many poor novices take the veil, though they have resolved to tear it into shreds at the moment when called upon to utter the vows. One dares not thus cause so great a scandal to all present, nor deceive the expectation of so many people. All those eyes, all those wills seem to weigh down upon you like a cope of lead; and, moreover, measures have been so well taken, everything has been so thoroughly arranged beforehand and after a fashion so evidently irrevocable, that the will yields to the weight of circumstances and utterly breaks down.

As the ceremony proceeded, the features of the fair unknown changed their expression. Her look had at first been one of caressing tenderness; it changed to an air of disdain and of mortification, as though at not having been able to make itself understood.

With an effort of will sufficient to have uprooted a mountain, I strove to cry out that I would not be a priest, but I could not speak; my tongue seemed nailed to my palate, and I found it impossible to express my will by the least syllable of negation. Though fully awake, I felt like one under the influence of a nightmare, who vainly strives to shriek out the one word upon which life depends.

She seemed conscious of the martyrdom I was undergoing, and, as though to encourage me, she gave me a look replete with divinest promise. Her eyes were a poem; their every glance was a song.

She said to me:

'If thou wilt be mine, I shall make thee happier than God Himself in His paradise. The angels themselves will be jealous of thee. Tear off that funeral shroud in which thou art about to wrap thyself. I am Beauty, I am Youth, I am Life. Come to

me! Together we shall be Love. Can Jehovah offer thee aught in exchange? Our lives will flow on like a dream, in one eternal kiss.

'Fling forth the wine of that chalice, and thou art free. I will conduct thee to the Unknown Isles. Thou shalt sleep in my bosom upon a bed of massy gold under a silver pavilion, for I love thee and would take thee away from thy God, before whom so many noble hearts pour forth floods of love which never reach even the steps of His throne!'

These words seemed to float to my ears in a rhythm of infinite sweetness, for her look was actually sonorous, and the utterances of her eyes were re-echoed in the depths of my heart as though living lips had breathed them into my life. I felt myself willing to renounce God, and yet my tongue mechanically fulfilled all the formalities of the ceremony. The fair one gave me another look, so beseeching, so despairing that keen blades seemed to pierce my heart, and I felt my bosom transfixed by more swords than those of Our Lady of Sorrows.

All was consummated; I had become a priest.

Never was deeper anguish painted on human face than upon hers. The maiden who beholds her affianced lover suddenly fall dead at her side, the mother bending over the empty cradle of her child, Eve seated at the threshold of the gate of Paradise, the miser who finds a stone substituted for his stolen treasure, the poet who accidentally permits the only manuscript of his finest work to fall into the fire, could not wear a look so despairing, so inconsolable. All the blood had abandoned her face, leaving it whiter than marble; her beautiful arms hung lifelessly on either side of her body as though their muscles had suddenly relaxed, and she sought the support of a pillar, for her yielding limbs almost betrayed her. As for myself, I staggered towards the door of the church, livid as death, my forehead bathed with a sweat bloodier than that of Calvary; I felt as though I were being strangled; the vault seemed to have flattened down upon my shoulders, and it seemed to me that my head alone sustained the whole weight of the dome.

As I was about to cross the threshold a hand suddenly caught mine—a woman's hand! I had never till then touched the hand of any woman. It was cold as a serpent's skin, and

yet its impress remained upon my wrist, burnt there as though branded by a glowing iron. It was she. 'Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done?' she exclaimed in a low voice, and immediately disappeared in the crowd.

The aged bishop passed by. He cast a severe and scrutinizing look upon me. My face presented the wildest aspect imaginable; I blushed and turned pale alternately; dazzling lights flashed before my eyes. A companion took pity on me. He seized my arm and led me out. I could not possibly have found my way back to the seminary unassisted. At the corner of a street, while the young priest's attention was momentarily turned in another direction, a Negro page, fantastically garbed, approached me, and without pausing on his way slipped into my hand a little pocket-book with gold-embroidered corners, at the same time giving me a sign to hide it. I concealed it in my sleeve, and there kept it until I found myself alone in my cell. Then I opened the clasp. There were only two leaves within, bearing the words, 'Clarimonde. At the Concini Palace'. So little acquainted was I at that time with the things of this world that I had never heard of Clarimonde, celebrated as she was, and I had no idea as to where the Concini Palace was situated. I hazarded a thousand conjectures, each more extravagant than the last; but, in truth, I cared little whether she were a great lady or a courtesan, so that I could but see her once more.

My love, although the growth of a single hour, had taken imperishable root. I did not even dream of attempting to tear it up, so fully was I convinced such a thing would be impossible. One look from her had sufficed to change my very nature. She had breathed her will into my life, and I no longer lived in myself, but in her and for her. I kissed the place upon my hand which she had touched, and I repeated her name over and over again for hours in succession. I only needed to close my eyes in order to see her distinctly as though she were actually present; and I reiterated to myself the words she had uttered in my ear at the church porch: 'Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done?' I comprehended at last the full horror of my situation, and the funereal and awful restraints of the state into which I had just entered became clearly revealed to me. To be a priest!—that is, to be chaste, never to love, to observe no distinction

of sex or age, to turn from the sight of all beauty, to put out one's own eyes, to hide for ever crouching in the chill shadows of some church or cloister, to visit none but the dying, to watch by unknown corpses, and ever bear about with one the black soutane as a garb of mourning for oneself, so that your very dress might serve as a pall for your coffin.

And I felt life rising within me like a subterranean lake, expanding and overflowing; my blood leaped fiercely through my arteries; my long-restrained youth suddenly burst into active being, like the aloe which blooms but once in a hundred years, and then bursts into blossom with a clap of thunder.

What could I do in order to see Clarimonde once more? I had no pretext to offer for desiring to leave the seminary, not knowing any person in the city. I would not even be able to remain there for more than a short time, and was only waiting my assignment to the curacy which I must thereafter occupy. I tried to remove the bars of the window; but it was at a fearful height from the ground, and I found that as I had no ladder it would be useless to think of escaping thus. And, furthermore, I could descend thence only by night in any event, and afterward how should I be able to find my way through the inextricable labyrinth of streets? All these difficulties, which to many would have appeared altogether insignificant, were gigantic to me, a poor seminarist who had fallen in love only the day before for the first time, without experience, without money, without attire.

'Ah!' cried I to myself in my blindness, 'were I not a priest I could have seen her every day; I might have been her lover, her spouse. Instead of being wrapped in this dismal shroud of mine I would have had garments of silk and velvet, golden chains, a sword, and fair plumes like other handsome young cavaliers. My hair, instead of being dishonoured by the tonsure, would flow down upon my neck in waving curls; I would have a fine waxed moustache; I would be a gallant.' But one hour passed before an altar, a few hastily articulated words, had for ever cut me off from the number of the living, and I had myself sealed down the stone of my own tomb; I had with my own hand bolted the gate of my prison!

I went to the window. The sky was beautifully blue; the

trees had donned their spring robes; nature seemed to be making parade of an ironical joy. The *Place* was filled with people, some going, others coming; young beaux and young belles were sauntering in couples towards the groves and gardens; merry youths passed by, cheerily trolling refrains of drinking songs—it was all a picture of vivacity, life, animation, gaiety, which formed a bitter contrast with my mourning and my solitude. On the steps of the gate sat a young mother playing with her child. She kissed its little rosy mouth, and performed, in order to amuse it, a thousand divine little puerilities such as only mothers know how to invent. The father standing at a little distance smiled gently upon the charming group, and with folded arms seemed to hug his joy to his heart. I could not endure that spectacle. I closed the window with violence, and flung myself on my bed, my heart filled with frightful hate and jealousy, and gnawed my fingers and my bedcovers like a tiger that has passed days without food.

I know not how long I remained in this condition, but at last, while writhing on the bed in a fit of spasmodic fury, I suddenly perceived the Abbé Serapion, who was standing erect in the centre of the room, watching me attentively. Filled with shame of myself, I let my head fall upon my breast and covered my face with my hands.

‘Romauld, my friend, something very extraordinary is going on within you,’ observed Serapion, after a few moments’ silence; ‘your conduct is altogether inexplicable. You—always so quiet, so pious, so gentle—you to rage in your cell like a wild beast! Take heed, brother—do not listen to the suggestions of the devil. The Evil Spirit, furious that you have consecrated yourself for ever to the Lord, is prowling around you like a ravening wolf and making a last effort to obtain possession of you. Instead of allowing yourself to be conquered, my dear Romauld, make to yourself a cuirass of prayers, a buckler of mortifications, and combat the enemy like a valiant man; you will then assuredly overcome him. Virtue must be proved by temptation, and gold comes forth purer from the hands of the assayer. Fear not. Never allow yourself to become discouraged. The most watchful and steadfast souls are at moments liable to such temptation. Pray, fast, meditate, and the Evil Spirit will depart from you.’

The words of the Abbé Serapion restored me to myself, and

I became a little more calm. 'I came,' he continued, 'to tell you that you have been appointed to the curacy of C——. The priest who had charge of it has just died, and Monseigneur the Bishop has ordered me to have you installed there at once. Be ready, therefore, to start tomorrow.' I responded with an inclination of the head, and the Abbé retired. I opened my breviary and began reading some prayers, but the letters became confused and blurred under my eyes, the thread of the ideas entangled itself hopelessly in my brain, and the volume at last fell from my hands without my being aware of it.

To leave tomorrow without having been able to see her again, to add yet another barrier to the many already interposed between us, to lose for ever all hope of being able to meet her, except, indeed, through a miracle! Even to write to her, alas! would be impossible, for by whom could I despatch my letter? With my sacred character of priest, to whom could I dare unbosom myself, in whom could I confide? I became a prey to the bitterest anxiety.

Then suddenly recurred to me the words of the Abbé Serapion regarding the artifices of the devil; and the strange character of the adventure, the supernatural beauty of Clarimonde, the phosphoric light of her eyes, the burning imprint of her hand, the agony into which she had thrown me, the sudden change wrought within me when all my piety vanished in a single instant—these and other things clearly testified to the work of the Evil One, and perhaps that satiny hand was but the glove which concealed his claws. Filled with terror at these fancies, I again picked up the breviary which had slipped from my knees and fallen upon the floor, and once more gave myself up to prayer.

Next morning Serapion came to take me away. Two mules freighted with our miserable valises awaited us at the gate. He mounted one, and I the other as well as I knew how.

As we passed along the streets of the city, I gazed attentively at all the windows and balconies in the hope of seeing Clarimonde, but it was yet early in the morning, and the city had hardly opened its eyes. Mine sought to penetrate the blinds and window-curtains of all the palaces before which we were passing. Serapion doubtless attributed this curiosity to my admiration of the architecture, for he slackened the pace

of his animal in order to give me time to look around me. At last we passed the city gates and began to mount the hill beyond. When we arrived at its summit I turned to take a last look at the place where Clarimonde dwelt. The shadow of a great cloud hung over all the city; the contrasting colours of its blue and red roofs were lost in the uniform half-tint, though which here and there floated upward, like white flakes of foam, the smoke of freshly kindled fires. By a singular optical effect one edifice, which surpassed in height all the neighbouring buildings that were still dimly veiled by the vapours, towered up, fair and lustrous with the gilding of a solitary beam of sunlight—although actually more than a league away it seemed quite near. The smallest details of its architecture were plainly distinguishable—the turrets, the platforms, the window-casements, and even the swallow-tailed weather vanes.

‘What is that palace I see over there, all lighted up by the sun?’ I asked Serapion. He shaded his eyes with his hand, and having looked in the direction indicated, replied: ‘It is the ancient palace which the Prince Concini has given to the courtesan Clarimonde. Awful things are done there!’

At that instant, I know not yet whether it was a reality or an illusion. I fancied I saw gliding along the terrace a shapely white figure, which gleamed for a moment in passing and as quickly vanished. It was Clarimonde.

Oh, did she know that at that very hour, all feverish and restless—from the height of the rugged road which separated me from her and which, alas! I could never more descend—I was directing my eyes upon the palace where she dwelt, and which a mocking beam of sunlight seemed to bring nigh to me, as though inviting me to enter therein as its lord? Undoubtedly she must have known it, for her soul was too sympathetically united with mine not to have felt its least emotional thrill, and that subtle sympathy it must have been which prompted her to climb—although clad only in her nightdress—to the summit of the terrace, amid the icy dews of the morning.

The shadow gained the palace, and the scene became to the eye only a motionless ocean of roofs and gables, amid which one mountainous undulation was distinctly visible. Serapion urged his mule forward, my own at once followed at the same

gait, and a sharp angle in the road at last hid the city of S—— for ever from my eyes, as I was destined never to return thither. At the close of a weary three-day's journey through dismal country fields, we caught sight of the cock upon the steeple of the church of which I was to take charge, peeping above the trees, and after having followed some winding roads fringed with thatched cottages and little gardens, we found ourselves in front of the façade, which certainly possessed few features of magnificence. A porch ornamented with some mouldings, and two or three pillars rudely hewn from sandstone; a tiled roof with counterforts of the same sandstone as the pillars, that was all. To the left lay the cemetery, overgrown with high weeds, and having a great iron cross rising up in its centre; to the right stood the presbytery under the shadow of the church. It was a house of the most extreme simplicity and frigid cleanliness. We entered the enclosure. A few chickens were picking up some oats scattered upon the ground; accustomed, seemingly, to the black habit of ecclesiastics, they showed no fear of our presence and scarcely troubled themselves to get out of the way. A hoarse, wheezy barking fell upon our ears, and we saw an aged dog running towards us.

It was my predecessor's dog. He had dull bleared eyes, grizzled hair, and every mark of the greatest age to which a dog can possibly attain. I patted him gently, and he proceeded at once to march along beside me with an air of satisfaction unspeakable. A very old woman, who had been the house-keeper of the former curé, also came to meet us, and after having invited me into a little back parlour, asked whether I intended to retain her. I replied that I would take care of her, and the dog, and the chickens, and all the furniture her master had bequeathed her at his death. At this she became fairly transported with joy, and the Abbé Serapion at once paid her the price which she asked for her little property.

As soon as my installation was over, the Abbé Serapion returned to the seminary. I was, therefore, left alone, with no one but myself to look to for aid or counsel. The thought of Clarimonde again began to haunt me, and in spite of all my endeavours to banish it, I always found it present in my meditations. One evening, while promenading in my little garden along the walks bordered with box plants, I fancied

that I saw through the elm-trees the figure of a woman, who followed my every movement, and that I beheld two sea-green eyes gleaming through the foliage; but it was only an illusion, and on going round to the other side of the garden, I could find nothing except a footprint in the sanded walk—a footprint so small that it seemed to have been made by the foot of a child. The garden was enclosed by very high walls. I searched every nook and corner of it, but could discover no one there. I have never succeeded in fully accounting for this circumstance, which, after all, was nothing compared with the strange things which happened to me afterwards.

For a whole year I lived thus, filling all the duties of my calling, with the most scrupulous exactitude, praying and fasting, exhorting and lending aid to the sick, and bestowing alms even to the extent of frequently depriving myself of the very necessities of life. But I felt a great aridness within me, and the sources of grace seemed closed against me. I never found that happiness which should spring from the fulfilment of a holy mission; my thoughts were far away and the words of *Clarimonde* were ever upon my lips like an involuntary refrain. Oh, brother, meditate well on this! Through having but once lifted my eyes to look upon a woman, through one fault apparently so venial, I have for years remained a victim to the most miserable agonies, and the happiness of my life has been destroyed for ever.

I will not longer dwell upon those defeats, or on those inward victories invariably followed by yet more terrible falls, but will at once proceed to the facts of my story. One night my door-bell was long and violently rung. The aged housekeeper arose and opened to the stranger, and the figure of a man, whose complexion was deeply bronzed, and who was richly clad in a foreign costume, with a poniard at his girdle, appeared under the rays of Barbara's lantern. Her first impulse was one of terror, but the stranger reassured her, and stated that he desired to see me at once on matters relating to my holy calling. Barbara invited him upstairs, where I was on the point of retiring. The stranger told me that his mistress, a very noble lady, was lying on the point of death, and desired to see a priest. I replied that I was prepared to follow him, took with me the sacred articles necessary for extreme unction, and descended in all haste.

Two horses black as night itself stood without the gate, pawing the ground with impatience, and veiling their chests with long streams of smoky vapour exhaled from their nostrils. He held the stirrup and aided me to mount upon one; then, merely laying his hand upon the pommel of the saddle, he vaulted on the other, pressed the animal's sides with his knees, and loosened rein. The horse bounded forward with the velocity of an arrow. Mine, of which the stranger held the bridle, also started off at a swift gallop, keeping up with his companion. We devoured the road. The ground flowed backward beneath us in a long streaked line of pale grey, and the black silhouettes of the trees seemed fleeing by us on either side like an army in rout. We passed through a forest so profoundly gloomy that I felt my flesh creep in the still darkness with superstitious fear. The showers of bright sparks which flew from the stony road under the ironshod feet of our horses, remained glowing in our wake like a fiery trail; and had anyone at that hour of the night beheld us both—my guide and myself—he must have taken us for two spectres riding upon nightmares. Witchfires ever and anon flitted across the road before us, and the night-birds shrieked fearsomely in the depth of the woods beyond, where we beheld at intervals the phosphorescent eyes of wild cats. The manes of the horses became more and more dishevelled, the sweat streamed over their flanks, and their breath came through their nostrils hard and fast. But when he found them slacking pace, the guide reanimated them by uttering a strange, guttural, unearthly cry, and the gallop began again with fury. At last the whirlwind race ceased; a huge black mass pierced through with many bright points of light suddenly rose before us, the hoofs of our horses echoed louder upon a strong wooden drawbridge, and we rode under a great vaulted archway which darkly yawned between two enormous towers. Some great excitement evidently reigned in the castle. Servants with torches were crossing the courtyard in every direction, and, above, lights were ascending and descending from landing to landing. I obtained a confused glimpse of vast masses of architecture—columns, arcades, flights of steps, stairways—a royal voluptuousness and elfin magnificence of construction worthy of fairyland. A Negro page—the same who had before brought me the tablet from Clarimonde, and whom I instantly recognised—approached to aid me in

dismounting, and the major-domo, attired in black velvet with a gold chain about his neck, advanced to meet me, supporting himself upon an ivory cane. Tears were falling from his eyes and streaming over his cheeks and white beard. 'Too late!' he cried, sorrowfully shaking his venerable head. 'Too late, sir priest! But if you have not been able to save the soul, come at least to watch by the poor body.'

He took my arm and conducted me to the deathchamber. I wept no less bitterly than he, for I had learned that the dead one was none other than that Clarimonde whom I had so deeply and so wildly loved. A *prie-dieu* stood at the foot of the bed; a bluish flame flickering in a bronze patera filled all the room with a wan, deceptive light, here and there bringing out in the darkness at intervals some projection of furniture or cornice. In a chiselled urn upon the table there was a faded white rose, whose leaves—excepting one that still held—had all fallen, like odorous tears, to the foot of the vase. A broken black mask, a fan, and disguises of every variety, which were lying on the arm-chairs, bore witness that death had entered suddenly and unannounced into that sumptuous dwelling. Without daring to cast my eyes upon the bed, I knelt down and began to repeat the Psalms for the Dead, with exceeding fervour, thanking God that he had placed the tomb between me and the memory of this woman, so that I might thereafter be able to utter her name in my prayers as a name for ever sanctified by death. But my fervour gradually weakened, and I fell insensibly into a reverie. That chamber bore no resemblance to a chamber of death. In lieu of the odours which I had been accustomed to breathe during such funereal vigils, a languorous vapour of Oriental perfume—I know not what amorous odour of woman—softly floated through the tepid air. That pale light seemed rather a twilight gloom contrived for voluptuous pleasure, than a substitute for the yellow-flickering watch-tapers which shine by the side of corpses. I thought upon the strange destiny which enabled me to meet Clarimonde again at the very moment when she was lost to me for ever, and a sigh of regretful anguish escaped from my breast. Then it seemed to me that someone behind me had also sighed and I turned round to look. It was only an echo. But in that moment my eyes fell upon the bed of death which they had till then

avoided. The red damask curtains, decorated with large flowers worked in embroidery, and looped up with gold bullion, permitted me to behold the fair dead, lying at full length, with hands joined upon her bosom. She was covered with a linen wrapping of dazzling whiteness, which formed a strong contrast with the gloomy purple of the hangings, and was of so fine a texture that it concealed nothing of her body's charming form, and allowed the eye to follow those beautiful outlines—undulating like the neck of a swan—which even death had not robbed of their supple grace. She seemed an alabaster statue executed by some skilful sculptor to place upon the tomb of a queen, or rather, perhaps, like a slumbering maiden over whom the silent snow had woven a spotless veil.

I could no longer maintain my constrained attitude of prayer. The air of the alcove intoxicated me, that febrile perfume of half-faded roses penetrated my very brain, and I began to pace restlessly up and down the chamber, pausing at each turn before the bier to contemplate the graceful corpse lying beneath the transparency of its shroud. Wild fancies came thronging to my brain. I thought to myself that she might not, perhaps, be really dead; that she might only have feigned death for the purpose of bringing me to her castle, and then declaring her love. At one time I even thought I saw her foot move under the whiteness of the coverings, and slightly disarrange the long, straight folds of the winding sheet.

And then I asked myself: 'Is this indeed Clarimonde? What proof have I that it is she? Might not that black page have passed into the service of some other lady? Surely, I must be going mad to torture and afflict myself thus!' By my heart answered with a fierce throbbing: 'It is she; it is she indeed!' I approached the bed again, and fixed my eyes with redoubled attention upon the object of my incertitude. Ah, must I confess it? That exquisite perfection of bodily form, although purified and made sacred by the shadow of death, affected me more voluptuously than it should have done, and that repose so closely resembled slumber that one might well have mistaken it for such. I forgot that I had come there to perform a funeral ceremony; I fancied myself a young bridegroom entering the chamber of the bride, who all modestly hides her fair face and through coyness seeks to

keep herself wholly veiled. Heartbroken with grief, yet wild with hope, shuddering at once with fear and pleasure, I bent over her, and grasped the corner of the sheet. I lifted it back, holding my breath all the while through fear of waking her. My arteries throbbed with such violence that I felt them hiss through my temples, and the sweat poured from my forehead in streams, as though I had lifted a mighty slab of marble. There, indeed, lay Clarimonde, even as I had seen her at the church on the day of my ordination. She was not less charming than then. With her, death seemed but a last coquetry. The pallor of her cheeks, the less brilliant carnation of her lips, her long eyelashes lowered and relieving their dark fringe against that white skin, lent her an unspeakably seductive aspect of melancholy, chastity and mental suffering; her long loose hair, still intertwined with some little blue flowers, made a shining pillow for her head, and veiled the nudity of her shoulders with its thick ringlets; her beautiful hands, purer, more diaphanous than the Host, were crossed on her bosom in an attitude of pious rest and silent prayer, which served to counteract all that might have proved otherwise too alluring—even after death—in the exquisite roundness and ivory polish of her bare arms from which the pearl bracelets had not yet been removed. I remained long in mute contemplation, and the more I gazed, the less could I persuade myself that life had really abandoned that beautiful body for ever. I do not know whether it was an illusion or a reflection of the lamplight, but it seemed to me that the blood was again beginning to circulate under that lifeless pallor, although she remained all motionless. I laid my hand lightly on her arm; it was cold, but not colder than her hand on the day when it touched mine at the portals of the church. I resumed my position, bending my face above her, and bathing her cheeks with the warm dew of my tears. Ah, what bitter feelings of despair and helplessness, what agonies unutterable did I endure in that long watch! Vainly did I wish that I could have gathered all my life into one mass that I might give it all to her, and breathe into her chill form the flame which devoured me. The night advanced, and feeling the moment of eternal separation approach, I could not deny myself the last sad sweet pleasure of imprinting a kiss upon the dead lips of her who had been my only love . . . Oh, miracle! A faint

breath mingled itself with my breath, and the mouth of Clarimonde responded to the passionate pressure of mine. Her eyes unclosed, and lighted up with something of their former brilliancy; she uttered a long sigh, and uncrossed her arms, passed them around my neck with a look of ineffable delight. 'Ah, it is thou, Romauld!' she murmured in a voice languishingly sweet as the last vibrations of a harp. 'What ailed thee, dearest? I waited so long for thee that I am dead; but we are now betrothed; I can see thee and visit thee. Adieu, Romauld, adieu! I love thee. That is all I wished to tell thee, and I give thee back the life which thy kiss for a moment recalled. We shall soon meet again.'

Her head fell back, but her arms yet encircled me, as though to retain me still. A furious whirlwind suddenly burst in the window, and entered the chamber. The last remaining leaf of the white rose for a moment palpitated at the extremity of the stalk like a butterfly's wing, then it detached itself and flew forth through the open casement, bearing with it the soul of Clarimonde. The lamp was extinguished, and I fell insensible upon the bosom of the beautiful dead.

When I came to myself again I was lying on the bed in my little room at the presbytery, and the old dog of the former curé was licking my hand which had been hanging down outside the covers. Barbara, all trembling with age and anxiety, was busying herself about the room, opening and shutting drawers, and empty powders into glasses. On seeing me open my eyes, the old woman uttered a cry of joy, the dog yelped and wagged his tail, but I was still so weak that I could not speak a single word or make the slightest motion. Afterward I learned that I had lain thus for three days, giving no evidence of life beyond the faintest respiration. Those three days do not reckon in my life, nor could I ever imagine whither my spirit had departed during those three days; I have no recollection of aught relating to them. Barbara told me that the same coppery-complexioned man who came to seek me on the night of my departure from the presbytery, had brought me back the next morning in a closed litter, and departed immediately afterward. When I became able to collect my scattered thoughts, I reviewed within my mind all the circumstances of that fateful night. At first I thought I had been the victim of some magical illusion, but ere long the

recollection of other circumstances, real and palpable in themselves, came to forbid that supposition. I could not believe that I had been dreaming, since Barbara as well as myself had seen the strange man with his two black horses, and described with exactness every detail of his figure and apparel. Nevertheless it appeared that none knew of any castle in the neighbourhood answering to the description of that in which I had again found Clarimonde.

One morning I found the Abbé Serapion in my room. Barbara had advised him that I was ill, and he had come with all speed to see me. Although this haste on his part testified to an affectionate interest in me, yet his visit did not cause me the pleasure which it should have done. The Abbé Serapion had something penetrating and inquisitorial in his gaze which made me feel very ill at ease. His presence filled me with embarrassment and a sense of guilt. At the first glance he divined my interior trouble, and I hated him for his clairvoyance.

While he inquired after my health in hypocritically honeyed accents, he constantly kept his two great yellow lion-eyes fixed upon me, and plunged his look into my soul like a sounding lead. Then he asked me how I directed my parish, if I was happy in it, how I passed the leisure hours allowed me in the intervals of pastoral duty, whether I had become acquainted with many of the inhabitants of the place, what was my favourite reading, and a thousand other such questions. I answered these inquiries as briefly as possible, and he, without ever waiting for my answers, passed rapidly from one subject of query to another. That conversation had evidently no connection with what he actually wished to say. At last, without any premonition, but as though repeating a piece of news which he had recalled on the instant, and feared might otherwise be forgotten subsequently, he suddenly said, in a clear vibrant voice, which rang in my ears like the trumpets of the Last Judgment:

"The great courtesan Clarimonde died a few days ago, at the close of an orgy which lasted eight days and eight nights. It was something infernally splendid. The abominations of the banquets of Belshazzar and Cleopatra were re-enacted there. Good God, what age are we living in? The guests were served by swarthy slaves who spoke an unknown tongue, and

who seemed to me to be veritable demons. The livery of the very least among them would have served for the gala-dress of an emperor. There have always been very strange stories told of this Clarimonde, and all her lovers came to a violent or miserable end. They used to say that she was a ghoul, a female vampire; but I believe she was none other than Beelzebub himself.'

He ceased to speak and began to regard me more attentively than ever, as though to observe the effect of his words on me. I could not refrain from starting when I heard him utter the name of Clarimonde, and this news of her death, in addition to the pain it caused me by reason of its coincidence with the nocturnal scenes I had witnessed, filled me with an agony and terror which my face betrayed, despite my utmost endeavours to appear composed. Serapion fixed an anxious and severe look upon me, and then observed: 'My son, I must warn you that you are standing with foot raised upon the brink of an abyss; take heed lest you fall therein. Satan's claws are long, and tombs are not always true to their trust. The tombstone of Clarimonde should be sealed down with a triple seal, for, if report be true, it is not the first time she has died. May God watch over you, Romauld!'

And with these words the Abbé walked slowly to the door. I did not see him again at that time, for he left for S—— almost immediately.

I became completely restored to health and resumed my accustomed duties. The memory of Clarimonde and the words of the old Abbé were constantly in my mind; nevertheless no extraordinary event had occurred to verify the funereal predictions of Serapion, and I had begun to believe that his fears and my own terrors were over-exaggerated, when one night I had a strange dream. I had hardly fallen asleep when I heard my bed-curtains drawn apart, as their rings slid back upon the curtain rod with a sharp sound. I rose up quickly upon my elbow, and beheld the shadow of a woman standing erect before me. I recognized Clarimonde immediately. She bore in her hand a little lamp, shaped like those which are placed in tombs, and its light lent her fingers a rosy transparency, which extended itself by lessening degrees even to the opaque and milky whiteness of her bare arm. Her only garment was the linen winding-sheet which had

shrouded her when lying upon the bed of death. She sought to gather its fold over her bosom as though ashamed of being so scantily clad, but her little hand was not equal to the task. She was so white that the colour of the drapery blended with that of her flesh under the pallid rays of the lamp. Enveloped with this subtle tissue which betrayed all the contour of her body, she seemed more like a marble statue than a woman endowed with life. But dead or living, statue or woman, shadow or body, her beauty was still the same, only that the green light of her eyes was less brilliant, and her mouth, once so warmly crimson, was only tinted with a faint tender rosiness, like that of her cheeks. The little blue flowers which I had noticed entwined in her hair were withered and dry, and had lost nearly all their leaves, but this did not prevent her from being charming—so charming that notwithstanding the strange character of the adventure, and the unexplainable manner in which she had entered my room, I felt not even for a moment the least fear.

She placed the lamp on the table and seated herself at the foot of my bed; then bending towards me, she said, in that voice at once silvery clear and yet velvety in its sweet softness, such as I never heard from any lips save hers:

‘I have kept thee long in waiting, dear Romauld, and it must have seemed to thee that I had forgotten thee. But I come from afar off, very far off, and from a land whence no other has ever yet returned. There is neither sun nor moon in that land whence I come: all is but space and shadow; there is neither road nor pathway; no earth for the foot, no air for the wing; and nevertheless behold me here, for Love is stronger than Death and must conquer him in the end. Oh, what sad faces and fearful things I have seen on my way hither! What difficulty my soul, returned to earth through the power of will alone, has had in finding its body and reinstating itself therein! What terrible efforts I had to make ere I could lift the ponderous slab with which they had covered me! See, the palms of my poor hands are all bruised! Kiss them, sweet love, that they may be healed!’ She laid the cold palms of her hands upon my mouth, one after the other. I kissed them, indeed, many times, and she the while watched me with a smile of ineffable affection.

I confess to my shame that I had entirely forgotten the

advice of the Abbé Serapion and the sacred office wherewith I had been invested. I had fallen without resistance, and at the first assault. I had not even made the least effort to repel the tempter. The fresh coolness of Clarimonde's skin penetrated my own, and I felt voluptuous tremors pass over my whole body. Poor child! in spite of all I saw afterward, I can hardly yet believe she was a demon; at least she had no appearance of being such, and never did Satan so skilfully conceal his claws and horns. She had drawn her feet up beneath her, and squatted down on the edge of the couch in an attitude full of negligent coquetry. From time to time she passed her little hand through my hair and twisted it into curls, as though trying how a new style of wearing it would become my face. I abandoned myself to her hands with the most guilty pleasure, while she accompanied her gentle play with the prettiest prattle. The most remarkable fact was that I felt no astonishment whatever at so extraordinary an adventure, and as in dreams one finds no difficulty in accepting the most fantastic events as simple facts, so all these circumstances seemed to me perfectly natural in themselves.

'I loved thee long ere I saw thee, dear Romauld, and sought thee everywhere. Thou wast my dream, and I first saw thee in the church at the fatal moment. I said at once, "It is he!" I gave thee a look into which I threw all the love I ever had, all the love I now have, all the love I shall ever have for thee—a look that would have damned a cardinal or brought a king to his knees at my feet in view of all his court. Thou remainedst unmoved, preferring thy God to me!

'Ah, how jealous I am of that God whom thou didst love and still lovest more than me!

'Woe is me, unhappy one that I am! I can never have thy heart all to myself, I whom thou didst recall to life with a kiss—dead Clarimonde, who for thy sake bursts asunder the gates of the tomb, and comes to consecrate to thee a life which she resumed only to make thee happy!'

All her words were accompanied with the most impassioned caresses, which bewildered my sense and my reason to such an extent, that I did not fear to utter a frightful blasphemy for the sake of consoling her, and to declare that I loved her as much as God.

Her eyes rekindled and shone like chrysoprases: 'In truth?

—in very truth?—as much as God!’ she cried, flinging her beautiful arms around me. ‘Since it is so, thou wilt come with me; thou wilt follow me whithersoever I desire. Thou wilt cast away thy ugly black habit. Thou shalt be the proudest and most envied of cavaliers; thou shalt be my lover! To be the acknowledged lover of Clarimonde, who has refused even a Pope, that will be something of which to feel proud! Ah, the fair, unspeakably happy existence, the beautiful golden life we shall live together! And when shall we depart?’

‘Tomorrow! Tomorrow!’ I cried in my delirium.

‘Tomorrow, then, so let it be!’ she answered. ‘In the meanwhile I shall have opportunity to change my toilet, for this is a little too light and in no wise suited for a journey. I must also forthwith notify all my friends who believe me dead, and mourn for me as deeply as they are capable of doing. The money, the dresses, the carriages—all will be ready. I shall call for thee at this same hour. Adieu, dear heart!’ And she lightly touched my forehead with her lips. The lamp went out, the curtains closed again, and became dark; a leaden, dreamless sleep fell on me and held me unconscious until the morning following.

I awoke later than usual, and the recollection of this singular adventure troubled me during the whole day. I finally persuaded myself that it was a mere vapour of my heated imagination. Nevertheless its sensations had been so vivid that it was difficult to persuade myself that they were not real, and it was not without some presentiment of what was going to happen that I got into bed at last, after having prayed God to drive far from me all thoughts of evil, and to protect the chastity of my slumber.

I soon fell into a deep sleep, and my dream was continued. The curtains again parted, and I beheld Clarimonde, not as on the former occasion, pale in her pale winding-sheet, with the violets of death upon her cheeks, but gay, sprightly, jaunty, in a superb travelling dress of green velvet, trimmed with gold lace, and looped up on either side to allow a glimpse of satin petticoat. Her blonde hair escaped in thick ringlets from beneath a broad black felt hat, decorated with white feathers whimsically twisted into various shapes. In one hand she held a little riding crop terminated by a golden whistle. She tapped me lightly with it, and exclaimed: ‘Well, my fine sleeper, is

this the way you make your preparations? I thought I should find you up and dressed. Arise quickly, we have no time to lose.'

I leaped out of bed at once.

'Come, dress yourself, and let us go,' she continued, pointing to a little package she had brought with her. 'The horses are becoming impatient of delay and champing their bits at the door. We ought to have been by this time at least ten leagues distant from here.'

I dressed myself hurriedly, and she handed me the articles of apparel herself one by one, bursting into laughter from time to time at my awkwardness, as she explained to me the use of a garment when I had made a mistake. She hurriedly arranged my hair, and this done, held up before me a little pocket mirror of Venetian crystal, rimmed with silver filigree-work, and playfully asked: 'How dost find thyself now? Wilt engage me for thy valet de chambre?'

I was no longer the same person, and I could not even recognize myself. I resembled my former self no more than a finished statue resembles a block of stone. My old face seemed but a coarse daub of the one reflected in the mirror. I was handsome, and my vanity was sensibly tickled by the metamorphosis. That elegant apparel, that richly embroidered vest had made of me a totally different personage, and I marvelled at the power of transformation owned by a few yards of cloth cut after a certain pattern. The spirit of my costume penetrated my very skin, and within ten minutes more I had become something of a coxcomb.

In order to feel more at ease in my new attire, I took several turns up and down the room. Clarimonde watched me with an air of maternal pleasure, and appeared well satisfied with her work. 'Come, enough of this child's-play! Let us start, Romauld dear. We have far to go, and we may not get there in time.' She took my hand and led me forth. All the doors opened before her at a touch, and we passed by the dog without awaking him.

At the gate we found Margheritone waiting, the same swarthy groom who had once before been my escort. He held the bridles of three horses, all black like those which bore us to the castle—one for me, one for him, one for Clarimonde. Those horses must have been Spanish genets born of mares

fecundated by a zephyr, for they were fleet as the wind itself, and the moon, which had just risen at our departure to light us on the way, rolled over the sky like a wheel detached from her own chariot. We beheld her on the right leaping from tree to tree, and putting herself out of breath in the effort to keep up with us. Soon we came upon a level plain where, hard by a clump of trees, a carriage with four vigorous horses awaited us. We entered it, and the postilions urged their animals into a mad gallop. I had one arm around Clarimonde's waist, and one of her hands clasped in mine; her head leaned upon my shoulder, and I felt her bosom, half bare, lightly pressing against my arm. I had never known such intense happiness. In that hour I had forgotten everything, and I no more remembered having ever been a priest than I remembered what I had been doing in my mother's womb, so great was the fascination which the evil spirit exerted upon me. From that night my nature seemed in some sort to have become halved, and there were two men within me, neither of whom knew the other. At one moment I believed myself a priest who dreamed nightly that he was a gentleman, at another that I was a gentleman who dreamed he was a priest. I could no longer distinguish the dream from the reality, nor could I discover where the reality began or where ended the dream. The exquisite young lord and libertine railed at the priest, the priest loathed the dissolute habits of the young lord. Two spirals entangled and confounded the one with the other, yet never touching, would afford a fair representation of this bicephalic life which I lived. Despite the strange character of my condition, I do not believe that I ever inclined, even for a moment, to madness. I always retained with extreme vividness all the perceptions of my two lives. Only there was one absurd fact which I could not explain to myself—namely, that the consciousness of the same individuality existed in two men so opposite in character. It was an anomaly for which I could not account—whether I believed myself to be the curé of the little village of C——, or *Il Signor Romauldo*, the titled lover of Clarimonde.

Be that as it may, I lived, at least I believed that I lived, in Venice. I have never been able to discover rightly how much of illusion and how much of reality there was in this fantastic adventure. We dwelt in a great palace on the Canaleio, filled

with frescoes and statues, and containing two Titians in the noblest style of the great master, which were hung in Clarimonde's chamber. It was a palace worthy of a king. We had each our gondola, our *barcarolli* in family livery, our music hall, and our special poet. Clarimonde always lived upon a magnificent scale; there was something of Cleopatra in her nature. As for me, I had the retinue of a prince's son, and I was regarded with as much reverential respect as though I had been of the family of one of the twelve Apostles or the four Evangelists of the Most Serene Republic. I would not have turned aside to allow even the Doge to pass, and I do not believe that since Satan fell from heaven, any creature was ever prouder or more insolent than I. I went to the Ridotto, and played with a luck which seemed absolutely infernal. I received the best of all society—the sons of ruined families, women of the theatre, shrewd knaves, parasites, hectoring swash-bucklers. But notwithstanding the dissipation of such a life, I always remained faithful to Clarimonde. I loved her wildly. She would have excited satiety itself, and chained inconstancy. To have Clarimonde was to have twenty mistresses; aye, to possess all women: so mobile, so varied of aspect, so fresh in new charms was she all in herself—a very chameleon of a woman, in sooth. She made you commit with her the infidelity you would have committed with another, by donning to perfection the character, the attraction, the style of beauty of the woman who appeared to please you. She returned my love a hundred-fold, and it was in vain that the young patricians and even the Ancients of the Council of Ten made her the most magnificent proposals. A Foscari even went so far as to offer to espouse her. She rejected all his overtures. Of gold she had enough. She wished no longer for anything but love—a love youthful, pure, evoked by herself, which should be a first and last passion. I would have been perfectly happy but for a cursed nightmare which recurred every night, and in which I believed myself to be a poor village curé, practising mortification and penance for my excesses during the day. Reassured by my constant association with her, I never thought further of the strange manner in which I had become acquainted with Clarimonde. But the words of the Abbé Serapion concerning her recurred often to my memory, and never ceased to cause me uneasiness.

For some time the health of Clarimonde had not been so good as usual; her complexion grew paler day by day. The physicians who were summoned could not comprehend the nature of her malady and knew not how to treat it. They all prescribed some insignificant remedies, and never called a second time. Her paleness, nevertheless, visibly increased, and she became colder and colder, until she seemed almost as white and dead as upon that memorable night in the unknown castle. I grieved with anguish unspeakable to behold her thus slowly perishing; and she, touched by my agony, smiled upon me sweetly and sadly with the fateful smile of those who feel that they must die.

One morning I was seated at her bedside, and breakfasting from a little table placed close at hand, so that I might not be obliged to leave her for a single instant. In the act of cutting some fruit I accidentally inflicted rather a deep gash on my finger. The blood immediately gushed forth in a little purple jet, and a few drops spurted upon Clarimonde. Her eyes flashed, her face suddenly assumed an expression of savage and ferocious joy such as I had never before observed in her. She leaped out of her bed with animal agility—the agility, as it were, of an ape or a cat—and sprang upon my wound, which she began to suck with an air of unutterable pleasure. She swallowed the blood in little mouthfuls, slowly and carefully, like a connoisseur tasting a wine from Xeres or Syracuse. Gradually, her eyelids half closed, and the pupils of her green eyes became oblong instead of round. From time to time she paused in order to kiss my hand, then she would again press her lips to the wound in order to coax forth a few more drops. When she found that the blood would no longer come, she arose with eyes liquid and brilliant, rosier than a May dawn; her face full and fresh, her hand warm and moist—in fine, more beautiful than ever, and in the most perfect health.

‘I shall not die! I shall not die!’ she cried, clinging to my neck, half mad with joy. ‘I can love thee yet for a long time. My life is thine, and all that is of me comes from thee. A few drops of thy rich and noble blood, more precious and more potent than all the elixirs of the earth, have given me back life.’

This scene long haunted my memory, and inspired me with

strange doubts in regard to Clarimonde; and the same evening, when slumber had transported me to my presbytery, I beheld the Abbé Serapion, graver and more anxious of aspect than ever. He gazed attentively at me, and sorrowfully exclaimed: 'Not content with losing your soul, you now desire also to lose your body. Wretched young man, into how terrible a plight have you fallen!' The tone in which he uttered these words powerfully affected me, but in spite of its vividness even that impression was soon dissipated, and a thousand other cares erased it from my mind. At last one evening, while looking into a mirror whose traitorous position she had not taken into account, I saw Clarimonde in the act of emptying a powder into the cup of spiced wine which she had long been in the habit of preparing after our repasts. I took the cup, feigned to carry it to my lips, and then placed it on the nearest article of furniture as though intending to finish it at my leisure. Taking advantage of a moment when the fair one's back was turned, I threw the contents under the table, after which I retired to my chamber and went to bed, fully resolved not to sleep, but to watch and discover what should come of all this mystery. I did not have to wait long. Clarimonde entered in her nightdress and having removed her apparel, crept into bed and lay down beside me. When she felt assured that I was asleep, she bared my arm, and drawing a gold pin from her hair, began to murmur in a low voice:

'One drop, only one drop! One ruby at the end of my needle . . . Since thou lovest me yet, I must not die! . . . Ah, poor love! His beautiful blood, so brightly purple, I must drink it. Sleep, my only treasure! Sleep, my god, my child! I will do thee no harm; I will only take of thy life what I must to keep my own from being for ever extinguished. But that I love thee so much, I could well resolve to have other lovers whose veins I could drain; but since I have known thee all other men have become hateful to me . . . Ah, the beautiful arm! How round it is! How white it is! How shall I ever dare to prick this pretty blue vein!' And while thus murmuring to herself she wept, and I felt her tears raining on my arms as she clasped it with her hands. At last she took the resolve, slightly punctured me with her pin, and began to suck up the blood which oozed from the place. Although she swallowed only a few

drops, the fear of weakening me soon seized her, and she carefully tied a little band around my arm, afterward rubbing the wound with an unguent which immediately cicatrized it.

Further doubts were impossible. The Abbé Serapion was right. Notwithstanding this positive knowledge, however, I could not cease to love Clarimonde, and I would gladly of my own accord have given her all the blood she required to sustain her factitious life. Moreover, I felt but little fear of her. The woman seemed to plead with me for the vampire, and what I had already heard and seen sufficed to reassure me completely. In those days I had plenteous veins, which would not have been so easily exhausted as at present; and I would not have thought of bargaining for my blood, drop by drop. I would rather have opened myself the veins of my arm and said to her: 'Drink, and may my love infiltrate itself throughout thy body together with my blood!' I carefully avoided ever making the least reference to the narcotic drink she had prepared for me, or to the incident of the pin, and we lived in the most perfect harmony.

Yet my priestly scruples began to torment me more than ever, and I was at a loss to imagine what new penance I could invent in order to mortify and subdue my flesh. Although these visions were involuntary, and though I did not actually participate in anything relating to them, I could not dare to touch the body of Christ with hands so impure and a mind defiled by such debauches whether real or imaginary. In the effort to avoid falling under the influence of these wearisome hallucinations, I strove to prevent my eyelids being overcome by sleep. I held my eyelids open with my fingers, and stood for hours together leaning upright against the wall, fighting sleep with all my might; but the dust of drowsiness invariably gathered upon my eyes at last, and finding all resistance useless, I would have to let my arms fall in the extremity of despairing weariness, and the current of slumber would again bear me away to the perfidious shores. Serapion addressed me with the most vehement exhortations, severely reproaching me for my softness and want of fervour. Finally, one day when I was more wretched than usual, he said to me: 'There is but one way by which you can obtain relief from this continual torment, and though it is an extreme measure it must be made use of; violent diseases require violent

remedies. I know where Clarimonde is buried. It is necessary that we shall disinter her remains, and that you shall behold in how pitiable a state the object of your love is. Then you will no longer be tempted to lose your soul for the sake of a corpse ready to crumble into dust. That will assuredly restore you to yourself.' For my part, I was so tired of this double life that I at once consented, desiring to ascertain beyond a doubt whether a priest or a gentleman had been the victim of delusion. I had become fully resolved either to kill one of the two men within me for the benefit of the other, or else to kill both, for so terrible an existence could not last long and be endured. The Abbé Serapion provided himself with a mattock, a lever, and a lantern, and at midnight we made our way to the cemetery of —, the location and place of which were perfectly familiar to him. After having directed the rays of the dark lantern upon the inscriptions of several tombs, we came at last upon a great slab, half concealed by huge weeds and devoured by mosses and parasitic plants, whereupon we deciphered the opening lines of the epitaph:

Here lies Clarimonde
Who was famed in her life-time
As the fairest of women.

'It is here without a doubt,' muttered Serapion, and placing his lantern on the ground, he forced the point of the lever under the edge of the stone and began to raise it. The stone yielded, and he proceeded to work with the mattock. Darker and more silent than the night itself, I stood by and watched him do it, while he, bending over his dismal toil, streamed with sweat, panted, and his hard-coming breath seemed to have the harsh tone of a death rattle. It was a weird scene, and had any persons from without beheld us, they would assuredly have taken us rather for profane wretches and shroud-stealers than for priests of God. There was something grim and fierce in Serapion's zeal which lent him the air of a demon rather than of an apostle or an angel, and his great aquiline face, with all its stern features brought out in strong relief by the lantern-light, had something fearsome in it

which enhanced the unpleasant fancy. An icy sweat came out upon my forehead in huge beads. Within the depths of my own heart I felt that the act of the austere Serapion was an abominable sacrilege; and I could have prayed that a triangle of fire would issue from the entrails of the dark clouds, heavily rolling above us, to reduce him to cinders. The owls which had been nestling in the cypress-trees, startled by the gleam of the lantern, flew against it from time to time, striking their dusty wings against its panes, and uttering plaintive cries of lamentation; wild foxes yelped in the far darkness, and a thousand sinister noises detached themselves from the silence. At last Serapion's mattock struck the coffin itself, making its planks re-echo with a deep sonorous sound, with that terrible sound nothingness utters when stricken. He wrenched apart and tore up the lid, and I beheld Clarimonde, pallid as a figure of marble, with hands joined; her white winding-sheet made but one fold from her head to her feet. A little crimson drop sparkled like a speck of dew at one corner of her colourless mouth. Serapion, at this spectacle, burst into fury: 'Ah, thou art here, demon; Impure courtesan! Drinker of blood and gold!' And he flung holy water upon the corpse and the coffin, over which he traced the sign of the cross with his sprinkler. Poor Clarimonde had no sooner been touched by the blessed spray than her beautiful body crumbled into dust, and became only a shapeless and frightful mass of cinders and half-calcined bones.

'Behold your mistress, my Lord Romauld!' cried the inexorable priest, as he pointed to these sad remains. 'Will you be easily tempted after this to promenade on the Lido or at Fusina with your beauty?' I covered my face with my hands; a vast ruin had taken place within me. I returned to my presbytery, and the noble Lord Romauld, the lover of Clarimonde, separated himself from the poor priest with whom he had kept such strange company so long. But once only, the following night, I saw Clarimonde. She said to me, as she had said the first time at the portals of the church: 'Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done? Wherefore have hearkened to that imbecile priest? Wert thou not happy? And what harm had I ever done thee that thou shouldst violate my poor tomb, and lay bare the miseries of my noth-

ingness? All communication between our souls and bodies is henceforth for ever broken. Adieu! Thou wilt yet regret me!' She vanished, and I never saw her any more.

Alas! she spoke truly indeed. I have regretted her more than once, and I regret her still. My soul's peace has been very dearly bought. The love of God was not too much to replace such a love as hers. And this, brother, is the story of my youth. Never gaze upon a woman, and walk abroad only with eyes ever fixed upon the ground; for however chaste and watchful one may be, the error of a single moment is enough to make one lose eternity.

THE GREY ONES

J. B. PRIESTLEY

'And your occupation, Mr Patson?' Dr Smith asked, holding his beautiful fountain pen a few inches from the paper.

'I'm an exporter,' said Mr Patson, smiling almost happily. Really this wasn't too bad at all. First, he had drawn Dr Smith instead of his partner Dr Meyenstein. Not that he had anything against Dr Meyenstein, for he had never set eyes on him, but he had been free to see him and Dr Meyenstein hadn't. If he had to explain himself to a psychiatrist, then he would much rather have one simply and comfortingly called Smith. And Dr Smith, a broad-faced man about fifty with giant rimless spectacles, had nothing forbidding about him, and looked as if he might have been an accountant, a lawyer or a dentist. His room too was reassuring, with nothing frightening in it; rather like a sitting-room in a superior hotel. And that fountain pen really was a beauty. Mr Patson had already made a mental note to ask Dr Smith where he had bought that pen. And surely a man who could make such a mental note, right off, couldn't have much wrong with him?

'It's a family business,' Mr Patson continued, smiling away. 'My grandfather started it. Originally for the Far East. Firms abroad, especially in rather remote places, send us orders for all manner of goods, which we buy here on commission for them. It's not the business it was fifty years ago, of course, but on the other hand we've been helped to some extent by all these trade restrictions and systems of export licences, which people a long way off simply can't cope with. So we cope for them. Irritating work often, but not uninteresting. On the whole I enjoy it.'

'That is the impression you've given me,' said Dr Smith, making a note. 'And you are reasonably prosperous, I gather? We all have our financial worries these days of course. I know I have.' He produced a mechanical sort of laugh, like an actor in a comedy that had been running too long, and Mr Patson echoed him like another bored actor. Then Dr Smith

looked grave and pointed his pen at Mr Patson as if he might shoot him with it. 'So I think we can eliminate all that side, Mr Patson—humph?'

'Oh yes—certainly—certainly,' said Mr Patson hurriedly, not smiling now.

'Well now,' said Dr Smith, poising his pen above the paper again, 'tell me what's troubling you.'

Mr Patson hesitated. 'Before I tell you the whole story, can I ask you a question?'

Dr Smith frowned, as if his patient had made an improper suggestion. 'If you think it might help—'

'Yes, I think it would,' said Mr Patson, 'because I'd like to know roughly where you stand before I begin to explain.' He waited a moment. 'Dr Smith, do you believe there's a kind of Evil Principle in the universe, a sort of super-devil, that is working hard to ruin humanity, and has its agents, who must really be minor devils or demons, living among us as people? Do you believe that?'

'Certainly not,' replied Dr Smith without any hesitation at all. 'That's merely a superstitious fancy, for which there is no scientific evidence whatever. It's easy to understand—though we needn't go into all that now—why anybody, even today, suffering from emotional stress, might be possessed by such an absurd belief, but of course it's mere fantasy, entirely subjective in origin. And the notion that this Evil Principle could have its agents among us might be very dangerous indeed. It could produce very serious anti-social affects. You realize that, Mr Patson?'

'Oh—yes—I do. I mean, at certain times when—well, when I've been able to look at it as you're looking at it, doctor. But most times I can't. And that, I suppose,' Mr Patson added, with a wan smile, 'is why I'm here.'

'Quite so,' Dr Smith murmured, making some notes. 'And I think you have been well advised to ask for some psychiatric treatment. These things are apt to be sharply progressive, although their actual progress might be described as regressive. But I won't worry you with technicalities, Mr Patson. I'll merely say that you—or was it Mrs Patson?—or shall I say both of you?—are to be congratulated on taking this very sensible step in good time. And now you know, as you said, where I stand, perhaps you had better tell me all about it.'

Please don't omit anything for fear of appearing ridiculous. I can only help you if you are perfectly frank with me, Mr Patson. I may ask a few questions, but their purpose will be to make your account clearer to me. By the way, here we don't adopt the psycho-analytic methods—we don't sit behind our patients while they relax on a couch—but if you would find it easier not to address me as you have been doing—face to face—'

'No, that's all right,' said Mr Patson, who was relieved to discover he would not have to lie on the couch and murmur at the opposite wall. 'I think I can talk to you just like this. Anyway, I'll try.'

'Good! And remember, Mr Patson, try to tell me everything relevant. Smoke if it will help you to concentrate.'

'Thanks, I might later on.' Mr Patson waited a moment, surveying his memories as if they were some huge glittering sea, and then waded in. 'It began about a year ago. I have a cousin who's a publisher, and one night he took me to dine at his club—the Burlington. He thought I might like to dine there because it's a club used a great deal by writers and painters and musicians and theatre people. Well, after dinner we played bridge for an hour or two, then we went down into the lounge for a final drink before leaving. My cousin was claimed by another publisher, so I was left alone for about a quarter of an hour. It was then that I overheard Firbright—you know, the famous painter—who was obviously full of drink, although you couldn't exactly call him drunk, and was holding forth to a little group at the other side of the fireplace. Apparently he'd just come back from Syria or somewhere around there, and he'd picked this idea up from somebody there though he said it only confirmed what he'd been thinking himself for some time.'

Dr Smith gave Mr Patson a thin smile. 'You mean the idea of an Evil Principle working to ruin humanity?'

'Yes,' said Mr Patson. 'Firbright said that the old notion of a scarlet-and-black sulphuric Satan, busy tempting people, was of course all wrong, though it might have been right at one time, perhaps in the Middle Ages. Then the devils were all fire and energy. Firbright quoted the poet Blake—I've read him since—to show that these weren't real devils and their Hell wasn't the real Hell. Blake, in fact, according to

Firbright, was the first man here to suggest we didn't understand the Evil Principle, but in his time it had hardly made a start. It's during the last few years, Firbright said, that the horrible thing has really got to work on us.'

'Got to work on us?' Dr Smith raised his eyebrows. 'Doing what?'

'The main object, I gathered from what Firbright said,' Mr Patson replied earnestly, 'is to make mankind go the way the social insects went, to turn us into automatic creatures, mass beings without individuality, soulless machines of flesh and blood.'

The doctor seemed amused. 'And why should the Evil Principle want to do that?'

'To destroy the soul of humanity,' said Mr Patson, without an answering smile. 'To eliminate certain states of mind that belong essentially to the Good. To wipe from the face of this earth all wonder, joy, deep feeling, the desire to create, to praise life. Mind you, that is what Firbright said.'

'But you believed him?'

'I couldn't help feeling, even then, that there was something in it. I'd never thought on those lines before—I'm just a plain business man and not given to fancy speculation—but I had been feeling for some time that things were going wrong and that somehow they seemed to be out of our control. In theory I suppose we're responsible for the sort of lives we lead, but in actual practice we find ourselves living more and more the kind of life we don't like. It's as if,' Mr Patson continued rather wildly, avoiding the doctor's eyes, 'we were all compelled to send our washing to one huge sinister laundry, which returned everything with more and more colour bleached out of it until it was all a dismal grey.'

'I take it,' said Dr Smith, 'that you are now telling me what you thought and felt yourself, and not what you overheard this man Firbright say?'

'About the laundry—yes. And about things never going the right way. Yes, that's what I'd been feeling. As if the shape and colour and smell of things were going. Do you understand what I mean, doctor?'

'Oh—yes—it's part of a familiar pattern. Your age may have something to do with it—'

'I don't think so,' said Mr Patson sturdily. 'This is something quite different. I've made all allowance for that.'

'So far as you can, no doubt,' said Dr Smith smoothly, without any sign of resentment. 'You must also remember that the English middle class, to which you obviously belong, has suffered recently from the effects of what has been virtually an economic and social revolution. Therefore any member of that class—and I am one myself—can't help feeling that life does not offer the same satisfactions as it used to do, before the War.'

'Doctor Smith,' cried Mr Patson, looking straight at him now, 'I know all about that—my wife and her friends have enough to say about it, never stop grumbling. But this is something else. I may tell you, I've always been a Liberal and believed in social reform. And if this was a case of one class getting a bit less, and another class getting a bit more, my profits going down and my clerks' and warehousemen's wages going up, I wouldn't lose an hour's sleep over it. But what I'm talking about is something quite different. Economics and politics and social changes may come into it, but *they're just being used.*'

'I don't follow you there, Mr Patson.'

'You will in a minute, doctor. I want to get back to what I overheard Firbright saying, that night. I got away from it just to make the point that I couldn't help feeling at once there was something in what he said. Just because for the first time somebody had given me a reason why these things were happening.' He regarded the other man earnestly.

Smiling thinly, Dr Smith shook his head. 'The hypothesis of a mysterious but energetic Evil Principle, Mr Patson, doesn't offer us much of a reason.'

'It's a start,' replied Mr Patson, rather belligerently. 'And of course that wasn't all, by any means. Now we come to these agents.'

'Ah—yes—the agents,' Dr Smith looked very grave now. 'It was Firbright who gave you that idea, was it?'

'Yes, it would never have occurred to me, I'll admit. But if this Evil Principle was trying to make something like insects out of us, it could do it two ways. One—by a sort of remote control, perhaps by a sort of continuous radio programme, never leaving our minds alone, telling us not to attempt any-

thing new, to play safe, not to have any illusions, to keep to routine, nor to waste time and energy wondering and brooding and being fanciful, and all that.'

'Did Firbright suggest something of that sort was happening?'

'Yes, but it wasn't his own idea. The man he'd been talking about before I listened to him, somebody he'd met in the Near East, had told him definitely all that non-stop propaganda was going on. But the other way—direct control, you might call it—was by the use of these agents—a sort of Evil Fifth Column—with more and more of 'em everywhere, hard at work.'

'Devils?' enquired the doctor, smiling. 'Demons? What?'

'That's what they amount to,' said Mr Patson, not returning the smile but frowning a little. 'Except that it gives one a wrong idea of them—horns and tails and that sort of thing. These are quite different, Firbright said. All you can definitely say is that they're not human. They don't belong to us. They don't like us. They're working against us. They have their orders. They know what they're doing. They work together in teams. They arrange to get jobs for one another, more and more influence and power. So what chance have we against them?' And Mr Patson asked this question almost at the top of his voice.

'If such beings existed,' Dr Smith replied calmly, 'we should soon be at their mercy, I agree. But then they don't exist—except of course as figures of fantasy, although in that capacity they can do a great deal of harm. I take it, Mr Patson, that you have thought about—or shall we say *brooded over*—these demonic creatures rather a lot lately? Quite so. By the way, what do you call them? It might save time and possible confusion if we can give them a name.'

'They're the Grey Ones,' said Mr Patson without any hesitation.

'Ah—the Grey Ones.' Dr Smith frowned again and pressed his thin lips together, perhaps to show his disapproval of such a prompt reply. 'You seem very sure about this, Mr Patson.'

'Well, why shouldn't I be? You ask me what I call them, so I tell you. Of course, I don't know what they call themselves. And I didn't invent that name for them.'

'Oh—this is Firbright again, is it?'

'Yes, that's what I heard him calling them, and it seemed to me a very good name for them. They're trying to give everything a grey look, aren't they? And there's something essentially grey about these creatures themselves—none of your gaudy, red and black, Mephistopheles stuff about *them*. Just quiet grey fellows busy greying everything—that's them.'

'Is it indeed? Now I want to be quite clear about this, Mr Patson. As I suggested earlier, this idea of the so-called Grey Ones is something I can't dismiss lightly, just because it might have very serious anti-social effects. It is one thing to entertain a highly fanciful belief in some mysterious Evil Principle, working on us for its own evil ends. It is quite another thing to believe that actual fellow-citizens, probably highly conscientious and useful members of the community, are not human beings at all but so many masquerading demons. You can see that, can't you?'

'Of course I can,' said Mr Patson, with a flick of impatience. 'I'm not stupid, even though I may have given you the impression that I am. This idea of the Grey Ones—well, it brings the whole thing home to you, doesn't it? Here they are, busy as bees round every corner, you might say.'

The doctor smiled. 'Yet you've never met one. Isn't that highly suggestive? Doesn't that make you ask yourself what truth there can be in this absurd notion? All these Grey Ones, seeking power over us, influencing our lives, and yet you've never actually come into contact with one. Now—now—Mr Patson—' And he wagged a finger.

'Who says I've never met one?' Mr Patson demanded indignantly. 'Where did you get that idea from, doctor?'

'Do you mean to tell me—?'

'Certainly I mean to tell you. I know at least a dozen of 'em: My own brother-in-law is one.'

Dr Smith looked neither shocked nor surprised. He merely stared searchingly for a moment or two, then rapidly made some notes. And now he stopped sounding like a rather playful schoolmaster and became a doctor in charge of a difficult case. 'So that's how it is, Mr Patson. You know at least a dozen Grey Ones, and one of them is your brother-in-law. That's correct, isn't it? Good! Very well, let us begin with your brother-in-law. When and how did you make the discovery that he is a Grey One?'

'Well, I'd wondered about Harold for years,' said Mr Patson slowly. 'I'd always disliked him but I never quite knew why. He'd always puzzled me too. He's one of those chaps who don't seem to have any centre you can understand. They don't act from any ordinary human feeling. They haven't motives you can appreciate. It's as if there was nothing inside 'em. They seem to tick over like automatic machines. Do you know what I mean, doctor?'

'It would be better now if you left me out of it. Just tell me what you thought and felt—about Harold, for instance.'

'Yes, Harold. Well, he was one of them. No centre, no feeling, no motives. I'd try to get closer to him, just for my wife's sake, although they'd never been close. I'd talk to him at home, after dinner, and sometimes I'd take him out. You couldn't call him unfriendly—that at least would have been *something*. He'd listen, up to a point, while I talked. If I asked him a question, he'd make some sort of reply. He'd talk himself in a kind of fashion, rather like a leading article in one of the more cautious newspapers. Chilly stuff, grey stuff. Nothing exactly wrong with it, but nothing right about it either. And after a time, about half an hour or so, I'd find it hard to talk to him, even about my own affairs. I'd begin wondering what to say next. There'd be a sort of vacuum between us. He had a trick, which I've often met elsewhere, of deliberately not encouraging you to go on, of just staring, waiting for you to say something silly. Now I put this down to his being a public official. When I first knew him, he was one of the assistants to the Clerk of our local Borough Council. Now he's the Clerk, quite a good job, for ours is a big borough. Well, a man in that position has to be more careful than somebody like me has. He can't let himself go, has too many people to please—or rather, not to offend. And one thing was certain about Harold—and that ought to have made him more human, but somehow it didn't—and that was that he meant to get on. He had ambition, but there again it wasn't an ordinary human ambition, with a bit of fire and nonsense in it somewhere, but a sort of cold determination to keep on moving up. You see what I mean? Oh—I forgot—no questions. Well, that's how he was—and it. But then I noticed another thing about Harold. And even my wife had to agree about this. He was what we called a damper.

If you took him out to enjoy something, he not only didn't enjoy it himself but he contrived somehow to stop you enjoying it. I'm very fond of a good show—and don't mind seeing a really good one several times—but if I took Harold along then it didn't matter what it was, I couldn't enjoy it. He wouldn't openly attack it or sneer at it, but somehow by just being there, sitting beside you, he'd cut it down and take all the colour and fun out of it. You'd wonder why you'd wasted your evening and your money on such stuff. It was the same if you tried him with a football or cricket match, you'd have a boring afternoon. And if you asked him to a little party, it was fatal. He'd be polite, quite helpful, do whatever you asked him to do, but the party would never get going. It would be just as if he was invisibly spraying us with some devilish composition that made us all feel tired and bored and depressed. Once we were silly enough to take him on a holiday with us motoring through France and Italy. It was the worst holiday we ever had. He killed it stone dead. Everything he looked at seemed smaller and duller and greyer than it ought to have been. Chartres, the Loire country, Provence, the Italian Riviera, Florence, Siena—they were all cut down and greyed over, so that we wondered why we'd ever bothered to arrange such a trip and hadn't stuck to Torquay and Bournemouth. Then, before I'd learnt more sense, I'd talk to him about various plans I had for improving the business, but as soon as I'd described any scheme to Harold I could feel my enthusiasm ebbing away. I felt—or he made me feel—any possible development wasn't worth the risk. Better stick to the old routine. I think I'd have been done for now if I hadn't had sense enough to stop talking to Harold about the business. If he asked me about any new plans, I'd tell him I hadn't any. Now all this was long before I knew about the Grey Ones. But I had Harold on my mind, particularly as he lived and worked so close to us. When he became Clerk to the Council, I began to take more interest in our municipal affairs, just to see what influence Harold was having on them. I made almost a detective job of it. For instance, we'd had a go-ahead, youngish Chief Education Officer, but he left and in his place a dull timid fellow was appointed. And I found out that Harold had worked that. Then we have a lively chap as Entertainments Officer, who'd brightened things up

a bit, but Harold got rid of him too. Between them, he and his friend, the Treasurer, who was another of them, managed to put an end to everything that added a little colour and sparkle to life round our way. Of course they always had a good excuse—economy and all that. But I noticed that Harold and the Treasurer only made economies in one direction, what you might call the anti-grey side, and never stirred themselves to save money in other directions, in what was heavily official, pompous, interfering, irritating, depressing, calculated to make you lose heart. And you must have noticed yourself that we never do save money in those directions, either in municipal or national affairs, and that what I complained of in our borough was going on all over the country—yes, and as far as I can make out, in a lot of other countries too.'

Dr Smith waited a moment or two, and then said rather sharply: 'Please continue, Mr Patson. If I wish to make a comment or ask a question, I will do so.'

'That's what I meant earlier,' said Mr Patson, 'when I talked about economics and politics and social changes just being used. I've felt all the time there was something behind 'em. If we're doing it for ourselves, it doesn't make sense. But the answer is of course that we're not doing it for ourselves, we're just being manipulated. Take Communism. The Grey Ones must have almost finished the job in some of those countries—they hardly need to bother any more. All right, we don't like Communism. We must make every possible effort to be ready to fight it. So what happens? More and more of the Grey Ones take over. This is their chance. So either way they win and we lose. We're further along the road we never wanted to travel. Nearer the bees, ants, termites. Because we're being pushed. My God—doctor—can't you feel it yourself?'

'No, I can't, but never mind about me. And don't become too general, please. What about your brother-in-law, Harold? When did you decide he was a Grey One?'

'As soon as I began thinking over what Firbright said,' replied Mr Patson. 'I'd never been able to explain Harold before—and God knows I'd tried often enough. Then I saw at once he was a Grey One. He wasn't born one, of course, for that couldn't possibly be how it works. My guess is that sometime while he was still young, the soul or essence of the

real Harold Sothers was drawn out and a Grey One slipped in. That must be going on all the time now, there are so many of them about. Of course they recognize each other and help each other, which makes it easy for them to handle us humans. They know exactly what they're up to. They receive and give orders. It's like having a whole well-disciplined secret army working against us. And the only possible chance now is to bring 'em out into the open and declare war on 'em.'

'How can we do that,' asked Dr Smith, smiling a little, 'if they're secret?'

'I've thought a lot about that,' said Mr Patson earnestly, 'and it's not so completely hopeless as you might think. After a time you begin to recognize a few. Harold, for instance. And our Borough Treasurer. I'm certain he's one. Then, as I told you at first, there are about a dozen more that I'd willingly stake a bet on. Yes, I know what you're wondering, doctor. If they're all officials, eh? Well no, they aren't, though seven or eight of 'em are—and you can see why—because that's where the power is now. Another two are up-and-coming politicians—and not in the same Party either. One's a banker I know in the City—and he's a Grey One all right. I wouldn't have been able to spot them if I hadn't spent so much time either with Harold or wondering about him. They all have the same cutting-down and bleaching stare, the same dead touch. Wait till you see a whole lot of 'em together, holding a conference.' Then Mr Patson broke off abruptly, as if he felt he had said too much.

Dr Smith raised his eyebrows so that they appeared above his spectacles, not unlike hairy caterpillars on the move. 'Perhaps you would like a cigarette now, Mr Patson. No, take one of these. I'm not a smoker myself but I'm told they're excellent. Ah—you have a light. Good! Now take it easy for a minute or two because I think you're tiring a little. And it's very important you should be able to finish your account of these—er—Grey Ones, if possible without any hysterical over-emphasis. No, no—Mr Patson—I didn't mean to suggest there'd been any such over-emphasis so far. You've done very well indeed up to now, bearing in mind the circumstances. And it's a heavy sort of day, isn't it? We seem to have too many days like this, don't we? Or is it simply that we're not getting any younger?' He produced his long-run actor's laugh. Then

he brought his large white hands together, contrived to make his lips smile without taking the hard stare out of his eyes, and said finally: 'Now then, Mr Patson. At the point you broke off your story, shall we call it, you had suggested that you had seen a whole lot of Grey Ones together, holding a conference. I think you might very usefully enlarge that rather astonishing suggestion, don't you?'

Mr Patson looked and sounded troubled. 'I'd just as soon leave that, if you don't mind, doctor. You see, if it's all nonsense, then there's no point in my telling you about that business. If it isn't all nonsense—'

'Yes,' said Dr Smith, after a moment, prompting him, 'if it isn't all nonsense—?'

'Then I might be saying too much.' And Mr Patson looked about for an ashtray as if to hide his embarrassment.

'There—at your elbow, Mr Patson. Now please look at me. And remember what I said earlier. I am not interested in fanciful theories of the universe or wildly imaginative interpretations of present world conditions. All I'm concerned with here, in my professional capacity, is your state of mind, Mr Patson. That being the case, it's clearly absurd to suggest that you might be saying too much. Unless you are perfectly frank with me, it will be very difficult for me to help you. Come now, we agreed about that. So far you've followed my instructions admirably. All I ask now is for a little more cooperation. Did you actually attend what you believed to be a conference of these Grey Ones?'

'Yes, I did,' said Mr Patson, not without some reluctance. 'But I'll admit I can't prove anything. The important part may be something I imagined. But if you insist, I'll tell you what happened. I overheard Harold and our Borough Treasurer arranging to travel together to Maundby Hall, which is about fifteen miles north of where I live. I'd never been there myself but I'd heard of it in connection with various summer schools and conferences and that sort of thing. Perhaps you know it, Dr Smith?'

'As a matter of fact, I do. I had to give a paper there one Saturday night. It's a rambling Early Victorian mansion, with a large ballroom that's used for the more important meetings.'

'That's the place. Well, it seems they were going there to

attend a conference of the New Era Community Planning Association. And when I heard them saying that, first I told myself how lucky I was not to be going too. Then afterwards, thinking it over, I saw that if you wanted to hold a meeting that no outsider in his senses would want to attend, you couldn't do better than hold it in a country house that's not too easy to get at, and call it a meeting or conference of the New Era Community Planning Association. I know if anybody said to me "Come along with me and spend the day listening to the New Era Community Planning Association," I'd make any excuse to keep away. Of course it's true that anybody like Harold couldn't be bored. The Grey Ones are never bored, which is one reason why they are able to collar and hold down so many jobs nowadays, the sort of jobs that reek of boredom. Well, this New Era Community Planning Association might be no more than one of the usual societies of busybodies, cranks and windbags. But then again it might be something very different, and I kept thinking about it in connection with the Grey Ones. Saturday was the day of the conference. I went down to my office in the morning, just to go through the post and see if there was anything urgent, and then went home to lunch. In the middle of the afternoon I felt I had to know what was happening out at Maundby Hall, so off I went in my car, I parked it just outside the grounds, scouted round a bit, then found an entrance through a little wood at the back. There was nobody about, and I sneaked into the house by way of a servants' door near the pantries and larders. There were some catering people around there, but nobody bothered me. I went up some back stairs and after more scouting, which I enjoyed as much as anything I've done this year, I was guided by the sound of voices to a small door in a corridor upstairs. This door was locked on the inside, but a fellow had once shown me how to deal with a locked door when the key's still in the lock on the other side. You slide some paper under the door, poke the key out so that it falls on to the paper and then slide the paper back with the key on it. Well, this trick worked and I was able to open the door, which I did very cautiously. It led to a little balcony overlooking the floor of the ballroom. There was no window near this balcony so that it was rather dark up there and I was able to creep down to the front rail without being

seen. There must have been between three and four hundred of them in that ballroom, sitting on little chairs. This balcony was high above the platform, so I had a pretty good view of them as they sat facing it. They looked like Grey Ones, but of course I couldn't be sure. And for the first hour or so, I couldn't be sure whether this really was a meeting of the New Era Community Planning Association or a secret conference of Grey Ones. The stuff they talked would have done for either. That's where the Grey Ones are so damnably clever. They've only to carry on doing what everybody expects them to do, in their capacity as sound conscientious citizens and men in authority, to keep going with their own hellish task. So there I was, getting cramp, no wiser. Another lot of earnest busybodies might be suggesting new ways of robbing us of our individuality. Or an organized convey of masquerading devils and demons might be making plans to bring us nearer to the insects, to rob us of our souls. Well, I was just about to creep back up to the corridor, giving it up as a bad job, when something happened.' He stopped, and looked dubiously at his listener.

'Yes, Mr Patson,' said Dr Smith encouragingly, 'then something happened?'

'This is the part you can say I imagined, and I can't prove that I didn't. But I certainly didn't dream it, because I was far too cramped and aching to fall asleep. Well, the first thing I noticed was a sudden change in the atmosphere of the meeting. It was as if somebody very important had arrived, although I didn't see anybody arriving. And I got the impression that the *real* meeting was about to begin. Another thing—I knew for certain now that this was no random collection of busybodies and windbags, that they were all Grey Ones. If you ask me to tell you in detail how I knew, I couldn't begin. But I noticed something else, after a minute or two. These Grey Ones massed together down there had now a positive quality of their own, which I'd never discovered before. It wasn't that they were just negative, not human, as they were at ordinary times; they had this positive quality, which I can't describe except as a sort of chilly hellishness. As if they'd stopped pretending to be human and were letting themselves go, recovering their demon natures. And here I'm warning you, doctor, that my account of what happened

from then is bound to be sketchy and peculiar. For one thing, I wasn't really well placed up in that balcony, not daring to show myself and only getting hurried glimpses; and for another thing, I was frightened. Yes, doctor, absolutely terrified. I was crouching there just above three or four hundred creatures from cold cold hell. That quality I mentioned, that chilly hellishness, seemed to come rolling over me in waves. I might have been kneeling on the edge of a pit of iniquity a million miles deep. I felt the force of this hellishness not on the outside but inside, as if the very essence of me was being challenged and attacked. One slip, a black-out, and then I might waken up to find myself running a concentration camp, choosing skins for lampshades. Then somebody, something, arrived. Whoever or whatever they'd been waiting for was down there on the platform. I knew that definitely. But I couldn't see him or it. All I could make out was a sort of thickening and whirling of the air down there. Then out of that a voice spoke, the voice of the leader they had been expecting. But this voice didn't come from outside, through my ears. It spoke inside me, right in the centre, so that it came out to my attention, if you see what I mean. Rather, like a small, very clear voice on a good telephone line, but coming from inside. I'll tell you frankly I didn't want to stay there and listen, no matter what big secrets were coming out; all I wanted to do was to get away from there as soon as I could but for a few minutes I was too frightened to make the necessary moves.'

'Then you heard what this—er—voice was saying, Mr Patson?' the doctor asked.

'Some of it—yes.'

'Excellent! Now this is important.' And Dr Smith pointed his beautiful fountain pen at Mr Patson's left eye. 'Did you learn from it anything you hadn't known before? Please answer me carefully.'

'I'll tell you one thing you won't believe,' cried Mr Patson. 'Not about the voice—we'll come to that—but about those Grey Ones. I risked a peep while the voice was talking, and what I saw nearly made me pass out. There they were—three or four hundred of 'em—not looking human at all, not making any attempt; they'd all gone back to their original shapes. They looked—this is the nearest I can get to it—like

big semi-transparent toads—and their eyes were like six hundred electric lamps burning under water, all greeny, unblinking, and shining out of Hell.'

'But what did you hear the voice say?' Dr Smith was urgent now. 'How much can you remember? That's what I want to know. Come along, man.'

Mr Patson passed a hand across his forehead and then looked at the edge of his hand with some astonishment, as if he had not known it would be so wet. 'I heard it thank them in the name of Adaragraffa—Lord of the Creeping Hosts. Yes, I could have imagined it—only I never knew I'd that sort of imagination. And what is imagination anyhow?'

'What else—what else—did you hear, man?'

'Ten thousand more were to be drafted into the Western Region. There would be promotions for some there who'd been on continuous duty longest. There was to be a swing over from the assault by way of social conditions, which could almost look after itself now, to the draining away of character, especially in the young of the doomed species. Yes, those were the very words,' Mr Patson shouted, jumping up and waving his arms. 'Especially in the young of the doomed species. Us—d'you understand—us. And I tell you—we haven't a chance unless we start fighting back now—*now*—yes, and with everything we've got left. Grey Ones. And more and more of them coming, taking charge of us, giving us a push here, a shove there—down—down—down—'

Mr Patson found his arms strongly seized and held by the doctor, who was clearly a man of some strength. The next moment he was being lowered into his chair. 'Mr Patson,' said the doctor sternly, 'you must not excite yourself in this fashion. I cannot allow it. Now I must ask you to keep still and quiet for a minute while I speak to my partner, Dr Meyenstein. It's for your own good. Now give me your promise.'

'All right, but don't be long,' said Mr Patson, who suddenly felt quite exhausted. As he watched the doctor go out, he wondered if he had not said either too much or not enough. Too much, he felt, if he was to be accepted as a sensible business man who happened to be troubled by some neurotic fancies. Not enough, perhaps to justify, in view of the doctor's obvious scepticism, the terrible shaking excitement that had possessed him at the end of their interview.

No doubt, round the corner, Doctors Smith and Meyenstein were having a good laugh over this rubbish about Grey Ones. Well, they could try and make him laugh too. He would be only too delighted to join them, if they could persuade him he had been deceiving himself. Probably that is what they would do now.

'Well, Mr Patson,' said Dr Smith, at once brisk and grave, as he returned with two other men, one of them Dr Meyenstein and the other a bulky fellow in white who might be a male nurse. All three moved forward slowly as Dr Smith spoke to him. 'You must realize that you are a very sick man—sick in mind if not yet sick in body. So you must put yourself in our hands.'

Even as he nodded in vague agreement, Mr Patson saw what he ought to have guessed before, that Dr Smith was a Grey One, and that now he had brought two more Grey Ones with him. There was a fraction of a moment, as the three men bore down upon him to silence his warning for ever, when he thought he caught another glimpse of the creatures in the ballroom, three of them now like big semi-transparent toads, six eyes like electric lamps burning under water, all greeny, unblinking, shining triumphantly out of Hell . . .

THE DOOR IN THE WALL

H. G. WELLS

I

One confidential evening, not three months ago, Lionel Wallace told me this story of the Door in the Wall. And at the time I thought that so far as he was concerned it was a true story.

He told it me with such a direct simplicity of conviction that I could not do otherwise than believe in him. But in the morning, in my own flat, I woke to a different atmosphere, and as I lay in bed and recalled the things he had told me, stripped of the glamour of his earnest slow voice, denuded of the focused, shaded table light, the shadowy atmosphere that wrapped about him, and me, and the pleasant bright things, the dessert and glasses and napery of the dinner we had shared, making them for the time a bright little world quite cut off from everyday realities. I saw it all as frankly incredible. 'He was mystifying!' I said, and then: 'How well he did it! . . . It isn't quite the thing I should have expected of him, of all people, to do well.'

Afterwards as I sat up in bed and sipped my morning tea, I found myself trying to account for the flavour of reality that perplexed me in his impossible reminiscences, by supposing they did in some way suggest, present, convey—I hardly know which word to use—experiences it was otherwise impossible to tell.

Well, I don't resort to that explanation now. I have got over my intervening doubts. I believe now, as I believed at the moment of telling, that Wallace did to the very best of his ability strip the truth of his secret for me. But whether he himself saw, or only thought he saw, whether he himself was the possessor of an inestimable privilege or the victim of a fantastic dream, I cannot pretend to guess. Even the fact of his death, which ended my doubts for ever, throw no light on that.

That much the reader must judge for himself.

I forget now what chance comment or criticism of mine moved so reticent a man to confide in me. He was, I think, defending himself against an imputation of slackness and unreliability I had made in relation to a great public movement, in which he had disappointed me. But he plunged suddenly. 'I have,' he said, 'a preoccupation—

'I know,' he went on, after a pause, 'I have been negligent. The fact is—it isn't a case of ghosts or apparitions—but—it's an odd thing to tell of, Redmond—I am haunted. I am haunted by something—that rather takes the light out of things, that fills me with longings . . .'

He paused, checked by that English shyness that so often overcomes us when we would speak of moving or grave or beautiful things. 'You were at Saint Aethelstan's all through,' he said, and for a moment that seemed to me quite irrelevant. 'Well,'—and he paused. Then very haltingly, at first, but afterwards more easily, he began to tell of the thing that was hidden in his life, the haunting memory of a beauty and a happiness that filled his heart with insatiable longings, that made all the interests and spectacle of worldly life seem dull and tedious and vain to him.

Now that I have the clue to it, the thing seems written visibly in his face. I have a photograph in which that look of detachment has been caught and intensified. It reminds me of what a woman once said of him—a woman who had loved him greatly. 'Suddenly,' she said, 'the interest goes out of him. He forgets you. He doesn't care a rap for you—under his very nose . . .'

Yet the interest was not always out of him, and when he was holding his attention to a thing Wallace could contrive to be an extremely successful man. His career, indeed, is set with successes. He left me behind him long ago: he soared up over my head, and cut a figure in the world that I couldn't cut—anyhow. He was still a year short of forty, and they say now that he would have been in office and very probably in the new Cabinet if he had lived. At school he always beat me without effort—as it were by nature. We were at school together at Saint Aethelstan's College in West Kensington for almost all our school-time. He came into the school as my co-equal, but he left far above me, in a blaze of scholar-

ships and brilliant performance. Yet I think I made a fair average running. And it was at school I heard first of the 'Door in the Wall'—that I was to hear of a second time only a month before his death.

To him at least the Door in the Wall was a real door, leading through a real wall to immortal realities. Of that I am now quite assured.

And it came into his life quite early, when he was a little fellow between five and six. I remember how, as he sat making his confession to me with a slow gravity, he reasoned and reckoned the date of it. 'There was,' he said, 'a crimson Virginia creeper in it—all one bright uniform crimson, in a clear amber sunshine against a white wall. That came into the impression somehow, though I don't clearly remember how, and there were horse-chestnut leaves upon the clean pavement outside the green door. They were blotched yellow and green, you know, not brown nor dirty, so that they must have been new fallen. I take it that means October. I look out for horse-chestnut leaves every year and I ought to know.

'If I'm right in that, I was about five years and four months old.'

He was, he said, rather a precocious little boy—he learnt to talk at an abnormally early age, and he was so sane and 'old-fashioned', as people say, that he was permitted an amount of initiative that most children scarcely attain by seven or eight. His mother died when he was two, and he was under the less vigilant and authoritative care of a nursery governess. His father was a stern, preoccupied lawyer, who gave him little attention, and expected great things of him. For all his brightness he found life a little grey and dull, I think. And one day he wandered.

He could not recall the particular neglect that enabled him to get away, nor the course he took among the West Kensington roads. All that had faded among the incurable blurs of memory. But the white wall and the green door stood out quite distinctly.

As his memory of that childish experience ran, he did at the very first sight of that door experience a peculiar emotion, an attraction, a desire to get to the door and open it and walk in. And at the same time he had the clearest conviction that either it was unwise or it was wrong of him—he could not tell

which—to yield to this attraction. He insisted upon it as a curious thing that he knew from the very beginning—unless memory has played him the queerest trick—that the door was unfastened, and that he could go in as he chose.

I seem to see the figure of that little boy, drawn and repelled. And it was very clear in his mind, too, though why it should be so was never explained, that his father would be very angry if he went in through that door.

Wallace described all these moments of hesitation to me with the utmost particularity. He went right past the door, and then, with his hands in his pockets and making an infantile attempt to whistle, strolled right along beyond the end of the wall. There he recalls a number of mean dirty shops, and particularly that of a plumber and decorator with a dusty disorder of earthenware pipes, sheet lead, ball taps, pattern books of wall paper, and tins of enamel. He stood pretending to examine these things, and *coveting*, passionately desiring, the green door.

Then, he said, he had a gust of emotion. He made a run for it, lest hesitation should grip him again; he went plump with outstretched hand through the green door and let it slam behind him. And so, in a trice, he came into the garden that has haunted all his life.

It was very difficult for Wallace to give me his full sense of that garden into which he came.

There was something in the very air of it that exhilarated, that gave one a sense of lightness and good happening and well-being; there was something in the sight of it that made all its colour clear and perfect and subtly luminous. In the instant of coming into it one was exquisitely glad—as only in rare moments, and when one is young and joyful, one can be glad in this world. And everything was beautiful there . . .

Wallace mused before he went on telling me. 'You see,' he said, with the doubtful inflection of a man who pauses at incredible things, 'there were two great panthers there . . . Yes, spotted panthers. And I was not afraid. There was a long wide path with marble-edged flower borders on either side, and these two huge velvety beasts were playing there with a ball. One looked up and came towards me, a little curious as it seemed. It came right up to me, rubbed its soft round ear very gently against the small hand I held out, and purred. It was, I

tell you, an enchanted garden. I know. And the size? Oh! it stretched far and wide, this way and that. I believe there were hills far away. Heaven knows where West Kensington had suddenly got to. And somehow it was just like coming home.

'You know, in the very moment the door swung to behind me, I forgot the road with its fallen chestnut leaves, its cabs and tradesmen's carts, I forgot the sort of gravitational pull back to the discipline and obedience of home, I forgot all hesitations and fear, forgot discretion, forgot all the intimate realities of this life. I became in a moment a very glad and wonder-happy little boy—in another world. It was a world with a different quality, a warmer, more penetrating and mellower light, with a faint clear gladness in its air, and wisps of sun-touched cloud in the blueness of its sky. And before me ran this long wide path, invitingly, with weedless beds on either side, rich with untended flowers, and these two great panthers. I put my little hands fearlessly on their soft fur, and caressed their round ears and the sensitive corners under their ears, and played with them, and it was as though they welcomed me home. There was a keen sense of home-coming in my mind, and when presently a tall, fair girl appeared in the pathway, and came to meet me, smiling, and said 'Well?' to me, and lifted me, and kissed me, and put me down, and led me by the hand, there was no amazement, but only an impression of delightful rightness, of being reminded of happy things that had in some strange way been overlooked. There were broad steps I remember, that came into view between spikes of delphinium, and up these we went to a great avenue between very old and shady dark trees. All down this avenue, you know, between the red chapped stems, were marble seats of honour and statuary, and very tame and friendly white doves . . .

'Along this cool avenue my girl-friend led me, looking down—I recall the pleasant lines, the finely modelled chin of her sweet kind face—asking me questions in a soft, agreeable voice, and telling me things, pleasant things I know, though what they were I was never able to recall . . . Presently a little Capuchin monkey, very clean, with a fur of ruddy brown and kindly hazel eyes, came down a tree to us and ran beside

me, looking up at me and grinning, and presently leapt to my shoulder. So we two went on our way in great happiness.'

He paused.

'Go on,' I said.

'I remember little things. We passed an old man musing among laurels, I remember, and a place gay with paroquets, and came through a broad shaded colonnade to a spacious cool place, full of pleasant fountains, full of beautiful things, full of the quality and promise of heart's desire. And there were many things and many people, some that still seem to stand out clearly and some that are a little vague; but all these people were beautiful and kind. In some way—I don't know how—it was conveyed to me that they were filling me with gladness by their gestures, by the touch of their hands, by the welcome and love in their eyes. Yes—'

He mused for a while. 'Playmates I found there. That was very much to me, because I was a lonely little boy. They played delightful games in a grass-covered court where there was a sun-dial set about with flowers. And as one played one lived . . .

'But—it's odd, there's a gap in my memory. I don't remember the games we played. I never remembered. Afterwards, as a child, I spent long hours trying, even with tears, to recall the form of that happiness. I wanted to play it all over again—in my nursery—by myself. No! All I remember is the happiness and two dear playfellows who were most with me . . . Then presently came a sombre dark woman, with a grave, pale face, and dreamy eyes, a sombre woman, wearing a soft long robe of pale purple, who carried a book, and beckoned and took me aside with her into a gallery above a hall—though my playmates were loath to have me go, and ceased their game and stood watching as I was carried away. "Come back to us!" they cried. "Come back to us soon!" I looked up at her face, but she heeded them not at all. Her face was very gentle and grave. She took me to a seat in the gallery, and I stood beside her, ready to look at her book as she opened it upon her knee. The pages fell open. She pointed, and I looked, marvelling, for in the living pages of that book I saw myself; it was a story about myself, and in it were all the things that had happened to me since ever I was born . . .

'It was wonderful to me, because the pages of that book were not pictures, you understand, but realities.'

Wallace paused gravely—looked at me doubtfully.

'Go on,' I said. 'I understand.'

'They were realities—yes, they must have been; people moved and things came and went in them; my dear mother, whom I had near forgotten; then my father, stern and upright, the servants, the nursery, all the familiar things of home. Then the front door and the busy streets, with traffic to and fro. I looked and marvelled, and looked half doubtfully again into the woman's face and turned the pages over, skipping this and that, to see more of this book and more, and so at last I came to myself hovering and hesitating outside the green door in the long white wall, and felt again the conflict and the fear.

"And next?" I cried, and would have turned on, but the cool hand of the grave woman delayed me.

"Next?" I insisted, and struggled gently with her hand, pulling up her fingers with all my childish strength, and as she yielded and the page came over she bent down upon me like a shadow and kissed my brow.

'But the page did not show the enchanted garden, nor the panther, nor the girl who had led me by the hand, nor the playfellows who had been so loath to let me go. It showed a long grey street in West Kensington, in that chill hour of afternoon before the lamps are lit, and I was there, a wretched little figure, weeping aloud, for all that I could do to restrain myself, and I was weeping because I could not return to my dear playfellows who had called after me, "Come back to us! Come back to us soon!" I was there. This was no page in a book, but harsh reality; that enchanted place and the restraining hand of the grave mother at whose knee I stood had gone—whither had they gone?'

He halted again, and remained for a time staring into the fire.

'Oh! the woefulness of that return!' he murmured.

'Well?' I said, after a minute or so.

'Poor little wretch I was!—brought back to this grey world again! As I realised the fullness of what had happened to me, I gave way to quite ungovernable grief. And the shame and humiliation of that public weeping and my disgraceful

homecoming remain with me still. I see again the benevolent-looking old gentleman in gold spectacles who stopped and spoke to me—prodding me first with his umbrella. "Poor little chap," said he; "and are you lost then?"—and me a London boy of five and more! And he must needs bring in a kindly young policeman and make a crowd of me, and so march me home. Sobbing, conspicuous, and frightened, I came back from the enchanted garden to the steps of my father's house.

That is as well as I can remember my vision of that garden—the garden that haunts me still. Of course, I can convey nothing of that indescribable quality of translucent unreality, that difference from the common things of experience that hung about it all; but that—that is what happened. If it was a dream, I am sure it was a daytime and altogether extraordinary dream . . . H'm!—naturally there followed a terrible questioning, by my aunt, my father, the nurse, the governess—everyone . . .

'I tried to tell them, and my father gave me my first thrashing for telling lies. When afterwards I tried to tell my aunt, she punished me again for my wicked persistence. Then, as I said, everyone was forbidden to listen to me, to hear a word about it. Even my fairy-tale books were taken away from me for a time—because I was too "imaginative". Eh? Yes, they did that! My father belonged to the old school . . . And my story was driven back upon myself. I whispered it to my pillow—my pillow that was often damp and salt to my whispering lips with childish tears. And I added always to my official and less fervent prayers this one heartfelt request: "Please God I may dream of the garden. Oh! take me back to my garden!" Take me back to my garden! I dreamt often of the garden. I may have added to it, I may have changed it; I do not know . . . All this, you understand, is an attempt to reconstruct from fragmentary memory a very early experience. Between that and the other consecutive memories of my boyhood there is a gulf. A time came when it seemed impossible I should ever speak of that wonder glimpse again.'

I asked an obvious question.

'No,' he said. 'I don't remember that I ever attempted to find my way back to the garden in those early years. This seems odd to me now, but I think that very probably a closer watch was kept on my movements after this misadventure to prevent

my going astray. No, it wasn't till you knew me that I tried for the garden again. And I believe there was a period—incredible as it seems now—when I forgot the garden altogether—when I was about eight or nine it may have been. Do you remember me as a kid at Saint Aethelstan's?"

'Rather!'

'I didn't show any signs, did I, in those days of having a secret dream?'

II

He looked up with a sudden smile.

'Did you ever play North-West Passage with me? . . . No, of course you didn't come my way!

'It was the sort of game,' he went on, 'that every imaginative child plays all day. The idea was the discovery of a North-West Passage to school. The way to school was plain enough; the game consisted in finding some way that wasn't plain, starting off ten minutes early in some almost hopeless direction, and working my way round through unaccustomed streets to my goal. And one day I got entangled among some rather low class streets on the other side of Campden Hill, and I began to think that for once the game would be against me and that I should get to school late. I tried rather desperately a street that seemed a *cul-de-sac*, and found a passage at the end. I hurried through that with renewed hope. "I shall do it yet!" I said, and passed a row of frowsy little shops that were inexplicably familiar to me, and behold! there was my long white wall and the green door that led to the enchanted garden!

'The thing whacked upon me suddenly. Then, after all, that garden, that wonderful garden, wasn't a dream!'

He paused.

'I suppose my second experience with the green door marks the world of difference there is between the busy life of a schoolboy and the infinite leisure of a child. Anyhow, this second time I didn't for a moment think of going in straight away. You see—For one thing, my mind was full of the idea of getting to school in time—set on not breaking my record for punctuality. I must surely have felt *some* little desire at least to try the door—yes. I must have felt that . . . But

I seem to remember the attraction of the door mainly as another obstacle to my overmastering determination to get to school. I was immensely interested by this discovery I had made, of course—I went on with my mind full of it—but I went on. It didn't check me. I ran past, tugging out my watch, found I had ten minutes still to spare, and then I was going downhill into familiar surroundings, I got to school, breathless, it is true, and wet with perspiration, but in time. I can remember hanging up my coat and hat . . . Went right by it and left it behind me. Odd, eh?'

He looked at me thoughtfully. 'Of course, I didn't know then that it wouldn't always be there. Schoolboys have limited imaginations. I suppose I thought it was an awfully jolly thing to have it there, to know my way back to it, but there was the school tugging at me. I expect I was a good deal distraught and inattentive that morning, recalling what I could of the beautiful strange people I should presently see again. Oddly enough, I had no doubt in my mind that they would be glad to see me . . . Yes, I must have thought of the garden that morning just as a jolly sort of place to which one might resort in the interludes of a strenuous scholastic career.

'I didn't go that day at all. The next day was a half holiday, and that may have weighed with me. Perhaps, too, my state of inattention brought down impositions upon me, and docked the margin of time necessary for the detour. I don't know. What I do know is that in the meantime the enchanted garden was so much upon my mind that I could not keep it to myself.

'I told. What was his name?—ferrety-looking youngster we used to call Squiff.'

'Young Hopkins,' said I.

'Hopkins it was. I did not like telling him. I had a feeling that in some way it was against the rules to tell him, but I did. He was walking part of the way home with me; he was talkative, and if we had not talked about the enchanted garden we should have talked of something else, and it was intolerable to me to think about any other subject. So I blabbed.

'Well, he told my secret. The next day in the play interval I found myself surrounded by half a dozen bigger boys, half teasing, and wholly curious to hear more of the enchanted

garden. There was that big Fawcett—you remember him?—and Carnaby and Morley Reynolds. You weren't there by any chance? No, I think I should have remembered if you were . . .

'A boy is a creature of odd feelings. I was, I really believe, in spite of my secret self-disgust, a little flattered to have the attention of these big fellows. I remember particularly a moment of pleasure caused by the praise of Crawshaw—you remember Crawshaw major, the son of Crawshaw the composer—who said it was the best lie he had ever heard. But at the same time there was a really painful undertow of shame at telling what I felt was indeed a sacred secret. That beast Fawcett made a joke about the girl in green—'

Wallace's voice sank with the keen memory of that shame. 'I pretended not to hear,' he said. 'Well, then Carnaby suddenly called me a young liar, and disputed with me when I said the thing was true. I said I knew where to find the green door, could lead them all there in ten minutes. Carnaby became outrageously virtuous, and said I'd have to—and bear out my words or suffer. Did you ever have Carnaby twist your arm? Then perhaps you'll understand how it went with me. I swore my story was true. There was nobody in the school then to save a chap from Carnaby, though Crawshaw put in a word or so. Carnaby had got his game. I grew excited and red-eared, and a little frightened. I behaved altogether like a silly little chap, and the outcome of it all was that instead of starting alone for my enchanted garden, I led the way presently—cheeks flushed, ears hot, eyes smarting, and my soul one burning misery and shame—for a party of six mocking, curious, and threatening schoolfellows.

'We never found the white wall and the green door . . .'

'You mean—?'

'I mean I couldn't find it. I would have found it if I could.

'And afterwards when I could go alone I couldn't find it. I never found it. I seem now to have been always looking for it through my schoolboy days, but I never came up on it—never.'

'Did the fellows—make it disagreeable?'

'Beastly . . . Carnaby held a council over me for wanton lying. I remember how I sneaked home and upstairs to hide the marks of my blubbering. But when I cried myself to sleep at last it wasn't for Carnaby, but for the garden, for the

beautiful afternoon I had hoped for, for the sweet friendly women and the waiting playfellows, and the game I had hoped to learn again, that beautiful forgotten game . . .

'I believed firmly that if I had not told . . . I had bad times after that—crying at night and wool-gathering by day. For two terms I slackened and had bad reports. Do you remember? Of course you would! It was *you*—your beating me in mathematics that brought me back to the grind again.'

III

For a time my friend stared silently into the red heart of the fire. Then he said: 'I never saw it again until I was seventeen.

'It leapt upon me for the third time—as I was driving to Paddington on my way to Oxford and a scholarship I had just one momentary glimpse. I was leaning over the apron of my hansom smoking a cigarette, and no doubt thinking myself no end of a man of the world, and suddenly there was the door, the wall, the dear sense of unforgettable and still unattainable things.

'We clattered by—I too taken by surprise to stop my cab until we were well past and round a corner. Then I had a queer moment, a double and divergent movement of my will: I tapped the little door in the roof of the cab, and brought my arm down to pull out my watch. "Yes, sir!" said the cabman, smartly. "Er—well it's nothing," I cried. "My mistake! We haven't much time! Go on!" And he went on . . .

'I got my scholarship. And the night after I was told of that I sat over my fire in my little upper room, my study, in my father's house, with his praise—his rare praise—and his sound counsels ringing in my ears, and I smoked my favourite pipe—the formidable bulldog of adolescence—and thought of that door in the long white wall. "If I had stopped," I thought, "I should have missed my scholarship, I should have missed Oxford—muddled all the fine career before me! I begin to see things better!" I fell musing deeply, but I did not doubt then this career of mine was a thing that merited sacrifice.

'Those dear friends and that clear atmosphere seemed very sweet to me, very fine but remote. My grip was fixing now upon the world. I saw another door opening—the door of my career.'

He stared again into the fire. Its red light picked out a stubborn strength in his face for just one flickering moment, and then it vanished again.

'Well,' he said and sighed, 'I have served that career. I have done—much work, much hard work. But I have dreamt of the enchanted garden a thousand dreams, and seen its door, or at least glimpsed its door, four times since then. Yes—four times. For a while this world was so bright and interesting, seemed so full of meaning and opportunity, that the half-effaced charm of the garden was by comparison gentle and remote. Who wants to pat panthers on the way to dinner with pretty women and distinguished men? I came down to London from Oxford, a man of bold promise that I have done something to redeem. Something—and yet there have been disappointments . . .

'Twice I have been in love—I will not dwell on that—but once, as I went to someone who, I knew, doubted whether I dared to come, I took a short cut at a venture through an unfrequented road near Earl's Court, and so happened on a white wall and a familiar green door. "Odd!" I said to myself, "but I thought this place was on Campden Hill. It's the place I never could find somehow—like counting Stonehenge—the place of that queer daydream of mine." And I went by it intent upon my purpose. It had no appeal to me that afternoon.

'I had just a moment's impulse to try the door, three steps aside were needed at the most—though I was sure enough in my heart that it would open to me—and then I thought that doing so might delay me on the way to the appointment in which I thought my honour was involved. Afterwards I was sorry for my punctuality—I might at least have peeped in, I thought, and waved a hand to those panthers, but I knew enough by this time not to seek again, belatedly that which is not found by seeking. Yes, that time made very sorry . . .

'Years of hard work after that, and never a sight of the door. It's only recently it has come back to me. With it there has come a sense as though some thin tarnish had spread itself over my world. I began to think of it as a sorrowful and bitter thing that I should never see that door again. Perhaps I was suffering a little from overwork—perhaps it was what I've heard spoken of as the feeling of forty. I don't know.

But certainly the keen brightness that makes effort easy has gone out of things recently, and that just at a time—with all these new political developments—when I ought to be working. Odd, isn't it? But I do begin to find life toilsome, its rewards, as I come near them, cheap. I began a little while ago to want the garden quite badly. Yes—and I've seen it three times.'

'The garden?'

'No—the door! I haven't gone in!'

He leant over the table to me, with an enormous sorrow in his voice as he spoke. 'Thrice I have had my chance—*thrice!* If ever that door offers itself to me again, I swore, I will go in, out of this dust and heat, out of this dry glitter of vanity, out of these toilsome futilities. I will go and never return. This time I will stay . . . I swore it, and when the time came—I *didn't go*.

'Three times in one year have I passed that door and failed to enter. Three times in the last year.

'The first time was on the night of the snatch division on the Tenants' Redemption Bill, on which the Government was saved by a majority of three. You remember? No one on our side—perhaps very few on the opposite side—expected the end that night. Then the debate collapsed like eggshells. I and Hotchkiss were dining with his cousin at Brentford; we were both unpaired, and we were called up by telephone, and set off at once in his cousin's motor. We got in barely in time, and on the way we passed my wall and door—livid in the moonlight, blotched with hot yellow as the glare of our lamps lit it, but unmistakable. "My God!" cried I. "What?" said Hotchkiss. "Nothing!" I answered, and the moment passed.

'I've made a great sacrifice,' I told the whip as I got in. 'They all have,' he said, and hurried by.

'I do not see how I could have done otherwise then. And the next occasion was as I rushed to my father's bedside to bid that stern old man farewell. Then, too, the claims of life were imperative. But the third time was different; it happened a week ago. It fills me with hot remorse to recall it. I was with Gurker and Ralphs—it's no secret now, you know, that I've had my talk with Gurker. We had been dining at Frobisher's, and the talk had become intimate between us. The question of my place in the reconstructed Ministry lay always

just over the boundary of the discussion. Yes—yes. That's all settled. It needn't be talked about yet, but there's no reason to keep a secret from you . . . Yes—thanks! thanks! But let me tell you my story.

'Then, on that night things were very much in the air. My position was a very delicate one. I was keenly anxious to get some definite word from Gurker, but was hampered by Ralphs' presence. I was using the best power of my brain to keep that light and careless talk not too obviously directed to the point that concerned me. I had to. Ralphs' behaviour since has more than justified my caution . . . Ralphs, I knew, would leave us beyond the Kensington High Street, and then I could surprise Gurker by a sudden frankness. One has sometimes to resort to these little devices . . . And then it was that in the margin of my field of vision I became aware once more of the white wall, the green door before us down the road.

'We passed it talking. I passed it. I can still see the shadow of Gurker's marked profile, his opera hat tilted forward over his prominent nose, the many folds of his neck wrap going before my shadow and Ralphs' as we sauntered past.

'I passed within twenty inches of the door. "If I say good night to them, and go in," I asked myself, "what will happen?" And I was all a-tingle for that word with Gurker.

'I could not answer that question in the tangle of my other problems, "They will think me mad," I thought. "And suppose I vanish now!—Amazing disappearance of a prominent politician!" That weighed with me. A thousand inconceivably petty worldlinesses weighed with me in that crisis.'

Then he turned on me with a sorrowful smile, and, speaking slowly, 'Here I am!' he said.

'Here I am!' he repeated, 'and my chance has gone from me. Three times in one year the door has been offered me—the door that goes into peace, into delight, into a beauty beyond dreaming, a kindness no man on earth can know. And I have rejected it, Redmond, and it has gone—'

'How do you know?'

'I know. I know. I am left now to work it out, to stick to the tasks that held me so strongly when my moments came. You say I have success—this vulgar, tawdry, irksome, envied thing. I have it.' He had a walnut in his big hand. 'If that was

my success,' he said, and crushed it, and held it out for me to see.

'Let me tell you something, Redmond. This loss is destroying me. For two months, for ten weeks nearly now, I have done no work at all, except the most necessary and urgent duties. My soul is full of inappeasable regrets. At nights—when it is less likely I shall be recognised—I go out. I wander. Yes. I wonder what people would think of that if they knew. A Cabinet Minister, the responsible head of that most vital of all departments, wandering alone—grieving—sometimes near audibly lamenting—for a door, for a garden!'

IV

I can see now his rather pallid face, and the unfamiliar sombre fire that had come into his eyes. I see him very vividly tonight. I sit recalling his words, his tones, and last evening's *Westminster Gazette* still lies on my sofa, containing the notice of his death. At lunch today the club was busy with his death. We talked of nothing else.

They found his body very early yesterday morning in a deep excavation near East Kensington Station. It is one of two shafts that have been made in connection with an extension of the railway southward. It is protected from the intrusion of the public by a hoarding upon the high road, in which a small doorway has been cut for the convenience of some of the workmen who live in that direction. The doorway was left unfastened through a misunderstanding between two gangers, and through it he made his way . . .

My mind is darkened with questions and riddles.

It would seem he walked all the way from the House that night—he has frequently walked home during the past Session—and so it is I figure his dark form coming along the late and empty street, wrapped up, intent. And then did the pale electric lights near the station cheat the rough planking into a semblance of white? Did that fatal unfastened door awaken some memory?

Was there, after all, ever any green door in the wall at all?

I do not know. I have told his story as he told it to me. There are times when I believe that Wallace was no more than the victim of the coincidence between a rare but not unprecedented

type of hallucination and a careless trap, but that indeed is not my profoundest belief. You may think me superstitious, if you will, and foolish; but, indeed, I am more than half convinced that he had, in truth, an abnormal gift, and a sense, something—I know not what—that in the guise of wall and door offered him an outlet, a secret and peculiar passage of escape into another and altogether more beautiful world. At any rate, you will say, it betrayed him in the end. But did it betray him? There you touch the inmost mystery of these dreamers, these men of vision and the imagination. We see our world fair and common, the hoarding and the pit. By our daylight standard he walked out of security into darkness, danger, and death.

But did he see like that?

PRISCILLA AND EMILY LOFFT

GEORGE MOORE

A blackbird whistled in the garden when Emily flung the drawing-room door open and gazed into the emptiness of the old faded room, her eyes falling straightway upon a portrait painted in clear tones of two children sitting on a green bank overshadowed by trees, turning the leaves of a picture book, twins, seemingly, so like were they one to the other, light-hearted girls, with brown ringlets showering about their faces. Emily had just returned from Priscilla's grave, and the portrait telling a sunny past so plainly, warned her that henceforth she would be alone—she knew not for how long; and too terrified for tears, she began to ask herself if she could continue her life in this old house that she and Priscilla had grown up in from childhood to womanhood, everything in it associated with her sister, every room, every table and chair, dinner services and tea services, the books on the shelves and on the tables. All these things had belonged to Priscilla as much as they had to herself, and now they belonged only to her.

The old Victorian paper was still on the walls, hardly more stained or faded than it was on the first day they saw it; and in spite of her desire to put all memories behind her, she remembered her delight and Priscilla's delight at the tapestry screens in rich wools, the faint water-colours on the walls, mills and ruins and mountain streams, the school exercises of their aunts. Aunt Clara and Aunt Margaret and Aunt Jane were dead; but their handiwork remained to tell of them. Priscilla and she had often talked of repapering the room, of replacing the squab sofa by a comfortable Chesterfield. It was only last week they were considering these things, and that the red damask curtains needed cleaning. The carpets would have had to come up . . . If Priscilla had lived another month, the house would have been in the hands of the workmen; had she lived another two months, all would have been changed; and Emily asked herself if it would be harder for

her to live in a new house, a house repapered, repainted, and refurnished, a house that bore no memory of Priscilla, or to live in this old house in which her sister's presence lingered like a ghost. Every piece of furniture, every picture, reminded her of something she had said to Priscilla or Priscilla had said to her. If that bird would only cease, she muttered, and fell to thinking that she had hated to hear him sing on the day that Priscilla died. Yes, he had sung that day—she had heard him, and today he was singing, the day of the funeral, forgetful of Priscilla, who had never forgotten to scatter crumbs under the great apple tree in which he sang, or to bring a dish of water for him to drink from and to bathe in.

A blackbird was whistling in the apple boughs the evening they had come up from Mayo to live with Aunt Clara at number four, Smith's Buildings—two little children of ten, dressed in black, for their father was dead. But neither of them understood the meaning of death at that time, and Priscilla had cried out and she had cried out to their aunt to be allowed to go into the lovely garden. It wasn't a lovely garden at all then, but a wilderness, though there were many hawthorns overtopping the railings, a great ash by the gate, and a little alley of lilac bushes; and tired though they were from the long railway journey, they would have liked to run round the garden, to play perhaps a game of hide-and-seek among the lilac bushes. So it was with much sorrow that they heard their aunt tell that nobody in Smith's Buildings cared to go into the garden; it was taboo because everybody living in the five households could go into it, a reason that their minds could not apprehend, for they did not know then that a benefit extended to all appeals to none in particular. And they had gone to bed asking themselves why nobody went into the garden just because the people from the other houses might go into it. And next day and the next they cast longing eyes upon the rood of ground, filled with apple trees and lilacs and hawthorns, and begged so hard to go and play in it that Aunt Clara had perforce to think of what arrangement might be come to with the agent for the property. Her nieces were little heiresses, each owning a property in the west of Ireland that produced about three hundred a year. Out of this six hundred a year we can easily afford to pay a gardener, Aunt Clara said, and the agent was invited to call, the proposal made

to him being that Miss Lofft should have the exclusive possession of the garden on condition that she paid for its upkeep, a thing that the other tenants had refused to do. Why, they asked, should they pay for the upkeep of a garden that they never entered and did not wish to enter? But if I pay for the upkeep, and make a fine border of London Pride, and fill the beds with snapdragons, Canterbury bells, honesty, columbines, Madonna lilies, pansies, and put hollyhocks along the wall, all the other tenants will benefit by the scent and colour of the garden, Aunt Clara had said, an argument that the agent accepted, asking, however, for some rent; four pounds a year was the price of their playground, that was all, and they had enjoyed this rood of ground all their lives, since they were ten to the present day.

She dropped her head into the cushion and lay shaken with grief till she could weep no more, and when she raised her face, swollen with tears, the blackbird, that had been silent for long, broke into another rich lay, calling her thoughts again to the distant but clear past of her childhood, and the fine days under the apple tree with her sister, dressing dolls or learning the lessons that they took to the convent school at the corner of the Green. Priscilla was a little slow at her lessons, and though she looked so demure in that picture, almost dull, that was the fault of the artist; for she was not demure, at least she was not dull, and in the middle of learning French verbs would pick up her hoop and trundle it round the garden with so much joy that Emily had to pick up her hoop and trundle it after her, though she would have liked to master her lessons first. But Priscilla always had her way with her, and her thoughts dropped into consideration of her love for her sister; an almost mystical attachment it had often seemed to her, going back to the time when they had lain in the womb together. Priscilla had never seemed another being to her, but her second self, her shadow, her ghost, each akin to the other as the sound and its echo. In appearance they were the same, and she remembered how the Reverend Mother had once said: You are as alike as two casts come out of the same mould. She had said something more than that to the nun standing by, but Emily had only heard half the sentence, something about the master-hand having been over one, whereas—the rest of the sentence she did not catch, but

guessed it to be a disparagement of Priscilla, whom the convent did not appreciate, for Priscilla did not seem to them to be shaping into a prize pupil. Prize pupils were all the convent cared for, the superficial qualities with which educational grants are earned.

They were indeed as alike as two casts come out of the same mould; and this likeness was not a mere chance; it penetrated from the surface into the heart and brain. Aunt Clara had realised the importance of their likeness one to the other better than the Reverend Mother had, and dressed them alike so that others might see it, and of all, that Emily and Priscilla might be conscious of it always. So they had grown up to look upon themselves not as two but as one, and when it came for her to take Priscilla to the dressmaker, after their aunt's death, she had never allowed any change to be made. If Mrs Symond said: I think you might wear this ribbon with advantage, she always answered: I think, Mrs Symond, that we both like the ribbon you speak of. One day Mrs Symond had asked them when they were going to be presented at Court. Of course she did, for two debutantes meant many dresses for her to make. And to persuade them to do what she herself had always refrained from doing for Priscilla's sake, Mrs Symond called her assistant, and asked her to show off the dresses they were making that year. The prettiest fashions that have appeared for many a year, the dressmaker said. And they were shown berthas, flounces, plumes, stomachers, lappets, and veils. But we are not going to the Castle, are we? Priscilla had whispered, for you know, Emily, I never should have the courage to dance with a man I didn't know. But if he didn't know you, he wouldn't ask you, Emily answered. I never could grasp that three-step, Emily. I should feel such a fool. And as Emily could not go alone to the Castle, she postponed their presentation at Court till next year.

Looking back on that day at Mrs Symond's, Emily felt that it was not because Priscilla was afraid of dancing with men who had only just been introduced to her, or could not dance the three-step (Priscilla danced very well—the dancing-master had always said so), that she had shrunk, frightened at the thought of the Castle, but because some instinct warned her that they would meet their fate at the Castle. Priscilla may well

have had a premonition that at the Castle a man would rob her of her sister. But we cannot escape our fate; and they might just as well have gone to the Castle to meet different men, to dance with them, aye, to marry them, for though marriage sunders, it is not as irreparable as death. It might have been better if she had married James Mease. But none can escape her fate. Theirs was waiting for them in the Shelbourne Hotel, whither they went to see the dresses of some friends who were going to the Drawing-Room.

It was that evening she had met James Mease, a young man who at first had not attracted her—almost repelled her; but she had come to like him, and during the Castle season they saw a great deal of each other. She had lost her head, thinking of nothing else for six weeks but James Mease, who, though almost a stranger to her, had made her think she was willing to leave Priscilla to go to live with him; Priscilla was willing that it should be so. And Emily fell to thinking of Priscilla's kindness, never complaining, never saying to her: If you marry this young man I shall be left alone, but trying always to efface herself, unwilling to come between her sister and her sister's happiness. A sad happiness was that month of courtship, a great cloud coming up in her blue sky at the end of the three weeks, when James's father and mother came to Dublin to make the acquaintance of their future daughter-in-law, saying: Our son will have ten thousand pounds, but the woman he marries must bring as much. Even when added together, her share of the money from her aunt's fortune and her own money did not amount to ten thousand pounds. Priscilla was willing to sacrifice herself, to give up her money and live in the same house as James (whom she had never liked) for the sake of her sister's happiness. Emily too, though she had begun to think of James Mease differently, was willing to sacrifice herself for the same reasons as moved Priscilla; and she tried to persuade him that Priscilla would never divide them, that they would be happier together than separated, that he did not know Priscilla, or understand her, but would learn to.

She remembered the long wrangle between herself and James, up and down and along and across Stephen's Green, through many streets, by the canal, and on its bridges while the boats passed through the locks. Everything was said that

could be said, not once, but twenty, a hundred times. She had done all she could to persuade him, and had failed, saying often: But even if I wished to leave my sister, I couldn't, for she is giving up her money to satisfy your father and mother. She had clung to him till she almost hated him and was ashamed of herself. The wisest words she had uttered were on her own doorstep, when she said: I give you your liberty. He had taken her at her word, and the last news she had of him was the news of his marriage. That was her luck—that he had married and was out of her life for ever; for if he had not married and had come back to her saying: Now that your sister is gone we can marry, she would have hated him. And he was the kind of man who would have done this, unfeeling, lacking in perception, unaware always that he had divided them for a time, and was seeking to divide them for ever. He had done that, for he was the cause of Priscilla's death. Once it was known that her engagement with James Mease was broken off, they had had to go away somewhere, and where could they go to live down the scandal better than to their own lodge in the glen under Croagh Patrick? It was there, during the winter, that Priscilla caught the cold that preceded her cough. What is a cold and a cough? Emily asked herself. Nothing in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases. But there was blood-spitting with Priscilla's cough, and this had brought them to Dublin, to their friend Sir Stanley Forbes, who advised them to winter in the south.

She had not the courage to think it all out again. Of what avail was this thinking? If she could only hush her thoughts! But the mind refuses to be hushed, and a new thought suddenly presented itself, that perhaps it was Priscilla's wish that she should remain in Smith's Buildings, lest the dead might be forgotten. The dead are never really dead, Emily said, until we cease to think of them. I should always be thinking of her, wherever I was. But if she wills it . . . And sitting on the little rep sofa, her eyes brimming with occasional tears, she bethought herself of the life that awaited her without Priscilla, alone in the world, without parents or relations. Aunt Clara was gone; a few distant cousins there were, dispersed over the world; a few neighbours, a few friends, scattered through Dublin; but nobody whom she could love. Lonely evenings, she said, the words provoked by the sight of the books in the

bookcase, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, Anthony Trollope, Mrs Henry Wood and Charlotte Yonge. All these she and Priscilla had read together on either side of the fireplace. They had been reading *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* and were but half-way through the story; it would remain unread now, for she would not care to finish it since she could not share it with Priscilla. And she began to think of that strange death that none had foreseen. Sir Stanley was disappointed that the winter in the south had not shown a greater improvement in Priscilla's health; she was thin, and white like a magnolia, his very words. But he did not anticipate that death was so near. I know he didn't, she said, speaking aloud. I know he didn't, she repeated, rising from the sofa, as if to give emphasis to her belief that the doctor had not suspected death to be so near.

After wandering around the faded room aimlessly, the doctor's study, by the spell of contrast, appeared to her, and she saw the old man, with his short, clipped beard, sitting in his Chippendale chair on the left of the carved Italian fireplace, all the carved tops of the bookcases, the infoliated mirrors with their perching birds, the inlaid tables, the bronzes and the vases. Was the rest of her life to be spent in collecting furniture and china? she asked herself; and returning to the sofa she began to listen, in her imagination, to the doctor, hearing him tell her that he did not despair of Priscilla's ultimate recovery if she avoided living within doors as far as possible. Tuberculosis, he said, is contracted in byres and houses, never in the open air; and since you have a garden when you can sleep in hammocks every night it is not raining, I don't see that you can do any better than to remain in Dublin. In the autumn you will go south again, where you will spend, I hope, as much of your time as possible in the open air. These were his very words. But despite all her care, Priscilla's health did not improve, remaining about the same.

Emily's thoughts concentrated on a few yards beyond the gates of Smith's Buildings, for half-way between these gates and the doctor's house last Friday she had met Esther Nunan coming from number four. Your maid told me that you were out, Esther said, and when I asked if Priscilla was at home, I learnt she had just come in from the garden and had gone up to her room to lie down, feeling rather poorly. Emily

remembered repeating the words: Feeling rather poorly, and then turning suddenly, she said: I think I'll go for the doctor and bring him home with me. He spoke of a bad sore throat, and wrote a prescription for a gargle; but Priscilla could not gargle, her throat being too swollen. She drank a little milk that evening, and during the night her breathing became more and more difficult. And all next day she struggled, dying towards evening, Sir Stanley's opinion being that the consumption from which she was suffering had flown to her throat and choked her. An ulceration of the larynx was the only explanation he could give of Priscilla's sudden death.

Emily buried her face in the cushions to shut out the sight of Priscilla's struggles for breath; she could not endure the memory of them, and it was not until she had exhausted her tears that she remembered a fact forgotten till now, that Priscilla had died struggling for speech. She had died with something on her mind; and Emily bethought herself of the paper and pencil that Priscilla had signed to her for. She had given her both, and waited anxiously, but Priscilla was not able to write; her hand fell away, and Emily read in her eyes: I cannot speak, I cannot write. It now seemed to her that she had only read Priscilla's eyes superficially. In her remembrance of them they seemed to say: I would give all the world to tell you, But I cannot.

Now what could Priscilla have had to tell me? she asked herself, forgetful of her grief for the moment. We had no secrets from each other, and yet Priscilla died with something upon her mind, something that she had not told me, something that she desired above all things to confide to me. What could it be? They had never been separated; only at Aix had they ever occupied different rooms. And her thoughts passing out of Dublin back to Aix-les-Bains, to the day they arrived there, to the moment when the carriage stopped in front of the boarding-house, Emily remembered saying: *Vous avez une chambre à coucher?* But when it came to saying: Can we have a double-bedded room? she began to stammer: *Nous voulons un lit double*, at which the proprietresses' face changed expression. We haven't any double-bedded rooms, she answered, but you can have two small rooms for the same price on the same floor. The thought of different rooms had frightened her, and they were about to tell the porter to

replace their luggage in the carriage, when the proprietress warned them that they would find it very hard to get a double-bedded room in any of the hotels. It being the height of the season, she said, you may not be able to get a room at all. And have to sleep in the streets, Emily whispered to Priscilla, forgetful that the proprietress spoke English. The nights are very cold, the proprietress answered, and the thought of the danger that a cold night might be to Priscilla compelled her to accept the two rooms, which, after all, were in the same corridor. I will come and unlace your dress for you, and call you in the morning, Priscilla, so after all it won't matter much. You won't be frightened, dear, and will not forget to lock your door?

The proprietress had promised that as soon as a double-bedded room was vacant, they should have it, but nobody left for weeks, and the room that was offered to them at last didn't seem to please Priscilla. It wasn't a very good room, it is true, but she wouldn't have minded sharing it with Priscilla, and perhaps Priscilla wouldn't have minded sharing it with her, but— It may have been only a fancy, but she fancied that Priscilla had come to like a room to herself; or perhaps Priscilla thought that it would be safer for them to occupy different rooms; she might have heard of the danger, or had an instinct of it. Be this as it may, Priscilla never forgot to lock her door, except once, and she was about to reprove Priscilla for her carelessness—the words were on her lips, but were stayed by the sight of Priscilla's embarrassment at the sudden intrusion. It had seemed to her that something was thrust under the pillow; she was about to ask Priscilla what she was hiding, and she wished now that she had asked her, for if she had things might have turned out differently. But the fact that Priscilla should hide anything from her had hurt her so deeply that she asked no questions, and after unlacing Priscilla's dress left the room abruptly.

This was the first and only misunderstanding that had ever occurred between them; and it must be something relating to that evening, perhaps it was about the book or letter, whatever she had thrust under the sofa pillow, that Priscilla wished to tell her. But no; for she had written on a piece of paper: In the garden, or words that read like: In the garden. What connection could the garden of Smith's Buildings have with

Aix-les-Bains? It was sad, it was heartbreaking, that Priscilla should have had a secret from her, but it was worse that she should have died unable to tell it. At the memory of Priscilla's hand dropping away from the paper, unable to write, tears rose to Emily's eyes, and she began to think it was her duty to start for Aix to enquire the matter out at the hotel. But what could the proprietress tell her? The key to Priscilla's secret was not in Aix but in the words she had written: In the garden. One word more would have been enough, and that word was withheld from her, and she stood thinking, wondering, not whether she would ever be happy again, but if she would be less unhappy than she was today.

Her friends were not unmindful; all were anxious to help, but their efforts to detach her thoughts from the gone were unavailing. Emily acquiesced in their proposals for drives, but her thoughts were far away, and once when the friend sitting beside her asked what was the matter, she answered: The matter is that Priscilla is dead. And during the summer months, alone in Dublin, she indulged her grief till grief became a companion, a friend, which she clung to desperately, dreading its decline or death, feeling that her grief was all that remained to her now of Priscilla, asking herself often what she would be without it, answering that she would hate herself, all self-respect would be taken from her. But in grief, as in all human things, there is a grain of insincerity. Who can say for certain that he is sincere, who can say for certain that he believes? In the midst of our deepest emotions we are acting a comedy with ourselves; within us one self is always mocking another self. And it came to pass that Emily did not dare to recall Priscilla trying to write something on a piece of paper which she wished to communicate to her, for to recall that moment would be to seek tears, and sought tears are contemptible; and Emily was ashamed and looked upon herself as a hypocrite.

But grief, like everything else, changes, and Emily very soon began to notice that her grief was no longer the same as it was when tears and sobs were frequent. Her grief became, as it were, more spiritual, and it often fell out that while she was working in the garden Priscilla returned to her, in her thought, of course, but it seemed to her that she often saw her sister passing across the sward from the potting shed, and so clearly

that she could not do else than leave the bed she was weeding. But not many steps were taken before the dear phantom vanished; and the pain that these visitations caused her was so like physical pain that she clasped her heart with her hand. In the evening, as she sat reading in the old faded room, she often saw her lost sister, not when she looked up, expecting to see her, but when her thoughts were away from her. It was then that Priscilla crossed the room, looking back as if to assure herself that her sister was there. If Emily called her sister's name, if she rose from her seat, the appearance vanished, but as long as she looked steadily she saw Priscilla, not wan and shadowy as a ghost, but plainly, as in the flesh.

At times it seemed to her that her sister returned to ask her help, but could not speak her wish. The Priscilla that she saw come out of the back drawing-room, was the Priscilla who had tried to write on the piece of paper, but could write only three words: *In the garden*. Emily longed to help her sister, but she was powerless, and it was her powerlessness to help that detained her in Dublin, for she could never quell the thought that Priscilla's secret would be revealed to her one day. How and when, she knew not, so she had perforce to deny herself to her friends, who were leaving Dublin for the summer months. Mountain and river scenery were proposed to her in vain, and if her resolution to wait for a sign wavered, as it sometimes did, the words: *In the garden*, repeated themselves in her mind. And under their sway one day she left the house and descended the steps into the garden, and looked round, thinking that the secret was about to be revealed to her.

But she heard no voice and saw no phantom in the lilac alley, where she expected to meet one, and the days and the weeks and even years went by, till one day a sudden shower of rain drove her for shelter to the potting-shed; and while waiting there, amidst the dust and cobwebs, hearing the rain patter on the large, heart-shaped leaves of the lilac, she noticed that one of the few planks piled against the wall of the shed had fallen awry, and that behind it was something that looked like a book. She moved the plank a little to one side, and found a French book and a dictionary. Left here by Priscilla, she said to herself. At the same moment the words: *In the garden*, came into her mind, and she stood tremulous, thinking of Priscilla, retiring in secret to the potting

shed to read this book. But why were her last thoughts about it? Emily asked herself, as she turned the book over, a thick one, closely printed. That the book contained something of importance to Priscilla and to herself she had no doubt, and the rain having ceased she went towards the house and began to read, continuing to read till supper time, the book dropping upon her knees from time to time. To think that it had come to pass that such a one as Priscilla had read this book, and with a dictionary! For the subject of it was a woman who was unfaithful to her husband with two different men, written in a French that must have puzzled Priscilla, so elaborate and careful was it. It often sent Emily to the dictionary, and she knew more French than her sister (Priscilla had never been able to master the verbs at school, and at Aix she had never tried to improve herself by talking or reading, whereas Emily had grappled with French speech at the table d'hôte, and all the books she read were French). The name of the Aix book-seller was upon the dictionary, and during supper Emily thought of the purchase of the dictionary, saying to herself as she went upstairs to the drawing-room: It was the dictionary or the book that Priscilla hid under the soft pillow the night she forgot to lock her door and I entered unexpectedly. On this remembrance she threw herself into an armchair and continued her reading of Priscilla's book, and it was not long before she came to a passage that caused it to drop upon her knees once again.

For in the chapter she had just read it was related how the heroine's bedchamber was in a distant wing of the house, only one other bedchamber being near it, and that as the heroine passed she knocked at the door of the spare room; and while waiting for her lover, began her preparations for the night before a toilet table covered with cut-glass bottles. And before this table, the lady, garbed in the finest muslin, sat combing her hair with tortoiseshell combs and brushing it with ivory brushes for the admiration of her lover, who sat watching, flattered that his lady should deem him worth of so much thought and expensive care.

Again Emily paused in her reading to ponder on the woman represented in the book, and to remember the words of a man she had heard discourse at the table d'hôte at Aix. The

subject of his discourse was that men and women were made of the same stuff in all ages, the stuff coming into the world the same, to be immediately modified by circumstance; and in proof of his theory, he told that France had produced in the sixteenth century the most beautiful poetry that the world had ever known, reciting some short poems which had seemed very beautiful to her so far as she could judge. Yet poetry, the man said, had left France like a migrating bird, not to return again for more than two hundred years. Might we not infer that men might lose their moral sense, to return to it later, and to lose it again? And now, making application of what she had heard at Aix to the woman in the book, Emily sat thinking that though men and women might be immoral in France, they might be moral in Ireland. It seemed to her hard to believe that a woman had ever lived in Ireland so licentious as the woman in the book, even during the Protestant ascendancy. It was impossible to believe that Aunt Clara, for instance, or Aunt Margaret, or Aunt Jane, had ever conducted themselves as the woman in the book did, or would have found pleasure in reading this book that Priscilla had brought home from France.

Emily sat thinking, almost forgetful of the people in the fiction, admitting, however, to herself that the book was written in a style that beguiled the reader, one which she could appreciate. She would have liked to read on for the sake of the style, but Priscilla had never read for style. She was not interested in literature for its own sake, and the questions that Priscilla had put to her about married life, asking why James would not consent to live with them both, left no doubt in her mind that Priscilla was altogether ignorant of the relations between men and women. It was therefore extraordinary that such a book as this should have come into Priscilla's hands, and that she should have taken enough pleasure in the reading of it to buy a dictionary. She was dying, it is true, and knew that she was dying, and no doubt felt death to be near her, almost impending. Might she not therefore have availed herself of the chance that had put this book into her hands to learn before she died something of the world she was about to leave? A morbid desire, no doubt, hardly legitimate, but comprehensible. She might have felt,

Emily continued, that she had never looked on the true face of life, but on a mask, and that of the true face she could only catch a glimpse in a book. It would have been better, perhaps, if the book had not come into her hands, for what did it profit her to learn what the world was? Better that she should have gone out of it thinking it pure, good, and kind—much better.

But how did the book come into Priscilla's hands? Did a man give it to her? But Priscilla was intimate with no man; she hardly answered when spoken to at the table d'hôte. The mystery seemed to grow denser. The book must have been given to her, Emily continued, or she must have found it. But where could she find it? In her bedroom—there was nowhere else. And then—?

Emily struggled to carry the story on, but she could not move it a step further, till one day there came a great rush of thought. Some previous occupant of Priscilla's room at Aix might have forgotten the book; it might have been left in a wardrobe or chest of drawers. But the housemaids could not have overlooked it. Another rush of thought! The book may have dropped behind the chest of drawers and was caught between it and the wall, and when Priscilla moved the chest of drawers the book fell. This conjecture seemed more in character with what she knew of Priscilla than any other. But much remained to be accounted for, and she could not think how it was that Priscilla had brought back to England a book that did not belong to her. Several days passed in vain conjectures, and she remembered at last that having found the book Priscilla could not take it downstairs to the office and say: A previous occupant left this book in my room. The proprietress would open it, and would at once suspect that Priscilla had read it; nor could Priscilla leave the book where she had found it, for when the room was next turned out the story would begin to run that the quiet English girl, as demure as an image, read improper books in her bedroom. A moment after, Emily discovered another link. Priscilla could not burn the book, for there were no fires; she was ashamed to confess to her sister that she had seen the book, and thinking that she could get rid of it in Ireland, she had slipped it into her placket and travelled over with it, to her great inconvenience. Her thought might have been to bury it in the garden when

she had finished reading it. But she had never finished it, and Emily was glad that Priscilla was spared the end. She had read enough, however, to know that the book was a disgrace.

And it was to burn this book that her spirit has kept me here, Emily said, raising her eyes to the clock, which was striking twelve, two hours after her usual bedtime. Yet she could not go to bed before she had accomplished some of her duty to Priscilla, and she sat up till one, tearing paper from the book and watching the text disappear into black ashes. But a book is not burnt quickly, and she had to take a large remnant of it to her room, for she did not dare leave it torn for the servants to look into, since they might suspect something, though it was in French. Nowhere would it be safe except under her pillow; and if she were to die that night and be found dead with it under her pillow!

But death did not come to take her that night, and the next evening what remained of the book perished in the grate, and as the last page curled and blackened, she began to apprehend all that the burning of the book meant to her. Now that it was gone she was free to leave this dusty old house and the dusty conventions in which half her life had been spent. She was free to return to Aix and to live like other English spinsters on a small income, travelling whither she listed, from one boarding-house to another, seeking— Does anybody do more than to seek and to find, mayhap, something? Does any woman find even the shadow of her dream at thirty-five? she asked. Her thoughts began to doze again, and whilst she dozed the day returned to the garden and the blackbird whistled again in the dusk. But would she be able to match that bird's song again? Once, ah, once; and between waking and dream she rose to her feet and went upstairs, forgetful of all things but her bed.

SORWORTH PLACE

RUSSELL KIRK

'But the age of chivalry is gone . . . The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone. It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half the evil, by losing all its grossness.'

—EDMUND BURKE,
Reflections on the Revolution in France

In defiance of a faint ancient charm that perfumes its name, Sorworth today is a dirty and dreary little town, fouled by the colliery since the pit was sunk and a blot of hideous industrial workers' houses began to spread about it. The lanes are half derelict, now that the pit approaches exhaustion. At a turn of the High Street, or down close off the Back Vennel, some fragments of old Scots masonry stand yet amidst a welter of hoardings and 'fish restaurants' and corrugated iron roofing.

To damp Sorworth, of all places, Mr Ralph Bain, M.C., had contrived to drift at the end of a month of purposeless nights in 'family and commercial' hotels or bare village taverns across three counties. Drinks with strangers in one village, listless games of cards in the next town, inconsequential talks on buses or trains, dull glimpses of a pleasant wood there, an old church here: thus February had run out, and the next little pension cheque would be forwarded to him at Sorworth, which spot he had chosen at random as his address for the first few days of March.

Bain lounged by the door of the King's Arms in his old tweeds (with the cigarette-burns neatly darned), and felt the crack in his skull more vexatious than usual, and shifted his

long legs languidly. Sorworth had nothing to show him. But what place had? He lit a cigarette, though he already had smoked three more this morning than he once resolved to allow himself out of the indispensable pension cheque.

At that moment, a girl came out of a provision shop across the square, walking obliquely past the market-cross in the direction of the King's Arms; and Bain, one hand cupped to shelter his match, his face inclined slightly downward, noticed the remarkable grace of her little feet. He glanced lazily up; then he threw away his match, let his cigarette go unlit, and instinctively straightened. He had not seen this lady before, but in that second it passed through his mind, whimsically, 'Perhaps she's what drew me to Sorworth.'

Surely a man might travel a great way without meeting such a face as hers—pale, very pale, with lips a glowing natural red, and black hair gathered with taste at the back of her head into a heavy roll that rested upon her firm shoulders. Her chin too, was delicately firm. She carried herself with a dignity that seems to be dying from modern life, looking straight ahead, as if in some reverie that walled her away from the grossness of Sorworth—yet not (Bain judged from her mouth) a reverie wholly pleasant. Among the mill girls and shop assistants and bedraggled housewives in Sorworth, there was none anything like her; and few anywhere else. As she passed by the King's Arms, she seemed to notice Bain; their eyes met, briefly; then she lowered her lashes, unsmiling, and was gone up the Vennel.

'Och, she's a bonnie one, Mrs Lurlin.' Happening to come to the door as the girl passed by, old MacLeod, who kept the King's Arms, had followed Bain's long look. 'There wullna be her like for aye, Mr Bain—not at auld Sorworth Place.' MacLeod shook his head portentously. In his youth he had been a gardener at some house of Lord Bute's, and he continued to hold the county families in profound respect, muttering sourly about Communists among the miners who drank in his bar.

'She's young to have the care of a big house,' said Bain, relapsed into lethargy, and lighting his cigarette at last.

'Aye, and wee tae be widowed, sir. Noo the hoose—she canna hope tae keep it in the auld way, ye ken. Twa maids, and they carlines fu' o' girnings, sir: sma' comfort in a cauld hoose that's na sae canny, when a's said. It will be rack

and ruin, forbye, wi' half the grand hooses in the county.' And MacLeod proceeded to expatiate on his favourite topics, the decay of old families and the follies of socialism.

'A widow?' put in Bain, lifting his heavy eyelids a bit. 'She couldn't have been married a great while. What was this Lurlin like?'

'Be wha' he was, sir, the gentleman's dead, dead the year noo, Mr Bain; and sma' gude claverin' o' men in the grave.' That said, MacLeod turned back into his pub; but Bain, surprised at this reticence in a publican who ordinarily manifested a full share of Scottish censoriousness, followed him.

'He didn't die in the war?' inquired Bain.

'Na, na,' said MacLeod, thus brought to bay; and, presently, 'The drink, sir, the drink; that, and mair. Dinna mistake me, Mr Bain. The Lurlins were braw auld blude; aye, but this Mr Alastair Lurlin, he wasna o' the proper line, ye ken—na mair than a cousin. Mr Hamish Lurlin, the auld laird, died seven years syne, and his twa sons were shot in Libya, first Alexander, then Hew. A' three death duties maun be paid, and the cousin comes tae what's left. Last year, this Mr Alastair dies: mair duties. Weel, Mrs Lurlin keeps the hoose, and the policies, and a bit moor besides. Ninety thousand acres Lurlin o' Sorworth had, before the first war. Noo, but a hoose wha's unco cauld and clammy. Come awa' upstairs, sir, if ye be sae fascinated'—this a trifle spitefully—'and ye can see the auld Place frae the attic, if ye ha' gude een.'

From a garret window of the King's Arms, they looked over the pantiles and corrugated iron roofs of the shabby town toward a serrated ridge some miles westward. On a flank of that hill, Bain just could make out the grey shape of a big ancient house, wraithlike against the heather and gorse and bracken. 'There'll be nane aulder in the county,' said MacLeod.

Bain went down alone to the parlour, sat some minutes before the doddering fire, and then addressed a note to Mrs Lurlin, Sorworth Place. He was, he wrote truthfully enough, rather a dilettante in architecture; recently he had heard her house spoken of as remarkable; he would be glad to see it, if no inconvenience would be caused; and he would be in Sorworth the rest of the week. After some hesitation, he

signed himself 'M.C.': the Military Cross, after all, was one of his few remaining links with decent society, and he had the right to use it.

This letter posted, he went up to his room, brushed his old tweed suit, and glanced at himself in the mirror: the heavy eyes, the long and regular features weakened by lines of indecision, the defiant half-grin of bravado. He grimaced, and the suture in the back of his head—a memento of the shell fragment that had given him his pension—wincd in sympathy. To escape from self-dislike, he went down to the bar, very like fleeing from the cell into the jailyard.

Late the next afternoon an answer to his note came, written in a small round hand, which said that Mr Bain would be shown about Sorworth Place if he should call on Thursday afternoon, and was signed 'Ann Lurlin'. The firm signature put Bain in mind of Mrs Lurlin's elegant, pale look; and he spent most of the intervening evening and night and morning in a reverie of nearly forgotten faces, men he had alienated by his negligence or his improvidence, women he had found hollow or who had found him exasperating. None of these ever thought of him now, even when dreaming before the fire. And why should they?

Shortly past noon on Thursday, he walked along an empty road toward the ridge called Sorworth Law; the road became a lane between high and crumbling stone dykes; and then he was at the entrance to a neglected park on the side of a hill, its gates vanished, its gatelodge empty, all its larger trees felled by some timber merchant and the stumps left among heaps of dead leaves. Bain turned up the drive, and soon he could see, on the bare slope above, the massive stone shape of the Place of Sorworth.

Two square towers, at either end; and between them, extending also far to the rear, an immense block of building, in part ashlar, but mostly rubble. None of this, except a fine large window, above the entrance, was later than the seventeenth century, and most was far older. An intricacy of crowstepped gables, turrets, dormers, and chimneys confused one's eyes when they roved upward. All in all, the Place was an admirable example of the Scots mansion house unprettified by Balmoralism. A flight of heavy stone steps led up to the

door, and on either side of the entrance projected a conical-capped turret, each supported at its base by an enormous corbel, curiously bevelled.

Some rods to the north, could be made out to be what was left of a detached building, the roof of it gone—a chapel, perhaps. So far as Bain could see, there were only two entrances; the grand portal, and a small heavy door with a wrought-iron grill before it, that probably gave upon the kitchen. At the angles of either tower, musket-holes or arrow-loops, some blocked with mortar, the rest now closed with small panes of glass, flanked the entrance. The roofs were of ancient stone slabs.

Away at the back, the stout dykes of a walled garden closed the view, although Bain could hear the rushing of a burn somewhere in that direction. The lawn before the Place was unkempt, no better than pastures; and there, in one of the towers and even in the main block, a broken pane glinted in the afternoon sun, and all about the strong grey house hung a suggestion of neglect and impoverishment that would have been more clearly manifest, doubtless, had not the mansion been so severe and rugged in its very character. The huge window of what must be the great hall broke the solidity of the façade just above the main door. Between this window and the doorway below, Bain perceived, as he climbed the steps, a terribly weathered coat of arms executed in a soft red sandstone, appended to it some pious inscription in venerably barbarous Scots-Latin characters, most of them indecipherable. He could read only the two words which composed the last line: L-A-R-V-A R-E-S-U-R-G-A-T. *Larva Resurgat?* Why *larva*, rather than *spiritus*? The old lairds sometimes put things quaintly. He found no bell and so banged at the oaken door with a rusty knocker.

After an interval of leaden silence, the door was pulled ajar a bit, and a sour woman's face peeked round it. Bain asked to be announced. The fat maid let him into a little round room with naked stone walls, at the stairfoot, and locked the door again and then conducted him up a twisting stone stair in one of the entrance turrets—its treads scooped hollow by centuries of feet—to a gigantic vaulted chamber, well lighted: the hall. It was fitted with sixteenth-century panelling, painted with heraldic symbols and family crests. The air was cold, the

yawning medieval fireplace quite empty; here and there a Jacobean carved cupboard, or the polished surface of a table, or a tapestried chair endeavoured to apologise for the emptiness of the Place. None of the furniture seemed in good repair. Bain sat gingerly on a Chippendale piece, while the maid scurried off to some hidie-hole in this labyrinth of a house.

After three or four minutes, Mrs Lurlin came down to him, emerging from behind a door concealed by a hanging. A faint smile hovered on her fine lips, her eyes met his composedly, and Bain thought her most beautiful, in an antique fashion. 'I'll show you the curiosities of this draughty place, Mr Bain,' she said, in a low voice with an agreeable suggestion of west coast accent about it, 'if you'll pledge yourself to ignore the dust and damp. I've nothing left but the house and the policies and a bit of moor, you know—not even a home farm.'

Bain hardly knew what he said in reply, for she unsettled him, as if he had been shaken awake. Then Mrs Lurlin led him up disused stairs and down into vaulted cellars and through chambers with mouldering tapestries and Lord knows where else. Almost all these interminable rooms were empty.

'Most was gone before the place became mine,' said Mrs Lurlin, without visible embarrassment, 'but I had to sell what was left of the furniture, except for a few sticks in the really necessary rooms. I suppose the wreckers will buy the house when I'm dead. You can sell an eighteenth-century house, just possibly, in spite of rates, but not a behemoth like this. I can't afford to live here; but I can't afford to go away, either. Do you have some great barn of this sort, Mr Bain?'

'I haven't even a cottage,' Bain told her, 'or a stick of furniture.' He thought her black eyes remarkably candid.

She took him up to the summit of one of the towers, where they stood in the wind and looked over the braes that parallel the den of Sorworth Water as it twists down to the sharp-toothed long skerries where it meets the sea. From this height they could see quite clearly the surf on the rocks, and, some distance south, smoke from the fishing village of Sorworthness. Sorworth Water was in spate. Just at the tower's foot, the den veered right up to the castle, so that a stone which Bain tossed over the rampart bounced down a steep slope

into the roaring burn. In the rough old days, the lairds of Sorworth had the security of a strongly situated house. 'You're not afraid of heights, Mr Bain?' asked this young woman.

'No,' he said. 'I've climbed a good deal.'

'I fancy you're afraid of very little,' she observed, lifting her eyebrows slightly. 'Do you know that I happened to see you in the square two days ago? I thought you looked like a soldier. What were you?'

He had been a captain, he told her.

'Come down into the policies, Captain Bain,' she said. As they descended, he bumped his head against a window ledge, and cried out involuntarily. She stopped, with an exclamation of sympathy.

'A mortar put a crack in my skull,' Bain apologised, 'and I'm still tender, and probably always will be.'

'Does it pain you much, Captain Bain?'

'No; but perhaps I ought to tell you that it makes me a trifle odd, now and then. Or so people seem to think.' He did not mind confiding this to her: perhaps it was the oddity he had just acknowledged, but at the moment they two seemed to him the only realities in an infinity of shadows.

'So much the better,' she said, still lower—either that or something of the sort.

'I beg your pardon, Mrs Lurlin?'

'I mean this, Captain Bain; we seem to be birds of a feather. People hereabouts think I am rather odd. Sorworth Place is soaked in oddity. The maids won't stay. I've only one, now; the other went last week, and even Margaret, who's left, won't sleep in—she goes down to her son's cottage. I don't suppose you know why Janet went, unless someone at the King's Arms told you the gossip. Well, Janet wouldn't stay because she thought something whispered to her in the cellars. Poor timid creature! It was all fancy; for if anything were to whisper, you know, it would whisper to *me*. Would you like to see the garden? Most of it has gone back, of course.'

They poked about the overgrown walks of the policies, talking of trifles, and presently strayed near the chapel ruin. 'May I glance inside?' asked Bain.

'There's very little . . .' she answered, somewhat sharply. But

Bain already had passed through the broken doorways. Some defaced sixteenth- and seventeenth-century monuments were fixed to the walls, and a litter of leaves encumbered the pavement. Where his feet scattered these, Bain noticed two or three ancient bronze rings fixed in stone slabs; and, being rather vain of his strength of arm, he bent, gripped one of them, and pulled upward. The stone lifted very slightly, though it was heavy, and when Bain let go the ring, the slab settled back with a dull reverberation.

'O, for God's sake, stop!'

He swung round to her. That delicate pallor of her young face had gone grey; she clutched at the door moulding for support. Bain took her hands in his, to save her from falling, and led her toward the house. 'What is it, Mrs Lurlin?' He felt mingled alarm and pleasure thus to have a bond between them—even the terror in her eyes.

'You shouldn't have done that! He's under, just under!'

Of course! In his wool-gathering, Bain had nearly forgotten this girl ever had a husband. He muttered something awkward, in his contrition: 'I thought . . . with the leaves about, and everything so neglected, you know . . . I thought no one would have been laid there this century.'

She was calmer now, and they re-entered the house through the kitchen door. 'I know. They shouldn't have put anyone there, after all this time. His uncle and grandfather are in the kirkyard in the village, and his two cousins. But he had himself buried in the old crypt; he wrote it into his will. Do you understand why? Because he knew I'd loathe it. I think tea will be ready, Captain Bain.'

At the tea table, in a pleasant corner room of one tower, she was cool and even witty. Bain saw in her a girl become woman in some short space, a year or two, perhaps; she was charming and possibly wise. But something stirred woefully, now and again, beneath this pretty surface. The afternoon went rapidly and smoothly. When it was time for Bain to leave, she went with him to the great door; and she said, deliberately, 'Come to tea tomorrow, too, if you like.'

Startled, Bain hesitated; and she caught him up, with just the hint of a flash in her eyes, before he had said anything. 'But don't trouble, Captain Bain, if you're to be busy.'

'I'm never busy, Mrs Lurlin,' he told her, unable to repress

his old arrogant grin. 'Shall I be frank? I was surprised that you should ask me. I'm thoroughly *declassé*.'

She looked at him steadily. 'I believe you're decent. I have no friends, and I hate to be solitary here, day on day. I'm afraid to be alone.'

'I wouldn't take you to be timid, Mrs Lurlin.'

'Don't you understand? I thought you'd guessed.' She came a trifle closer to Bain; and she said, in her low sweet voice, 'I'm afraid of my husband.'

Bain stared at her. 'Your husband? I understood—I thought that he's dead.'

'Quite,' said Ann Lurlin.

Somewhere in that Minoan maze of a house, a board or table creaked; the wind rattled a sash; and this little room at the stairfoot was musty. 'You know, don't you?' Mrs Lurlin whispered. 'You know something's near.'

Bain stayed on at the King's Arms, and every afternoon he walked up the barren lawn to Sorworth Place for tea. Some days he came early, and with Mrs Lurlin he tramped over the Muir of Sorworth, talking of books and queer corners and the small things of nature. Ann Lurlin, he perceived, was one of those women, now unhappily rare, who delight in knowing about squirrels' habits and in watching field mice and peeking into birds' nests, with a childlike curiosity quite insatiable.

On one afternoon, they reached the summit of the Law and looked back upon the Place. A vast twisted oak, still bare of new leaves, stood halfway between them and the house, its black branches outlined like fingers against the grey of the distant mansion. This was the finest of many brave views on the Muir of Sorworth, and they could see the colliery, a dismal smudge far down in the valley, and the red roofs of Sorworth village, at this remove still seeming the douce market town that it once had been. In the several days that had elapsed since Bain's first call, Mrs Lurlin had not touched upon the theme of her parting shot at the stairfoot, and Bain had been content to let that field lie fallow. But now she clutched his arm, and he sensed that the mood was upon her again.

She was looking intently toward a rise of ground this side of

the oak. 'Do you—' She checked herself, and said, instead, 'Do I seem rational to you, Captain?'

She did, he told her; but he said nothing of all the rest he felt about her.

'I am going to put your confidence to the test.' He observed that her charming lips were pressed tightly together, when for a moment she was silent. 'Do you think you see anything between us and that tree?'

Bain studied the face of the moor. At first he detected nothing; then, for just an instant, it seemed as if some large stooping creature had hurried from one hillock to another, perhaps its back showing above the bracken. 'I don't know, Mrs Lurlin,' he said, a bit too quickly. 'A dog?'

'It didn't seem like a dog to you, now, did it?' She looked into his eyes, and then turned her sleek head back toward the moor.

'No. I suppose it's a man out ferreting.' But he let his inflexion rise toward the end of the sentence.

'No one keeps ferrets here, Captain Bain. I'm glad you saw it, too, because I feel less mad. But I don't think anyone else would have made it out. You saw it because you know me so well, and—and because of that crack in your poor head, perhaps. I fancy it makes you sensitive to certain things.'

Bain thought it kindest to be blunt: he asked her what way she was rowing.

'Let's sit down here on the heather, then,' she went on, 'where we can see for a good way round. I'd rather not talk about this when we're in the house. First I ought to say something about my husband.'

Perceiving that all this hurt her, Bain murmured that he had been told her late husband had been no credit to the family.

'No,' said Ann Lurlin, 'no. Have you read Trollope, Captain? Perhaps you remember how he describes Sir Florian, in *The Eustace Diamonds*. Sir Florian Eustace had only two flaws—"he was vicious, and he was dying." Now Lizzie Eustace married Florian knowing these things; but I didn't know them about my husband when I married. I hadn't any money, and no relative left worth naming. Alastair—though he looked sick, even then—had manners. I don't suppose I wanted to look very closely. Afterward, I found he was foul.'

Bain dug his fingers into the heather.

'If we were to walk down toward that tree,' said Mrs Lurlin, after a silence, 'I don't think we'd meet anything, not yet. I don't believe there's any—any *body* to what we saw. I fancy it was only a kind of presentiment. I've been alone here, more than once, and caught a glimpse of something and made myself hunt; but nothing ever was there.'

'Supposing a thing like that could—could rise,' Bain interjected, stealthily surveying the bracken, 'why should he have power over you? You're not foul.'

She did not seem to hear him. 'He wanted everything to be vile, and me to be vilest of all. Sometimes I think it was the pain of dying in him that made him try to befoul everything. When he found he couldn't break me, he cursed like a devil, really as if he were in hell. But I stayed with him, to his last day; I was his wife, whatever he was. Most of the time he lay with his eyes shut, only gasping; but in the evening, when he was nearly gone, I could see he was trying to speak, and I bent down, and he smirked and whispered to me, "You think you've won free, Ann? No. Wait a year. I'll want you then."'

'A year?' asked Bain.

'It will be a year next Friday. Now I'm going to confess something.' She turned her little body so that her eyes looked directly into Bain's. 'When I saw you in the square, I wondered if I could use you. I had some notion that I might stick a life between myself and . . . You looked no better than a dare-devil. Do you mind my saying that? Something in me whispered, "He was made to take chances; that's what he's good for." I meant you to come to see me. I don't suppose it flatters you, Ralph, to have been snared by a madwoman.'

'No,' Bain answered her, 'You're not mad. We both may be dolls in someone's dream, Ann, but you're not mad.'

'And you'd best go, for good,' she told him. 'I don't want to stain you with this, now that I know you. I want you to go away.'

'You can't dismiss me,' Bain contrived to grin his old grin. 'I'm not in your net. But how am I to get into your mind, Ann? How am I to stand between you and what your memory calls up?'

'If it were only memory and fancy, I could bear it.' She shut her eyes. 'A glimpse of him in a dream, a trick of imagination when I turn a dark corner, the shape dodging on

the moor—those might pass away. But I think he's coming . . . Now you'll know I'm fit for Bedlam. I think he's coming—well, in the flesh, or something like.'

'Nonsense!' said Bain.

'Very well, then, I'm mad. But you'll bear with me, Ralph? Perhaps something in me calls him; possibly I even control him, after a fashion. But I think he'll be here Friday night.'

Believing she might faint, Bain put his big hand behind her head. 'If you really think that, Ann, leave the house, and we'll go to Edinburgh or London or where you like. We'll leave now.'

'Where could I live?' She nodded toward the grey castle. 'It's all I have—not even enough to pay my rent anywhere else. And then, it would make no difference. I think he'd follow me. He wants life to drag down with him. Either he must break me, or he must be broken somehow himself, before he'll rest.'

Bain sat awhile, and presently said, 'Do you want me to watch in Sorworth Place on Friday night, Ann?'

She turned her head away, as if ashamed of her selfishness. 'I do.'

It passed through his mind that she might think he was making a rake's bargain with her, over this wild business. A bargain he might have made with another woman, or even with this one at another time, he admitted to himself, but not with a woman beside herself with terror. 'You understand, Ann,' he blurted, 'that I'm asking nothing of you, not now.'

'I know,' she whispered, her face still averted. 'I'm offering nothing—nothing but your death of fright.' Then she tried to laugh. 'Who'd think, to look at you, Captain Bain, that you're so very proper? I'd rather be scandalous than damned.'

Thus it was settled; and though they two walked and talked and drank their tea on the Tuesday and the Wednesday and the Thursday, they did not mention again her past or their future. Whatever sighed in some passage or cupboard of that house, whatever shifted and faded across the moor—why,

ch intimations they ignored, speaking instead of the whaups that cried from the sky above them or of the stories they had loved as children.

Old Sorworth Place still was fit to stand a siege, Bain told

himself as he mounted the staircase between the turrets on Friday afternoon. The lower windows could not be forced, the doors were immensely stout; anything that had substance might scrape and pound in vain outside, all night, once the bolts were shot home. Ann Lurlin herself admitted him, and they went to sit in her little study, and the hours fled, and their tea, untasted, grew cold; and at length they heard fat Margaret shuffle down the kitchen passage, open the door, and make her way through the policies toward the distant sanctuary of her son's cottage.

Then Ann's eyes seconded Bain's glance, and he ran down the stair to the kitchen door, locked it, and made sure the great door was well bolted. He returned to the study and the pale girl with the great black eyes. The night was coming on. They could think of very little to say. Here was Bain locked in for the night with the woman he most desired, though he had known many women, too well. 'Yet Tantalus' be his delight . . .' Unless she sought him, he would not touch her, in this her hour of dismay.

'Where will you stay?' asked Bain, when the sun had sunk quite below the level of the little west window of the study.

'In my bedroom,' she said, drearily enough. 'There's no place safer.'

Her room was in the southern tower. Bain's mind reviewed the plan of the Place. 'Is there a way into the tower except through the great hall?'

She shook her sweet head. 'There were doors on the other levels, once, but they were blocked long ago.'

This made his work easier. 'Well, then, Ann, your bogle will have to swallow me whole before he opens the door behind the hanging, and I'm a sour morsel.' He didn't admit the possibility of fleshly revenants, Bain told himself, and if he could keep her safe from frenzy this one night, she might be safe forever after.

Solemn as a hanging judge, she looked at him for what seemed a long time. 'You shouldn't stay here, Ralph; you shouldn't have let you.' She ran her little tongue along her dry lips. 'You know I never can be anything to you.' This was said with a kind of frozen tenderness.

These words hurt him beyond belief; and yet he had expected them. He saw himself as if in a mirror: his shallow,

tired, defiant face, his frayed clothes, every long lazy inch of himself, futile and fickle. 'No,' said Bain, managing a hoarse laugh, 'no, Ann, of course you can't—or not tonight. I meant to sit outside your door.'

Biting her lip, she murmured, 'Not tonight, nor any other night, ever.'

'Well,' Bain said, 'you needn't drive the point home with a hammer. Besides, you might care for me in better days.'

She continued to look at him as if beseeching mercy. 'You don't understand me, Ralph. It's not you: why, so far as I still can care for any man, I care for you. Anyway, I'm grateful to you as I've never been to anyone else, and I'd give myself to you if I could. It's not what you think. It's this: after having a year with him, I couldn't bear to be anything to a man again. It would be dreadful. I can't forget.'

'Don't tell yourself that.' Bain spoke slowly and heavily. 'It won't be true. Given time, this night and your life with that—that fellow will wash away. But I suppose I'll be gone, and good riddance.'

She lit a candle; paraffin lamps and candles were the only lighting in the Place. Now, he knew, their night of listening and guarding must commence. 'You still can go, Ralph,' she told him, softly. 'A moment ago I hinted that I felt something for you, but that was because I tried to be kind. Kind! Well, whatever makes you do this for me? In honesty, I don't love you, though I should.'

'Bravado,' Bain said, 'and boredom, mixed.' He was glad she could not see his eyes or his mouth in that feeble candlelight. 'Now up with you, and let me play my game of hide-and-seek, Ann Lurlin.' He went with her to the door behind the hanging, and watched her ascend to the first turn of the stair. Looking back upon him, she contrived a smile of understanding, and was gone to her room. Alone, he felt a swelling of confidence.

'Come on, if you like, Alastair Lurlin, Esq.,' he thought. 'I'm your man for a bout of creep-mouse.'

Before settling himself in the hall for the night, he must make sure that no one was playing tricks, a remote possibility he had kept at the back of his mind, by way of a forlorn link with the world of solid things. So, taking his little electric torch from a pocket, he proceeded to inspect every chill corner

of the Place, apart from Ann's south tower, with a military thoroughness. Certain corners in this pile were calculated to make one wary; but they were empty, every one. After half an hour or so, he found himself looking from a loophole in the north tower, and across the main block of the house he saw a light glowing from Ann's window. There she would be lying in a passion of dread. But nothing should force itself upon her this night.

Returning to the main block, he listened: nothing. 'For a parson's son,' he thought, 'Ralph Bain gets in peculiar nooks.' Then he opened a door into the great hall.

O God! Something white was by the stairdoor, even then slipping out of the hall into the turret. He flung himself across the hall, down the stair, and leaped the last twist of the spiral to overtake that white fugitive. It was Ann Lurlin, pressing herself against the great door.

She shuddered there in her nightgown, her slim naked feet upon the damp flagstones. For a tremulous instant he thought his own desperate longing might have stirred some impulse in her: that she might have come to him out of love or gratitude. But a glance at her face undid his hope. She was nearly out of her mind, a tormented thing fumbling at the oak, and when he took her by the arms, she panted spasmodically and managed to say, 'I don't know why I'm here. I wanted to run out, run and run.'

For only a moment he pressed her body to his. Then, picking her up, he carried her to the door behind the hanging, and thrust her in. 'Go back, Ann: I've promised you.' She put both her chill hands in his, looked at him as if she were to paint his picture, and kissed him lightly with cold lips. Then she crept up the steps. He bolted the little tapestried door from his side.

Well, back to sentry-duty. What hadn't he inspected in this house? The cellars. Down you go, Captain Bain. They were fine old Scots vaults of flinty stone, those cellars, but he detested them this night. Outside, a light rain was falling. He sat upon a broken stool in the cellar that had been a medieval kitchen, shadowed by the protruding oven. This was the rag-taggle end of chivalry all right—a worn-out fool crouching in a crumbling house to humour a crazy girl. Then something

crunched on the gravel outside the barred window. From old-soldierly habit, Bain kept stock-still in the shadow.

He saw it plain, so that there could be no possibility of illusion; and he asked himself, in a frantic sensation of which he was at once ashamed, 'What have you got into, Ralph Bain, for the sake of a pretty little thing that won't be yours?'

It was a face at the slit of a window, damn it: a sickening face, the nose snubbed against the glass like a little boy's at a sweetshop. The eyelids of this face were drawn down; but while Bain watched, they slowly opened, as if drawn upward by a power beyond themselves, and the face turned awkwardly upon its neck, surveying the cellar. Somehow Bain knew, with an immense temporary relief, that he was not perceived in his sanctuary back of the oven, supposing the thing could 'perceive' in any ordinary sense. Then the face withdrew from the window, and again Bain heard the gravel crunch.

Some little time elapsed before Bain could make his muscles obey him. The crunching grew fainter, and then, hearing with a preternatural acuity, he made out a fumbling at the small kitchen door down the passage. But it was a vain fumbling. Something groped, lifted the latch, pressed its weight against the barrier. The stout door did not budge. At this, Bain experienced a reckless exultation: whatever was outside in the night obeyed in some sort the laws of matter. 'Go on, you dead heads,' thought Bain, wildly. 'Fumble, damn you, push, scratch like a cat. You'll not get at her.' Rising from his stool, Bain tiptoed down the passage, and heard the stumbling feet in the gravel, moving on. Would it try the big doors? Of course. Let it try.

Bain told himself he had to look at what was outside; and he made his way to the lowest loophole of the left-hand turret, which commanded the steps. There was moon enough to show him the stairs, and they were empty. But the great door, a trifle ajar, was just closing *behind* whatever had entered.

He sucked in his breath, and believed he would go mad. 'O Lord! O Lord! It's in, and I'm done for!' These phrases thrust through his consciousness like hot needles. Yet a dogged rationality contended against them. However had the door been forced? Then he thought of Ann in her night-

gown. Before he had caught her, she must have drawn the bolt; and he, in his lovesick anxiety, had forgotten to try it. Collusion between the living and the damned: this conjecture of treachery woke in him, and he felt momentarily that all his days with Ann Lurlin had been part of a witch's snare. But he rejected the doubt. Whatever had moved Ann, whether simple terror and a foolish hope of flight, or some blind impulse forced upon her out of the abyss, no deceit lay in her.

These sterile reflections occupied no measurable time. Face it out, Bain: nothing else for it. With luck, he could be in the hall first. He was up the kitchen stair and through an ante-room as fast as ever he had moved in his life. An uncertain moonlight showed him the hall, and he was alone in it, barring the way to the tapestried door, but then the door from the turret stair opened. Something entered.

Just inside the hall, the thing paused heavily. Light enough came from the great window to outline it; Bain had not the heart to pull out his torch; indeed, he could not move at all. Again he looked upon the sagging face he had seen at the cellar-loop. The thing was clothed in a black suit, all mildewed. Its slow body seemed to gather itself for new movement.

Who should be master, who should move first—these points might decide the issue, Bain hoped: perhaps a horrid logic governed this contest. Ralph Bain then compelled himself to take two steps forward, toward the middle of the hall. He looked at the dark shape by the window, and twice tried to speak, and on the third attempt a few broken words croaked from his throat: 'Time you were properly buried, old man.'

No answering sound came. Bain flexed his arms, but could not force himself to advance further. He could discern no expression upon the face: only a blackened mask obedient to some obscene impulse from a remote beyond. How long they two stood there, Bain did not know. But presently the thing swung about awkwardly, lurched over the threshold, and was gone back to the darkness of the stair-turret.

Bain thanked God with all sincerity. Now who was the hunter and who the quarry? The will was in him to make an end of this thing. Would it have gone back to the door and out into the rain? Bain listened. Yes, there came a stumbling

on the stair—from above. What was it trying for? And then Bain knew. Ah, what a fool he was! It was ascending to the roofs, and would cross the slabs to the woman whose passionate terror perhaps animated its shape.

Bain went after it, slipping and bruising himself in his urgency; but as he leaped up the spiral toward the higher stories of the north tower, he felt a cold draught sweeping down upon him. The thing had got open a window, and must be upon the roof. Bain found that window, and stared into the night.

Now the rain fell heavily, and down at the foot of the wall, Sorworth Water moaned and gleamed. From Ann Lurlin's room, the candlelight cast some faint radiance upon the stone slabs of the sharp-peaked roof; and the glimmer was enough to show Bain a sodden bulk inching its way along the gutter toward the south tower, a footing precarious enough in daylight. The ruined face was averted from Bain, whatever power moved the thing being intent upon that piteous lighted window.

What propelled Ralph Bain then was an impulse beyond duty, beyond courage, beyond even the love of woman. He dropped from the window upon the wet and shimmering slabs, clambered along the gutter, and flung himself upon the dark hulk. Bain heaved with all the strength that was in him. Together, living and dead, they rolled upon the mossy old stones; together they fell.

A glimpse of the great stone wall; a flash of the savage burn; then explosion of everything, opening to the blessed dark.

Early on Saturday morning, a lone fisherman out of Sorworthness, rowing near the reefs that lie off the mouth of Sorworth Water, thought he perceived some unpleasant mass lying nearly submerged in the tangle of kelp among the rocks. But the sea boils nastily there, and the fisherfolk of Sorworthness are of the old legend-cherishing sort, and this man recalled certain things muttered by the arthritic old hag in the chimney corner, his mother. Rather than rowing closer in, then, he worked his boat round and made back towards the decayed little harbour.

Some hours later, having got two friends into his boat for company, he returned to the skerries for a closer look; but the tide had ebbed, and if anything human or human-like had lodged earlier among the rocks, now it was gone forever. Whatever ends in the boiling sea upon the reefs, having tumbled down the den of Sorworth Water, never wakes again.

WHERE THEIR FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED

MAY SINCLAIR

There was nobody in the orchard. Harriott Leigh went out, carefully, through the iron gate into the field. She had made the latch slip into its notch without a sound.

The path slanted widely up the field from the orchard gate to the stile under the elder tree. George Waring waited for her there.

Years afterwards, when she thought of George Waring she smelt the sweet, hot, wine-scent of the elder flowers. Years afterwards, when she smelt elder flowers she saw George Waring, with his beautiful, gentle face, like a poet's or a musician's, his black-blue eyes, and sleek, olive-brown hair. He was a naval lieutenant.

Yesterday he had asked her to marry him and she had consented. But her father hadn't, and she had come to tell him that and say goodbye before he left her. His ship was to sail the next day.

He was eager and excited. He couldn't believe that anything could stop their happiness, that anything he didn't want to happen could happen.

'Well?' he said.

'He's a perfect beast, George. He won't let us. He says we're too young.'

'I was twenty last August,' he said, aggrieved.

'And I shall be seventeen in September.'

'And this is June. We're quite old, really. How long does he mean us to wait?'

'Three years.'

'Three years before we can be engaged even—why, we might be dead.'

She put her arms round him to make him feel safe. They kissed; and the sweet, hot, wine-scent of the elder flowers mixed with their kisses. They stood, pressed close together, under the elder tree.

Across the yellow fields of charlock they heard the village clock strike seven. Up in the house a gong clanged.

'Darling, I must go,' she said.

'Oh stay—stay *five minutes*.'

He pressed her close. It lasted five minutes, and five more. Then he was running fast down the road to the station, while Harriott went along the fieldpath, slowly, struggling with her tears.

'He'll be back in three months,' she said. 'I can live through three months.'

But he never came back. There was something wrong with the engines of his ship, the *Alexandra*. Three weeks later she went down in the Mediterranean, and George with her.

Harriott said she didn't care how soon she died now. She was quite sure it would be soon, because she couldn't live without him.

Five years passed.

The two lines of beech trees stretched on and on, the whole length of the Park, a broad green drive between. When you came to the middle they branched off right and left in the form of a cross, and at the end of the right arm there was a white stucco pavilion with pillars and a three-cornered pediment like a Greek temple. At the end of the left arm, the west entrance to the Park, double gates and a side door.

Harriott, on her stone seat at the back of the pavilion, could see Stephen Philpotts the very minute he came through the side door.

He had asked her to wait for him there. It was the place he always chose to read his poems aloud in. The poems were a pretext. She knew what he was going to say. And she knew what she would answer.

There were elder bushes in flower at the back of the pavilion, and Harriott thought of George Waring. She told herself that George was nearer to her now than he could ever have been, living. If she married Stephen she would not be unfaithful, because she loved him with another part of herself. It was not as though Stephen were taking George's place. She loved Stephen with her soul, in an unearthly way.

But her body quivered like a stretched wire when the door

opened and the young man came towards her down the drive under the beech trees.

She loved him; she loved his slenderness, his darkness and sallow whiteness, his black eyes lighting up with the intellectual flame, the way his black hair swept back from his forehead, the way he walked, tiptoe, as if his feet were lifted with wings.

He sat down, beside her. She could see his hands tremble. She felt that her moment was coming; it had come.

'I wanted to see you alone because there's something I must say to you. I don't quite know how to begin . . .'

Her lips parted. She panted slightly.

'You've heard me speak of Sybill Foster?'

Her voice came stammering, 'N-no, Stephen. Did you?'

'Well, I didn't mean to, till I knew it was all right. I only heard yesterday.'

'Heard what?'

'Why, that she'll have me. Oh, Harriott—do you know what it's like to be terribly happy?'

She knew. She had known just now, the moment before he told her. She sat there, stone-cold and stiff, listening to his raptures; listening to her own voice saying she was glad.

Ten years passed.

Harriott Leigh sat waiting in the drawing-room of a small house in Maida Vale. She had lived there ever since her father's death two years before.

She was restless. She kept on looking at the clock to see if it was four, the hour that Oscar Wade had appointed. She was not sure that he would come, after she had sent him away yesterday.

She now asked herself, why, when she had sent him away yesterday, she had let him come today. Her motives were not altogether clear. If she really meant what she had said then, she oughtn't to let him come to her again. Never again.

She had shown him plainly what she meant. She could see herself, sitting very straight in her chair, uplifted by a passionate integrity, while he stood before her, hanging his head, ashamed and beaten; she could feel again the throb in her voice as she kept on saying that she couldn't, she couldn't; he must see that she couldn't; that no, nothing would make

her change her mind; she couldn't forget he had a wife; that he must think of Muriel.

To which he had answered savagely: 'I needn't. That's all over. We only live together for the look of the thing.'

And she, serenely, with great dignity: 'And for the look of the thing, Oscar, we must leave off seeing each other. Please go.'

'Do you mean it?'

'Yes. We must never see each other again.'

And he had gone then, ashamed and beaten.

She could see him, squaring his broad shoulders to meet the blow. And she was sorry for him. She told herself she had been unnecessarily hard. Why shouldn't they see each other again, now he understood where they must draw the line? Until yesterday the line had never been very clearly drawn. Today she meant to ask him to forget what he had said to her. Once it was forgotten, they could go on being friends as if nothing had happened.

It was four o'clock. Half-past. Five. She had finished tea and given him up when, between the half-hour and six o'clock, he came.

He came as he had come a dozen times, with his measured, deliberate, thoughtful tread, carrying himself well braced, with a sort of held-in arrogance, his great shoulders heaving. He was a man of about forty, broad and tall, lean-flanked and short-necked, his straight, handsome features showing small and even in the big square face and in the flush that swamped it. The close-clipped, reddish-brown moustache bristled forwards from the pushed-out upper lip. His small, flat eyes shone, reddish-brown, eager and animal.

She liked to think of him when he was not there, but always at the first sight of him she felt a slight shock. Physically, he was very far from her admired ideal. So different from George Waring and Stephen Philpotts.

He sat down, facing her.

There was an embarrassed silence, broken by Oscar Wade.

'Well, Harriott, you said I could come.' He seemed to be throwing the responsibility on her.

'So I suppose you've forgiven me,' he said.

'Oh yes, Oscar, I've forgiven you.'

He said she'd better show it by coming to dine with him somewhere that evening.

She could give no reason to herself for going. She simply went.

He took her to a restaurant in Soho. Oscar Wade dined well, even extravagantly, giving each dish its importance. She liked his extravagance. He had none of the mean virtues.

It was over. His flushed, embarrassed silence told her what he was thinking. But when he had seen her home he left her at her garden gate. He had thought better of it.

She was not sure whether she were glad or sorry. She had had her moment of righteous exaltation and she had enjoyed it. But there was no joy in the weeks that followed it. She had given up Oscar Wade because she didn't want him very much; and now she wanted him furiously, perversely, because she had given him up. Though he had no resemblance to her ideal, she couldn't live without him.

She dined with him again and again, till she knew Schnebler's Restaurant by heart, the white panelled walls, picked out with gold; the white pillars, and the curling gold fronds of their capitals; the Turkey carpets, blue and crimson, soft under her feet; the thick crimson velvet cushions, that clung to her skirts; the glitter of silver and glass on the innumerable white circles of the tables. And the faces of the diners, red, white, pink, brown, grey and sallow, distorted and excited; the curled mouths that twisted as they ate; the convoluted electric bulbs pointing, pointing down at them, under the red, crinkled shades. All shimmering in a thick air that the red light stained as wine stains water.

And Oscar's face, flushed with his dinner. Always, when he leaned back from the table and brooded in silence she knew what he was thinking. His heavy eyelids would lift; she would find his eyes fixed on hers, wondering, considering.

She knew now what the end would be. She thought of George Waring, and Stephen Philpotts, and of her life, cheated. She hadn't chosen Oscar, she hadn't really wanted him; but now he had forced himself on her she couldn't afford to let him go. Since George died no man had loved her, no other man ever would. And she was sorry for him when she thought of him going from her, beaten and ashamed.

She was certain, before he was, of the end. Only she didn't know when and where and how it would come. That was what Oscar knew.

It came at the close of one of their evenings when they had dined in a private sitting-room. He said he couldn't stand the heat and noise of the public restaurant.

She went before him, up a steep, red-carpeted stair to a white door on the second landing.

From time to time they repeated the furtive, hidden adventure. Sometimes she met him in the room above Schnebler's. Sometimes, when her maid was out, she received him at her house in Maida Vale. But that was dangerous, not to be risked too often.

Oscar declared himself unspeakably happy. Harriott was not quite sure. This was love, the thing she had never had, that she had dreamed of, hungered, and thirsted for, but now she had it she was not satisfied. Always she looked for something just beyond it, some mystic, heavenly rapture, always beginning to come, that never came. There was something about Oscar that repelled her. But because she had taken him for her lover, she couldn't bring herself to admit that it was a certain coarseness. She looked another way and pretended it wasn't there. To justify herself, she fixed her mind on his good qualities, his generosity, his strength, the way he had built up his engineering business. She made him take her over his works and show her his great dynamos. She made him lend her the books he read. But always, when she tried to talk to him, he let her see that *that* wasn't what she was there for.

'My dear girl, we haven't time,' he said. 'It's waste of our priceless moments.'

She persisted. 'There's something wrong about it all if we can't talk to each other.'

He was irritated. 'Women never seem to consider that a man can get all the talk he wants from other men. What's wrong is our meeting in this unsatisfactory way. We ought to live together. It's the only sane thing. I would, only I don't want to break up Muriel's home and make her miserable.'

'I thought you said she wouldn't care.'

'My dear, she cares for her home and her position and the children. You forget the children.'

Yes. She had forgotten the children. She had forgotten

Muriel. She had left off thinking of Oscar as a man with a wife, and children and a home.

He had a plan. His mother-in-law was coming to stay with Muriel in October and he would get away. He would go to Paris, and Harriott should come to him there. He could say he went on business. No need to lie about it; he *had* business in Paris.

He engaged rooms in an hotel in the rue de Rivoli. They spent two weeks there.

For three days Oscar was madly in love with Harriott and Harriott with him. As she lay awake she would turn on the light and look at him as he slept at her side. Sleep made him beautiful and innocent; it laid a fine, smooth tissue over his coarseness; it made his mouth gentle; it entirely hid his eyes.

In six days reaction had set in. At the end of the tenth day, Harriott, returning with Oscar from Montmartre, burst into a fit of crying. When questioned, she answered wildly that the Hotel Saint Pierre was too hideously ugly; it was getting on her nerves. Mercifully Oscar explained her state as fatigue following excitement. She tried hard to believe that she was miserable because her love was purer and more spiritual than Oscar's; but all the time she knew perfectly well she had cried from pure boredom. She was in love with Oscar, and Oscar bored her. Oscar was in love with her, and she bored him. At close quarters, day in and day out, each was revealed to the other as an incredible bore.

At the end of the second week she began to doubt whether she had ever been really in love with him.

Her passion returned for a little while after they got back to London. Freed from the unnatural strain which Paris had put on them, they persuaded themselves that their romantic temperaments were better fitted to the old life of casual adventure.

Then, gradually, the sense of danger began to wake in them. They lived in perpetual fear, face to face with all the chances of discovery. They tormented themselves and each other by imagining possibilities that they would never have considered in their first fine moments. It was as though they were beginning to ask themselves if it were, after all, worth while running such awful risks, for all they got out of it. Oscar

still swore that if he had been free he would have married her. He pointed out that his intentions at any rate were regular. But she asked herself: Would I marry *him*? Marriage would be the Hotel Saint Pierre all over again, without any possibility of escape. But, if she wouldn't marry him, was she in love with him? That was the test. Perhaps it was a good thing he wasn't free. Then she told herself that these doubts were morbid, and that the question wouldn't arise.

One evening Oscar called to see her. He had come to tell her that Muriel was ill.

'Seriously ill?'

'I'm afraid so. It's pleurisy. May turn to pneumonia. We shall know one way or another in the next few days.'

A terrible fear seized upon Harriott. Muriel might die of her pleurisy; and if Muriel died, she would have to marry Oscar. He was looking at her queerly, as if he knew what she was thinking, and she could see that the same thought had occurred to him and that he was frightened too.

Muriel got well again; but their danger had enlightened them. Muriel's life was now inconceivably precious to them both; she stood between them and that permanent union, which they dreaded and yet would not have the courage to refuse.

After enlightenment the rupture.

It came from Oscar, one evening when he sat with her in her drawing-room.

'Harriott,' he said, 'do you know I'm thinking seriously of settling down?'

'How do you mean, settling down?'

'Patching it up with Muriel, poor girl . . . Has it never occurred to you that this little affairs of ours can't go on for ever?'

'You don't want it to go on?'

'I don't want to have any humbug about it. For God's sake, let's be straight. If it's done, it's done. Let's end it decently.'

'I see. You want to get rid of me.'

'That's a beastly way of putting it.'

'Is there any way that isn't beastly? The whole thing's beastly. I should have thought you'd have stuck to it now you've made it what you wanted. When I haven't an ideal, I

haven't a single illusion, when you've destroyed everything you didn't want.'

'What didn't I want?'

'The clean, beautiful part of it. The part *I* wanted.'

'My part at least was real. It was cleaner and more beautiful than all that putrid stuff you wrapped it up in. You were a hypocrite, Harriott, and I wasn't. You're a hypocrite now if you say you weren't happy with me.'

'I was never really happy. Never for one moment. There was always something I missed. Something you didn't give me. Perhaps you couldn't.'

'No. I wasn't spiritual enough,' he sneered.

'You were not. And you made me what you were.'

'Oh, I noticed that you were always very spiritual, *after* you'd got what you wanted.'

'What I wanted?' she cried. 'Oh, my God—'

'If you ever knew what you wanted.'

'What—I—wanted,' she repeated, drawing out her bitterness.

'Come,' he said, 'why not be honest? Face facts. I was awfully gone on you. You were awfully gone on me—once. We got tired of each other and it's over. But at least you might own we had a good time while it lasted.'

'A good time?'

'Good enough for me.'

'For you, because for you love only means one thing. Everything that's high and noble in it you dragged down to that, till there's nothing left for us but that. *That's* what you made of love.'

Twenty years passed.

It was Oscar who died first, three years after the rupture. He did it suddenly one evening, falling down in a fit of apoplexy.

His death was an immense relief to Harriott. Perfect security had been impossible as long as he was alive. But now there wasn't a living soul who knew her secret.

Still, in the first moment of shock Harriott told herself that Oscar dead would be nearer to her than ever. She forgot how little she had wanted him to be near her, alive. And long before the twenty years had passed she had contrived to persuade herself that he had never been near her at all. It was incredible that she had ever known such a person as

Oscar Wade. As for their affair, she couldn't think of Harriott Leigh as the sort of woman to whom such a thing could happen. Schnebler's and the Hotel Saint Pierre ceased to figure among prominent images of her past. Her memories, if she had allowed herself to remember, would have clashed disagreeably with the reputation for sanctity which she had now acquired.

For Harriott at fifty-two was the friend and helper of the Reverend Clement Farmer, Vicar of St Mary the Virgin's, Maida Vale. She worked as a deaconess in his parish, wearing the uniform of a deaconess, the semi-religious gown, the cloak, the bonnet and veil, the cross and rosary, the holy smile. She was also secretary to the Maida Vale and Kilburn Home for Fallen Girls.

Her moments of excitement came when Clement Farmer, the lean, austere likeness of Stephen Philpotts, in his cassock and lace-bordered surplice, issued from the vestry, when he mounted the pulpit, when he stood before the altar rails and lifted up his arms in the Benediction; her moments of ecstasy when she received the Sacrament from his hands. And she had moments of calm happiness when his study door closed on their communion. All these moments were saturated with a solemn holiness.

And they were insignificant compared with the moment of her dying.

She lay dozing in her white bed under the black crucifix with the ivory Christ. The basins and medicine bottles had been cleared from the table by her pillow; it was spread for the last rites. The priest moved quietly about the room, arranging the candles, the Prayer Book and the Holy Sacrament. Then he drew a chair to her bedside and watched with her, waiting for her to come up out of her doze.

She woke suddenly. Her eyes were fixed upon him. She had a flash of lucidity. She was dying, and her dying made her supremely important to Clement Farmer.

'Are you ready?' he asked.

'Not yet. I think I'm afraid. Make me not afraid.' He rose and lit the two candles on the altar. He took down the crucifix from the wall and stood it against the foot-rail of the bed.

She sighed. That was not what she had wanted. 'You will not be afraid now,' he said.

'I'm not afraid of the hereafter. I suppose you get used to it. Only it may be terrible just at first.'

'Our first state will depend very much on what we are thinking of at our last hour.'

'There'll be my—confession,' she said.

'And after it you will receive the Sacrament. Then you will have your mind fixed firmly upon God and your Redeemer . . . Do you feel able to make your confession now, Sister? Everything is ready.'

Her mind went back over her past and found Oscar Wade there. She wondered: should she confess to him about Oscar Wade? One moment she thought it was possible; the next she knew that she couldn't. She could not. It wasn't necessary. For twenty years he had not been part of her life. No. She wouldn't confess about Oscar Wade. She had been guilty of other sins.

She made a careful selection.

'I have cared too much for the beauty of this world . . . I have failed in charity to my poor girls. Because of my intense repugnance to their sin . . . I have thought, often, about people I love, when I should have been thinking about God.'

After that she received the Sacrament.

'Now,' he said, 'there is nothing to be afraid of.'

'I won't be afraid if—if you would hold my hand.'

He held it. And she lay still a long time, with her eyes shut. Then he heard her murmuring something. He stooped close.

'This—is—dying. I thought it would be horrible. And it's bliss . . . Bliss.'

The priest's hand slackened, as if at the bidding of some wonder. She gave a weak cry.

'Oh—don't let me go.'

His grasp tightened.

'Try,' he said, 'to think about God. Keep on looking at the crucifix.'

'If I look,' she whispered, 'you won't let go my hand?'

'I will not let you go.'

He held it till it was wrenched from him in the last agony.

She lingered for some hours in the room where these things had happened.

Its aspect was familiar and yet unfamiliar, and slightly repugnant to her. The altar, the crucifix, the lighted candles, suggested some tremendous and awful experience the details of which she was not able to recall. She seemed to remember that they had been connected in some way with the sheeted body on the bed; but the nature of the connection was not clear; and she did not associate the dead body with herself. When the nurse came in and laid it out, she saw that it was the body of a middle-aged woman. Her own living body was that of a young woman of about thirty-two.

Her mind had no past and no future, no sharp-edged coherent memories, and no idea of anything to be done next.

Then, suddenly, the room began to come apart before her eyes, to split into shafts of floor and furniture and ceiling that shifted and were thrown by their commotion into different planes. They leaned slanting at every possible angle; they crossed and overlaid each other with a transparent mingling of dislocated perspectives, like reflections fallen on an interior seen behind glass.

The bed and the sheeted body slid away somewhere out of sight. She was standing by the door that still remained in position.

She opened it and found herself in the street, outside a building of yellowish-grey brick and freestone, with a tall slated spire. Her mind came together with a palpable click of recognition. This object was the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Maida Vale. She could hear the droning of the organ. She opened the door and slipped in.

She had gone back into a definite space and time, and recovered a limited section of coherent memory. She remembered the rows of pitch-pine benches, with their Gothic peaks and mouldings; the stone-coloured walls and pillars with their chocolate stencilling; the hanging rings of lights along the aisles of the nave; the high altar with its lighted candles, and the polished brass cross, twinkling. These things were somehow permanent and real, adjusted to the image that now took possession of her.

She knew what she had come there for. The service was over. The choir had gone from the chancel; the sacristan moved before the altar, putting out the candles. She walked up the middle aisle to a seat that she knew under the pulpit.

She knelt down and covered her face with her hands. Peeping sideways through her fingers, she could see the door of the vestry on her left at the end of the north aisle. She watched it steadily.

Up in the organ loft the organist drew out the Recessional, slowly and softly, to its end in the two solemn, vibrating chords.

The vestry door opened and Clement Farmer came out, dressed in his black cassock. He passed before her, close, close outside the bench where she knelt. He paused at the opening. He was waiting for her. There was something he had to say.

She stood up and went towards him. He still waited. He didn't move to make way for her. She came close, closer than she had ever come to him, so close that his features grew indistinct. She bent her head back, peering, short-sightedly, and found herself looking into Oscar Wade's face.

He stood still, horribly still, and close, barring her passage.

She drew back; his heaving shoulders followed her. He leaned forward, covering her with his eyes. She opened her mouth to scream and no sound came.

She was afraid to move lest he should move with her. The heaving of his shoulders terrified her.

One by one the lights in the side aisles were going out. The lights in the middle aisle would go next. They had gone. If she didn't get away she would be shut up with him there, in the appalling darkness.

She turned and moved towards the north aisle, groping, steadying herself by the book ledge.

When she looked back, Oscar Wade was not there.

Then she remembered that Oscar Wade was dead. Therefore, what she had seen was not Oscar. It was his ghost. He was dead; dead seventeen years ago. She was safe from him for ever.

When she came out on to the steps of the church she saw that the road it stood in had changed. It was not the road she remembered. The pavement on this side was raised slightly and covered in. It ran under a succession of arches. It was a long gallery walled with glittering shop windows on one side; on the other a line of tall grey columns divided it from the street.

She was going along the arcades of the rue de Rivoli. Ahead of her she could see the edge of an immense grey pillar jutting out. That was the porch of the Hotel Saint Pierre. The revolving glass doors swung forward to receive her; she crossed the grey, sultry vestibule under the pillared arches. She knew it. She knew the porter's shining, wine-coloured mahogany pen on her left, and the shining wine-coloured mahogany barrier of the clerk's bureau on her right; she made straight for the great grey carpeted staircase; she climbed the endless flights that turned round and round the caged-in shaft of the well, past the latticed doors of the lift, and came up on to a landing that she knew, and into the long, ash-grey, foreign corridor lit by a dull window at one end.

It was there that the horror of the place came on her. She had no longer any memory of St Mary's Church, so that she was unaware of her backward course through time. All space and time were here.

She remembered she had to go to the left, the left.

But there was something there; where the corridor turned by the window; at the end of all the corridors. If she went the other way she would escape it.

The corridor stopped there. A blank wall. She was driven back past the stairhead to the left.

At the corner, by the window, she turned down another long ash-grey corridor on her right, and to the right again where the night-light sputtered on the table-flap at the turn.

This third corridor was dark and secret and depraved. She knew the soiled walls and the warped door at the end. There was a sharp-pointed streak of light at the top. She could see the number of it now, 107.

Something had happened there. If she went in it would happen again.

Oscar Wade was in the room waiting for her behind the closed door. She felt him moving about in there. She leaned forward, her ear to the keyhole, and listened. She could hear the measured, deliberate, thoughtful footsteps. They were coming from the bed to the door.

She turned and ran; her knees gave way under her; she sank and ran on, down the long grey corridors and the stairs, quick and blind, a hunted beast seeking for cover, hearing his feet coming after her.

The revolving doors caught her and pushed her out into the street.

The strange quality of her state was this, that it had no time. She remembered dimly that there had once been a thing called time; but she had forgotten altogether what it was like. She was aware of things happening and about to happen; she fixed them by the place they occupied, and measured their duration by the space she went through.

So now she thought: If I only could go back and get to the place where it hadn't happened.

To get back farther—

She was walking now on a white road that went between broad grass borders. To the right and left were the long raking lines of the hills, curve after curve, shimmering in a thin mist.

The road dropped to the green valley. It mounted the humped bridge over the river. Beyond it she saw the twin gables of the grey house pricked up over the high, grey garden wall. The tall iron gate stood in front of it between the ball-topped stone pillars.

And now she was in a large, low ceilinged room with drawn blinds. She was standing before the wide double bed. It was her father's bed. The dead body, stretched out in the middle under the drawn white sheet, was her father's body.

The outline of the sheet sank from the peak of the upturned toes to the shin bone, and from the high bridge of the nose to the chin.

She lifted the sheet and folded it back across the breast of the dead man. The face she saw then was Oscar Wade's face, stilled and smoothed in the innocence of sleep, the supreme innocence of death. She stared at it, fascinated, in a cold, pitiless joy.

Oscar was dead.

She remembered how he used to lie back like that beside her in the room in the Hotel Saint Pierre, on his back with his hands folded on his waist, his mouth half open, his big chest rising and falling. If he was dead, it would never happen again. She would be safe.

The dead face frightened her, and she was about to cover it up again when she was aware of a light heaving, a rhythmical rise and fall. As she drew the sheet up tighter, the hands

under it began to struggle convulsively, the broad ends of the fingers appeared above the edge, clutching it to keep it down. The mouth opened; the eyes opened; the whole face stared back at her in a look of agony and horror.

The the body drew itself forwards from the hips and sat up, its eyes peering into her eyes; he and she remained for an instant motionless, each held there by the other's fear.

Suddenly, she broke away, turned and ran, out of the room, out of the house.

She stood at the gate, looking up and down the road, not knowing by which way she must go to escape Oscar. To the right, over the bridge and up the hill and across the downs she would come to the arcades of the rue de Rivoli and the dreadful grey corridors of the hotel. To the left the road went through the village.

If she could get further back she would be safe, out of Oscar's reach. Standing by her father's death-bed she had been young, but not young enough. She must get back to the place where she was younger still, to the Park and the green drive under the beech trees and the white pavilion at the cross. She knew how to find it. At the end of the village the high road ran right and left, east and west, under the Park walls; the south gate stood there at the top, looking down the narrow street.

She ran towards it through the village, past the long grey barns of Goodyer's farm, past the grocer's shop, past the yellow front and blue sign of the Queen's Head, past the post office, with its one black window blinking under its vine, past the church and the yew-trees in the churchyard to where the south gate made a delicate black pattern on the green grass.

These things appeared insubstantial, drawn back behind a sheet of air that shimmered over them like thin glass. They opened out, floated past and away from her; and instead of the high road and park walls she saw a London street of dingy white façades, and instead of the south gate the swinging glass doors of Schnebler's Restaurant.

The glass doors swung open and she passed into the restaurant. The scene beat on her with the hard impact of reality; the white and gold panels, the white pillars and their curling gold

capitals, the white circles of the tables, glittering, the flushed faces of the diners, moving mechanically.

She was driven forward by some irresistible compulsion to a table in the corner, where a man sat alone. The table napkin he was using hid his mouth, and jaw, and chest; and she was not sure of the upper part of the face above the straight, drawn edge. It dropped; and she saw Oscar Wade's face. She came to him, dragged, without power to resist; she sat down beside him, and he leaned to her over the table; she could feel the warmth of his red, congested face; the smell of wine floated towards her on his thick whisper.

'I knew you would come.'

She ate and drank with him in silence, nibbling and sipping slowly, staving off the abominable moment it would end in.

At last they got up and faced each other. His long bulk stood before her, above her; she could almost feel the vibration of its power.

'Come,' he said. 'Come.'

And she went before him, slowly, slipping out through the maze of tables, hearing behind her Oscar's measured, deliberate, thoughtful tread. The steep, red-carpeted staircase rose up before her.

She swerved from it, but he turned her back.

'You know the way,' he said.

At the top of the flight she found the white door of the room she knew. She knew the long windows guarded by drawn muslin blinds; the gilt looking-glass over the chimney piece that reflected Oscar's head and shoulders grotesquely between two white porcelain babies with bulbous limbs and garlanded loins, she knew the sprawling stain on the drab carpet by the table, the shabby, infamous couch behind the screen.

They moved about the room, turning and turning in it like beasts in a cage, uneasy, inimical, avoiding each other.

At last they stood still, he at the window, she at the door, the length of the room between them.

'It's no good your getting away like that,' he said. 'There couldn't be any other end to it—to what we did.'

'But that *was* ended.'

'Ended there, but not here.'

'Ended for ever. We've done with it for ever.'

'We haven't. We've got to begin again. And go on. And go on.'

'Oh, no. No. Anything but that.'

'There isn't anything else.'

'We can't. We can't. Don't you remember how it bored us?'

'Remember? Do you suppose I'd touch you if I could help it? . . . That's what we're here for. We must. We must.'

'No. No. I shall get away—now.'

She turned to the door to open it.

'You can't,' he said. 'The door's locked.'

'Oscar—what did you do that for?'

'We always did it. Don't you remember?'

She turned to the door again and shook it; she beat on it with her hands.

'It's no use, Harriott. If you got out now you'd only have to come back again. You might stave it off for an hour or so, but what's that in an immortality?'

'Immortality?'

'That's what we're in for.'

'Time enough to talk about immortality when we're dead . . . Ah—'

They were being drawn towards each other across the room, moving slowly, like figures in some monstrous and appalling dance, their heads thrown back over their shoulders, their faces turned from the horrible approach. Their arms rose slowly, heavy with intolerable reluctance; they stretched them out towards each other, aching, as if they held up an overpowering weight. Their feet dragged and were drawn.

Suddenly her knees sank under her; she shut her eyes; all her being went down before him in darkness and terror.

It was over. She had got away, she was going back, back, to the green drive of the Park, between the beech trees, where Oscar had never been, where he would never find her. When she passed through the south gate her memory became suddenly young and clean. She forgot the rue de Rivoli and the Hotel Saint Pierre; she forgot Schnebler's Restaurant and the room at the top of the stairs. She was back in her youth. She was Harriott Leigh going to wait for Stephen Philpotts in the pavilion opposite the west gate. She could feel herself, a slender figure moving fast over the grass between the lines of

the great beech trees. The freshness of her youth was upon her.

She came to the heart of the drive where it branched right and left in the form of a cross. At the end of the right arm the white Greek temple, with its pediment and pillars, gleamed against the wood.

She was sitting on their seat at the back of the pavilion, watching the side door that Stephen would come in by.

The door was pushed open; he came towards her, light and young, skimming between the beech trees with his eager, tip-toeing stride. She rose up to meet him. She gave a cry.

'Stephen!'

It had been Stephen. She had seen him coming. But the man who stood before her between the pillars of the pavilion was Oscar Wade.

And now she was walking along the field-path that slanted from the orchard door to the stile; further and further back, to where young George Waring waited for her under the elder tree. The smell of the elder flowers came to her over the field. She could feel on her lips and in all her body the sweet, innocent excitement of her youth.

'George, oh, George!'

As she went along the field-path she had seen him. But the man who stood waiting for her under the elder tree was Oscar Wade.

'I told you it's no use getting away, Harriott. Every path brings you back to me. You'll find me at every turn.'

'But how did you get *here*?'

'As I got into the pavilion. As I got into your father's room, on to his deathbed. Because I *was* there. I am in all your memories.'

'My memories are innocent. How could you take my father's place, and Stephen's, and George Waring's? You?'

'Because I did take them.'

'Never. My love for *them* was innocent.'

'Your love for me was part of it. You think the past affects the future. Has it never struck you that the future may affect the past? In your innocence there was the beginning of your sin. You *were* what you *were to be*.'

'I shall get away,' she said.

'And, this time, I shall go with you.'

The stile, the elder tree, and the field floated away from her. She was going under the beech trees down the Park drive towards the south gate and the village, slinking close to the right-hand row of trees. She was aware that Oscar Wade was going with her under the left-hand row, keeping even with her, step by step, and tree by tree. And presently there was grey pavement under her feet and a row of grey pillars on her right hand. They were walking side by side down the rue de Rivoli towards the hotel.

They were sitting together now on the edge of the dingy white bed. Their arms hung by their sides, heavy and limp, their heads drooped, averted. Their passion weighed on them with the unbearable unescapable boredom of immortality.

'Oscar—how long will it last?'

'I can't tell you. I don't know whether *this* is one moment of eternity, or the eternity of one moment.'

'It must end some time,' she said. 'Life doesn't go on for ever. We shall die.'

'Die? We *have* died. Don't you know what this is? Don't you know where you are? This is death. We're dead, Harriott. We're in hell.'

'Yes. There can't be anything worse than this.'

'This isn't the worst. We're not quite dead yet, as long as we've life in us to turn and run and get away from each other; as long as we can escape into our memories. But when you've got back to the farthest memory of all and there's nothing beyond it—when there's no memory but this—in the last hell we shall not run away any longer; we shall find no more roads, no more passages, no more open doors. We shall have no need to look for each other. In the last death we shall be shut up in this room, behind that locked door, together. We shall lie here together, for ever and ever, joined so fast that even God can't put us asunder. We shall be one flesh and one spirit, one sin repeated for ever and ever; spirit loathing flesh, flesh loathing spirit; you and I loathing each other.'

'Why? Why?' she cried.

'Because that's all that's left us. That's what you made of love.'

The darkness came down swamping, it blotted out the room. She was walking along a garden path between high borders of

phlox and larkspur and lupin. They were taller than she was, their flowers swayed and nodded above her head. She tugged at the tall stems and had no strength to break them. She was a little thing.

She said to herself then that she was safe. She had gone back so far that she was a child again; she had the blank innocence of childhood. To be a child, to go small under the heads of the lupins, to be blank and innocent, without memory, was to be safe.

The walk led her out through a yew hedge on to a bright green lawn. In the middle of the lawn there was a shallow round pond in a ring of rockery cushioned with small flowers, yellow and white and purple. Goldfish swam in the olive brown water. She would be safe when she saw the goldfish swimming towards her. The old one with the white scales would come up first, pushing up his nose, making bubbles in the water.

At the bottom of the lawn there was a privet hedge cut by a broad path that went through the orchard. She knew what she would find there; her mother was in the orchard. She would lift her up in her arms to play with the hard red balls of the apples that hung from the tree. She had got back to the farthest memory of all; there was nothing beyond it.

There would be an iron gate in the wall of the orchard. It would lead into a field.

Something was different here, something had frightened her. An ash-grey door instead of an iron gate.

She pushed it open and came into the last corridor of the Hotel Saint Pierre.

OKE OF OKEHURST

VERNON LEE

That sketch up there with the boy's cap? Yes; that's the same woman. I wonder whether you could guess who she was. A singular being, is she not? The most marvellous creature, quite that I have ever met; a wonderful elegance, exotic, far-fetched, poignant; an artificial perverse sort of grace and research in every outline and movement and arrangement of head and neck, and hands and fingers. Here are a lot of pencil-sketches I made while I was preparing to paint her portrait. Yes; there's nothing but her in the whole sketch-book. Mere scratches, but they may give some idea of her marvellous, fantastic kind of grace. Here she is leaning over the staircase, and here sitting in the swing. Here she is walking quickly out of the room. That's her head. You see she isn't really handsome; her forehead is too big, and her nose too short. This gives no idea of her. It was altogether a question of movement. Look at the strange cheeks, hollow and rather flat; well, when she smiled she had the most marvellous dimples here. There was something exquisite and uncanny about it. Yes; I began the picture, but it was never finished. I did the husband first. I wonder who has his likeness now? Help me to move these pictures away from the wall. Thanks. This is her portrait; a huge wreck. I don't suppose you can make much of it; it is merely blocked in, and seems quite mad. You see my idea was to make her leaning against a wall—there was one hung with yellow that seemed almost brown—so as to bring out the silhouette.

It was very singular I should have chosen that particular wall. It does look rather insane in this condition, but I like it; it has something of her. I would frame it and hang it up, only people would ask questions. Yes; you have guessed quite right—it is Mrs Oke of Okehurst. I forgot you had relations in that part of the country; besides, I suppose the newspapers were full of it at the time. You didn't know that it all took place under my eyes? I can scarcely believe now that it

did: it all seems so distant, vivid but unreal, like a thing of my own invention. It really was much stranger than anyone guessed. People could no more understand it than they could understand her. I doubt whether anyone ever understood Alice Oke besides myself. You mustn't think me unfeeling. She was a marvellous, weird, exquisite creature, but one couldn't feel sorry for her. I felt much sorrier for the wretched creature of a husband. It seemed such an appropriate end for her; I fancy she would have liked it could she have known. Ah! I shall never have another chance of painting such a portrait as I wanted. She seemed sent me from heaven or the other place. You have never heard the story in detail? Well, I don't usually mention it, because people are so brutally stupid or sentimental; but I'll tell it you. Let me see. It's too dark to paint any more today, so I can tell it you now. Wait; I must turn her face to the wall. Ah, she was a marvellous creature!

II

You remember, three years ago, my telling you I had let myself in for painting a couple of Kentish squireen? I really could not understand what had possessed me to say yes to that man. A friend of mine had brought him one day to my studio—Mr Oke of Okehurst, that was the name on his card. He was a very tall, very well-made, very good-looking young man, with a beautiful fair complexion, beautiful fair moustache, and beautifully fitting clothes; absolutely like a hundred other young men you can see any day in the Park, and absolutely uninteresting from the crown of his head to the tip of his boots. Mr Oke, who had been a lieutenant in the Blues before his marriage, was evidently extremely uncomfortable on finding himself in a studio. He felt misgivings about a man who could wear a velvet coat in town, but at the same time he was nervously anxious not to treat me in the very least like a tradesman. He walked round my place, looked at everything with the most scrupulous attention, stammered out a few complimentary phrases, and then, looking at his friend for assistance, tried to come to the point, but failed. The point, which the friend kindly explained, was that Mr Oke was desirous to know whether my engagements would

allow of my painting him and his wife and what my terms would be. The poor man blushed perfectly crimson during this explanation, as if he had come with the most improper proposal; and I noticed—the only interesting thing about him—a very odd nervous frown between his eyebrows, a perfect double gash—a thing which usually means something abnormal: a mad-doctor of my acquaintance calls it the maniac-frown. When I had answered, he suddenly burst out into rather confused explanations: his wife—Mrs Oke—had seen some of my—pictures—paintings—portraits—at the—the—what d'you call it? Academy. She had—in short, they had made a very great impression upon her. Mrs Oke had a great taste for art; she was, in short, extremely desirous of having her portrait and his painted by me, *etcetera*.

'My wife,' he suddenly added, 'is a remarkable woman. I don't know whether you will think her handsome—she isn't exactly, you know. But she's awfully strange,' and Mr Oke of Okehurst gave a little sigh and frowned that curious frown, as if so long a speech and so decided an expression of opinion had cost him a great deal.

It was a rather unfortunate moment in my career. A very influential sitter of mine—you remember the fat lady with the crimson curtain behind her?—had come to the conclusion or been persuaded that I had painted her old and vulgar, which, in fact, she was. Her whole clique had turned against me, the newspapers had taken up the matter, and for the moment I was considered as a painter to whose brushes no woman would trust her reputation. Things were going badly. So I snapped but too gladly at Mr Oke's offer, and settled to go down to Okehurst at the end of a fortnight. But the door had scarcely closed upon my future sitter when I began to regret my rashness; and my disgust at the thought of wasting a whole summer upon the portrait of a totally uninteresting Kentish squire, and his doubtless equally uninteresting wife, grew greater and greater as the time for execution approached. I remember so well the frightful temper in which I got into the train for Kent, and the even more frightful temper in which I got out of it at the little station nearest to Okehurst. It was pouring floods. I felt a comfortable fury at the thought that my canvases would get nicely wetted before

Mr Oke's coachman had packed them on the top of the waggonette. It was just what served me right for coming to this confounded place to paint these confounded people. We drove off in the steady downpour. The roads were a mass of yellow mud; the endless flat grazing-grounds under the oak-trees, after having been burnt to cinders in a long drought, were turned into a hideous brown sop; the country seemed intolerably monotonous.

My spirits sank lower and lower. I began to meditate upon the modern Gothic country house, with the usual amount of Morris furniture, Liberty rugs, and Mudie novels, to which I was doubtless being taken. My fancy pictured very vividly the five or six little Okes—that man certainly must have at least five children—the aunts, and sisters-in-law, and cousins; the eternal routine of afternoon tea and lawn-tennis; above all, it pictured Mrs Oke, the bouncing, well-informed, model house-keeper, electioneering, charity-organising young lady, whom such an individual as Mr Oke would regard in the light of a remarkable woman. And my spirit sank within me, and I cursed my avarice in accepting the commission, my spiritlessness in not throwing it over while yet there was time. We had meanwhile driven into a large park, or rather a long succession of grazing-grounds, dotted about with large oaks, under which the sheep were huddled together for shelter from the rain. In the distance, blurred by the sheets of rain, was a line of low hills, with a jagged fringe of bluish firs and a solitary windmill. It must be a good mile and a half since we had passed a house, and there was none to be seen in the distance—nothing but the undulation of sere grass, sopped brown beneath the huge blackish oak-trees, and whence arose, from all sides, a vague disconsolate bleating. At last the road made a sudden bend, and disclosed what was evidently the home of my sitter. It was not what I had expected. In a dip in the ground a large red-brick house, with the rounded gables and high chimney-stacks of the time of James I—a forlorn, vast place, set in the midst of the pasture-land, with no trace of garden before it, and only a few large trees indicating the possibility of one to the back; no lawn either, but on the other side of the sandy dip, which suggested a filled-up moat, a huge oak, short, hollow, with wreath-

ing, blasted, black branches, upon which only a handful of leaves shook in the rain. It was not at all what I had pictured to myself the home of Mr Oke of Okehurst.

My host received me in the hall, a large place, panelled and carved, hung round with portraits up to its curious ceiling—vaulted and ribbed like the inside of a ship's hull. He looked even more blond and pink and white, more absolutely mediocre in his tweed suit; and also, I thought, even more good-natured and duller. He took me into his study, a room hung with whips and fishing tackle in place of books, while my things were being carried upstairs. It was very damp, and a fire was smouldering. He gave the embers a nervous kick with his foot, and said, as he offered me a cigar—

'You must excuse my not introducing you at once to Mrs Oke. My wife—in short, I believe my wife is asleep.'

'Is Mrs Oke unwell?' I asked, a sudden hope flashing across me that I might be off the whole matter.

'Oh no! Alice is quite well; at least, quite as well as she usually is. My wife,' he added, after a minute, and in a very decided tone, 'does not enjoy very good health—a nervous constitution. Oh no! not at all ill, nothing at all serious, you know. Only nervous, the doctors say; mustn't be worried or excited, the doctors say; requires lots of repose—that sort of thing.'

There was a dead pause. This man depressed me, I knew not why. He had a listless, puzzled look, very much out of keeping with his evident admirable health and strength.

'I suppose you are a great sportsman?' I asked from sheer despair, nodding in the direction of the whips and guns and fishing-rods.

'Oh no! not now. I was once. I have given up all that,' he answered, standing with his back to the fire, and staring at the polar bear beneath his feet. 'I—I have no time for all that now,' he added, as if an explanation were due. 'A married man—you know. Would you like to come up to your rooms?' he suddenly interrupted himself. 'I have one arranged for you to paint in. My wife said you would prefer a north light. If that one doesn't suit, you can have your choice of any other.'

I followed him out of the study, through the vast entrance-

hall. In less than a minute I was no longer thinking of Mr and Mrs Oke and the boredom of doing their likeness; I was simply overcome by the beauty of this house, which I had pictured modern and philistine. It was, without exception, the most perfect example of an old English manor-house that I had ever seen; the most magnificent intrinsically, and the most admirably preserved. Out of the huge hall, with its immense fireplace of delicately carved and inlaid grey and black stone, and its rows of family portraits, reaching from the wainscoting to the oaken ceiling, vaulted and ribbed like a ship's hull, opened the wide, flat-stepped staircase, the parapet surmounted at intervals by heraldic monsters, the wall covered with oak carvings of coats-of-arms, leafage, and little mythological scenes, painted a faded red and blue, and picked out with tarnished gold, which harmonised with the tarnished blue and gold of the stamped leather that reached to the oak cornice, again delicately tinted and gilded. The beautifully damascened suits of court armour looked, without being at all rusty, as if no modern hand had ever touched them; the very rugs underfoot were of sixteenth-century Persian make; the only things of today were the big bunches of flowers and ferns, arranged in majolica dishes upon the landings. Everything was perfectly silent; only from below came the chimes, silvery like an Italian palace fountain, of an old-fashioned clock.

It seemed to me that I was being led through the palace of the Sleeping Beauty.

'What a magnificent house!' I exclaimed as I followed my host through a long corridor, also hung with leather, wainscoted with carvings, and furnished with big wedding coffers, and chairs that looked as if they came out of some Vandyck portrait. In my mind was the strong impression that all this was natural, spontaneous—that it had about it nothing of the picturesqueness which swell studios have taught to rich and aesthetic houses. Mr Oke misunderstood me.

'It is a nice old place,' he said, 'but it's too large for us. You see, my wife's health does not allow of our having too many guests; and there are no children.'

I thought I noticed a vague complaint in his voice; and he evidently was afraid there might have seemed something of the kind, for he added immediately—

'I don't care for children one jackstraw, you know, myself; can't understand how anyone can, for my part.'

If ever a man went out of his way to tell a lie, I said to myself, Mr Oke of Okehurst was doing so at the present moment.

When he had left me in one of the two enormous rooms that were allotted to me, I threw myself into an arm-chair and tried to focus the extraordinary imaginative impression which this house had given me.

I am very susceptible to such impressions; and besides the sort of spasm of imaginative interest sometimes given to me by certain rare and eccentric personalities, I know nothing more subduing than the charm, quieter and less analytic, of any sort of complete and out-of-the-common-run of house. To sit in a room like the one I was sitting in, with the figures of the tapestry glimmering grey and lilac and purple in the twilight, the great bed, columned and curtained, looming in the middle, and the embers reddening beneath the overhanging mantelpiece of inlaid Italian stonework, a vague scent of rose-leaves and spices, put into the china bowls by the hands of ladies long since dead, while the clock downstairs sent up, every now and then, its faint silvery tune of forgotten days, filled the room;—to do this is a special kind of voluptuousness, peculiar and complex and indescribable, like the half-drunkenness of opium or haschisch, and which, to be conveyed to others in any sense as I feel it, would require a genius, subtle and heady, like that of Baudelaire.

After I had dressed for dinner, I resumed my place in the armchair, and resumed also my reverie, letting all these impressions of the past—which seemed faded like the figures in the arras, but still warm like the embers in the fireplace, still sweet and subtle like the perfume of the dead rose leaves and broken spices in the china bowls—permeate me and go to my head. Of Oke and Oke's wife I did not think; I seemed quite alone, isolated from the world, separated from it in this exotic enjoyment.

Gradually the embers grew paler; the figures in the tapestry more shadowy; the columned and curtained bed loomed out vaguer; the room seemed to fill with greyness; and my eyes wandered to the mullioned bow-windows, beyond whose panes, between whose heavy stone-work, stretched a greyish-

brown expanse of sere and sodden park grass, dotted with big oaks; while far off, with the blood-red of the sunset. Between the falling of the raindrops from the ivy outside, there came, fainter or sharper, the recurring bleating of the lambs separated from their mothers, a forlorn, quavering, eerie little cry.

I started up at a sudden rap at my door.

'Haven't you heard the gong for dinner?' asked Mr Oke's voice.

I had completely forgotten his existence.

III

I feel that I cannot possibly reconstruct my earliest impressions of Mrs Oke. My recollection of them would be entirely coloured by my subsequent knowledge of her; whence I conclude that I could not at first have experienced the strange interest and admiration which that extraordinary woman very soon excited in me. Interest and admiration, be it well understood, of a very unusual kind, as she was herself a very unusual kind of woman; and I, if you choose, am a rather unusual kind of man. But I can explain that better anon.

This much is certain, that I must have been immeasurably surprised at finding my hostess and future sitter so completely unlike everything I had anticipated. Or no—now I come to think of it, I scarcely felt surprised at all; or if I did, that shock of surprise could have lasted but an infinitesimal part of a minute. The fact is, that, having once seen Alice Oke in the reality, it was quite impossible to remember that one could have fancied her at all different; there was something so complete, so completely unlike everyone else, in her personality, that she seemed always to have been present in one's consciousness, although present, perhaps, as an enigma.

Let me try and give you some notion of her: not that first impression, whatever it may have been, but the absolute reality of her as I gradually learned to see it. To begin with, I must repeat and reiterate over and over again, that she was, beyond all comparison, the most graceful and exquisite woman I have ever seen, but with a grace and an exquisiteness that had nothing to do with any preconceived notion of previous experience of what goes by these names: grace and

exquisiteness recognised at once as perfect, but which were seen in her for the first, and probably, I do believe, for the last time. It is conceivable, is it not, that once in a thousand years there may arise a combination of lines, a system of movements, an outline, a gesture, which is new, unprecedented, and yet hits off exactly our desires for beauty and rareness? She was very tall; and I suppose people would have called her thin. I don't know, for I never thought about her as a body—bones, flesh, that sort of thing; but merely as a wonderful series of lines, and a wonderful strangeness of personality. Tall and slender, certainly, and with not one item of what makes up our notion of a well-built woman. She was as straight—I mean she had as little of what people call figure—as a bamboo; her shoulders were a trifle high, and she had a decided stoop; her arms and her shoulders she never once wore uncovered. But this bamboo figure of hers had a suppleness and a stateliness, a play of outline with every step she took, that I can't compare to anything else; there was in it something of the peacock and something also of the stag; but, above all, it was her own. I wish I could describe her. I wish, alas!—I wish, I wish, I have wished a hundred thousand times—I could paint her, as I see her now, if I shut my eyes—even if it were only a silhouette. There! I see her so plainly, walking slowly up and down a room, the slight highness of her shoulders just completing the exquisite arrangement of lines made by the straight supple back, the long exquisite neck, the head, with the hair cropped in short pale curls, always drooping a little, except when she would suddenly throw it back, and smile, not at me, nor at anyone, nor at anything that had been said, but as if she alone had suddenly seen or heard something, with the strange dimple in her thin, pale cheeks, and the strange whiteness in her full, wide-opened eyes: the moment when she had something of the stag in her movement. But where is the use of talking about her? I don't believe, you know, that even the greatest painter can show what is the real beauty of a very beautiful woman in the ordinary sense: Titian's and Tintoretto's women must have been miles handsomer than they have made them. Something—and that the very essence—always escapes, perhaps because real beauty is as much a thing in time—a thing like music, a succession, a series—as

in space. Mind you, I am speaking of a woman beautiful in the conventional sense. Imagine, then, how much more so in the case of a woman like Alice Oke; and if the pencil and brush, imitating each line and tint, can't succeed, how is it possible to give even the vaguest notion with mere wretched words—words possessing only a wretched abstract meaning, an impotent conventional association? To make a long story short, Mrs Oke of Okehurst was, in my opinion, to the highest degree exquisite and strange—an exotic creature, whose arm you can no more describe than you could bring home the perfume of some newly discovered tropical flower by comparing it with the scent of a cabbage-rose or a lily.

That first dinner was gloomy enough. Mr Oke—Oke of Okehurst, as the people down there called him—was horribly shy, consumed with a fear of making a fool of himself before me and his wife, I then thought. But that sort of shyness did not wear off; and I soon discovered that, although it was doubtless increased by the presence of a total stranger, it was inspired in Oke, not by me, but by his wife. He would look every now and then as if he were going to make a remark, and then evidently restrain himself, and remain silent. It was very curious to see this big, handsome, manly young fellow, who ought to have had any amount of success with women, suddenly stammer and grow crimson in the presence of his own wife. Nor was it the consciousness of stupidity; for when you got him alone, Oke, although always slow and timid, had a certain amount of ideas, and very defined political and social views, and a certain childlike earnestness and desire to attain certainty and truth which was rather touching. On the other hand, Oke's singular shyness was not, so far as I could see, the result of any kind of bullying on his wife's part. You can always detect, if you have any observation, the husband or the wife who is accustomed to be snubbed, to be corrected, by his or her better-half: there is a self-consciousness in both parties, a habit of watching and fault-finding, of being watched and found fault with. This was clearly not the case at Okehurst. Mrs Oke evidently did not trouble herself about her husband in the very least; he might say or do any amount of silly things without rebuke or even notice; and he might have done so, had he chosen, ever since his wedding-day. You felt that at once. Mrs Oke simply

passed over his existence. I cannot say she paid much attention to anyone's, even to mine. At first I thought it an affectation on her part—for there was something far-fetched in her whole appearance, something suggesting study, which might lead one to tax her with affectation at first; she was dressed in a strange way, not according to any established aesthetic eccentricity, but individually, strangely, as if in the clothes of an ancestress of the seventeenth century. Well, at first I thought it a kind of pose on her part, this mixture of extreme graciousness and utter indifference which she manifested towards me. She always seemed to be thinking of something else; and although she talked quite sufficiently, and with every sign of superior intelligence, she left the impression of having been as taciturn as her husband.

In the beginning, in the first few days of my stay at Okehurst, I imagined that Mrs Oke was a highly superior sort of flirt; and that her absent manner, her look, while speaking to you, into an invisible distance, her curious irrelevant smile, were so many means of attracting and baffling adoration. I mistook it for the somewhat similar manners of certain foreign women—it is beyond English ones—which mean, to those who can understand, 'pay court to me.' But I soon found I was mistaken. Mrs Oke had not the faintest desire that I should pay court to her; indeed she did not honour me with sufficient thought for that; and I, on my part, began to be too much interested in her from another point of view to dream of such a thing. I became aware, not merely that I had before me the most marvellously rare and exquisite and baffling subject for a portrait, but also one of the most peculiar and enigmatic of characters. Now that I look back upon it, I am tempted to think that the psychological peculiarity of that woman might be summed up in an exorbitant and absorbing interest in herself—a Narcissus attitude—curiously complicated with a fantastic imagination, a sort of morbid day-dreaming, all turned inwards, and with no outer characteristic save a certain restlessness, a perverse desire to surprise and shock, to surprise and shock more particularly her husband, and thus be revenged for the intense boredom which his want of appreciation inflicted upon her.

I got to understand this much little by little, yet I did not seem to have really penetrated the something mysterious

about Mrs Oke. There was a waywardness, a strangeness, which I felt but could not explain—a something as difficult to define as the peculiarity of her outward appearance, and perhaps very closely connected therewith. I became interested in Mrs Oke as if I had been in love with her; and I was not in the least in love. I neither dreaded parting from her, nor felt any pleasure in her presence. I had not the smallest wish to please or to gain her notice. But I had her on the brain. I pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation, with a kind of passion which filled my days, and prevented my ever feeling dull. The Okes lived a remarkably solitary life. There were but few neighbours, of whom they saw but little; and they rarely had a guest in the house. Oke himself seemed every now and then seized with a sense of responsibility towards me. He would remark vaguely, during our walks and after-dinner chats, that I must find life at Okehurst horribly dull; his wife's health had accustomed him to solitude, and then also his wife thought the neighbours a bore. He never questioned his wife's judgement on these matters. He merely stated the case as if resignation were quite simple and inevitable; yet it seemed to me, sometimes, that this monotonous life of solitude, by the side of a woman who took no more heed of him than of a table or chair, was producing a vague depression and irritation in this young man, so evidently cut out for a cheerful, commonplace life. I often wondered how he could endure it at all, not having, as I had, the interest of a strange psychological riddle to solve, and of a great portrait to paint. He was, I found, extremely good—the type of the perfectly conscientious young Englishman, the sort of man who ought to have been the Christian soldier kind of thing; devout, pure-minded, brave, incapable of any baseness, a little intellectually dense, and puzzled by all manner of moral scruples. The condition of his tenants and of his political party—he was a regular Kentish Tory—lay heavy on his mind. He spent hours every day in his study, doing the work of a land agent and a political whip, reading piles of reports and newspapers and agricultural treatises; and emerging for lunch with piles of letters in his hand, and that odd puzzled look in his good healthy face, that deep gash between his eyebrows, which my friend the mad-doctor calls the *maniac-frown*. It was with this expression of

face that I should have liked to paint him; but I felt that he would not have liked it, that it was more fair to him to represent him in his mere wholesome pink and white and blond conventionality. I was perhaps rather unconscientious about the likeness of Mr Oke; I felt satisfied to paint it no matter how, I mean as regards character, for my whole mind was swallowed up in thinking how I should paint Mrs Oke, how I could best transport on to canvas that singular and enigmatic personality. I began with her husband, and told her frankly that I must have much longer to study her. Mr Oke couldn't understand why it should be necessary to make a hundred and one pencil-sketches of his wife before even determining in what attitude to paint her; but I think he was rather pleased to have an opportunity of keeping me at Okehurst; my presence evidently broke the monotony of his life. Mrs Oke seemed perfectly indifferent to my staying, as she was perfectly indifferent to my presence. Without being rude, I never saw a woman pay so little attention to a guest; she would talk with me sometimes by the hour, or rather let me talk to her, but she never seemed to be listening. She would lie back in a big seventeenth-century armchair while I played the piano, with that strange smile every now and then in her thin cheeks, that strange whiteness in her eyes; but it seemed a matter of indifference whether my music stopped or went on. In my portrait of her husband she did not take, or pretend to take, the very faintest interest; but that was nothing to me. I did not want Mrs Oke to think me interesting; I merely wished to go on studying her.

The first time that Mrs Oke seemed to become at all aware of my presence as distinguished from that of the chairs and tables, the dogs that lay in the porch, or the clergyman or lawyer or stray neighbour who was occasionally asked to dinner, was one day—I might have been there a week—when I chanced to remark to her upon the very singular resemblance that existed between herself and the portrait of a lady that hung in the hall with the ceiling like a ship's hull. The picture in question was a full length, neither very good nor very bad, probably done by some stray Italian of the early seventeenth century. It hung in a rather dark corner, facing the portrait, evidently painted to be its companion, of a dark

man, with a somewhat unpleasant expression of resolution and efficiency, in a black Vandyck dress. The two were evidently man and wife; and in the corner of the woman's portrait were the words, 'Alice Oke, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, Esq., and wife to Nicholas Oke of Okehurst', and the date 1626. 'Nicholas Oke' being the name painted in the corner of the small portrait. The lady was really wonderfully like the present Mrs Oke, at least so far as an indifferently painted portrait of the early days of Charles I can be like a living woman of the nineteenth century. There were the same strange lines of figure and face, the same dimples in the thin cheeks, the same wide-opened eyes, the same vague eccentricity of expression, not destroyed even by the feeble painting and conventional manner of the time. One could fancy that this woman had the same walk, the same beautiful line of nape of the neck and stooping head as her descendant; for I found that Mr and Mrs Oke, who were first cousins, were both descended from that Nicholas Oke and that Alice, daughter of Virgil Pomfret. But the resemblance was heightened by the fact that, as I soon saw, the present Mrs Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress, dressing in garments that had a seventeenth-century look; nay, that were sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait.

'You think I am like her,' answered Mrs Oke dreamily to my remark, and her eyes wandered off to that unseen something, and the faint smile dimpled her thin cheeks.

'You are like her, and you know it, I may even say you wish to be like her, Mrs Oke,' I answered, laughing.

'Perhaps I do.'

And she looked in the direction of her husband. I noticed that he had an expression of distinct annoyance besides that frown of his.

'Isn't it true that Mrs Oke tries to look like that portrait?' I asked, with a perverse curiosity.

'Oh, fudge!' he exclaimed, rising from his chair and walking nervously to the window. 'It's all nonsense, mere nonsense. I wish you wouldn't, Alice.'

'Wouldn't what?' asked Mrs Oke, with a sort of contemptuous indifference. 'If I am like that Alice Oke, why I am; and I am very pleased anyone should think so. She and

her husband are just about the only two members of our family—our most flat, stale, and unprofitable family—that ever were in the least degree interesting.’

Oke grew crimson, and frowned as if in pain.

‘I don’t see why you should abuse our family, Alice,’ he said. ‘Thank God, our people have always been honourable and upright men and women!’

‘Excepting always Nicholas Oke and Alice his wife, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, Esq.,’ she answered, laughing, as he strode out into the park.

‘How childish he is!’ she exclaimed when we were alone. ‘He really minds, really feels disgraced by what our ancestors did two centuries and a half ago. I do believe William would have those two portraits taken down and burned if he weren’t afraid of me and ashamed of the neighbours. And as it is, these two people really are the only two members of our family that ever were in the least interesting. I will tell you the story some day.’

As it was, the story was told to me by Oke himself. The next day, as we were taking our morning walk, he suddenly broke a long silence, laying about him all the time at the sere grasses with the hooked stick that he carried, like the conscientious Kentishman he was, for the purpose of cutting down his and other folk’s thistles.

‘I fear you must have thought me very ill-mannered towards my wife yesterday,’ he said shyly; ‘and indeed I know I was.’

Oke was one of those chivalrous beings to whom every woman, every wife—and his own most of all—appeared in the light of something holy. ‘But—but—I have a prejudice which my wife does not enter into, about raking up ugly things in one’s own family. I suppose Alice thinks that it is so long ago that it has really got no connection with us; she thinks of it merely as a picturesque story. I daresay many people feel like that; in short, I am sure they do, otherwise there wouldn’t be such lots of discreditable family traditions afloat. But I feel as if it were all one whether it was long ago or not; when it’s a question of one’s own people, I would rather have it forgotten. I can’t understand how people can talk about murders in their families, and ghosts, and so forth.’

'Have you any ghosts at Okehurst, by the way?' I asked. The place seemed as if it required some to complete it.

'I hope not,' said Oke gravely.

His gravity made me smile.

'Why, would you dislike it if there were?' I asked.

'If there are such things as ghosts,' he replied, 'I don't think they should be taken lightly. God would not permit them to be, except as a warning or a punishment.'

We walked on some time in silence, I wondering at the strange type of this commonplace young man, and half wishing I could put something into my portrait that should be the equivalent of this curious unimaginative earnestness. Then Oke told me the story of those two pictures—told it me about as badly and hesitantly as was possible for mortal man.

He and his wife were, as I have said, cousins, and therefore descended from the same old Kentish stock. The Okes of Okehurst could trace back to Norman, almost to Saxon times, far longer than any of the titled or better-known families of the neighbourhood. I saw that William Oke, in his heart, thoroughly looked down upon all his neighbours. 'We have never done anything particular, or been anything particular—never held any office,' he said; 'but we have always been here, and apparently always done our duty. An ancestor of ours was killed in the Scotch wars, another at Agincourt—mere honest captains.' Well, early in the seventeenth century, the family had dwindled to a single member, Nicholas Oke, the same who had rebuilt Okehurst in its present shape. This Nicholas appears to have been somewhat different from the usual run of the family. He had, in his youth, sought adventures in America, and seems, generally speaking, to have been less of a nonentity than his ancestors. He married, when no longer very young, Alice, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, a beautiful young heiress from a neighbouring county. 'It was the first time an Oke married a Pomfret,' my host informed me, 'and the last time. The Pomfrets were quite different sort of people—restless, self-seeking; one of them had been a favourite of Henry VIII.' It was clear that William Oke had no feeling of having any Pomfret blood in his veins; he spoke of these people with an evident, family dislike—the dislike of an Oke, one of the old, honourable, modest stock, which had

quietly done its duty, for a family of fortune-seekers and Court minions. Well, there had come to live near Okehurst, in a little house recently inherited from an uncle, a certain Christopher Lovelock, a young gallant and poet, who was in momentary disgrace at Court for some love affair. This Lovelock had struck up a great friendship with his neighbours of Okehurst—too great a friendship, apparently, with the wife, either for her husband's taste or her own. Anyhow, one evening as he was riding home alone, Lovelock had been attacked and murdered, ostensibly by highwaymen, but as was afterwards rumoured, by Nicholas Oke, accompanied by his wife dressed as a groom. No legal evidence had been got, but the tradition had remained. 'They used to tell it us when we were children,' said my host, in a hoarse voice, 'and to frighten my cousin—I mean my wife—and me with stories about Lovelock. It is merely a tradition, which I hope may die out, as I sincerely pray to heaven that it may be false. Alice—Mrs Oke—you see,' he went on after some time, 'doesn't feel about it as I do. Perhaps I am morbid. But I do dislike having the old story raked up.'

And we said no more on the subject.

IV

From that moment I began to assume a certain interest in the eyes of Mrs Oke; or rather, I began to perceive that I had a means of securing her attention. Perhaps it was wrong of me to do so; and I have often reproached myself very seriously later on. But after all, how was I to guess that I was making mischief merely by chiming in, for the sake of the portrait I had undertaken, and of a very harmless psychological mania, with what was merely the fad, the little romantic affectation or eccentricity, of a scatterbrained and eccentric young woman? How in the world should I have dreamed that I was handling explosive substances? A man is surely not responsible if the people with whom he is forced to deal, and whom he deals with as with all the rest of the world, are quite different from all other human creatures.

So, if indeed I did at all conduce to mischief, I really cannot blame myself. I had met in Mrs Oke an almost unique subject for a portrait-painter of my particular sort, and a

most singular, bizarre personality. I could not possibly do my subject justice so long as I was kept at a distance, prevented from studying the real character of the woman. I required to put her into play. And I ask you whether any more innocent way of doing so could be found than talking to a woman, and letting her talk, about an absurd fancy she had for a couple of ancestors of hers of the time of Charles I, and a poet whom they had murdered?—particularly as I studiously respected the prejudices of my host, and refrained from mentioning the matter, and tried to restrain Mrs Oke from doing so, in the presence of William Oke himself.

I had certainly guessed correctly. To resemble the Alice Oke of the year 1626 was the caprice, the mania, the pose, the whatever you may call it, of the Alice Oke of 1880; and to perceive this resemblance was the sure way of gaining her good graces. It was the most extraordinary craze, of all the extraordinary crazes of childless and idle women, that I had ever met; but it was more than that, it was admirably characteristic. It finished off the strange figure of Mrs Oke, as I saw it in my imagination—this bizarre creature of enigmatic, far-fetched exquisiteness—that she should have no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past. It seemed to give the meaning to the absent look in her eyes, to her irrelevant and far-off smile. It was like the words to a weird piece of gipsy music, this that she, who was so different, so distant from all women of her own time, should try and identify herself with a woman of the past—that she should have a kind of flirtation— But of this anon.

I told Mrs Oke that I had learnt from her husband the outline of the tragedy, or mystery, whichever it was, of Alice Oke, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, and the poet Christopher Lovelock. That look of vague contempt, of a desire to shock, which I had noticed before, came into her beautiful, pale, diaphanous face.

‘I suppose my husband was very shocked at the whole matter,’ she said—‘told it you with as little detail as possible, and assured you very solemnly that he hoped the whole story might be a mere dreadful calumny? Poor Willie! I remember already when we were children, and I used to come with my mother to spend Christmas at Okehurst, and my cousin was down here for his holidays, how I used to horrify him

by insisting upon dressing up in shawls and waterproofs, and playing the story of the wicked Mrs Oke; and he always piously refused to do the part of Nicholas, when I wanted to have the scene at Cotes Common. I didn't know then that I was like the original Alice Oke; I found it out only after our marriage. You really think that I am?'

She certainly was, particularly at that moment, as she stood in a white Vandyck dress, with the green of the park-land rising up behind her, and the low sun catching her short locks and surrounding her head, her exquisitely bowed head, with a pale yellow halo. But I confess I thought the original Alice Oke, siren and murderess though she might be, very uninteresting compared with this wayward and exquisite creature whom I had rashly promised myself to send down to posterity in all her unlikely wayward exquisiteness.

One morning while Mr Oke was despatching his Saturday heap of Conservative manifestoes and rural decisions—he was justice of the peace in a most literal sense, penetrating into cottages and huts, defending the weak and admonishing the ill-conducted—one morning while I was making one of my many pencil-sketches (alas, they are all that remain to me now!) of my future sitter, Mrs Oke gave me her version of the story of Alice Oke and Christopher Lovelock.

'Do you suppose there was anything between them?' I asked—'that she was ever in love with him? How do you explain the part which tradition ascribes to her in the supposed murder? One has heard of women and their lovers who have killed the husband; but a woman who combines with her husband to kill her lover, or at least the man who is in love with her—that is surely very singular.' I was absorbed in my drawing, and really thinking very little of what I was saying.

'I don't know,' she answered pensively, with that distant look in her eyes. 'Alice Oke was very proud, I am sure. She may have loved the poet very much, and yet been indignant with him, hated having to love him. She may have felt that she had a right to rid herself of him, and to call upon her husband to help her to do so.'

'Good heavens! what a fearful idea!' I exclaimed, half laughing. 'Don't you think, after all, that Mr Oke may be right in saying that it is easier and more comfortable to take the whole story as a pure invention?'

'I cannot take it as an invention,' answered Mrs Oke contemptuously, 'because I happen to know that it is true.'

'Indeed!' I answered, working away at my sketch, and enjoying putting this strange creature, as I said to myself, through her paces; 'how is that?'

'How does one know that anything is true in this world?' she replied evasively; 'because one does, because one feels it to be true, I suppose.'

And, with that far-off look in her light eyes, she relapsed into silence.

'Have you ever read any of Lovelock's poetry?' she asked me suddenly the next day.

'Lovelock?' I answered, for I had forgotten the name. 'Lovelock who—' But I stopped, remembering the prejudices of my host, who was seated next to me at table.

'Lovelock who was killed by Mr Oke's and my ancestors.'

And she looked full at her husband, as if in perverse enjoyment of the evident annoyance which it caused him.

'Alice,' he entreated in a low voice, his whole face crimson, 'for mercy's sake, don't talk about such things before the servants.'

Mrs Oke burst into a high, light, rather hysterical laugh, the laugh of a naughty child.

'The servants! Gracious, heavens! Do you suppose they haven't heard the story? Why, it's as well known as Okehurst itself in the neighbourhood. Don't they believe that Lovelock has been seen about the house? Haven't they all heard his footsteps in the big corridors? Haven't they, my dear Willie, noticed a thousand times that you never will stay a minute in the yellow drawing-room—that you run out of it, like a child, if I happen to leave you there for a minute?'

True! How was it I had not noticed that? or rather, that I only now remembered having noticed it? The yellow drawing-room was one of the most charming rooms in the house: a large, bright room, hung with yellow damask and panelled with carvings, that opened straight out on to the lawn, far superior to the room in which we habitually sat, which was comparatively gloomy. This time Mr Oke struck me as really too childish. I felt an intense desire to badger him.

'The yellow drawing-room!' I exclaimed. 'Does this interest-

ing literary character haunt the yellow drawing-room? Do tell me about it. What happened there?’

Mr Oke made a painful effort to laugh.

‘Nothing ever happened there, so far as I know,’ he said, and rose from the table.

‘Really?’ I asked incredulously.

‘Nothing did happen there,’ answered Mrs Oke slowly, playing mechanically with a fork, and picking out the pattern of the tablecloth. ‘That is just the extraordinary circumstance, that, so far as anyone knows, nothing ever did happen there; and yet that room has an evil reputation. No member of our family, they say, can bear to sit there alone for more than a minute. You see, William evidently cannot.’

‘Have you ever seen or heard anything strange there?’ I asked of my host.

He shook his head. ‘Nothing,’ he answered curtly, and lit his cigar.

‘I presume you have not,’ I asked, half laughing, of Mrs Oke, ‘since you don’t mind sitting in that room for hours alone? How do you explain this uncanny reputation, since nothing ever happened there?’

‘Perhaps something is destined to happen there in the future,’ she answered, in her absent voice. And then she suddenly added, ‘Suppose you paint my portrait in that room?’

Mr Oke suddenly turned round. He was very white, and looked as if he were going to say something, but desisted.

‘Why do you worry Mr Oke like that?’ I asked, when he had gone into his smoking-room, with his usual bundle of papers. ‘It is very cruel of you, Mrs Oke. You ought to have more consideration for people who believe in such things, although you may not be able to put yourself in their frame of mind.’

‘Who tells you that I don’t believe in *such things*, as you call them?’ she answered abruptly.

‘Come,’ she said, after a minute, ‘I want to show you why I believe in Christopher Lovelock. Come with me into the yellow room.’

bundle of papers, some printed and some manuscript, but all of them brown with age, which she took out of an old Italian ebony inlaid cabinet. It took her some time to get them, as a complicated arrangement of double locks and false drawers had to be put in play; and while she was doing so, I looked round the room, in which I had been only three or four times before. It was certainly the most beautiful room in this beautiful house, and, as it seemed to me now, the most strange. It was long and low, with something that made you think of the cabin of a ship, with a great mullioned window that let in, as it were, a perspective of the brownish green parkland, dotted with oaks, and sloping upwards to the distant line of bluish firs against the horizon. The walls were hung with flowered damask, whose yellow, faded to brown, united with the reddish colour of the carved wainscoting, and the carved oaken beams. For the rest, it reminded me more of an Italian room than an English one. The furniture was Tuscan of the early seventeenth century, inlaid and carved; there were a couple of faded allegorical pictures, by some Bolognese master, on the walls; and in a corner, among a stack of dwarf orange-trees, a little Italian harpsichord of exquisite curve and slenderness, with flowers and landscapes painted upon its cover. In a recess, was a shelf of old books, mainly English and Italian poets of the Elizabethan time; and close by it, placed upon a carved wedding-chest, a large and beautiful melon-shaped lute. The panes of the mullioned window were open, and yet the air seemed heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume, not that of any growing flower, but like that of old stuff that should have lain for years among spices.

'It is a beautiful room!' I exclaimed. 'I should awfully like to paint you in it'; but I had scarcely spoken the words when I felt I had done wrong. This woman's husband could not bear the room, and it seemed to me vaguely as if he were right in detesting it.

Mrs Oke took no notice of my exclamation, but beckoned me to the table where she was standing sorting the papers.

'Look!' she said, 'these are all poems by Christopher Lovelock'; and touching the yellow papers with delicate and reverent fingers, she commenced reading some of them out loud in a slow, half-audible voice. They were songs in the style of those of Herrick, Waller, and Drayton, complaining

for the most part of the cruelty of a lady called Dryope, in whose name was evidently concealed a reference to that of the mistress of Okehurst. The songs were graceful, and not without a certain faded passion; but I was thinking not of them, but of the woman who was reading them to me.

Mrs Oke was standing with the brownish yellow wall as a background to her white brocade dress, which, in its stiff seventeenth century make, seemed but to bring out more clearly the slightness, the exquisite suppleness, of her tall figure. She held the papers in one hand, and leaned the other, as if for support, on the inlaid cabinet by her side. Her voice, which was delicate, shadowy, like her person, had a curious throbbing cadence, as if she were reading the words of a melody, and restraining herself with difficulty from singing it; and as she read, her long slender throat throbbed slightly, and a faint redness came into her thin face. She evidently knew the verses by heart, and her eyes were mostly fixed with that distant smile in them, with which harmonised a constant tremulous little smile in her lips.

'That is how I would wish to paint her!' I exclaimed within myself; and scarcely noticed, what struck me on thinking over the scene; that this strange being read these verses as one might fancy a woman would read love-verses addressed to herself.

'Those are all written for Alice Oke—Alice the daughter of Virgil Pomfret,' she said slowly, folding up the papers. 'I found them at the bottom of this cabinet. Can you doubt of the reality of Christopher Lovelock now?'

The question was an illogical one, for to doubt of the existence of Christopher Lovelock was one thing, and to doubt of the mode of his death was another; but somehow I did feel convinced.

'Look!' she said, when she had replaced the poems, 'I will show you something else.' Among the flowers that stood on the upper storey of her writing-table—for I found that Mrs Oke had a writing-table in the yellow room—stood, as on an altar, a small black carved frame, with a silk curtain drawn over it: the sort of thing behind which you would have expected to find a head of Christ or of the Virgin Mary. She drew the curtain and displayed a large-sized miniature, representing a young man, with auburn curls and

a peaked auburn beard, dressed in black, but with lace about his neck, and large pear-shaped pearls in his ears; a wistful melancholy face. Mrs Oke took the miniature religiously off its stand, and showed me, written in faded characters upon the back, the name 'Christopher Lovelock', and the date 1626.

'I found this in the secret drawer of that cabinet, together with the heap of poems,' she said, taking the miniature out of my hand.

I was silent for a minute.

'Does—does Mr Oke know that you have got it here?' I asked; and then wondered what in the world had impelled me to put such a question.

Mrs Oke smiled that smile of contemptuous indifference. 'I have never hidden it from anyone. If my husband disliked my having it, he might have taken it away, I suppose. It belongs to him, since it was found in his house.'

I did not answer, but walked mechanically towards the door. There was something heady and oppressive in this beautiful room; something, I thought, almost repulsive in this exquisite woman. She seemed to me, suddenly, perverse and dangerous.

I scarcely know why, but I neglected Mrs Oke that afternoon. I went to Mr Oke's study, and sat opposite to him smoking while he was engrossed in his accounts, his reports, and electioneering papers. On the table, above the heap of paper-bound volumes and pigeon-holed documents, was, as sole ornament of his den, a little photograph of his wife, done some years before. I don't know why, but as I sat and watched him, with his florid, honest, manly beauty, working away conscientiously, with that little perplexed frown of his, I felt intensely sorry for this man.

But this feeling did not last. There was no help for it: Oke was not as interesting as Mrs Oke; and it required too great an effort to pump up sympathy for this normal, excellent, exemplary young squire, in the presence of so wonderful a creature as his wife. So I let myself go to the habit of allowing Mrs Oke daily to talk over her strange craze, or rather of drawing her out about it. I confess that I derived a morbid and exquisite pleasure in doing so: it was so characteristic in her, so appropriate to the house! It completed her personality so perfectly, and made it so much easier to conceive a

way of painting her. I made up my mind little by little, while working at William Oke's portrait (he proved a less easy subject than I had anticipated, and, despite his conscientious efforts, was a nervous, uncomfortable sitter, silent and brooding)—I made up my mind that I would paint Mrs Oke standing by the cabinet in the yellow room, in the white Vandyck dress copied from the portrait of her ancestress. Mr Oke might resent it, Mrs Oke even might resent it; they might refuse to take the picture, to pay for it, to allow me to exhibit; they might force me to run my umbrella through the picture. No matter. That picture should be painted, if merely for the sake of having painted it; for I felt it was the only thing I could do, and that it would be far away my best work. I told neither of my resolution, but prepared sketch after sketch of Mrs Oke, while continuing to paint her husband.

Mrs Oke was a silent person, more silent even than her husband, for she did not feel bound, as he did, to attempt to entertain a guest or to show any interest in him. She seemed to spend her life—a curious, inactive, half-invalidish life, broken by sudden fits of childish cheerfulness—in an eternal day-dream, strolling about the house and grounds, arranging the quantities of flowers that always filled all the rooms, beginning to read and then throwing aside novels and books of poetry, of which she always had a large number; and I believe, lying for hours, doing nothing, on a couch in that yellow drawing-room, which, with her sole exception, no member of the Oke family had ever been known to stay in alone. Little by little I began to suspect and to verify another eccentricity of this eccentric being, and to understand why there were stringent orders never to disturb her in that yellow room.

It had been a habit at Okehurst, as at one or two other English manor-houses, to keep a certain amount of the clothes of each generation, more particularly wedding-dresses. A certain carved oaken press, of which Mr Oke once displayed the contents to me, was a perfect museum of costumes, male and female, from the early years of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century—a thing to take away the breath of a *bric-à-brac* collector, an antiquary, or a *genre* painter. Mr Oke was none of these, and therefore took but little interest in the collection, save in so far as it interested his

family feeling. Still he seemed well acquainted with the contents of that press.

He was turning over the clothes for my benefit, when suddenly I noticed that he frowned. I know not what impelled me to say, 'By the way, have you any dresses of that Mrs Oke whom your wife resembles so much? Have you got that particular white dress she was painted in, perhaps?'

Oke of Okehurst flushed very red.

'We have it,' he answered hesitatingly, 'but—it isn't here at present—I can't find it. I suppose,' he blurted out with an effort 'that Alice has got it. Mrs Oke sometimes has the fancy of having some of these old things down. I suppose she takes ideas from them.'

A sudden light dawned in my mind. The white dress in which I had seen Mrs Oke in the yellow room, the day that she showed me Lovelock's verses, was not, as I had thought, a modern copy; it was the original dress of Alice Oke, the daughter of Virgil Pomfret—the dress in which, perhaps, Christopher Lovelock had seen her in that room.

The idea gave me a delightful picturesque shudder. I said nothing. But I pictured to myself Mrs Oke sitting in that yellow room—that room which no Oke of Okehurst save herself ventured to remain in alone, in the dress of her ancestress, confronting, as it were, that vague, haunting something that seemed to fill the place—that vague presence, it seemed to me, of the murdered cavalier poet.

Mrs Oke, as I have said, was extremely silent, as a result of being extremely indifferent. She really did not care in the least about anything except her own ideas and day-dreams, except when, every now and then, she was seized with a sudden desire to shock the prejudices or superstitions of her husband. Very soon she got into the way of never talking to me at all, save about Alice and Nicholas Oke and Christopher Lovelock; and then, when the fit seized her, she would go on by the hour, never asking herself whether I was or was not equally interested in the strange craze that fascinated her. It so happened that I was. I loved to listen to her, going on discussing by the hour the merits of Lovelock's poems, and analysing her feelings and those of her two ancestors. It was quite wonderful to watch the exquisite, exotic creature in one of these moods, with the distant look in her grey eyes and

the absent-looking smile in her thin cheeks, talking as if she had intimately known these people of the seventeenth century, discussing every minute mood of theirs, detailing every scene between them and their victim, talking of Alice, and Nicholas, and Lovelock as she might of her most intimate friends. Of Alice particularly, and of Lovelock. She seemed to know every word that Alice had spoken, every idea that had crossed her mind. It sometimes struck me as if she were telling me, speaking of herself in the third person, of her own feelings—as if I were listening to a woman's confidences, the recital of her doubts, scruples, and agonies about a living lover. For Mrs Oke, who seemed the most self-absorbed of creatures in all other matters, and utterly incapable of understanding or sympathising with the feelings of other persons, entered completely and passionately into the feelings of this woman, this Alice, who, at some moments, seemed to be not another woman, but herself.

'But how could she do it—how could she kill the man she cared for?' I once asked her.

'Because she loved him more than the whole world!' she exclaimed, and rising suddenly from her chair, walked towards the window, covering her face with her hands.

I could see, from the movement of her neck, that she was sobbing. She did not turn round, but motioned me to go away.

'Don't let us talk any more about it,' she said. 'I am ill today, and silly.'

I closed the door gently behind me. What mystery was there in this woman's life? This listlessness, this strange self-engrossment and stranger mania about people long dead, this indifference and desire to annoy towards her husband—did it all mean that Alice Oke had loved or still loved someone who was not the master of Okehurst? And his melancholy, his preoccupation, the something about him that told of a broken youth—did it mean that he knew it?

VI

The following days Mrs Oke was in a condition of quite unusual good spirits. Some visitors—distant relatives—were expected and although she had expressed the utmost annoy-

ance at the idea of their coming, she was now seized with a fit of housekeeping activity, and was perpetually about arranging things and giving orders, although all arrangements, as usual, had been made, and all orders given, by her husband.

William Oke was quite radiant.

'If only Alice were always well like this!' he exclaimed; 'if only she would take, or could take, an interest in life, how different things would be! But,' he added, as if fearful lest he should be supposed to accuse her in any way, 'how can she, usually, with her wretched health? Still, it does make me awfully happy to see her like this.'

I nodded. But I cannot say that I really acquiesced in his views. It seemed to me, particularly with the recollection of yesterday's extraordinary scene, that Mrs Oke's high spirits were anything but normal. There was something in her unusual activity and still more unusual cheerfulness that were merely nervous and feverish; and I had, the whole day, the impression of dealing with a woman who was ill and who would very speedily collapse.

Mrs Oke spent her day wandering from one room to another, and from the garden to the greenhouse, seeing whether all was in order, when, as a matter of fact, all was always in order at Okehurst. She did not give me any sitting, and not a word was spoken about Alice Oke or Christopher Lovelock. Indeed, to a casual observer, it might have seemed as if all that craze about Lovelock had completely departed, or never existed. About five o'clock, as I was strolling among the red-brick round-gabled outhouses—each with its armorial oak—and the old-fashioned, spalliered kitchen and fruit garden, I saw Mrs Oke standing, her hands full of York and Lancaster roses, upon the steps facing the stables. A groom was currycombing a horse, and outside the coach-house was Mr Oke's high-wheeled cart.

'Let us have a drive!' suddenly exclaimed Mrs Oke, on seeing me. 'Look what a beautiful evening—and look at that dear little cart! It is so long since I have driven, and I feel as if I must drive again. Come with me. And you, harness Jim at once and come round to the door.'

I was quite amazed; and still more so when the cart drove up before the door, and Mrs Oke called to me to accompany her. She sent away the groom, and in a minute we were

rolling along, at a tremendous pace, along the yellow sand road, with the sere pasture-lands, the big oaks, on either side.

I could scarcely believe my senses. This woman, in her mannish little coat and hat, driving a powerful young horse with the utmost skill, and chattering like a schoolgirl of sixteen, could not be the delicate, morbid, exotic, hot-house creature, unable to walk or to do anything, who spent her days lying about on couches in the heavy atmosphere, redolent with strange scents and associations, of the yellow drawing-room. The movement of the light carriage, the cool draught, the very grind of the wheels upon the gravel, seemed to go to her head like wine.

'It is so long since I have done this sort of thing,' she kept repeating; 'so long, so long. Oh, don't you think it delightful, going at this pace, with the idea that any moment the horse may come down and we two be killed;' and she laughed her childish laugh, and turned her face, no longer pale, but flushed with the movement and the excitement, towards me.

The cart rolled on quicker and quicker, one gate after another swinging to behind us, as we flew up and down the little hills, across the pasture lands, through the little red-brick gabled villages, where the people came out to see us pass, past the rows of willows along the streams, and the dark-green compact hop-fields, with the blue and hazy tree-tops of the horizon getting bluer and more hazy as the yellow light began to graze the ground. At last we got to an open space, a high-lying piece of common-land, such as is rare in that ruthlessly utilised country of grazing grounds and hop-gardens. Among the low hills of the Weald, it seemed quite preternaturally high up, giving a sense that its extent of flat heather and gorse, bound by distant firs, was really on the top of the world. The sun was setting just opposite, and its light lay flat on the ground, staining it with the red and black of the heather, or rather turning it into the surface of a purple sea, canopied over by a bank of dark-purple clouds—the jet-like sparkle of the dry ling and gorse tipping the purple like sunlit wavelets. A cold wind swept in our faces.

'What is the name of this place?' I asked. It was the only bit of impressive scenery that I had met in the neighbourhood of Okehurst.

'It is called Cotes Common,' answered Mrs Oke, who had

slackened the pace of the horse, and let the reins hang loose about his neck. 'It was here that Christopher Lovelock was killed.'

There was a moment's pause; and then she proceeded, tickling the flies from the horse's ears with the end of her whip, and looking straight into the sunset, which now rolled, a deep purple stream, across the heath to our feet—

'Lovelock was riding home one summer evening from Appledore, when, as he had got half-way across Cotes Common, somewhere about here—for I have always heard them mention the pond in the old gravel-pits as about the place—he saw two men riding towards him, in whom he presently recognised Nicholas Oke of Okehurst accompanied by a groom. Oke of Okehurst hailed him; and Lovelock rode up to meet him. "I am glad to have met you, Mr Lovelock," said Nicholas, "because I have some important news for you"; and so saying, he brought his horse close to the one that Lovelock was riding, and suddenly turning round, fired off a pistol at his head. Lovelock had time to move, and the bullet, instead of striking him, went straight into the head of his horse, which fell beneath him. Lovelock, however, had fallen in such a way as to be able to extricate himself easily from his horse; and drawing his sword, he rushed upon Oke, and seized his horse by the bridle, Oke quickly jumped off and drew his sword; and in a minute, Lovelock, who was much the better swordsman of the two, was having the better of him. Lovelock had completely disarmed him, and got his sword at Oke's throat, crying out to him that if he would ask forgiveness he should be spared for the sake of their old friendship, when the groom suddenly rode up from behind and shot Lovelock through the back. Lovelock fell, and Oke immediately tried to finish him with his sword, while the groom drew up and held the bridle of Oke's horse. At that moment the sunlight fell upon the groom's face, and Lovelock recognised Mrs Oke. He cried out, "Alice, Alice! it is you who have murdered me!" and then he died. Then Nicholas Oke sprang into his saddle and rode off with his wife, leaving Lovelock dead by the side of his fallen horse. Nicholas Oke had taken the precaution of removing Lovelock's purse and throwing it into the pond, so the murder was put down to certain highwaymen who were about in that part of the

country. Alice Oke died many years afterwards, quite an old woman, in the reign of Charles II; but Nicholas did not live very long, and shortly before his death got into a very strange condition, always brooding, and sometimes threatening to kill his wife. They say that in one of these fits, just shortly before his death, he told the whole story of the murder, and made a prophecy that when the head of his house and master of Okehurst should marry another Alice Oke, descended from himself and his wife, there should be an end of the Okes of Okehurst. You see, it seems to be coming true. We have no children, and I don't suppose we shall ever have any. I, at least, have never wished for them.'

Mrs Oke paused, and turned her face towards me with the absent smile in her thin cheeks; her eyes no longer had that distant look; they were strangely eager and fixed. I did not know what to answer; this woman positively frightened me. We remained for a moment in that same place, with the sunlight dying away in crimson ripples on the heather, gilding the yellow banks, the black waters of the pond, surrounded by thin rushes, and the yellow gravel-pits; while the wind blew in our faces and bent the ragged warped bluish tops of the firs. Then Mrs Oke touched the horse, and off we went at a furious pace. We did not exchange a single word, I think, on the way home. Mrs Oke sat with her eyes fixed on the reins, breaking the silence now and then only by a word to the horse, urging him to an even more furious pace. The people we met along the roads must have thought that the horse was running away, unless they noticed Mrs Oke's calm manner and the look of excited enjoyment in her face. To me it seemed that I was in the hands of a mad-woman, and I quietly prepared myself for being upset or dashed against a cart. It had turned cold, and the draught was icy in our faces when we got within sight of the red gables and high chimney-stacks of Okehurst. Mr Oke was standing before the door. On our approach I saw a look of relieved suspense, of keen pleasure come into his face.

He lifted his wife out of the cart in his strong arms with a kind of chivalrous tenderness.

'I am so glad to have you back, darling,' he exclaimed—'so glad! I was delighted to hear you had gone out with the cart, but as you have not driven for so long, I was beginning

to be frightfully anxious, dearest. Where have you been all this time?’

Mrs Oke had quickly extricated herself from her husband, who had remained holding her, as one might hold a delicate child who has been causing anxiety. The gentleness and affection of the poor fellow had evidently not touched her—she seemed almost to recoil from it.

‘I have taken him to Cotes Common,’ she said, with that perverse look which I had noticed before, as she pulled off her driving gloves. ‘It is such a splendid old place.’

Mr Oke flushed as if he had bitten upon a sore tooth, and the double gash painted itself scarlet between his eyebrows.

Outside, the mists were beginning to rise, veiling the park-land dotted with big black oaks, and from which, in the watery moonlight, rose on all sides the eerie little cry of the lambs separated from their mothers. It was damp and cold, and I shivered.

VII

The next day Okehurst was full of people, and Mrs Oke, to my amazement, was doing the honours of it as if a house full of commonplace, noisy young creatures, bent upon flirting and tennis, were her usual idea of felicity.

The afternoon of the third day—they had come for an electioneering ball, and stayed three nights—the weather changed; it turned suddenly very cold and began to pour. Everyone was sent indoors, and there was a general gloom suddenly over the company. Mrs Oke seemed to have got sick of her guests, and was listlessly lying back on a couch, paying not the slightest attention to the chattering and piano-strumming in the room, when one of the guests suddenly proposed that they should play charades. He was a distant cousin of the Okes, a sort of fashionable artistic Bohemian, swelled out to intolerable conceit by the amateur-actor vogue of a season.

‘It would be lovely in this marvellous old place,’ he cried, ‘just to dress up, and parade about, and feel as if we belonged to the past. I have heard you have a marvellous collection of old costumes, more or less ever since the days of Noah, somewhere, Cousin Bill.’

The whole party exclaimed in joy at this proposal. William Oke looked puzzled for a moment, and glanced at his wife, who continued to lie listless on her sofa.

'There is a press full of clothes belonging to the family,' he answered dubiously, apparently overwhelmed by the desire to please his guests; 'but—but—I don't know whether it's quite respectful to dress up in the clothes of dead people.'

'Oh, fiddlesticks!' cried the cousin. 'What do the dead people know about it? Besides,' he added, with mock seriousness, 'I assure you we shall behave in the most reverent way and feel quite solemn about it all, if only you will give us the key, old man.'

Again Mr Oke looked towards his wife, and again met only her vague, absent glance.

'Very well,' he said, and led his guests upstairs.

An hour later the house was filled with the strangest crew and the strangest noises. I had entered, to a certain extent, into William Oke's feeling of unwillingness to let his ancestors' clothes and personality be taken in vain; but when the masquerade was complete, I must say that the effect was quite magnificent. A dozen youngish men and women—those who were staying in the house and some neighbours who had come for lawn-tennis and dinner—were rigged out, under the direction of the theatrical cousin, in the contents of that oaken press; and I have never seen a more beautiful sight than the panelled corridors, the carved and escutcheoned staircase, the dim drawing-rooms with their faded tapestries, the great hall with its vaulted and ribbed ceiling, dotted about with groups of single figures that seemed to have come straight from the past. Even William Oke, who, besides myself and a few elderly people, was the only man not masqueraded, seemed delighted and fired by the sight. A certain schoolboy character suddenly came out in him; and finding that there was no costume left for him, he rushed upstairs and presently returned in the uniform he had worn before his marriage. I thought I had really never seen so magnificent a specimen of the handsome Englishman; he looked, despite all the modern associations of his costume, more genuinely old-world than all the rest, a knight for the Black Prince or Sidney, with his admirably regular features and beautiful fair hair and complexion. After a minute, even

the elderly people had got costumes of some sort—dominoes arranged at the moment, and hoods and all manner of disguises made out of pieces of old embroidery and Oriental stuffs and furs; and very soon this rabble of masquers had become, so to speak, completely drunk with its own amusement—with the childishness, and, if I may say so, the barbarism, the vulgarity underlying the majority even of well-bred English men and women—Mr Oke himself doing the mountebank like a schoolboy at Christmas.

‘Where is Mrs Oke? Where is Alice?’ someone suddenly asked.

Mrs Oke had vanished. I could fully understand that to this eccentric being, with her fantastic, imaginative, morbid passion for the past, such a carnival as this must be positively revolting; and, absolutely indifferent as she was to giving offence, I could imagine how she would have retired, disgusted and outraged, to dream her strange day-dreams in the yellow room.

But a moment later, as we were all noisily preparing to go in to dinner, the door opened and a strange figure entered, stranger than any of these others who were profaning the clothes of the dead: a boy, slight and tall, in a brown riding-coat, leathern belt, and big buff boots, a little grey cloak over one shoulder, a large grey hat slouched over the eyes, a dagger and pistol at the waist. It was Mrs Oke, her eyes preternaturally bright, and her whole face lit up with a bold, perverse smile.

Everyone exclaimed, and stood aside. Then there was a moment’s silence, broken by faint applause. Even to a crew of noisy boys and girls playing the fool in the garments of men and women long dead and buried, there is something questionable in the sudden appearance of a young married woman, the mistress of the house, in a riding-coat and jack-boots; and Mrs Oke’s expression did not make the jest seem any the less questionable.

‘What is that costume?’ asked the theatrical cousin, who, after a second, had come to the conclusion, that Mrs Oke was merely a woman of marvellous talent whom he must try and secure for his amateur troop next season.

‘It is the dress in which an ancestress of ours, my namesake Alice Oke, used to go out riding with her husband in the

days of Charles I,' she answered, and took her seat at the head of the table. Involuntarily my eyes sought those of Oke of Okehurst. He, who blushed as easily as a girl of sixteen, was now as white as ashes, and I noticed that he pressed his hand almost convulsively to his mouth.

'Don't you recognise my dress, William?' asked Mrs Oke, fixing her eyes upon him with a cruel smile.

He did not answer, and there was a moment's silence, which the theatrical cousin had the happy thought of breaking by jumping upon his seat and emptying off his glass with the exclamation—

'To the health of the two Alice Okes, of the past and the present!'

Mrs Oke nodded, and with an expression I had never seen in her face before, answered in a loud and aggressive tone—

'To the health of the poet, Mr Christopher Lovelock, if his ghost be honouring this house with its presence!'

I felt suddenly as if I were in a madhouse. Across the table, in the midst of this room full of noisy wretches, tricked out red, blue, purple, and parti-coloured, as men and women of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, as improvised Turks and Eskimos, and dominoes, and clowns, with faces painted and corked and floured over, I seemed to see that sanguine sunset, washing like a sea of blood over the heather, to where, by the black pond and the wind-warped firs, there lay the body of Christopher Lovelock, with his dead horse near him, the yellow gravel and lilac hung soaked crimson all around; and above emerged, as out of the redness, the pale blond head covered with the grey hat, the absent eyes, and strange smile of Mrs Oke. It seemed to me horrible, vulgar, abominable, as if I had got inside a madhouse.

VIII

From that moment I noticed a change in William Oke; or rather, a change that had probably been coming on for some time got to the stage of being noticeable.

I don't know whether he had any words with his wife about her masquerade of that unlucky evening. On the whole I decidedly think not. Oke was with everyone a diffident and reserved man, and most of all so with his wife; besides, I can

fancy that he would experience a positive impossibility of putting into words any strong feeling of disapprobation towards her, that his disgust would necessarily be silent. But be this as it may, I perceived very soon that the relations between my host and hostess had become exceedingly strained. Mrs Oke, indeed, had never paid much attention to her husband, and seemed merely a trifle more indifferent to his presence than she had been before. But Oke himself, although he affected to address her at meals from a desire to conceal his feeling, and a fear of making the position disagreeable to me, very clearly could scarcely bear to speak to or even see his wife. The poor fellow's honest soul was quite brimful of pain, which he was determined not to allow to overflow, and which seemed to filter into his whole nature and poison it. This woman had shocked and pained him more than was possible to say, and yet it was evident that he could neither cease loving her nor commence comprehending her real nature. I sometimes felt, as we took our long walks through the monotonous country, across the oak-dotted grazing-grounds, and by the brink of the dull-green, serried hop-rows, talking at rare intervals about the value of the crops, the drainage of the estate, the village schools, the Primrose League, and the iniquities of Mr Gladstone, while Oke of Okehurst carefully cut down every tall thistle that caught his eye—I sometimes felt, I say, an intense and impotent desire to enlighten this man about his wife's character. I seemed to understand it so well, and to understand it well seemed so unfair; that just he should be condemned to puzzle for ever over this enigma, and wear out his soul trying to comprehend what now seemed so plain to me. But how would it ever be possible to get this serious, conscientious, slow-brained representative of English simplicity and honesty and thoroughness to understand the mixture of self-engrossed vanity, of shallowness, of poetic vision, of love of morbid excitement, that walked this earth under the name of Alice Oke?

So Oke of Okehurst was condemned never to understand; but he was condemned also to suffer from his inability to do so. The poor fellow was constantly straining after an explanation of his wife's peculiarities; and although the effort was probably unconscious, it caused him a great deal of pain. The gash—the maniac-frown as my friend calls it—between his

eyebrows, seemed to have grown a permanent feature of his face.

Mrs Oke, on her side, was making the very worst of the situation. Perhaps she resented her husband's tacit reproval of that masquerade night's freak, and determined to make him swallow more of the same stuff, for she clearly thought that one of William's peculiarities, and one for which she despised him, was that he could never be goaded into an outspoken expression of disapprobation; that from her he would swallow any amount of bitterness without complaining. At any rate she now adopted a perfect policy of teasing and shocking her husband about the murder of Lovelock. She was perpetually alluding to it in her conversation, discussing in his presence what had or had not been the feelings of the various actors in the tragedy of 1626, and insisting upon her resemblance and almost identity with the original Alice Oke. Something had suggested to her eccentric mind that it would be delightful to perform in the garden at Okehurst, under the huge ilexes and elms, a little masque which she had discovered among Christopher Lovelock's works; and she began to scour the country and enter into vast correspondence for the purpose of effectuating this scheme. Letters arrived every other day from the theatrical cousin, whose only objection was that Okehurst was too remote a locality for an entertainment in which he foresaw great glory to himself. And every now and then there would arrive some young gentleman or lady, whom Alice Oke had sent for to see whether they would do.

I saw very plainly that the performance would never take place, and that Mrs Oke herself had no intention that it ever should. She was one of those creatures to whom realisation of a project is nothing, and who enjoy plan-making almost the more for knowing that all will stop short at the plan. Meanwhile, this perpetual talk about the pastoral, about Lovelock, this continual attitudinising as the wife of Nicholas Oke, had the further attraction to Mrs Oke of putting her husband into a condition of frightful though suppressed irritation, which she enjoyed with the enjoyment of a perverse child. You must not think that I looked on indifferent, although I admit that this was a perfect treat to an amateur student of character like myself. I really did feel most sorry for poor Oke, and frequently quite indignant with his wife.

I was several times on the point of begging that this kind of behaviour, particularly before a comparative stranger like me, was very poor taste. But there was something elusive about Mrs Oke, which made it next to impossible to speak seriously with her; and besides, I was by no means sure that any interference on my part would not merely animate her perversity.

One evening, a curious incident took place. We had just sat down to dinner, the Okes, the theatrical cousin, who was down for a couple of days, and three or four neighbours. It was dusk, and the yellow light of the candles mingled charmingly with the greyiness of the evening. Mrs Oke was not well, and had been remarkably quiet all day, more diaphanous, strange, and far away than ever; and her husband seemed to have felt a sudden return of tenderness, almost of compassion, for this delicate, fragile creature. We had been talking of quite different matters, when I saw Mr Oke suddenly turn very white, and look fixedly for a moment at the window opposite to his seat.

'Who's that fellow looking in at the window, and making signs to you, Alice? Damn his impudence!' he cried, and jumping up, ran to the window, opened it, and passed out into the twilight. We all looked at each other in surprise; some of the party remarked upon the carelessness of servants in letting nasty-looking fellows hang about the kitchen, others told stories of tramps and burglars. Mrs Oke did not speak; but I noticed the curious, distant-looking smile in her thin cheeks.

After a minute William Oke came in, his napkin in his hand. He shut the window behind him and silently resumed his place.

'Well, who was it?' we all asked.

'Nobody. I—I must have made a mistake,' he answered, and turned crimson, while he busily peeled a pear.

'It was probably Lovelock,' remarked Mrs Oke, just as she might have said, 'It was probably the gardener,' but with that faint smile of pleasure still in her face. Except the theatrical cousin who burst into a loud laugh, none of the company had ever heard of Lovelock's name, and, doubtless, imagining him to be some natural appanage of the Oke family, groom or farmer, said nothing, so the subject dropped.

From that evening onwards things began to assume a different aspect. That incident was the beginning of a perfect system—a system of what? I scarcely know how to call it. A system of grim jokes on the part of Mrs Oke, of superstitious fancies on the part of her husband—a system of mysterious persecutions on the part of some less earthly tenant of Okehurst. Well, yes, after all, why not? We have all heard of ghosts, had uncles, cousins, grandmother, nurses, who have seen them; we are all a bit afraid of them at the bottom of our souls; so why shouldn't they be? I am too sceptical to believe in the impossibility of anything, for my part! Besides, when a man has lived throughout a summer in the same house with a woman like Mrs Oke of Okehurst, he gets to believe in the possibility of a great many improbable things, I assure you, as a mere result of believing in her. And when you come to think of it, why not? That weird creature, visibly not of this earth, a reincarnation of a woman who murdered her lover two centuries and a half ago, that such a creature should have the power of attracting about her (being altogether superior to earthly lovers) the man who loved her in that previous existence, whose love for her was his death—what is there astonishing in that? Mrs Oke herself, I feel quite persuaded, believed or half believed it; indeed she very seriously admitted the possibility thereof, one day that I made the suggestion half in jest. At all events, it rather pleased me to think so; it fitted in so well with the woman's whole personality; it explained those hours and hours spent all alone in the yellow room, where the very air, with its scent of heady flowers and old perfumed stuffs, seemed redolent of ghosts. It explained that strange smile which was not for any of us, and yet was not merely for herself—that strange, far-off look in the wide pale eyes. I liked the idea, and I liked to tease, or rather to delight her with it. How should I know that the wretched husband would take such matters seriously?

He became day by day more silent and perplexed-looking; and, as a result, worked harder, and probably with less effect, at his land-improving schemes and political canvassing. It seemed to me that he was perpetually listening, watching, waiting for something to happen; a word spoken suddenly, the sharp opening of a door, would make him start, turn crimson, and almost tremble; the mention of Lovelock brought a

helpless look, half a convulsion, like that of a man overcome by great heat, into his face. And his wife, so far from taking an interest in his altered looks, went on irritating him more and more. Every time that the poor fellow gave one of those starts of his, or turned crimson at the sudden sound of a footstep, Mrs Oke would ask him, with her contemptuous indifference, whether he had seen Lovelock. I soon began to perceive that my host was getting perfectly ill. He would sit at meals never saying a word, with his eyes fixed scrutinisingly on his wife, as if vainly trying to solve some dreadful mystery; while his wife, ethereal, exquisite, went on talking in her listless way about the masque, about Lovelock, always about Lovelock. During our walks and rides, which we continued pretty regularly, he would start whenever in the roads or lanes surrounding Okehurst, or in its grounds, we perceived a figure in the distance. I have seen him tremble at what, on nearer approach, I could scarcely restrain my laughter on discovering to be some well-known farmer or neighbour or servant. Once, as we were returning home at dusk, he suddenly caught my arm and pointed across the oak-dotted pastures in the direction of the garden, then started off almost at a run, with his dog behind him, as if in pursuit of some intruder.

'Who was it?' I asked. And Mr Oke merely shook his head mournfully. Sometimes in the early autumn twilights, when the white mists rose from the park-land, and the rooks formed long black lines on the palings, I almost fancied I saw him start at the very trees and bushes, the outlines of the distant oast-houses, with their conical roofs and projecting vanes, like gibing fingers in the half light.

'Your husband is ill,' I once ventured to remark to Mrs Oke, as she sat for the hundred-and-thirtieth of my preparatory sketches (I somehow could never get beyond preparatory sketches with her). She raised her beautiful, wide, pale eyes, making as she did so that exquisite curve of shoulders and neck and delicate pale head that I so vainly longed to reproduce.

'I don't see it,' she answered quietly. 'If he is, why doesn't he go to town and see the doctor? It's merely one of his glum fits.'

'You should not tease him about Lovelock,' I added, very seriously. 'He will get to believe in him.'

'Why not? If he sees him, why he sees him. He would not be the only person that has done so'; and she smiled faintly and half perversely, as her eyes sought that usual distant indefinable something.

But Oke got worse. He was growing perfectly unstrung, like a hysterical woman. One evening that we were sitting alone in the smoking-room, he began unexpectedly a rambling discourse about his wife; how he had first known her when they were children, and they had gone to the same dancing-school near Portland Place; and how her mother, his aunt-in-law, had brought her for Christmas to Okehurst while he was on his holidays; how finally, thirteen years ago, when he was twenty-three and she was eighteen, they had been married; how terribly he had suffered when they had been disappointed of their baby, and she had nearly died of the illness.

'I did not mind about the child, you know,' he said in an excited voice; 'although there will be an end of us now, and Okehurst will go to the Curtises. I minded only about Alice.' It was next to inconceivable that this poor excited creature, speaking almost with tears in his voice and his eyes, was the quiet, well-got-up, irreproachable young ex-Guardsman who had walked into my studio a couple of months before.

Oke was silent for a moment, looking fixedly at the rug at his feet, when suddenly he burst out in a scarce audible voice—

'If you knew how I cared for Alice—how I still care for her. I could kiss the ground she walks upon. I would give anything—my life any day—if only she would look for two minutes as if she liked me a little—as if she didn't utterly despise me;' and the poor fellow burst into a hysterical laugh, which was almost a sob. Then he suddenly began to laugh outright, exclaiming, with a sort of vulgarity of intonation which was extremely foreign to him—

'Damn it, old fellow, this *is* a queer world we live in!' and rang for more brandy and soda, which he was beginning, I noticed, to take pretty freely now, although he had been almost a blue-ribbon man—as much so as is possible for a hospitable country gentleman—when I first arrived.

IX

It became clear to me now that, incredible as it might seem, the thing that ailed William Oke was jealousy. He was simply madly in love with his wife, and madly jealous of her. Jealous—but of whom? He himself would probably have been quite unable to say. In the first place—to clear off any possible suspicion—certainly not of me. Besides the fact that Mrs Oke took only just a very little more interest in me than in the butler or the upper housemaid, I think that Oke himself was the sort of man whose imagination would recoil from realising any definite object of jealousy, even though jealousy might be killing him inch by inch. It remained a vague, permeating, continuous feeling—the feeling that he loved her, and she did not care a jackstraw about him, and that everything with which she came into contact was receiving some of that notice which was refused to him—every person, or thing, or tree, or stone: it was the recognition of that strange far-off look in Mrs Oke's eyes, of that strange absent smile on Mrs Oke's lips—eyes and lips that had no look and no smile for him.

Gradually his nervousness, his watchfulness, suspiciousness, tendency to start, took a definite shape. Mr Oke was for ever alluding to steps or voices he had heard, to figures he had seen sneaking round the house. The sudden bark of one of the dogs would make him jump up. He cleaned and loaded very carefully all the guns and revolvers in his study, and even some of the old fowling-pieces and holster-pistols in the hall. The servants and tenants thought that Oke of Okehurst had been seized with a terror of tramps and burglars. Mrs Oke smiled conemptuously at all these things.

'My dear William,' she said one day, 'the persons who worry you have just as good a right to walk up and down the passages and staircases, and to hang about the house, as you or I. They were there, in all probability, long before either of us was born, and are greatly amused by your preposterous notions of privacy.'

Mr Oke laughed angrily. 'I suppose you will tell me it is Lovelock—your eternal Lovelock—whose steps I hear on the gravel every night. I suppose he has as good a right to be here as you or I.' And he strode out of the room.

'Lovelock—Lovelock! Why will she always go on like that about Lovelock?' Mr Oke asked me that evening, suddenly staring me in the face.

I merely laughed.

'It's only because she has that play of his on the brain,' I answered; 'and because she thinks you superstitious, and likes to tease you.'

'I don't understand,' sighed Oke.

How could he? And if I had tried to make him do so, he would merely have thought I was insulting his wife, and have perhaps kicked me out of the room. So I made no attempt to explain psychological problems to him, and he asked me no more questions until once— But I must first mention a curious incident that happened.

The incident was simply this. Returning one afternoon from our usual walk, Mr Oke suddenly asked the servant whether anyone had come. The answer was in the negative; but Oke did not seem satisfied. We had hardly sat down to dinner when he turned to his wife and asked, in a strange voice which I scarcely recognised as his own, who had called that afternoon.

'No one,' answered Mrs Oke; 'at least to the best of my knowledge.'

William Oke looked at her fixedly.

'No one?' he repeated, in a scrutinising tone; 'no one, Alice?'

Mrs Oke shook her head. 'No one,' she replied.

There was a pause.

'Who was it then, that was walking with you near the pond, about five o'clock?' asked Oke slowly.

His wife lifted her eyes straight to his and answered contemptuously—

'No one was walking with me near the pond, at five o'clock or any other hour.'

Mr Oke turned purple, and made a curious hoarse noise like a man choking.

'I—I thought I saw you walking with a man this afternoon, Alice,' he brought out with an effort; adding, for the sake of appearances before me, 'I thought it might have been the curate come with that report for me.'

Mrs Oke smiled.

'I can only repeat that no living creature has been near me this afternoon,' she said slowly. 'If you saw anyone with

me, it must have been Lovelock, for there certainly was no one else.'

And she gave a little sigh, like a person trying to reproduce in her mind some delightful but too evanescent impression.

I looked at my host; from crimson his face had turned perfectly livid, and he breathed as if someone were squeezing his windpipe.

No more was said about the matter. I vaguely felt that a great danger was threatening. To Oke or to Mrs Oke? I could not tell which; but I was aware of an imperious inner call to avert some dreadful evil, to exert myself, to explain, to interpose. I determined to speak to Oke the following day, for I trusted him to give me a quiet hearing, and I did not trust Mrs Oke. That woman would slip through my fingers like a snake if I attempted to grasp her elusive character.

I asked Oke whether he would take a walk with me the next afternoon, and he accepted to do so with a curious eagerness. We started about three o'clock. It was a stormy, chilly afternoon, with great balls of white clouds rolling rapidly in the cold blue sky, and occasional lurid gleams of sunlight, broad and yellow, which made the black ridge of the storm, gathered on the horizon, look blue-black as ink.

We walked quickly across the sere and sodden grass of the park, and on to the high road that led over the low hills, I don't know why, in the direction of Cotes Common. Both of us were silent, for both of us had something to say, and did not know how to begin. For my part, I recognised the impossibility of starting the subject: an uncalled-for interference from me would merely indispose Mr Oke, and make him doubly dense of comprehension. So, if Oke had something to say, which he evidently had, it was better to wait for him.

Oke, however, broke the silence only by pointing out to me the condition of the hops, as we passed one of many hop-gardens.

'It will be a poor year,' he said stopping short and looking intently before him—'no hops at all. No hops this autumn.'

I looked at him. It was clear that he had no notion what he was saying. The dark-green vines were covered with fruit; and only yesterday he himself had informed me that he had not seen such a profusion of hops for many years.

I did not answer, and we walked on. A cart met us in a dip

of the road, and the carter touched his hat and greeted Mr Oke. But Oke took no heed; he did not seem to be aware of the man's presence.

The clouds were collecting all round; black domes, among which coursed the round grey masses of fleecy stuff.

'I think we shall be caught in a tremendous storm,' I said; hadn't we better be turning?' He nodded, and turned sharp round.

The sunlight lay in yellow patches under the oaks of the pasturelands, and burnished the green hedges. The air was heavy and yet cold, and everything seemed preparing for a great storm. The rooks whirled in black clouds round the trees and the conical red caps of the oast-houses which give that country the look of being studded with turreted castles; then they descended—a black line—upon the fields, with what seemed an unearthly loudness of caw. And all round there arose a shrill quavering bleating of lambs and calling of sheep, while the wind began to catch the topmost branches of the trees.

Suddenly Mr Oke broke the silence.

'I don't know you very well,' he began hurriedly, and without turning his face towards me; 'but I think you are honest, and you have seen a good deal of the world—much more than I. I want you to tell me—but truly, please—what do you think a man should do if'—and he stopped for some minutes.

'Imagine,' he went on quickly, 'that a man cares a great deal—a very great deal for his wife, and that he finds out that she—well, that—that she is deceiving him. No—don't misunderstand me; I mean—that she is constantly surrounded by someone else and will not admit it—someone whom she hides away. Do you understand? Perhaps she does not know all the risk she is running, you know, but she will not draw back—she will not avow it to her husband—'

'My dear Oke,' I interrupted, attempting to take the matter lightly, 'these are questions that can't be solved in the abstract, or by people to whom the thing has not happened. And it certainly has not happened to you or me.'

Oke took no notice of my interruption. 'You see,' he went on, 'the man doesn't expect his wife to care much about him. It's not that; he isn't merely jealous, you know. But he feels

that she is on the brink of dishonouring herself—because I don't think a woman can really dishonour her husband; dishonour is in our own hands, and depends only on our own acts. He ought to save her, do you see? He must, must save her, in one way or another. But if she will not listen to him, what can he do? Must he seek out the other one, and try and get him out of the way? You see it's all the fault of the other—not hers, not hers. If only she would trust in her husband, she would be safe. But that other one won't let her.'

'Look here, Oke,' I said boldly, but feeling rather frightened; 'I know quite well what you are talking about. And I see you don't understand the matter in the very least. I do. I have watched you and watched Mrs Oke these six weeks, and I see what is the matter. Will you listen to me?'

And taking his arm, I tried to explain to him my view of the situation—that his wife was merely eccentric, and a little theatrical and imaginative, and that she took a pleasure in teasing him. That he, on the other hand, was letting himself get into a morbid state; that he was ill, and ought to see a good doctor. I even offered to take him to town with me.

I poured out volumes of psychological explanations. I dissected Mrs Oke's character twenty times over, and tried to show him that there was absolutely nothing at the bottom of his suspicions beyond an imaginative pose and a garden-play on the brain. I adduced twenty instances, mostly invented for the nonce, of ladies of my acquaintance, who had suffered from similar fads. I pointed out to him that his wife ought to have an outlet for her imaginative and theatrical over-energy. I advised him to take her to London and plunge her into some set where everyone should be more or less in a similar condition. I laughed at the suggestion of there being any hidden individual about the house. I explained to Oke that he was suffering from delusions, and called upon so conscientious and religious a man to take every step to rid himself of them, adding innumerable examples of people who had cured themselves of seeing visions and of brooding over morbid fancies. I struggled and wrestled, like Jacob with the angel, and I really hoped I had made some impression. At first, indeed, I felt that not one of my words went into the man's brain—that, though silent, he was not listening. It seemed almost hopeless to present my views in such a light that he could

grasp them. I felt as if I were expounding and arguing at a rock. But when I got on to the tack of his duty towards his wife and himself, and appealed to his moral and religious notions, I felt that I was making an impression.

'I daresay you are right,' he said, taking my hand as we came in sight of the red gables of Okehurst, and speaking in a weak, tired, humble voice. 'I don't understand you quite, but I am sure what you say is true. I daresay it is all that I'm seedy. I feel sometimes as if I were mad, and just fit to be locked up. But don't think I don't struggle against it. I do, I do continually, only sometimes it seems too strong for me. I pray God night and morning to give me the strength to overcome my suspicions, or to remove these dreadful thoughts from me. God knows I know what a wretched creature I am, and how unfit to take care of that poor girl.'

And Oke again pressed my hand. As we entered the garden, he turned to me once more.

'I am very, very grateful to you,' he said, 'and, indeed, I will do my best to try and be stronger. If only,' he added, with a sigh, 'if only Alice would give me a moment's breathing-time, and not go on day after day mocking me with her Lovelock.'

X

I had begun Mrs Oke's portrait, and she was giving me a sitting. She was unusually quiet that morning; but, it seemed to me, with the quietness of a woman who is expecting something, and she gave me the impression of being extremely happy. She had been reading, at my suggestion, the *Vita Nuova*, which she did not know before, and the conversation came to roll upon that, and upon the question whether love so abstract and so enduring was a possibility. Such a discussion, which might have savoured of flirtation in the case of almost any other young and beautiful woman, became in the case of Mrs Oke something quite different; it seemed distant, intangible, not of this earth, like her smile and the look in her eyes.

'Such love as that,' she said, looking into the far distance of the oak-dotted park-land, 'is very rare, but it can exist. It

becomes a person's whole existence, his whole soul; and it can survive the death, not merely of the beloved, but of the lover. It is inextinguishable, and goes on in the spiritual world until it meets a reincarnation of the beloved; and when this happens, it jets out and draws to it all that may remain of that lover's soul, and takes shape and surrounds the beloved one once more.'

Mrs Oke was speaking slowly, almost to herself, and I had never, I think, seen her look so strange and so beautiful, the stiff white dress bringing out but the more the exotic exquisiteness and incorporeality of her person.

I did not know what to answer, so I said half in jest—

'I fear you have been reading too much Buddhist literature, Mrs Oke. There is something dreadfully esoteric in all you say.'

She smiled contemptuously.

'I know people can't understand such matters,' she replied, and was silent for some time. But, through her quietness and silence, I felt, as it were, the throb of a strange excitement in this woman, almost as if I had been holding her pulse.

Still, I was in hopes that things might be beginning to go better in consequence of my interference. Mrs Oke had scarcely once alluded to Lovelock in the last two or three days; and Oke had been much more cheerful and natural since our conversation. He no longer seemed so worried; and once or twice, I had caught in him a look of great gentleness and loving-kindness, almost of pity, as towards some young and very frail thing, as he sat opposite his wife.

But the end had come. After that sitting Mrs Oke had complained of fatigue and retired to her room, and Oke had driven off on some business to the nearest town. I felt all alone in the big house, and after having worked a little at a sketch I was making in the park, I amused myself rambling about the house.

It was a warm, enervating, autumn afternoon; the kind of weather that brings the perfume out of everything, the damp ground and fallen leaves, the flowers in the jars, the old woodwork and stuffs; that seems to bring on to the surface of one's consciousness all manner of vague recollections and expectations, a something half pleasurable, half painful, that makes it impossible to do or to think. I was the prey of this particular, not at all unpleasurable, restlessness. I wandered

up and down the corridors, stopping to look at the pictures, which I knew already in every detail, to follow the pattern of the carvings and old stuffs, to stare at the autumn flowers, arranged in magnificent masses of colour in the big china bowls and jars. I took up one book after another and threw it aside; then I sat down at the piano and began to play irrelevant fragments. I felt quite alone, although I had heard the grind of the wheels on the gravel, which meant that my host had returned. I was lazily turning over a book of verses—I remember it perfectly well, it was Morris's *Love is Enough*—in a corner of the drawing-room, when the door suddenly opened and William Oke showed himself. He did not enter, but beckoned to me to come out to him. There was something in his face that made me start up and follow him at once. He was extremely quiet, even stiff, not a muscle of his face moving, but very pale.

'I have something to show you,' he said, leading me through the vaulted hall, hung round with ancestral pictures, into the gravelled space that looked like a filled-up moat, where stood the big blasted oak, with its twisted, pointing branches. I followed him on to the lawn, or rather the piece of park-land that ran up to the house. We walked quickly, he in front, without exchanging a word. Suddenly he stopped, just where there jutted out the bow-window of the yellow drawing-room, and I felt Oke's hand tight upon my arm.

'I have brought you here to see something,' he whispered hoarsely; and he led me to the window.

I looked in. The room, compared with the outdoor, was rather dark; but against the yellow wall I saw Mrs Oke sitting alone on a couch in her white dress, her head slightly thrown back, a large red rose in her hand.

'Do you believe me now?' whispered Oke's voice hot at my ear. 'Do you believe now? Was it all my fancy? But I will have him this time. I have locked the door inside, and, by God! he shan't escape.'

The words were not out of Oke's mouth when I felt myself struggling with him silently outside that window. But he broke loose, pulled open the window, and leapt into the room, and I after him. As I crossed the threshold, something flashed in my eyes; there was a loud report, a sharp cry, and the thud of a body on the ground.

Oke was standing in the middle of the room, with a faint smoke about him; and at his feet, sunk down from the sofa, with her blonde head resting on its seat, lay Mrs Oke, a pool of red forming in her white dress. Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly.

I know nothing of time. It all seemed to be one second, but a second that lasted hours. Oke stared, then turned round and laughed.

'The damned rascal has given me the slip again!' he cried; and quickly unlocking the door, rushed out of the house with dreadful cries.

That is the end of the story. Oke tried to shoot himself that evening, but merely fractured his jaw, and died a few days later, raving. There were all sorts of legal inquiries, through which I went as through a dream; and whence it resulted that Mr Oke had killed his wife in a fit of momentary madness. That was the end of Alice Oke. By the way, her maid brought me a locket which was found round her neck, all stained with blood. It contained some very dark auburn hair, not at all the colour of William Oke's. I am quite sure it was Lovelock's.

THE LIPS

HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

The *Saul Taverner*, blackbirder, Luke Martin, master, up from Cartagena, came to her anchor in the harbour of St Thomas, capital, and chief town of the Danish West Indies. A Martinique barkentine berthed to leeward of her, sent a fully manned boat ashore after the harbour-master with a request for permission to change anchorage. Luke Martin's shore boat was only a few lengths behind the Frenchman's. Martin shouted after the officer whom it landed:

'Tell Lollik I'll change places with ye, an' welcome! What ye carryin'—brandy? I'll take six cases off'n ye.'

The barkentine's mate, a French-Island mulatto, nodded over his shoulder, and noted down the order in a leather pocketbook without slackening his pace. It was no joyful experience to lie in a semi-enclosed harbour directly to leeward of a slaver, and haste was indicated despite propitiatory orders for brandy. 'Very well, Captain,' said the mate, stiffly.

Martin landed as the Martinique mate rounded a corner to the left and disappeared from view in the direction of the harbour-master's. Martin scowled after him, muttering to himself.

'Airs! Talkin' English—language of the islands; thinkin' in French, you an' your airs! An' yer gran'father came outta blackbird ship like's not! You an' your airs!'

Reaching the corner the mate had turned, Martin glanced after him momentarily, then turned to the right, mounting a slight rise. His business ashore took him to the fort. He intended to land his cargo, or a portion of it, that night. The colony was short of field hands. With the help of troops from Martinique, French troops, and Spaniards down from its nearer neighbour, Porto Rico, it had just put down a bloody uprising on its subsidiary island of St Jan. Many of the slaves had been killed in the joint armed reprisal of the year 1833.

Luke Martin got his permission to land his cargo, therefore,

without difficulty, and, being a Yankee bucko who let no grass grow under his feet, four bells in the afternoon watch saw the hatches off and the decks of the *Saul Taverner* swarming with manacled Blacks for the ceremony of washing-down.

Huddled together, blinking in the glaring sun of a July afternoon under parallel 18, north latitude, the mass of swart humanity were soaped, with handfuls of waste out of soft-soap buckets, scrubbed with brushes on the ends of short handles, and rinsed off with other buckets. Boatloads of Negroes surrounded the ship to see the washing-down, and these were kept at a distance by a swearing third mate told off for the purpose.

By seven bells the washing-down was completed, and before sundown a row of lighters, each guarded by a pair of Danish gendarmes with muskets and fixed bayonets, had ranged alongside for the taking off of the hundred and seventeen Blacks who were to be landed, most of whom would be sent to replenish the labourers on the plantations of St Jan off the other side of the island of St Thomas.

The disembarking process began just after dark, to the light of lanterns. Great care was exercised by all concerned lest any escape by plunging overboard. A tally-clerk from shore checked off the Blacks as they went over the side into the lighters, and these, as they became filled, were rowed to the landing-stage by other slaves, bending over six great sweeps in each of the stub-bowed, heavy wooden boats.

Among the huddled black bodies of the very last batch stood a woman, very tall and thin, with a new-born child, black as a coal, at her breasts. The woman stood a little aloof from the others, farther from the low rail of the *Saul Taverner's* forward deck, crooning to her infant. Behind her approached Luke Martin, impatient of his unloading, and cut at her thin ankles with his rhinoceros leather whip. The woman did not wince. Instead she turned her head and muttered a few syllables in a low tone, in the Eboe dialect. Martin shoved her into the mass of Blacks, cursing roundly as he cut a second time at the spindling shins.

The woman turned, very quietly and softly, as he was passing behind her, let her head fall softly on Martin's shoulder and whispered into his ear. The motion was so

delicate as to simulate a caress, but Martin's curse died in his throat. He howled in pain as the woman raised her head, and his whip clattered on the deck boarding while the hand which had held it went to the shoulder. The woman, deftly holding her infant, had moved in among the huddling Blacks, a dozen or more of whom intervened between her and Martin, who hopped on one foot and cursed, a vicious, continuous stream of foul epithets; then, still cursing, made his way in haste to his cabin after an antiseptic, any idea of revenge swallowed up in his superstitious dread of what might happen to him if he did not, forthwith, dress the ghastly wound just under his left ear, where the black woman had caused her firm, white and shining teeth to meet in the great muscle of his neck between shoulder and jaw.

When he emerged, ten minutes later, the wound now soaked in permanganate of potash, and roughly clotted with a clean cloth, the last lighter, under the impetus of its six sweeps, was half-way ashore, and the clerk of the government, from the fort, was awaiting him, with a bag of coin and a pair of gendarmes to guard it. He accompanied the government clerk below, where, the gendarmes at the cabin door, they figured and added and counted money for the next hour, a bottle of sound rum and a pair of glasses between them.

At two bells, under a shining moon, the *Saul Taverner*, taking advantage of the evening trade wind, was running for the harbour's mouth to stand away for Norfolk, Virginia, whence, empty, she would run up the coast for her home port of Boston, Massachusetts.

It was midnight, what with the care of his ship coming out of even the plain and safe harbour of St Thomas, before Martin the skipper, Culebra lighthouse off the port quarter, turned in. The wound in the top of his shoulder ached dully, and he sent for Matthew Pound, his first mate, to wash it out with more permanganate and dress it suitably. It was in an awkward place—curse the black slut!—for him to manage it for himself.

Pound went white and muttered under his breath at the ugly sight of it when Martin had removed his shirt, painfully, and eased off the cloth he had roughly laid over it, a cloth now stiff and clotted with the exuding blood drying on its inner surface, from the savage wound.

Thereafter, not liking the look on his mate's face, nor that whitening which the sight of the place in his neck had brought about, Martin dispensed with assistance, and dressed the wound himself.

He slept little that first night, but this was partly for thinking of the bargain he had driven with those short-handed Danes. They had been hard up for black meat to sweat on those hillside canefields over on St Jan. He could have disposed, easily, of his entire cargo, but that, unfortunately, was out of the question. He had, what with an exceptionally slow and hot voyage across the Caribbean from Cartagena, barely enough of his said cargo left to fulfil his engagement to deliver a certain number of head in Norfolk. But he would have been glad enough to rid his hold of them all—curse them!—and set his course straight for Boston. He was expecting to be married the day after his arrival. He was eager to get home, and even now the *Saul Taverner* was carrying as much sail as she could stand up under, heeling now to the unfailing trade winds of this latitude.

The wound ached and pained, none the less, and he found it well-nigh impossible to settle himself in a comparatively comfortable position on its account. He tossed and cursed far into the warm night. Toward morning he fell into a fitful doze.

The entire side of his neck and shoulder was one huge, searing ache when he awakened and pushed himself carefully upright with both hands. He could not bend his head nor, at first, move it from side to side. Dressing was a very painful process, but he managed it. He wanted to see what the bite looked like, but, as he never shaved during a voyage, there was no glass in his cabin. He bathed the sore place gingerly with bay rum, which hurt abominably and caused him to curse afresh. Dressed at last, he made his way up on deck, past the steward who was laying breakfast in his cabin. The steward, he thought, glanced at him curiously, but he could not be sure. No wonder. He had to walk sidewise, with the pain of his neck, like a crab. He ordered more sail, stuns'ls, and, these set and sheeted home, he returned to the cabin for breakfast.

Mid-afternoon saw him, despite the vessel's more than satisfactory speed and the progress of a long leg toward

Boston and Lydia Farnham, in such a devilish temper that everyone on board the ship kept as far as possible out of his way. He took no night watches, these being divided among the three mates, and after his solitary supper, punctuated with numerous curses at a more than usually awkward steward, he went into his state-room, removed his shirt and singlet, and thoroughly rubbed the entire aching area with coconut oil. The pain now ran down his left arm to the elbow, and penetrated to all the cords of his neck, the muscles of which throbbed and burned atrociously.

The embrocation gave him a certain amount of relief. He remembered that the woman had muttered something. It was *not* Eboe, that jargon of *lingua franca* which served as a medium for the few remarks necessary between slavers and their human cattle. It was some outlandish coastal or tribal dialect. He had not caught it, sensed its meaning; though there had resided in those few syllables some germ of deadly meaning. He remembered, vaguely, the cadence of the syllables, even though their meaning had been unknown to him. Wearing, aching, depressed, he turned in, and this time, almost immediately, he fell asleep.

And in his sleep, those syllables were repeated to him, into his left ear, endlessly, over and over again, and in his sleep he knew their meaning; and when he awoke, a swaying beam of pouring moonlight coming through his porthole, at four bells after midnight, the cold sweat had made his pillow clammy wet and stood dankly in the hollows of his eyes and soaked his tangled beard.

Burning from head to foot, he rose and lit the candle in his binnacle-light, and cursed himself again for a fool for not acquiring a mirror through the day. Young Sumner, the third mate, shaved. One or two of the fo'castle hands, too. There would be mirrors on board. He must obtain one to-morrow. What was it the woman had said—those syllables? He shuddered. He could not remember. Why should he remember? Gibberish—nigger-talk! It was nothing. Merely the act of a bestial Black. They were all alike. He should have taken the living hide off the wench. To bite him! Well, painful as it was, it should be well healed before he got back to Boston, and Lydia.

Laboriously, for he was very stiff and sore all along the

left side, he climbed back into his bed, after blowing out the binnacle-light. That candlewick! It was very foul. He should have wet his thumb and finger and pinched it out. It was still smoking.

Then the syllables again, endlessly—over and over, and, now that he slept, and, somehow, knew that he slept and could not carry their meaning into the next waking state, *he knew what they meant*. Asleep, drowned in sleep, he tossed from side to side of his berth-bed, and the cold sweat ran in oily trickles down into his thick beard.

He awakened in the early light of morning in a state of horrified half-realization. He could not get up, it seemed. The ache now ran all through his body, which felt as though it had been beaten until flayed. One of the brandy bottles from the Martinique barkentine, opened the night of departure from St Thomas, was within reach. He got it, painfully, drew the cork with his teeth, holding the bottle in his right hand, and took a long, gasping drink of the neat spirit. He could feel it through him like liquid, golden fire. Ah! that was better. He raised the bottle again, set it back where it had been, half empty. He made a great effort to roll out of the berth, failed, sank back well-nigh helpless, his head humming and singing like a hive of angry bees.

He lay there, semi-stupefied now, vague and dreadful things working within his head, his mind, his body; things brewing, seething, there inside him, as though something had entered into him and was growing there where the focus of pain throbbed, in the great muscles of his neck on the left side.

There, an hour later, a timid steward found him, after repeated and unanswered knocks on the state-room door. The steward had at last ventured to open the door a mere peeping-slit, and then, softly closing it behind him, and white-faced, hastened to find Pound, the first mate.

Pound, after consultation with the second mate, Sumner, accompanied the steward to the state-room door, opening off the captain's cabin. Even there, hard bucko that he was, he hesitated. No one aboard the *Saul Taverner* approached Captain Luke Martin with a sense of ease or anything like self-assurance. Pound repeated the steward's door-opening, peeped within, and thereafter entered the cabin, shutting the door.

Martin lay on his right side, the bed-clothes pushed down to near his waist. He slept in his singlet, and the left side of his neck was uppermost. Pound looked long at the wound, his face like chalk, his hands and lips trembling. Then he softly departed, shutting the door behind him a second time, and went thoughtfully up on deck again. He sought out young Sumner and the two spoke together for several minutes. Then Sumner went below to his cabin, and, emerging on the deck, looked furtively all around him. Observing the coast clear, he drew from beneath his drill jacket something twice the size of his hand, and, again glancing about to make sure he was not observed, dropped the article overboard. It flashed in the bright morning sun as it turned about in the air before the waters received it forever. It was his small cabin shaving-mirror.

At four bells in the forenoon, Pound again descended to the captain's cabin. This time Martin's voice, a weak voice, answered his discreet knock and at its invitation he entered the state-room. Martin now lay on his back, his left side away from the door.

'How are you feeling, sir?' asked Pound.

'Better,' murmured Martin; 'this damned thing!' He indicated the left side of his neck with a motion of his right thumb. 'I got some sleep this morning. Just woke up, just now. It's better—the worst of it over, I reckon.'

A pause fell between the men. There seemed nothing more to say. Finally, after several twitches and fidgeting, Pound mentioned several details about the ship, the surest way to enlist Martin's interest at any time. Martin replied, and Pound took his departure.

Martin had spoken the truth when he alleged he was better. He had awakened with a sense that the worst was over. The wound ached abominably still, but the unpleasantness was distinctly lessened. He got up, rather languidly, slowly pulled on his deck clothes, called for coffee through the state-room door.

Yet, when he emerged on his deck ten minutes later, his face was drawn and haggard, and there was a look in his eyes that kept the men silent. He looked over the ship professionally, the regular six bells morning inspection, but he was

preoccupied and his usual intense interest in anything concerned with his ship was this day merely perfunctory. For, nearly constantly now that the savage pain was somewhat allayed and tending to grow less as the deck exercise cleared his mind and body of their poisons, those last syllables, the muttered syllables in his left ear when the Black woman's head had lain for an instant on his shoulder, those syllables which were not in Eboe, kept repeating themselves to him. It was as though they were constantly reiterated in his physical ear rather than merely mentally; vague syllables, with one word, 'Ikundu', standing out and pounding itself deeper and deeper into his consciousness.

'Hearin' things!' he muttered to himself as he descended to his cabin on the conclusion of the routine morning inspection a half-hour before noon. He did not go up on deck again for the noon observations. He remained, sitting very quietly there in his cabin, listening to what was being whispered over and over again in his left ear, the ear above the wound in his neck muscle.

It was highly unusual for this full-blooded bucko skipper to be quiet as his cabin steward roundly noted. The explanation was, however, very far from the steward's mind. He imagined that the wound had had a devastating effect upon the captain's nerves, and so far his intuition was a right one. But beyond that the steward's crude psychology did not penetrate. He would have been sceptical, amused, scornful, had anyone suggested to him the true reason for this unaccustomed silence and quietude on the part of his employer. Captain Luke Martin, for the first time in his heady and truculent career, was frightened.

He ate little for his midday dinner, and immediately afterward retired to his state-room. He came out again, almost at once, however, and mounted the cabin ladder to the after deck. The *Saul Taverner*, carrying a heavy load of canvas, was spanking along at a good twelve knots. Martin looked aloft, like a sound sailor-man, when he emerged on deck, but his preoccupied gaze came down and seemed to young Sumner, who touched his hat to him, to look inward. Martin was addressing him.

'I want the lend of your lookin'-glass,' said he in quiet tones.

Young Sumner started, felt the blood leave his face. This was what Pound had warned him about; why he had thrown his glass over the side.

'Sorry, sir. It ain't along with me this 'vyage, sir. I had it till we lay in St Thomas. But now it's gone. I couldn't shave this mornin', sir.' The young mate made an evidential gesture, rubbing a sun-burned hand across his day's growth of beard on a weak but not unhandsome face.

He expected a bull-like roar of annoyance from the captain. Instead Martin merely nodded absently, and walked forward. Sumner watched him interestedly until he reached the hatch leading to the crew's quarters below decks forward. Then:

'Cripes! He'll get one from Dave Sloan!' And young Sumner ran to find Pound and tell him that the captain would probably have a looking-glass within a minute. He was very curious to know the whys and wherefores of his senior mate's unusual request about his own looking-glass. He had obeyed, but he wanted to know; for here, indeed, was something very strange. Pound had merely told him the captain mustn't see that wound in his neck, which was high enough up so that without a glass he could not manage to look at it.

'What's it like, Mr Pound?' he ventured to enquire.

'It's wot you'd name kinder livid-like,' returned Pound, slowly. 'It's a kind of purplish. Looks like—nigger lips!'

Back in his state-room, Martin, after closing the door leading to the cabin, started to take off his shirt. He was half-way through this operation when he was summoned on deck. He hastily readjusted the shirt, almost shame-facedly, as though discovered in some shameful act, and mounted the ladder. Pound engaged him for twenty minutes, ship matters. He gave his decisions in the same half-hearted voice which was so new to those about him, and descended again.

The bit of mirror-glass which he had borrowed from Sloan in the fo'castle was gone from his washstand. He looked, painfully, all over the cabin for it, but it was not there. Ordinarily such a thing happening would have elicited a very tempest of raging curses. Now he sat down, almost helplessly, and stared about the state-room with unseeing eyes. But not with unheeding ears! The voice was speaking English now, no longer gibberish syllables grouped about the one clear word, '*T'kundu*'. The voice in his left ear was compelling, tense, re-

petitive. 'Over the side,' it was repeating to him, and again, and yet again, 'Over the side!'

He sat there a long time. Then, at last, perhaps, an hour later, his face, which there was no one by to see, now pinched, drawn and grey in the bold challenging afternoon light in the white-painted state-room, he rose, slowly, and with almost furtive motions began to pull off his shirt.

He got it off, laid it on his berth, drew off the light singlet which he wore under it, and slowly, tentatively, with his right hand, reached for the wound in his neck. As his hand approached it, he felt cold and weak. At last his hand, fingers groping, touched the sore and tender area of the wound, felt about, found the wound itself . . .

It was Pound who found him, two hours later, huddled in a heap on the cramped floor of the state-room, naked to the waist, unconscious.

It was Pound, hard old Pound, who laboriously propped the captain's great bulk—for he was a heavy-set man, standing six feet in height—into his chair, pulled the singlet and then the discarded shirt over his head and then poured brandy between his bluish lips. It required half an hour of the mate's rough restoratives, brandy, chafing of the hands, slapping the limp, huge wrists, before Captain Luke Martin's eyelids fluttered and the big man gradually came awake.

But Pound found the monosyllabic answers to his few, brief questions cryptic, inappropriate. It was as though Martin were answering someone else, some other voice.

'I will,' he said, wearily, and again, 'Yes, I will!'

It was then, looking him up and down in considerable puzzlement, that the mate saw the blood on the fingers of his right hand, picked up the great, heavy hand now lying limply on the arm of the state-room chair.

The three middle fingers had been bleeding for some time. The blood from them was now dry and clotted. Pound, picking up the hand, examining it in the light of the lowering afternoon sun, saw that these fingers had been savagely cut, or, it looked like, *sawed*. It was as though the saw-teeth that had ground and torn them had grated along their bones. It was a ghastly wound.

Pound, trembling from head to foot, fumbling about the medicine case, mixed a bowl of permanganate solution, soaked

the unresisting hand, bound it up. He spoke to Martin several times, but Martin's eyes were looking at something far away, his ears deaf to his mate's words. Now and again he nodded his head acquiescently, and once more, before old Pound left him, sitting there limply, he muttered, 'Yes, yes! —I will, I will!'

Pound visited him again just before four bells in the early evening, supper time. He was still seated, looking, somehow, shrunken, apathetic.

'Supper, Captain?' inquired Pound tentatively. Martin did not raise his eyes. His lips moved, however, and Pound bent to catch what was being said.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Martin. 'I will, I will—yes, I will!'

'It's laid in the cabin, sir,' ventured Pound, but he got no reply, and he slipped out, closing the door behind him.

'The captain's sick, Maguire,' said Pound to the little steward. 'You might as well take down the table and all that, and then go forward as soon as you're finished.'

'Ay ay, sir,' replied the wondering steward, and proceeded to unset the cabin table according to these orders. Pound saw him through with these duties, followed him out on deck, saw that he went forward as directed. Then he returned, softly.

He paused outside the state-room door, listened. There was someone talking there, someone besides the skipper, a thick voice, like one of the Negroes, but very faint; thick, guttural, but light; a voice like a young boy's or—a woman's. Pound, stupefied, listened, his ear now directly against the door. He could not catch, through that thickness, what was being said, but it was in form, by the repeated sounds, the captain's voice alternating with the light, guttural voice, clearly a conversation, like question and answer, question and answer. The ship had no boy. Of women there were a couple of dozen, but all of them were battened below, under hatches, Black women, down in the stinking manhold. Besides, the captain—there could not be a woman in there with him. No woman, no one at all, could have got in. The state-room had been occupied only by the captain when he had left it fifteen minutes before. He had not been out of sight of the closed door all that time. Yet—he listened the more intently, his mind now wholly intrigued by this strange riddle.

He caught the cadence of Martin's words, now, the same

cadence, he knew instinctively, as that of the broken sentence he had been repeating to him in his half-dazed state while he was binding up those gashed fingers. Those fingers! He shuddered. The *Saul Taverner* was a hell-ship. None was better aware of that than he, who had largely contributed, through many voyages in her, to that sinister reputation she bore, but—this! This was something like real hell.

'Yes, yes— I will, I will, I will—' that was the swing, the tonal cadence of what Martin was saying at more or less regular intervals in there; then the guttural, light voice—the two going on alternately, one after the other, no pauses in that outlandish conversation.

Abruptly the conversation ceased. It was as though a sound-proof door had been pulled down over it. Pound straightened himself up, waited a minute, then knocked on the door.

The door was abruptly thrown open from inside, and Captain Luke Martin, his eyes, glassy, unseeing, stepped out, Pound giving way before him. The captain paused in the middle of his cabin, looking about him, his eyes still bearing that 'unseeing' look. Then he made his way straight toward the companion ladder. He was going up on deck, it seemed. His clothes hung on him now, his shirt awry, his trousers crumpled and seamed where he had lain on the floor, sat, huddled up, in the small chair where Pound had placed him.

Pound followed him up the ladder.

Once on deck, he made his way straight to the port rail, and stood, looking, still as though 'unseeingly', out over the billowing waves. It was dark now; the sub-tropic dusk had lately fallen. The ship was quiet save for the noise of her sharp bows as they went to cut through the middle North Atlantic swell on her twelve-knot way to Virginia.

Suddenly old Pound sprang forward, grappled with Martin. The captain had started to climb the rail—suicide, that was it, then—those voices!

The thwarting of what seemed to be his purpose aroused Martin at last. Behind him lay a middle-aged man's lifetime of command, of following his own will in all things. He was not accustomed to being thwarted, to any resistance, which, aboard his own ship, always went down, died still-born, before his bull-like bellow, his truculent fists.

He grappled in turn with his mate, and a long, desperate, and

withal a silent struggle began there on the deck, lighted only by the light from the captain's cabin below, the light of the great binnacle lamp of whale oil, through the skylights set above-decks for daytime illumination below.

In the course of that silent, deadly struggle, Pound seeking to drag the captain back from the vicinity of the rail, the captain laying about him with vicious blows, the man became rapidly dishevelled. Martin had been coatless, and a great swath of his white shirt came away in the clutching grip of Pound, baring his neck and left shoulder.

Pound slackened, let go, shrank and reeled away, covering his eyes lest they be blasted from their sockets by the horror which he had seen.

For there, where the shirt had been torn away and exposed the side of Martin's neck, stood a pair of blackish-purple, perfectly formed, blubbery lips; and as he gazed, appalled, horrified, the lips had opened in a wide yawn, exposing great, shining African teeth, from between which, before he could bury his face in his hands away from this horror, a long, pink tongue had protruded and licked the lips . . .

And when old Pound, shaking now to his very marrow, cold with the horror of this dreadful portent there on the deck warm with the pulsing breath of the trade wind, had recovered himself sufficiently to look again toward the place where the master of the *Saul Taverner* had struggled with him there against the railing, that place stood empty and no trace of Luke Martin so much as ruffled the phosphorescent surface of the *Saul Taverner's* creaming wake.

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I felt suddenly as if I were in a madhouse. Across the table, in the midst of this room full of noisy wretches, I seemed to see that sanguine sunset, washing like a sea of blood over the heather. There, by the black pond and the wind-warped firs, lay the body of Christopher Lovelock, with his dead horse near him. And above emerged, as out of the redness, the pale blond head, the absent eyes and strange smile of Mrs. Oke. It seemed to me horrible, vulgar, abominable...

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