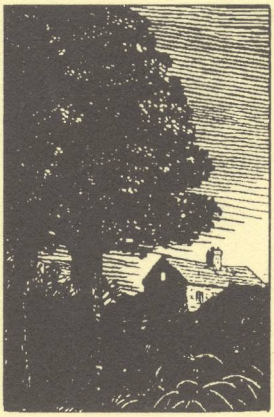
Written With My Left Hand

by Nugent Barker



Tartarus Press

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From a portrait of Nugent Baker by Ian Tillard

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Written With My Left Hand by Nugent Barker
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Written With My Left Hand
is limited to 350 copies

The first edition of this volume was dedicated
To my Mother

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Foreword

Written With My Left Hand—a marvellously evocative title, perfectly presenting the unifying theme of what might otherwise be considered a disparate collection of twenty-one tales, and it is a title that recalls the old associations of left-handedness with the sinister. One idly wonders if the writer of these tales was himself left-handed, and one wonders many other things about Nugent Barker (1888-1955), but the facts about him that can be gathered together are few and far between.

These twenty-one tales comprise, so far as is known, Barker's entire literary output. They were originally published in irregular clumps over a twenty-three year period. Five came out between 1928 and 1931; another six from 1934 through 1936. Four appeared in 1939, and the remaining six were original to Barker's only book, *Written With My Left Hand*, published by Percival Marshall & Co. of London in 1951.

Barker had débuted with two stories published simultaneously in December 1928. Both of these attracted the attention of Edward J. O'Brien, the noted anthologist, and one of them, 'Whessoe,' was reprinted in his *Best British Short Stories of 1929*. The volume itself is dedicated to Nugent Barker, and it also contains a short biographical

notice—one of the few sources of information on Barker, so I copy it here in full:

> Barker, Nugent. Educated at Cheltenham College. Began life as a black and white artist. In 1914 the doctors failed to pass him into the army on account of his eyes. Has recently devoted himself entirely to literature. He comes from one of the oldest Irish families, the Nugents of Westmeath. He lives in London. (p. 352)

In the 1930s, O'Brien selected two further stories by Barker for reprinting in his annuals. Also in the 1930s, John Gawsworth included some of Barker's work in the anonymous horror anthologies he was then compiling. A few more facts on Barker come from Gawsworth's brief biographical notes: his birth year of 1888, and the names of the magazines to which he contributed.

In March 1934, *Cornhill Magazine*, then edited by Lord Gorell, published the first of seven Barker stories that would appear in its pages. In 1950, when Barker planned to collect his stories into a book (an earlier attempt had been thwarted during World War II), Lord Gorell was invited to contribute a 'Foreword' to the collection. The result is a short puff-piece that unfortunately tells us nothing more about Nugent Barker, though Lord Gorell certainly had nice things to say about some of the stories. And he advised readers to 'read this collection, not all at once, but bit by bit, savour it and enjoy it: it includes some very distinguished imagination and some first-class writing.'

Barker indeed had a 'very distinguished imagination,' and we can only wish that we had some examples of his black and white art to accompany his stories—if only to

see how well the expression of his visual imagination might stand up beside his considerable writing talent.

We know little of Barker's family life (his one book is dedicated to his mother), and little of his time as a schoolboy at Cheltenham College in Gloucestershire, though he must have been there at the same time as Herman Cyril McNeile (1888-1937), the writer better known as 'Sapper,' creator of the Bulldog Drummond series of adventure tales.

In the late 1920s, Barker lived at 16 Tite Street in Chelsea, in the very house where Oscar Wilde had lived just before his infamous trials. (Soon after writing 'Whessoe' in this house, Barker claimed that he had had the pleasure of meeting the ghost of Wilde's witty acquaintance, the artist James McNeill Whistler, at midnight in the garden.) Barker was still living in Tite Street at the time of his death in 1955. (We have knowledge of his death year only because of the indefatigable delvings of researcher Richard Dalby in the death records at St Catherine's House in London.) And that sums up virtually everything we know of Nugent Barker.

Barker's stories live on their own merits, occasionally reappearing in various anthologies, and now, finally, in the long overdue republication of his collected works, the single volume held in your hands. Admirers of Walter de la Mare and John Metcalfe will also relish Nugent Barker's stories, and be pleased to admit him into the company of such august writers.

Douglas A. Anderson

The Stories of Nugent Barker

'Aimless Afternoon'
Cornhill Magazine, January 1939
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'The Announcement'
Cornhill Magazine, March 1934
[John Gawsworth, ed.] *Crimes, Creeps and Thrills* (1935)
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Crescendo'
Cornhill Magazine, March 1939
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Curious Adventure of Mr Bond'
Cornhill Magazine, July 1939
Edward J. O'Brien, ed. *The Best British Short Stories of 1940* (1940)
Argosy [reported but not seen]
Written With My Left Hand (1951)
Edmund Crispin, ed. *Best Tales of Terror 2* (1965)
Alfred Hitchcock, ed. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: Stories That Scared Even Me* (1967)
Charles M. Collins, ed. *A Walk with the Beast* (1969)
Alfred Hitchcock, ed. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: Stories That Scared Even Me, Part One* (1970)
Alfred Hitchcock, ed. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: Slay Ride* (1971)

'Death's Door'
[John Gawsworth, ed.] *Masterpiece of Thrills* (1935)
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Expectation of Life'
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Gertie Macnamara'
Cornhill Magazine, January 1935 [As 'Witches in the Mill', including only the first part of the story (pp. 99-102) as collected in *Written With My Left Hand.*]
Written With My Left Hand (1951)
Argosy, August 1951

'I and My Wife Isobel'
Cornhill Magazine, December 1939
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Interlude'
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'The Invalid'
Fortnightly Review, December 1928
[John Gawsworth, ed.] *Thrills, Crimes and Mysteries* (1935)
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Last Call' [see 'A Passage in the Life of Dr Wilks']

'Life and Death of the Princess Gertrude'
London Mercury, August 1931
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Mrs Sayce's Guy'
Life & Letters, May 1929
[John Gawsworth, ed.] *New Tales of Horror by Eminent Authors* (1934)
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'One, Two, Buckle My Shoe'
Written With My Left Hand (1951)
Hugh Lamb, ed. *Star Book of Horror No. 2* (1976)
Richard Dalby, ed. *The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories 2* (1991)

'Out of Leading-Strings'
Life & Letters, December 1934
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'A Passage in the Life of Dr Wilks'
Written With My Left Hand (1951)
Argosy, July 1952 [as 'Last Call']

'The Six'
Cornhill Magazine, August 1935
[John Gawsworth, ed.] *Thrills, Crimes and Mysteries* (1935)
Argosy, January 1943
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'The Spurs'
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Stanley Hutchinson'
Life & Letters, March 1935
Edward J. O'Brien, ed. *The Best British Short Stories of 1935* (1935)
Written With My Left Hand (1951)
Argosy, October 1951

'The Strange Disappearance of Monsieur Charbo'
Life & Letters, January 1931
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'The Thorn'
Written With My Left Hand (1951)

'Whessoe'
Life & Letters, December 1928
Edward J. O'Brien, ed. *The Best British Short Stories of 1929* (1929)
[John Gawsworth, ed.] *Thrills, Crimes and Mysteries* (1935)
Written With My Left Hand (1951)
Richard Dalby, ed. *The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories* (1990)
Richard Dalby, ed. *The Anthology of Ghost Stories* (1994)

'Witches in the Mill' [see 'Gertie Macnamara']

Written With My Left Hand

Curious Adventure of Mr Bond

MR BOND climbed from the wooded slopes of the valley into broad moonlight. His Inverness cape, throwing his portly figure into still greater prominence against the floor of tree-tops at his back, was torn and soiled by twigs and thorns and leaves, and he stooped with prim concern to brush off the bits and pieces. After this, he eased his knapsack on his shoulder; and now he blinked his eyes upon the country stretching out before him.

Far away, across the tufted surface of the tableland, there stood a house, with its column of smoke, lighted and still, on the verge of a forest.

A house—an *inn*—he felt it in his very bones! His hunger returned, and became a source of gratification to him. Toiling on, and pulling the brim of his hat over his eyes, he watched the ruby gleam grow bigger and brighter; and when at last he stood beneath the sign, he cried aloud, scarcely able to believe in his good fortune.

'The *Rest of the Traveller*,' he read; and there, too, ran the name of the landlord: 'Crispin Sasserach'.

The stillness of the night discouraged him, and he was afraid to tap at the curtained window. And now, for the first time, the full weight of his weariness fell upon the traveller. Staring into the black mouth of the porch, he

imagined himself to be at rest, in bed, sprawled out, abundantly sleeping, drugged into forgetfulness by a full stomach. He shut his eyes, and drooped a little under his Inverness cape; but when he looked again into the entrance, there stood Crispin Sasserach, holding a lamp between their faces. Mr Bond's was plump and heavy-jawed, with sagging cheeks, and eyes that scarcely reflected the lamplight; the other face was smooth and large and oval, with small lips pressed into a smile.

'Come in, come in,' the landlord whispered, '*do* come in. She is cooking a *lovely* broth tonight!'

He turned and chuckled, holding the lamp above his head. Through the doorway of this lost, upland inn, Mr Bond followed the monstrous back of his host The passage widened and became a hall; and here, amongst the shadows that were gliding from their lurking-places as the lamp advanced, the landlord stopped, and tilted the flat of his hand in the air, as though enjoining his guest to listen. Then Mr Bond disturbed the silence of the house with a sniff and a sigh. Not only could he smell the 'lovely broth' —already, in this outer hall, he tasted it . . . a complex and subtle flavour, pungent, heavy as honey, light as a web in the air, nipping him in the stomach, bringing tears into his eyes.

Mr Bond stared at Crispin Sasserach, at the shadows beyond, and back again to Crispin Sasserach. The man was standing there with his huge, oval, hairless face upturned in the light of the lamp he carried; then, impulsively, and as though reluctant to cut short such sweet anticipation, he plucked the traveller by the cape, and led him to the cheerful living-room, and introduced him, with a flourish of the hand, to Myrtle Sasserach, the landlord's young and small and busy wife, who at that very moment was standing at a round table of great size, beneath the massive

centre-beam of the ceiling, her black hair gleaming in the light of many candles, her plump hand dipping a ladle soundlessly into a bowl of steam.

On seeing the woman, whose long lashes were once more directed towards the bowl, Mr Bond drew his chin primly into his neck-cloth, and glanced from her to Crispin Sasserach, and finally he fixed his eyes on the revolutions of the ladle. In a moment, purpose fell upon the living-room, and with swift and nervous gestures the landlord seated his guest at the table, seized the ladle from his wife, plunged it into the bowl, and thrust the brimming plate into the hands of Myrtle, who began at once to walk towards the traveller, the steam of the broth rising into her grave eyes.

After a muttered grace, Mr Bond pushed out his lips as though he were whispering 'spoon'.

'Oh, what a lovely broth!' he murmured, catching a drip in his handkerchief.

Crispin Sasserach grinned with delight. 'I always say it's the best in the world.' Whereupon, with a rush, he broke into peals of falsetto laughter, and blew a kiss towards his wife. A moment later, the two Sasserachs were leaving their guest to himself, bending over their own platefuls of broth, and discussing domestic affairs, as though they had no other person sitting at their table. For some time their voices were scarcely louder than the sound of the broth-eating; but when the traveller's plate was empty, then, in a flash, Crispin Sasserach became again a loud and attentive host 'Now then, sir—another helping?' he suggested, picking up the ladle, and beaming down into the bowl, while Myrtle left her chair and walked a second time towards the guest.

Mr Bond said that he would, and pulled his chair a little closer to the table. Into his blood and bones, life had

returned with twice its accustomed vigour; his very feet were as light as though he had soaked them in a bath of pine needles.

'There you are, sir! Myrtle's coming! Lord a'mighty, how I wish I was tasting it for the first time!' Then, spreading his elbows, the landlord crouched over his own steaming plateful, and chuckled again. 'This broth is a wine in itself! It's a wine in itself, b'God! It staggers a man!' Flushed with excitement, his oval face looked larger than ever, and his auburn hair, whirled into bellicose corkscrews, seemed to burn brighter, as though someone had brought the bellows to it.

Stirred by the broth, Mr Bond began to describe minutely his journey out of the valley. His voice grew as prosy, his words as involved, as though he were talking at home amongst his own people. 'Now, let me see—where was I?' he buzzed again and again. And later: 'I was very glad to see your light, I can tell you!' he chuckled. Then Crispin jumped up from the table, his small mouth pouting with laughter.

The evening shifted to the fireside. Fresh logs cracked like pistol shots as Crispin Sasserach dropped them into the flames. The traveller could wish for nothing better than to sit here by the hearth, talking plangently to Crispin, and slyly watching Myrtle as she cleared away the supper things; though, indeed, amongst his own people, Mr Bond was thought to hold women in low esteem. He found her downcast eyes modest and even pretty. One by one she blew the candles out; with each extinguishment she grew more ethereal, while reaping a fuller share of the pagan firelight. 'Come and sit beside us now, and talk,' thought Mr Bond, and presently she came.

They made him very comfortable. He found a log fire

burning in his bedroom, and a bowl of broth on the bedside table. 'Oh, but they're overdoing it!' he cried aloud, petulantly; 'they're crude, crude! They're nothing but schoolchildren!'—and, seizing the bowl, he emptied it onto the shaggy patch of garden beneath his window. The black wall of the forest seemed to stand within a few feet of his eyes. The room was filled with the mingled light of moon, fire, and candle.

Mr Bond, eager at last for the dreamless rest, the abandoned sleep, of the traveller, turned and surveyed the room in which he was to spend the night. He saw with pleasure the four-poster bed, itself as large as a tiny room; the heavy oaken chairs and cupboards; the tall, twisting candlesticks, their candles burnt half-way, no doubt, by a previous guest; the ceiling, that he could touch with the flat of his hand. He touched it.

In the misty morning he could see no hint of the forest, and down the shallow staircase he found the hall thick with the odour of broth. The Sasserachs were seated already at the breakfast-table, like two children, eager to begin the day with their favourite food. Crispin Sasserach was lifting his spoon and pouting his lips, while Myrtle was stirring her ladle round the tureen, her eyes downcast; and Mr Bond sighed inaudibly as he saw again the woman's dark and lustrous hair. He noticed also the flawless condition of the Sasserach skin. There was not a blemish to be seen on their two faces, on their four hands. He attributed this perfection to the beneficial qualities of the broth, no less than to the upland air; and he began to discuss, in his plangent voice, the subject of health in general. In the middle of this discourse Crispin Sasserach remarked, excitedly, that he had a brother who kept an inn a day's journey along the edge of the forest.

'Oh,' said Mr Bond, pricking up his ears, 'so you have a brother, have you?'

'Certainly,' whispered the innkeeper. 'It is most convenient.'

'Most convenient for what?'

'Why, for the inns. His name's Martin. We share our guests. We help each other. The proper brotherly spirit, b'God!'

Mr Bond stared angrily into his broth. 'They share their guests. . . . But what,' he thought, 'has that to do with me?' He said aloud: 'Perhaps I'll meet him one day, Mr Sasserach.'

'Today!' cried Crispin, whacking his spoon on to the table. 'I'm taking you there today! But don't you worry,' he added, seeing the look on the other's face, and flattering himself that he had read it aright; 'you'll be coming back to us. Don't you worry! Day after Tomorrow—day after that—one of these days! Ain't that right, Myr? Ain't that right?' he repeated, bouncing up and down in his chair like a big child.

'Quite right,' answered Myrtle Sasserach to Mr Bond, whose eyes were fixed upon her with heavy attention.

A moment later the innkeeper was out of his chair, making for the hall, calling back to Myrtle to have his boots ready. In the midst of this bustle, Mr Bond bowed stiffly to Myrtle Sasserach, and found his way with dignity to the back garden, that now appeared wilder than he had supposed—a fenced-in plot of grass reaching above his knees and scattered with burdock whose prickly heads clung to his clothes as he made for the gate in the fence at the foot of this wilderness. He blinked his eyes, and walked on the rough turf that lay between him and the forest. By this time the sun was shining in an unclouded sky; a fine day was at hand; and Mr Bond was sweeping

his eye along the endless wall of the forest when he heard the innkeeper's voice calling to him in the stillness. 'Mr Bond! Mr Bond!' Turning reluctantly, and stepping carefully through the garden in order to avoid the burrs of the burdock, the traveller found Crispin Sasserach on the point of departure, in a great bustle, with a strong horse harnessed to a two-wheeled cart, and his wife putting up her face to be kissed.

'Yes, I'll go with you,' cried Mr Bond, but the Sasserachs did not appear to hear him. He lingered for a moment in the porch, scowling at Myrtle's back, scowling at the large young horse that seemed to toss its head at him with almost human insolence; then he sighed, and, slinging his knapsack over his shoulder, sat himself beside the driver; the horse was uncommonly large, restless between the shafts, and in perfect fettle; and without a word from Crispin the animal began to plunge forward rapidly over the worn track.

For some time the two men drove in silence, on the second stage of Mr Bond's adventure above the valley. The traveller sat up stiffly, inflating his lungs methodically, glaring through his small eyes, and forcing back his shoulders. Presently he began to talk about the mountain air, and received no answer. On his right hand the wall of the forest extended as far as his eyes could see; while on his left hand ran the brink of the valley, a mile away, broken here and there by rowan trees.

The monotony of the landscape, and the continued silence of the innkeeper, soon began to pall on Mr Bond, who liked talking and was seldom at ease unless his eyes were busy picking out new things. Even the horse behaved

with the soundless regularity of a machine; so that, besides the traveller, only the sky showed a struggle to make progress.

Clouds came from nowhere, shaped and broke, and at midday the sun in full swing was riding between white puffs of cloud, glistening by fits and starts on the moist coat of the horse. The forest beneath, and the stretch of coarse grass running to the valley, were constantly shining and darkening, yet Crispin Sasserach never opened his mouth, even to whisper, though sometimes, between his teeth, he spat soundlessly over the edge of the cart. The landlord had brought with him a casserole of the broth; and during one of these sunny breaks he pulled up the horse, without a word, and poured the liquor into two pannikins, which he proceeded to heat patiently over a spirit-stove.

In the failing light of the afternoon, when the horse was still making his top speed, when Crispin Sasserach was buzzing fitfully between his teeth, and sleep was flirting with the traveller, a shape appeared obscurely on the track ahead, and with it came the growing jingle of bells. Mr Bond sat up and stared. He had not expected to meet, in such a Godforsaken spot, another cart, or carriage. He saw at length, approaching him, a four-wheeled buggy, drawn by two sprightly horses in tandem. A thin-faced man in breeches and a bowler hat was driving it. The two drivers greeted each other solemnly, raised their whips, but never slackened speed.

'Well—who was that?' asked Mr Bond, after a pause.

'My brother Martin's manservant.'

'Where is he going?' asked Mr Bond.

'To "The Rest of the Traveller". With news.'

'Indeed? What news?' persisted Mr Bond.

The landlord turned his head.

'News for my Myrtle,' he whispered, winking at the traveller.

Mr Bond shrugged his shoulders. 'What is the use of talking to such a boor?' he thought, and fell once more into his doze; the harvest-moon climbed up again, whitening the earth; while now and then the landlord spat towards the forest, and never spoke another word until he came to Martin Sasserach's.

Then Crispin leapt to life.

'Out with you!' he cried. 'Pst! Mr Bond! Wake up! Get out at once! We've reached "The Headless Man," sir!'

Mr Bond, staggered by so much energy, flopped to the ground. His head felt as large as the moon. He heard the horse panting softly, and saw the breath from its nostrils flickering upwards in the cold air; while the white-faced Crispin Sasserach was leaping about under the moon, whistling between his teeth, and calling out enthusiastically:

'Mar-tin! Mar-tin! Here he is!'

The sheer wall of forest echoed back the name. Indeed, the whole of the moonlight seemed to be filled with the name 'Martin'; and Mr Bond had a fierce desire to see this Martin Sasserach whose sign was hanging high above the traveller's head. After repeated calls from Crispin, the landlord of 'The Headless Man' appeared, and Mr Bond, expecting a very giant in physical stature, was shocked to see the small and bespectacled figure that had emerged from the house. Crispin Sasserach grew quick and calm in a moment. 'Meet again,' he whispered to Mr Bond, shutting his eyes, and stretching his small mouth as though in ecstasy; then he gave the traveller a push towards the approaching Martin, and a moment later he was in his cart, and the horse was springing its way back to 'The Rest of the Traveller'.

Mr Bond stood where he was, listening to the dying sound of the horse, and watching the landlord of 'The Headless Man'; and presently he was staring at two grey flickering eyes behind the landlord's glasses.

'Anyone arriving at my inn from my brother's is trebly welcome. He is welcome not only for Crispin's own sake and mine, but also for the sake of our brother Stephen.' The voice was as quiet and as clear as the moonlight, and the speaker began to return to his inn with scarcely a pause between speech and movement. Mr Bond examined curiously the strongly-lighted hall that in shape and size was the very double of Crispin's. Oil-lamps, gracefully columned, gleamed almost as brightly from their fluted silver surfaces as from their opal-lighted heads; and there was Martin stooping up the very stairs, it seemed, that Mr Bond had walked at Crispin Sasserach's—a scanty man, this brother, throwing out monstrous shadows, turning once to peer back at his guest, and standing at last in a bright and airy bedroom, where, with courteous words from which his eyes, lost in thought and gently flickering, seemed to be far distant, he invited his guest to wash before dining.

Martin Sasserach fed Mr Bond delicately on that evening of his arrival, presenting him with small, cold dishes of various kinds and always exquisitely cooked and garnished; and these, together with the almost crystalline cleanliness of the room and of the table, seemed appropriate to the chemist-like appearance of the host. A bottle of wine was opened for Mr Bond, who, amongst his own people, was known to drink nothing headier than bottled cider. During dinner, the wine warmed up a brief moment of attention in Martin Sasserach. He peered with sudden interest at his guest. ' "The Headless Man?" There is, in fact, a story connected with that name. If you can call it a

story.' He smiled briefly, tapping his finger, and a moment later was examining an ivory piece, elaborately carved, that held the bill of fare. 'Lovely! Lovely! Isn't it? . . . In fact, there are many stories,' he ended, as though the number of stories excused him from wasting his thought over the recital of merely one. Soon after dinner he retired, alluding distantly to work from which he never liked to be away long.

Mr Bond went to bed early that night, suffering from dyspepsia, and glowering at the absence of home comforts in his bright and efficient bedroom.

The birds awakened him to a brisk, autumnal morning. Breathing heavily, he told himself that he was always very fond of birds and trees and flowers; and soon he was walking sleepily in Martin Sasserach's garden. The trimness of the beds began to please him. He followed the right-angled paths with dignified obesity, his very bones were proud to be alive.

A green gate at the garden-foot attracted Mr Bond's attention; but, knowing that it would lead him on to the wild grass beyond, and thence to the forest, whose motionless crest could be seen all this while over the privet hedge, he chose to linger where he was, sniffing the clear scent of the flowers, and losing, with every breath and step, another whiff of Crispin's broth, to his intense delight.

Hunger drew him back into the house at last, and he began to pace the twilit rooms. Martin Sasserach, he saw, was very fond of ivory. He stooped and peered at the delicate things. Ivory objects of every description, perfectly carved paper-knives, chess-men, salad-spoons; tiny busts and faces, often of grotesque appearance; and even delicate boxes, fretted from ivory.

The echo of his feet on the polished floors intensified

the silence of 'The Headless Man'; yet even this indoor hush was full of sound, when compared with the stillness of the scene beyond the uncurtained windows. The tufted grass was not yet lighted by the direct rays of the sun. The traveller stared towards the rowan trees that stood on the brink of the valley. Beyond them stretched a carpet of mist, raising the rest of the world to the height of the plateau; and Mr Bond, recalling the house and town that he had left behind him, began to wonder whether he was glad or sorry that his adventures had brought him to this lost region. 'Cold enough for my cape,' he shivered, fetching it from the hall, and hurrying out of the inn; the desire had seized him to walk on the tufted grass, to foot it as far as the trees; and he had indeed gone some distance on his journey, wrapped in his thoughts and antique Inverness cape, when the note of a gong came up behind him, like a thread waving on the air.

'Hark at that,' he whispered, staring hard at the ragged line of rowan trees on which his heart was set; then he shrugged his shoulders, and turned back to 'The Headless Man', where his host was standing lost in thought at the breakfast-table that still held the crumbs of the night before.

'Ah, yes. Yes. It's you. . . . You slept well?'

'Tolerably well,' said Mr Bond.

'We breakfast rather early here. It makes a longer day. Stennet will be back later. He's gone to my brother Crispin's.'

'With news?' said Mr Bond.

Martin Sasserach bowed courteously, though a trifle stiffly. He motioned his guest towards a chair at the table. Breakfast was cold and short and silent. Words were delicate things to rear in this crystalline atmosphere. Martin's skin sagged and was the colour of old ivory. Now

and then he looked up at his guest, his grey eyes focused beyond mere externals; and it seemed as though they lodged themselves in Mr Bond's very bones. On one of these occasions the traveller made great play with his appetite. 'It's all this upland air,' he asserted, thumping his chest.

The sun began to rise above the plateau. Again the landlord vanished, murmuring his excuses; silence flooded 'The Headless Man', the garden purred in the full blaze of the sun that now stood higher than the forest, and the gravelled paths crunched slowly beneath Mr Bond's feet. 'News for Myrtle,' he pondered, letting his thoughts stray back over his journey; and frequently he drifted through the house where all was still and spacious: dusty, museum-like rooms brimming with sunlight, while everywhere those ivory carvings caught his eye, possessing his sight as completely as the taste of Crispin's broth had lodged in his very lungs.

Lunch was yet another meal of cold food and silence, broken only by coffee that the landlord heated on a spirit stove at the end of the table, and by a question from the traveller, to which this thin-haired Martin, delicately flicking certain greyish dust off the front of his coat and sleeve, replied that he had been a collector of carvings for years past, and was continually adding to his collection. His voice drew out in length and seemed, in fact, to trail him from the sunlit dining-room, back to his everlasting work . . . and now the afternoon itself began to drag and presently to settle down in the sun as though the whole of time were dozing.

'Here's my indigestion back again,' sighed Mr Bond, mooning about. At home he would have rested in his bedroom, with its pink curtains and flowered wallpaper.

He crept into the garden, and eyed the back of the

house. Which of those windows in the trimly-creepered stone lit up the landlord and his work? He listened for the whirring of a lathe, the scraping of a knife . . . and wondered, startled, why he had expected to hear such things. He felt the forest behind his back, and turned, and saw it looming above the privet hedge. Impulsively, he started to cross the sun-swept grass beyond the gate: but within a few yards of the forest his courage failed him again: he could not face the wall of trees: and with a cry he fled into the house, and seized his Inverness.

His eyes looked far beyond the rowans on the skyline as he plodded over the tufted grass. Already he could see himself down there below, counties and counties away, on the valley level, in the house of his neighbours the Allcards, drinking their coffee or tea and telling them of his adventures and especially of *this* adventure. It was not often that a man of his age and secure position in the world went off alone, in search of joy or trouble. He scanned the distant line of rowan trees, and nodded, harking back: 'As far as it has gone. I'll tell them this adventure, as far as it ever went.' And he would say to them: 'The things I might have seen, if I had stayed! Yes, Allcard, I was very glad to climb down into the valley that day, I can tell you! I don't mind admitting I was a bit frightened!'

The tippet of his cape caressed his shoulders, like the hand of a friend.

Mr Bond was not yet half-way to the rowan trees when, looking back, he saw, against the darkness of the forest wall, a carriage rapidly approaching 'The Headless Man'. At once there flashed into his memory the eyes of the manservant Stennet who went between the Sasserach inns.

He knew that Stennet's eyes were on him now. The

sound of the horses' feet was coming up to him like a soft ball bouncing over the grass. Mr Bond shrugged his shoulders, and stroked his pendulous cheeks. Already he was on his way back to 'The Headless Man', conscious that two flying horses could have overtaken him long before he had reached the rowans. 'But why,' he thought, holding himself with dignity, 'should I imagine that these people are expecting me to run away? And why that sudden panic in the garden? It's all that deathly quietness of the morning getting on my nerves.'

The carriage had disappeared some time before he reached the inn, over whose tiled and weather-stained roof the redness of the evening was beginning to settle. And now the traveller was conscious of a welcome that seemed to run out and meet him at the very door. He found a log fire crackling in the dining-room; and Mr Bond, holding his hands to the blaze, felt suddenly at ease, and weary. He had intended to assert himself—to shout for Martin Sasserach—to demand that he be escorted down at once from the plateau . . . but now he wished for nothing better than to stand in front of the fire, waiting for Stennet to bring him tea.

A man began to sing in the heart of the house. Stennet? The fellow's eyes and hawk-like nose were suddenly visible in the fire. The singing voice grew louder . . . died at length discreetly into silence and the tread of footsteps in the hall . . . and again the traveller was listening to the flames as they roared in the chimney.

'Let me take your coat, sir,' Stennet said.

Then Mr Bond whipped round, his cheeks shaking with anger.

Why did they want to force this hospitality upon him, making him feel like a prisoner? He glared at the large-checked riding-breeches, at the muscular shoulders, at

the face that seemed to have grown the sharper through swift driving. He almost shouted: 'Where's that bowler hat?'

Fear? . . . Perhaps . . . But if fear had clutched him for a moment, it had left him now. He knew that the voice had pleased him, a voice of deference breaking into the cold and irreverent silence of 'The Headless Man'. The cape was already off his shoulders, hanging on Stennet's bent and respectful arm. And—God be praised!—the voice was announcing that tea would be ready soon. Mr Bond's spirits leapt with the word. He and Stennet stood there, confidentially plotting. 'China? Yes, sir. We have China,' Stennet said.

'And buttered toast,' said Mr Bond, softly rubbing his chin. Some time after tea he was awakened from his doze by the hand of the manservant, who told him that a can of boiling water was waiting in his room.

Mr Bond felt that dinner would be a rich meal that night, and it was. He blushed as the dishes were put before him. Hare soup! How did they know his favourite soup? Through entrée, remove, and roast, his hands, soft and pink from washing, were busier than they had been for days. The chicken was braised to a turn. Oh, what mushrooms *au gratin*! The partridge brought tears to his eyes. The Saxony pudding caused him to turn again to Martin, in Stennet's praise.

The landlord bowed with distant courtesy. 'A game of chess?' he suggested, when dinner was over. 'My last opponent was a man like yourself, a traveller making a tour of the inns. We started a game. He is gone from us now. Perhaps you will take his place?' smiled Martin Sasserach, his precise voice dropping and seeming to transmit its flow of action to the thin hand poised above the board. 'My move,' he whispered, playing at once; he had thought it

out for a week. But although Mr Bond tried to sink his thoughts into the problem so suddenly placed before him, he could not take them off his after-dinner dyspepsia, and with apologies and groans he scraped back his chair. 'I'm sorry for that,' smiled Martin, and his eyes flickered over the board. 'I'm very sorry. Another night . . . undoubtedly . . . with your kind help . . . another night . . .'

The prospect of another day at 'The Headless Man' was at once disturbing and pleasant to Mr Bond as he went wheezing up to bed.

'Ah, Stennet! Do you ever suffer from dyspepsia?' he asked mournfully, seeing the man at the head of the staircase. Stennet snapped his fingers, and was off downstairs in a moment; and a minute later he was standing at the traveller's door, with a bowl of Crispin's famous broth. 'Oh, that!' cried Mr Bond, staring down at the bowl. Then he remembered its fine effect on his indigestion at Crispin's; and when at last he pulled the sheets over his head, he fell asleep in comfort and did not wake until the morning.

At breakfast Martin Sasserach looked up from his plate. 'This afternoon,' he murmured, 'Stennet will be driving you to my brother Stephen's.'

Mr Bond opened his eyes. 'Another inn? Another of you Sasserachs?'

'Crispin—Martin—Stephen. Just the three of us. A perfect number . . . if you come to think of it.'

The traveller strode into the garden. Asters glowed in the lustreless light of the morning. By ten o'clock the sun was shining again, and by midday a summer heat lay on the plateau, penetrating even into Mr Bond's room. The silence of the forest pulled him to the window, made him lift up his head and shut his eyes upon that monstrous mass of trees. Fear was trying to overpower him. He did

not want to go to Stephen Sasserach's; but the hours were running past him quickly now, the stillness was gone from the inn.

At lunch, to which his host contributed a flow of gentle talk, the traveller felt rising within him an impatience to be off on the third stage of his journey, if such a stage must be. He jumped up from his chair without apology, and strode into the garden. The asters were now shining dimly in the strong sunlight. He opened the gate in the privet hedge, and walked on to the tufted grass that lay between it and the forest. As he did so, he heard the flap of a wing behind him and saw a pigeon flying from a window in the roof. The bird flew over his head and over the forest and out of sight; and for the first time he remembered seeing a pigeon taking a similar course when he was standing in the garden at Crispin's inn.

His thoughts were still following the pigeon over the boundless floor of tree-tops when he heard a voice calling to him in the silence. 'Mr Bond! Mr Bond!' He walked at once to the gate and down the garden and into the house, put on his Inverness, and hitched his knapsack on to his shoulder; and in a short while he was perched beside Stennet in the flying buggy, staring at the ears of the two horses, and remembering that Martin, at the last moment, instead of bidding his guest good-bye, had gone back to his work.

Though he never lost his fear of Stennet, Mr Bond found Martin's man a good companion on a journey, always ready to speak when spoken to, and even able to arouse the traveller's curiosity, at times, in the monotonous landscape.

'See those rowans over there?' said Stennet, nodding to the left. 'Those rowans belong to Mr Martin. He owns them half-way back to Mr Crispin's place, and half-way on to Mr Stephen's. And so it is with Mr Crispin and Mr Stephen in their turn.'

'And what about the forest?'

'Same again,' said Stennet, waving his hand towards the right. 'It's round, you know. And they each own a third, like a huge slice of cake.'

He clicked his tongue, and the horses pricked up their ears, though on either side of the dashboard the performance was no more than a formality, so swiftly was the buggy moving. 'Very much quicker than Crispin's cart!' gasped the passenger, feeling the wind against his face; yet, when the evening of the autumn day was closing in, he looked about him with surprise.

He saw the moon rise up above the valley.

Later still, he asked for information regarding the names of the three inns, and Stennet laughed.

'The gentlemen are mighty proud of them. I can tell you! Romantic and a bit fearsome, that's what I call them. Poetical, too. They don't say "The Traveller's Rest", but "The Rest of the Traveller", mind you. That's poetical. I don't think it was Mr Crispin's idea. I think it was Mr Martin's—or Mrs Crispin's. They're the clever ones. "The Headless Man" is merely grim—a grim turn of mind, Mr Martin has—and it means, of course, no more than it says—a man without a head. And then again,' continued Stennet, whistling to his horses, whose backs were gleaming in the moonlight, 'the inn you're going to now —"The Traveller's Head"—well, inns are called "The King's Head" sometimes, aren't they, in the King's honour? Mr Stephen goes one better than that. He dedicates his inn to the traveller himself.' By this time a

spark of light had become visible in the distance, and Mr Bond fixed his eyes upon it. Once, for a moment, the spark went out, and he imagined that Stephen's head had passed in front of the living-room lamp. At this picture, anger seized him, and he wondered, amazed, why he was submitting so tamely to the commands—he could call them no less—of these oddly hospitable brothers. Fanned by his rage, the spark grew steadily bigger and brighter, until at last it had achieved the shape and size of a glowing window through which a man's face was grinning into the moonshine.

'Look here, what's all this?' cried Mr Bond, sliding to his feet.

' "The Traveller's Head," sir,' answered Stennet, pointing aloft.

They both stared up at the sign above their heads; then Mr Bond scanned the sprawling mass of the inn, and scowled at its surroundings. The night was still and vibrant, without sound; the endless forest stood like a wall of blue-white dust; and the traveller was about to raise his voice in wrath against the brothers Sasserach, when a commotion burst from the porch of the inn, and on to the moon-drenched grass there strode a tall and ungainly figure, swinging its arms, with a pack of creatures flopping and tumbling at its heels. 'Here *is* Mr Stephen,' Stennet whispered, watching the approach; the landlord of 'The Traveller's Head' was smiling pleasantly, baring his intensely white teeth, and when he had reached the traveller he touched his forehead with a gesture that was at once respectful and overbearing.

'Mr Bond, sir?' Mr Bond muttered and bowed, and stared down at the landlord's children—large-headed, large-bellied, primitive creatures flopping round their father and pulling the skirts of the Inverness cape.

Father and children gathered round the traveller, who, lost within this little crowd, soon found himself at the entrance of 'The Traveller's Head', through which his new host urged him by the arm while two of the children pushed between them and ran ahead clumsily into the depths of the hall. The place was ill-lighted and ill-ventilated; and although Mr Bond knew from experience exactly where the living-room would be situated, yet, after he had passed through its doorway, he found no further resemblance to those rooms in which he had spent two stages of a curious adventure. The oil-lamp, standing in the middle of the round centre table, was without a shade; a moth was plunging audibly at the blackened chimney, hurling swift shadows everywhere over the ceiling and figured wall-paper; while, with the return of the children, a harmonium had started fitfully to grunt and blow.

'Let me take your cloak, your cape, Mr Bond, sir,' the landlord said, and spread it with surprising care on one of the vast sofas that looked the larger because of their broken springs and the stuffing that protruded through their soiled covers: but at once the children seized upon the cape, and would have torn it to pieces had not Mr Bond snatched it from them—at this, they cowered away from the stranger, fixing him with their eyes.

Amidst this congestion of people and furniture, Stephen Sasserach smiled and moved continuously, a stooping giant whom none but Mr Bond obeyed. Here was the type of man whose appearance the traveller likened to that of the old-time executioner, the axe-man of the Middle Ages—harsh, loyal, simple, excessively domesticated, with a bulging forehead and untidy eyebrows and arms muscled and ready for deeds. Stephen kept no order in his house. Noise was everywhere, yet little seemed to be done. The children called their father Steve, and put out

their tongues at him. They themselves were unlovely things, and their inner natures seemed to ooze through their skins and form a surface from which the traveller recoiled. Three of their names were familiar to Mr Bond. Here were Crispin and Martin and Stephen over again; while Dorcas and Lydia were sisters whose only virtue was their mutual devotion.

The food at 'The Traveller's Head' was homely and palatable, and Stephen the father cooked it and served it liberally on chipped plates. He sat in his soiled blue shirt, his knotted arms looking richly sunburnt against the blue. He was never inarticulate, and this surprised Mr Bond. On the contrary, he spoke rapidly and almost as if to himself, in a low rugged voice that was always a pleasure to hear. At moments he dropped into silence, his eyes shut, his eyebrows lowered, and his bulging forehead grew still more shiny with thought; on such occasions, Dorcas and Lydia would steal to the harmonium, while, backed by a wail from the instrument, Crispin the Younger and Martin the Younger would jump from the sofas on to the floor.

Rousing himself at last, Stephen the Elder thumped his fist on the table, and turned in his chair to shout at the children: 'Get along with you, devils! Get out your board, and *practise*, you little devils!' Whereupon the children erected a huge board, punctured with holes; and each child began to hurl wooden balls through the holes and into the pockets behind them with astonishing accuracy, except for Dorcas and Lydia. And presently their father reminded them: 'The moon is shining!' At once the children scuttled out of the room, and Mr Bond never saw them again.

The noise and the figured wallpaper, and the fat moth beating itself against the only source of light, had caused the traveller's head to grow heavy with sleep; and now it grew heavier still as he sat by the fire with Stephen after

supper was over, listening to the talk of that strangely attractive man in the soiled blue shirt. 'You fond of children, Mr Bond, sir?' Mr Bond nodded.

'Children and animals . . .' he murmured drowsily.

'One has to let them have their way,' sighed Stephen Sasserach. The rugged voice came clearly and soothingly into Mr Bond's ears, until at last it shot up, vigorously, and ordered the guest to bed. Mr Bond pulled himself out of his chair, and smiled, and said goodnight, and the moth flew into his face. Where were the children, he wondered. Their voices could not be heard. Perhaps they had fallen asleep, suddenly, like animals. But Mr Bond found it difficult to imagine those eyes in bed, asleep.

Lying, some minutes later, in his own massive bed in this third of the Sasserach inns, with an extinguished candle on his bedside table, and gazing towards the open window from which he had drawn apart one of the heavy embroidered curtains, Mr Bond fancied that he could hear faint cries of triumph, and sounds of knocking, coming from the direction of the forest. Starting up into complete wakefulness, he went to the window, and stared at the forest beyond the tufted grass. The sounds, he fancied, putting his hand to his ear, were as those given forth by the children during their game—but louder, as though the game were bigger. Perhaps strange animals were uttering them. Whatever their origin, they were coming from that depth of trees whose stillness was deepened by the light of the moon.

'Oh, God!' thought Mr Bond, 'I'm sick to death of the moonlight!'—and with a sweep of the arm he closed the curtains, yet could not shut out the sounds of the forest, nor the sight of the frosted grass beneath the moon. Together, sound and sight filled him with foreboding, and his cheeks shook as he groped for the unlighted candle. He

must fetch his Inverness from below, fetch it at once, and get away while there was time. He found his host still sitting by the lamp in the living-room. Stephen's fist, lying on the table, was closed; he opened it, and out flew the moth.

'He thinks he has got away,' cried Stephen, looking up, and baring his teeth in a smile: 'but he hasn't! He never will!'

'I've come for my Inverness,' said Mr Bond.

It was lying on one of the massive sofas. The fire was out, and the air chilly, and the depth of the room lay in darkness. An idea crossed the mind of Mr Bond. He said, lifting up the cape: 'I thought I'd like it on my bed.' And he shivered to show how cold he was. From one of the folds the moth flew out, and whirled round the room like a mad thing.

'That's all right, Mr Bond, sir. That's all right.' The man had fallen into a mood of abstraction; his forehead shone in the rays of the lamp; and the traveller left the room, holding himself with dignity in his gay dressing-gown, the Inverness hanging on his arm.

He was about to climb the staircase when a voice spoke softly in his ear, and wished him goodnight.

Stennet! What was the man doing here? Mr Bond lifted his candle and gazed in astonishment at the back of Martin's manservant. The figure passed into the shadows, and the soft and deliberate ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall deepened the silence and fear of the moments that followed.

Mr Bond ran to his room, locked himself in, and began to dress. His dyspepsia had seized him again. If only he were back at Crispin's! He parted the curtains, and peeped at the night. The shadow of the inn lay on the yard and the tufted grass beyond, and one of the

chimneys, immensely distorted, extended as far as the forest. The forest-wall itself was solid with moonlight; from behind it there came no longer the sounds of the knocking, and the silence set Mr Bond trembling again.

'I shall escape at dawn,' he whispered, 'when the moon's gone down.'

Feeling no longer sleepy, he took from his knapsack a volume of *Mungo Park*, and, fully dressed, settled himself in an easy chair, with the curtains drawn again across the window, and the candle burning close beside him. At intervals he looked up from his book, frowning, running his eyes over the group of three pagodas, in pale red, endlessly repeated on the wallpaper. The restful picture made him drowsy, and presently he slept and snored and the candle burned on.

At midnight he was awakened by crashing blows on his door; the very candle seemed to be jumping with fear, and Mr Bond sprang up in alarm.

'Yes? Who's that?' he called out, feebly.

'What in the name of God is *that*?' he whispered, as the blows grew louder.

'What are they up to now?' he asked aloud, with rising terror.

A splinter flew into the room, and he knew in a flash that the end of his journey had come. Was it Stephen or Stennet, Stephen or Stennet behind the door? The candle flickered as he blundered to and fro. He had no time to think, no time to act. He stood and watched the corner of the axe-blade working in the crack in the panel. 'Save me, save me,' he whispered, wringing his hands. They fluttered towards his Inverness, and struggled to push themselves into the obstinate sleeves. 'Oh, come on, come on,' he whimpered, jerking his arms about, anger rising with terror. The whole room shuddered beneath the axe. He

plunged at the candle and blew it out. In the darkness a ray of light shot through a crack in the door, and fell on the window curtain.

Mr Bond remembered the creeper clinging beneath his window, and as soon as possible he was floundering, scrambling, slipping down to the house-shadowed garden below. Puffing out his cheeks, he hurried onward, while the thuds of the axe grew fainter in his ears. Brickbats lay in his path, a zinc tub wrenched at his cape and ripped it loudly, an iron hoop caught in his foot and he tottered forward with outstretched hands. And now, still running in the far-flung shadow of the house, he was on the tufted grass, whimpering a little, struggling against desire to look back over his shoulder, making for the forest that lay in the full beams of the moonlight. He tried to think, and could think of nothing but the size and safety of the shadow on which he was running. He reached the roof of the inn at last: plunged aside from his course of flight: and now he was running up the monstrous shadow of the chimney, thinking of nothing at all because the forest stood so near. Blindingly, a moon-filled avenue stretched before him: the chimney entered the chasm, and stopped: and it was as though Mr Bond were a puff of smoke blowing into the forest depths. His shadow, swinging its monstrously distorted garments, led him to an open space at the end of the avenue. The thick-set trees encircled it with silence deeper than any that Mr Bond had known. Here, in this glade, hung silence within a silence. Yet, halting abruptly, and pressing the flat of his hands to his ribs in the pain of his sudden burst of breathing, Mr Bond had no ears for the silence, nor eyes for anything beyond the scene that faced him in the centre of the forest glade: a group of upright posts, or stakes, set in a concave semi-circle, throwing long shadows, and bearing on each

summit a human skull. ' "The Traveller's Head", "The Headless Man," ' he whispered, stricken with terror, whipping his back on the skulls: and there was Stephen Sasserach in silhouette, leaping up the avenue, brandishing his axe as though he were a demented wood-cutter coming to cut down trees.

The traveller's mind continued to run swiftly through the names of the three inns. ' "The Traveller's Head",' he thought, ' "The Headless Man", "The Rest of the Traveller".' He remembered the carrier pigeons that had flown ahead of him from inn to inn; he remembered the dust on the front of Martin's coat . . .

He was staring at the figure in the soiled blue shirt. It had halted now, as still as a tree, on the verge of the moon-filled glade: but the whirling thoughts of Mr Bond were on the verge of light more blinding than this; they stopped, appalled: and the traveller fled beyond the skulls, fruitlessly searching for covert in the farthest wall of trees.

Then Stephen sprang in his wake, flinging up a cry that went knocking against the tree-trunks.

The echoes were echoed by Mr Bond, who, whipping round to face his enemy, was wriggling and jerking in his Inverness cape, slipping it off at last, and swinging it in his hand, for his blood was up. And now he was deep in mortal combat, wielding his Inverness as the gladiators used to wield their nets in the old arenas. Time and again the axe and the cape engaged each other; the one warding and hindering; the other catching and ripping, clumsily enough, as though in sport. Around the skulls the two men fought and panted, now in darkness, now in the full light pouring down the avenue. Their moon-cast shadows fought another fight together, wilder still than theirs. Then Stephen cried: 'Enough of this!' and bared his teeth for the first time since the strife had started.

'B-but you're my friend!' bleated Mr Bond; and he stared at the shining thread of the axe.

'The best you ever had, sir, Mr Bond, sir!' answered Stephen Sasserach; and, stepping back, the landlord of 'The Traveller's Head' cut off the traveller's head.

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The thump of the head on the sticks and leaves and grass of the forest glade was the first sound in the new and peaceful life of Mr Bond, and he did not hear it; but to the brothers Sasserach it was a promise of life itself, a signal that all was ready now for them to apply their respective talents busily and happily in the immediate future.

Stephen took the head of Mr Bond, and with gentle though rather clumsy fingers pared it to a skull, grinning back at it with simple satisfaction when the deed was over, and after that he set it up as a fine mark for his brood of primitives, the game's endeavour being to see who could throw the ball into the eye-sockets; and to his brother Martin, landlord of 'The Headless Man', he sent the headless man, under the care of Stennet: and Martin, on a soft, autumnal day, reduced the headless body to a skeleton, with all its troubles gone, and through the days and nights he sat at work, with swift precision in his fingers, carving and turning, powdering his coat with dust, creating his figures and trinkets, his paper-knives and salad-spoons and fretted boxes and rare chess-men; and to his brother Crispin, landlord of 'The Rest of the Traveller', Martin sent the rest of the traveller, the soft and yielding parts, the scraps, the odds and ends, the miscellaneous pieces, all the internal lumber that had gone to fill the skin of the man from the Midlands and to help to render him in middle years a prey to dyspepsia. Crispin received the

parcel with a pursing of his small mouth, and a call to Myrtle in his clear falsetto: 'Stennet's here!'

She answered from the kitchen. 'Thank you, Cris!' Her hands were soft and swollen as she scoured the tureen. The back of the inn was full of reflected sunlight, and her dark hair shone.

'It's too late in the season now,' she said, when tea-time came. 'I don't suppose we'll have another one before the spring.'

Yet she was wrong. That very evening, when the moon had risen from beyond the valley, Myrtle murmured: 'There he comes,' and continued to stir her ladle in the bowl.

Her husband strolled into the hall, and wound the clock.

He took the lamp from its bracket on the wall.

He went to the door, and flung it open to the moonlight, holding the lamp above his head.

'Come in, come in,' he said, to the stranger standing there; 'she is cooking a *lovely* broth tonight!'

Stanley Hutchinson

I

WELL, Mr Bidmead had a sow. And she waun't no ordinary sow, for all that she spent her time grunting and wallering in the mire; but there was summat about those eyes of her'n, a sparkle, a 'by yer leave', an 'after you', as ain't gener'ly to be found in sties. And it was onny reasonable to suppose that these fine manners might reveal theirselves later on in the liddle porkers that were gathered around her when the story began; it was whispered all over the place how the fat things should ought to grow up into swine of a special grandeur, seeing that their father was hisself a well-mannered hog, though his ways was less dentical than their mother's, I reckon. So one day-morning, Mr Bidmead waun't terrible surprised when one of the liddle fellers, whose age at that time must a been somewhere in the neighbourhood of six weeks or thereabout, walked up to the cottage, poked his snout round the door-jamb, and offered him, in the purtiest manner possible, the time of day.

'Talkin',' said Mr Bidmead. 'Now, ain't that very nice?' Whereupon he invited the liddle chap to dinner, and they got chatting and laughing together, and after an hour

or so the old man asked him how his name was called, and it turned out to be Stanley Hutchinson.

'I knowed some Hutchinsons once, lived over in Chailey,' said Mr Bidmead; 'big chep, five darters, lost his wife in a railway accident. Took on the "Green Cross" when her feyther died.'

''Tain't those Hutchinsons,' said the liddle pig, turning up his snout. Presently Mr Bidmead brought out the elderberry wine; and from that day onward the old man did all that lay in his power to make that pig happy. Cooked him flour and water puddings; pushed up a rush-bottomed chair for his own using; read him bits out of the daily papers, or kept him supplied with the current prices of pork. And at night-time they'd have out the cribbage cards, or maybe the backgammon board, and the bottle of elderberry wine would stand betwixt um; then 'twas that Mr Hutchinson, after a few glasses, would come up with the funniest tales that you ever heard, or astound that old man with some of his clever tricks with matches. And last thing of all, when their eyes was so sleepy that they didn't know whatsumdever to do with um, they'd go slapping up to bed, and Mr Bidmead would lay awake for whole hours listening to Stanley Hutchinson snoring in the room opposite his'n, for he was a lonely man.

There never was a more eddicated pig than Stanley Hutchinson; and people used to come on foot and on horse-back, in pony-traps and in farm-carts, from Houghton, and Madehurst, and Halnaker, and from beyond Ammerley, and from beyond Heyshott, to crack their jokes with him.

Now it came to pass, that what with the extra food and drink and other expenses, Mr Bidmead found hisself one day at the end of all his money. The thought worrited him, as you can imagine; looking towards Mr Hutchinson,

he couldn't hardly contrive to keep back his tears. So within three days he had decided that the onny thing to be done, the onny thing, was to go selling Stanley Hutchinson's relations for what they would fetch. Off he went to Tom Garrett, the carrier. 'Lookee now, Tom Garr'tt,' said he. And so it was all arranged how the whole stock should be taken to Arundel in time for next market day.

Eh, dear oh me, that was a terrible sad parting. When Stanley Hutchinson learnt what was in the wind, he crept up to Mr Bidmead's bedroom, and searched for a hankercher in a drawer; and by Job, there he found a golden coin, bright gold it was, with nicks upon it as sharp as new. And directly he see it, he thought how he'd like to swaller it, for in spite of all his eddication, in spite of his fine manners, in spite of everything, Stanley Hutchinson at heart was nothing but a pig. And then his eddication got the better of him, and he thought how he'd give it a liddle lick; so he give it a liddle lick; and then he wrapped it up in the hankercher, and took it downstairs, and blowed his snout in the garden.

But he was a brave feller; and after a stroll or two up the paths, and over the flower-beds, he began to see how Mr Bidmead's plan was all for the best. So he said to hisself: 'Lookee, Stan, lookee here, me pig, there's no hem use worritin' like a engineer;' and as soon as ever the old man had got his back turned, by Job, Stanley took his mother aside, and gave her the golden coin, telling her how it would keep her rich and contented during her last days—for she guessed exactly what was laid up for her in the time to come, surelye. With that the old sow swallered the golden coin, a sovereign it was, and good money; and when she turned back to the cart that was to take her and the children to Arundel, there was such an 'after you' look in her eyes that Stanley Hutchinson reckoned he hadn't

ever felt so proud of her in his whole life. 'Gee up!' he cried. So the young porkers scrambled in first, while their brother looked up from the road and wished um goodbye.

'Goo'-bye, Elsie. Goo'-bye, Syd.' So it went round. 'Goo'-bye, Feyther. Give my love to Ethel.' For it was let on to the children how they were all going off to spend a few days with some cousins that they had never seen. 'Goo'-bye, Mother darlin',' said the liddle pig.

And so they all went away, and got killed.

II

That evening, when Mr Bidmead and the pig were halfway through their game of cribbage, they put up the cards and turned their faces to the wood fire. ''Tain't no go,' said the old man softly, thinking of the fine mess that he had got hisself into; and after trying him with some clever tricks with matches, Mr Hutchinson thought the same.

So they went to bed; and on the following morning it was no different; dull voices, flat feet, and looks that waun't no better than a rush-light. But just as he was passing Stanley the sweet whey butter, all of a sudden the old man give out a great cry, fit to blow the whole of Slindon village off the top of the hill.

'Why, by Job!' he hollered, 'if I bain't the biggest fool that ever was borned!' And with that, he started to walk up and down the parlour, now this way, now that way, up and down the parlour he walked, with his hands behind him, and his eyes growing rounder every minute.

'What's wrong with 'ee now?' asked the liddle pig.

'Hoy, there's nothin' wrong at all!' cried Mr Bidmead, 'everything's right—eh, lawk-a-mussy-me!' he shouted, grinning from ear to ear, 'it queers me why I didn't think

an't before!' Whereupon the old chap began to sniffle as loud as he could.

'I jest be g'wine to git a pocket-hankercher, Mus Hutchinson,' said he.

'There's nothin' like um,' said the liddle pig. But Mr Bidmead onny sniffed the louder, strutted up and down the parlour, and winked as though he'd never stop. 'To git a pocket-hankercher,' he kept on repeating, clasping his bony hands together: then all of a sudden the old man couldn't keep it up a moment longer, but opened the door, and runned to his room as fast as the stairs would carry him; while Stanley put his trotters on the winder-sill, and watched the liddle sparrers as they played in the street.

There now, it waun't long before the old chap was down again, staring at nothing, and clenching his hands so that the knuckles gleamed.

'Wheer be my g-golden coin?' he whispered. 'Lawk-a-mussy-me, oh wheer be my g-golden coin?'

'What golden coin?' asked the liddle pig.

'Oh, Stanley, Stanley, wheer by my g-golden coin?'

'Which coin be that?' asked the liddle pig.

Yet nothing else would the old man say, but now and again he moaned a bit, and give out a real sniffle, for he was very upset and had clean forgotten to git his pocket-hankercher. So Stanley took a turn in the garden, saying to hisself how the fresh air would do him a power of good. There he went snuffing the snowdrops and the pretty coloured crocuses, and reading out the linen labels that the old man had tied upon sticks; and when at last he had come to the far end, with its row of tall trees and the empty sty where his mother had reared him, he shook his head, and for ten whole minutes walked like an undertaker, to and thro', to and thro', beneath the wintry branches.

Now, that was market day at Arundel; but this here worriting had put it clean out of Mr Bidmead's mind. 'Eh, by Job!' he hollered, all of a sudden. And with that, the old man began to put on his gaiters at a hem of a rate, and to call hisself all the lamentable hard names that he could think of. So it happened that by the time the liddle pig had wandered back to the house, Mr Bidmead was hurrying down Slindon Hill on his way to Arundel, to attend the sale of Mr Hutchinson's relations. Well, it waun't very long before Stanley guessed what was in the wind, so he fetched a paper, and set down in Mr Bidmead's chair in the parlour, and spent his time figgering out the state of the pig market; but when Mr Bidmead came home in the twilight, twitching his hands with excitement, and pulling in his lips so far that you couldn't see um, never a word did the old feller say, no, never one word, about the wunnerful prices that the hogs had fetched.

'I be middlin' rich,' he thought to hisself, 'I be middlin' rich.'

That night he spoke again to Stanley Hutchinson about the missing coin, and the liddle pig went hunting all over the house to find where it had got to: ''Tis hem strange, wheer it can a' got to.' the pig murmured, nosing around. But Mr Bidmead kept on thinking: 'I be middlin' rich . . . I be middlin' rich . . .' Then he forgot how happy he was, and fretted like a miser for the lost coin.

III

So the week went by; and although the weather suddenly changed, and early spring came to the beech woods of Slindon, there was always a nip in the evening air, when Mr Bidmead, leaning forrard, throwed another log on to the fire, and Mr Hutchinson, leaning backard,

watched in the flames the sparkle of his mother's eyes; and sometimes Stanley would let on to hisself that he could hear the sow's soft trotters in the room; and once he heard her gulp the golden coin, at a single swaller, without as much as a 'How did ye come by it, Stan?'

One morning, when Mr Bidmead was out faggoting, the postman handed in a parcel, and the liddle pig opened it, being it was urgent. And by Job, there lay the golden coin, wrapped in a letter, and placed in a box; and the letter came from a butcher over in Parham, telling Mr Bidmead how he'd found the sovereign in the sow's innards.

Now, Stanley waun't prepared for this; and first thing he done, he thought how silly the whole thing was, and how he'd better keep the coin for hisself, like, and burn the letter straightaway. And then he thought how glad Mr Bidmead would be to see that coin back again, and all his worritings over. So he took it up to the old man's bedroom, and put it into the drawer: and there it lay, and there it shone and sparkled, until the liddle pig fancied that there waun't a thing to equal it but the sparkle of his mother's eyes. And then he thought how suspicious the old man would be, finding it back in the drawer again; all this time the coin was winking, and suddenly he thought how much he'd like to swaller it. And then his eddication got the better of him, and he thought how he'd give it a liddle lick; so he give it a liddle lick; and at that moment, by Job, who did he hear on the stairs but Mr Bidmead. With that, he wrapped the sovereign in a hankercher, and took it across to his room; and there he blowed his snout, and there he blowed it, and when he blowed his snout the second time he swallered the golden coin.

So there it was; and that evening, when he had torn up the letter, and he and Mr Bidmead were playing

cribbage, his wits went wandering, to think how that coin would be his for evermore. 'Your play, Stan,' said the pig's old friend. Coming out of his day-dream, the pig played a card; then he gazed into the fire, the fire put out its tongue at him, and young Hutchinson laughed.

For a long time after he'd swallered the golden coin, Stanley Hutchinson did nothing but wink to hisself all day and half the night. Then the weather became warmer, and in the evenings he and Mr Bidmead used to chat and laugh together over a fire that waun't as big as it used to be in the winter-time: and whether it was for this reason, I don't rightly know, but although he blinked, and peered, and listened as hard as ever he could, the liddle pig waun't able to see the sparkle of his mother's eye no longer, or to hear the voice that had always seemed to grunt so favourable at the things he'd done. It is said, too, that the whole of the room began to rock a liddle behind his back, and that the old clock ticked its way clean into the middle of Stanley Hutchinson's soul. Later still, when spring began to change to summer, and the old man used to let the fire burn out entirely after the cooking was over, the dark chimbley did seem to be lighted up by a red glow of firelight, surelye: but the pig knowed how it waun't that at all, no fear, it was the golden coin that lay winking and burning in his innards.

So it went on, and Mr Bidmead, kind old feller that he was, began to consarn hisself more than ever before with the comforts and pleasures of Mr Hutchinson, bringing out the cribbage cards at all hours, and losing on purpose every mortal game that he put his hand to; fixing up the backgammon board, and going at it hammer and

tongs, whether the liddle hog wished it or no; laughing like a nigger at the tricks with matches; and fetching in the elderberry wine whensumdever the pig looked a liddle bit hipped in the eye.

And on top of this, by Job, Stanley discovered that his mother's eyes were beginning to sparkle again; but this time he could see um in the paraffin lamp that the old man had bought out of the pig-money, and in the patches of light that twinkled on the new cups and sarcers and plates of Chailey china; and sometimes, when the nights were very sleepy and hot, the old man would fall into a doze, with a smile upon his lips, and after a while his mouth would hang open, so that all of a sudden the room would fetch up with a snore as loud as a hog's. And at last Stanley Hutchinson couldn't abide it a moment longer. So one day near the beginning of June, he went to Mr Bidmead, and gave it in how he would go searching for the lost coin.

'I justabout can't tell 'ee what makes me think so,' said the liddle pig, 'but I have an idea,' said he. . . . ' I dunno but what,' he continued, 'I'll sure find that golden coin far, far away.'

Then the old man looked at him, and said:

'If so be as I thought there was any truth in these words o' your'n, Stan, why then, I reckon I'd tell 'ee to go and search for the coin, surelye. But how can a chap,' said the old man thoughtfully, 'go searchin' for a golden coin what he's never seen, what he's never knowed the date of, what he'd never even heard tell of before that morning many weeks ago when I runned upstairs to my bedroom for to git me a pocket-handkercher?' So he went on, talking and talking, and all the time he was thinking to hisself most miserably: 'Stan could tell me summat about that golden coin, I reckon.' For the pig didn't know that the

butcher had written again from Parham, a month earlier, asking Mr Bidmead why he hadn't acknowledged the liddle parcel. Mr Bidmead had gone to the postman; and, hearing the most disturbing news that waun't entirely disconnected with Stanley Hutchinson, ever since that time the old chap had been beezled as to whether he should go prying further, for fear he might bring the most terrible shame upon hisself and the liddle cottage. Eh, by Job, it was a frightening thought! Mr Hutchinson! His own Stanley! The cleverest pig in the village! And now, looking down at his toes, then round the parlour, and again at the liddle pig, Mr Bidmead reckoned all at once how it would be wiser to ask no tom-fool questions about the matter, being as he'd onny get perky answers or maybe a few witty jokes that would leave him nowhere. So he said nothing. But he took a basket, and in it he put brown bread; and he put a pound of butter in it, and he put some cheese in it, and then he put some eggs in it, and then he put some salt and pepper in it, and a liddle elderberry wine, and then he put some apples in it, and then he said goodbye, and the pig went.

He went on a fine, blowy day in summer, and Slindon village knew him no more. Eh, dear oh me, how sudden it all was. And how they wondered whether he would ever come back. . . . But I can tell you a liddle of his journey; I can foller him as far as my eyes reach.

In spite of the wind, it was a very hot day, for it was a very hot wind; and by the time he had come to the bottom of Slindon Hill, lawk-a-mussy-me, the basket was empty, clean holler it was, and Stanley Hutchinson sat upon his haunches, lifted his snout, and set up a most dismal cry.

Well, there waun't nothing for it but that he must go begging, which he done, and so purtily, that, by Job, he

was able to get as much again as he had eaten, and he ate that too; and so it went on, until you couldn't have told him from a balloon-ball; and then he disappeared beyond the corner; and after that . . . he took hisself . . . I feel so certain sure . . . towards the place where they go killing and curing pigs. . . .

IV

Now, that ain't the end of the story. It's no more the end of the story than this story is the end of the world. But the disappearance of Stanley Hutchinson was the end of Mr Bidmead, poor man. Two days after the pig had left him, the golden coin came back, and Mr Bidmead couldn't hardly contain hisself for joy, but started to run from room to room of the liddle cottage, up and down the liddle cottage he runned, for it's a strange thing how much more pleased he was with the one sovereign than with all the money that he had got for the pigs. There was a bit of the miser in Mr Bidmead, I reckon; yet no one can say that the old chap was selfish, and his eyes shone like gold when he thought to hisself: 'My Stan will be follering soon.' So he arranged a lot of surprises for his pig Stan. He bought some fish, and ice to keep it as fresh as a daisy; and he bought some eggs, and heaped um in a pyramid on a plate; and he give the elderberry wine a taste, to see if it hadn't turned a liddle; and he brought some roses from the garden, and stood um out in ornaments and jugs; and he shuffled all the cribbage cards, and even went so far as to shake the backgammon dice, ready for throwing; and the pig never came. That was in June. In July the old man couldn't hardly shamble up to his bedroom; in August he waun't no better than a clodpate; near the middle of autumn the villagers shook their heads over the fire.

'He had no ought to take up with a pig like Stan,' they muttered; 'that business has catched a holt of him, surelye.'

But bless ye, I disremember half the things they said of Bidmead, who onny put his fingers in his ears, like, and fared his own way. His clothes went to pieces, the garden grew, he ate where he would, never spreading the table-cloth; and his nose sniffled for want of a hankercher. One night he gazed oddly over the parlour; he kept on blinking his liddle pig-eyes as though he'd no ought to be there.

''Tis no use, hangin' on in this purty place,' he muttered; 'I justabout don't remember what everything's for.' So he shuffled out of his chair; then, seeing the cribbage cards, put um idly into his pocket. Afterwards he turned out the light, and left the cottage for the last time.

The wind blew, and clouds rushed over the sky; the moon kept peeping out at shortish intervals, and during one of um the old man put his hand into his pocket, and took out the golden coin. It was all he had left, the rest of his money was clean gone, and as he looked at it he thought how he'd like to swaller it. But the fag end of his eddication got the better of him, and he thought how he'd give the coin a liddle lick; so he give it a liddle lick; and with that, he went shuffling and padding to the bottom of the garden.

The wind was tossing through the trees. Sometimes it sounded like human laughter, and sometimes like the voices of all kinds of animals, from geese to elephants. The shape of the sty rose up before him; and when he opened the door, and peeped inside, he give a grunt of satisfaction.

'Gruntin',' said a liddle voice. 'Now, ain't that very nice?' And, by Job, there was Stanley Hutchinson's ghost; and from that day to this, nobody never goes near the sty, nobody never goes near it, because of the voices that can

be heard there, in the small hours, grunting and laughing together over the cribbage cards.

And if you don't believe this story, you ought to, and if you don't believe it, you can be no lover of pigs, and if you don't believe it, that's a pity; why, everybody in Slindon will tell you how it was all true. And maybe that's the onny virtue in it. For it ain't Shakespeare, by a long chalk, and it ain't Milton, and it ain't even Bunyan, though I suppose at a pinch it might be called the story of a Pig's Progress.

The Six

'DRUNK again,' the landlord muttered, watching him rise and go. 'Eli, you're drunk!'

They grinned and spat; the lamp shone on their faces.

The young man's shadow, cast by the light of the village inn, lay very faintly on the ground in front of him, for dusk was scarcely beginning to slip into the lane. Eli Lethbridge knew he was drunk. *They* knew he was drunk by the quiet and unperturbed manner in which he walked: whenever he stretched out an arm, exceedingly calmly and slowly, delicately shaping his fingers, it was always as though he had no need to steady himself, but to steady the thing that he touched. He walked to the farm that his father had left him, a lonely place, very seldom in the world's eye now, with fields running down to the tamarisk hedge by the sea. On his way there, he saw in the distance a party of nuns from a neighbouring town; their dark dresses, and white heads looking like the wings of birds, added a feeling of destination to the landscape. He walked for half an hour in his neglected garden, staring at the broken fences, through which farm animals wandered to and fro; after that he went indoors and reached for his rifle and hitched it under his arm—the lightweight Winchester repeater, without which he was never completely happy—

and after that he turned his back on the village. As he went, the clock began to strike in the church tower; when the last note was ended, everything seemed quieter than it had been before, and presently he heard nothing but the waves lapping far out on the sands.

The road that he was following led to a break in the tamarisk hedge; then it shelved between banks of sea-kale, and merged into the shingle. The crunching of his boots on the stones was a sound that never failed to plunge him at once into a world of his own. From that moment, everything seemed full of purpose. 'Here we are!' he said: never 'Here I am!'—but he could not have told you why he spoke of himself in the plural whenever he was alone on the shore. It was neap-tide now. The thin line of surf, growing grey in the dusk, was interrupted here and there by drifts of seaweed, or merely by the extreme lethargy of the waves. Eli Lethbridge stood suddenly still, and watched and heard the surf-line fritter away six times before his boots began to crunch again on the shingle.

When he was far out on the sands, midway between the shingle and the sea, he started to walk eastwards, and his shadow was now thrown darkly by the light in the west. Tamarisk bordered the coast. He could not remember the time when the smell and taste of tamarisk were unknown to him; but he did remember the day when he was basking on the sunny bank beneath the shrub, and a lizard had scuttled away by his feet, almost before he had seen it. The young man, walking to the east, ran his eye over the interminable length of hedge and the interminable margin of the sea, which were fading quickly into the dusk. Breakwaters ran down the shingle, and tapered far out on to the sands. Groyne after groyne: as far as his sight could reach, there were groynes, closing together with the distance, and he had seen them, clambered over

them, stepped over them into white puddles, or skirted the ends of them, all the years of his life.

Here and there, on some of the shorter and seaward posts of the groynes, a gull was perching. Hardly a season went by when the sand was not sprinkled with gulls, or the air pierced with their screams; but tonight, when only a listless breeze was stirring, very few could be seen or heard. He did not often shoot the gulls. He liked to see them riding on long and passive wings above his head, or settling on the sands with their incomparable lightness and grace. Eli Lethbridge pressed his elbow into his side, and laughed. He knew no greater comfort than the feel of his rifle under his arm. The whole of his life had been spent in shooting—shooting at marks on the shore when the tide was out, shooting at lumps of white chalk on the posts of the breakwaters—until his eye had become as keen as a gull's. It was his hobby, and no one had ever been able to take it away from him. Even in his father's time a life of leisure had been granted to him, and he had spent it in shooting, in drinking, in walking alone along these sands of countless breakwaters, with his rifle hanging on his arm.

Of those numberless days, there was little to be remembered save here and there an exceptional shot, or an unwonted flight of sea-birds, or a week of storms, when sometimes a ship would be driven on to the coast; therefore such occurrences—he called them, to himself, 'adventures'—often came to his mind, and they came there now. They, and the close evening, and the spirits that he had drunk, gathered to his head, while the young man continued to walk into the east, from which quarter the light was ebbing quickly and as quickly building up a curtain of crimson behind his back. After a while, the weight of the rifle began to turn him from thought to action, and several

times he stopped and fired, and the distant mark was scattered in a spray of chalk and the crack of the rifle was sucked away by the sands. Far to his left lay the feathery tamarisk, and the fringe of it was already ruffled into the grey-green of the sky; southward ran the sea, still ebbing, without a moon, and the sound of it was scarcely louder than the ebbing of the daylight. Though his mind was mellow, and he kept on breaking into songs, his eyes and ears were never at rest, but always searching, always ready to catch the ultimate sight and sound of the evening. And presently, in the distance ahead, he saw six gulls standing on six posts of a breakwater, motionless, as he had so frequently seen them before.

He did not often shoot the gulls. He felt that he had no wish, just now, to shoot six gulls. But they were many groynes away, glimmering, tremulous in the dusk that was almost darkness, and distance always cast a spell over him in the end. He dropped to his knee, and looked along the barrel at the beautiful, phosphorescent things, and fired, aiming low on account of the dusky light, passing quickly and evenly from one target to another, giving no thought to the wanton thing that he was doing, shooting because he must.

By this time, sombre clouds were blotting out the light in the west, and the young man's shadow seemed to fill up the whole of the sands. On his way to the distant breakwater, he paused, and stared over the sea. The eye of a lightship, seven miles out, sending no beam, and as clear as though it were a spark within a few feet of his face, burned suddenly on the rim of the horizon, remained for a period, and was gone. He had often watched this light in the evenings; and now, deliberately, cruelly, before continuing on his way, he watched it come and go six times, once for each of the gulls he had killed. . . .

Eli Lethbridge had never heard of Wordsworth's evening, 'quiet as a nun.' This, indeed, was as quiet as a nun, and it was quieter—it was as quiet as six nuns. They were sitting on the sands, with their hands in their laps, and their feet pointing to the east. Their heads, clothed in their lovely flying coifs, were still showing above the short posts of the breakwater. It was clear that they had been sleeping. The six were dead.

I and My Wife Isobel

ONE evening in late September, I and my wife Isobel were walking the six miles from Mullington to Froon, over the Mendip Hills, and my old bones were beginning to tell on me. Silence, and a mingling of each other's thoughts (a power created by the twilight, no less than by years of matrimonial bliss) had long ago fallen between us; we could still hear the parson's voice, and now it seemed to roll and rise and sink appropriately over the sombre hills and dales; for I must tell you that we had been to a friend's funeral, and could still see the graveyard lying out under the three yews as darkly as the church floor under the roof; and could still smell the tinkling flock of sheep in the lane as the mourners flowed out like a black river through the lichgate when all was said and done. Some of these people had walked back with old Mercer, to the bakemeat and the wine, others had hurried home to their firesides, but I and my wife Isobel had taken the lonely road to Froon.

There was no escaping from its loneliness when the mist began to hide the eastern plain, for then we could see no spark, no spire, no drift of smoke in the landscape below us, and clearly enough we seemed to hear the parson's voice presiding at the burial of the world. The clouds

assembled about the hill-tops; and I started thinking of our house at Froon, its windows shuttered and its curtains drawn in sympathy for our departed friend; and my thoughts dwelt for a moment on our lodger, Bidolack (we like to turn an extra coin wherever possible); and presently the black hill running on our left hand fell away, and westwards I could see the final flush above the Plain of Somerset, and a streak of red on the estuary of the Severn.

As darkness stole into the Mendip Hills, so did the note of a bell steal into the darkness; but so gradually, that we could not tell when day was gone, nor silence broken. At first I thought of the sheep and their tinkling bells outside the church at Mullington; then I heard the trotting of a horse behind me: my wife Isobel looked back, and so did I: and there we stood until the Morrisons pulled up and offered us a lift to Froon.

We heard the note of unction in their voices: What were the flowers like? Did old Mercer cry? Their feeble lamp shone down on us, and in its glass I saw my long face hideously distorted.

The horse was lame, and I began to fear that its capricious clatter might destroy the harmony of my surroundings that till now had charmed me on the road that runs from Mullington to Froon.

Once, indeed, my peaceful thoughts were rudely shattered by that brat, young Barney Morrison, who sat at the back of the vehicle with his mother and my wife Isobel. 'Why don't these people buy a trap of their own?' he demanded, lifting his half-witted leer to the sky. I took no notice of the child, beyond glaring at him once over my shoulder.

At length we dropped towards the plain, and there we left the Morrisons and walked to Froon. The track we followed in the darkness trickled out from stunted grass

and boulders in the foothills; thence it travelled eastwards, gathering lights and shadows on the way, until it reached the flaring Market Place at Froon, with our old, stately mansion in the corner.

We climbed up to our richly-ornamented door by steep and narrow steps. I knocked and knocked again, impressively, and it was opened by our servant-maid, who bore the foreign name of Filippina. We saw her for a moment in the Market light before we walked into our panelled dining-room, where massive pictures hung upon the walls—the very pictures that are hanging there today. I went at once and flung the curtains back and opened the shutters and let the Market light into the room. (I do not care to burn good oil when the Market Place is busy.) Window by window I let the light into the room. I took my Prayer Book from the pocket of my overcoat and put it gently on the table, and the light from Thomas Dixon's oil-shop fell on it, and I could see the golden cross.

We heard a cry from Filippina's room. I started up at that, and would have hurried out, had I not caught the sound of running footsteps in the hall. I thought: 'That's lodger Bidolack,' and then: 'He's at his tricks again!' The fellow had the insolence to stand and sing, outside our door, in his lilting, fruity, tenor voice:

'O heaven, to think of their white souls,
And mine so black and grim!'

I saw in a mirror the face of my wife Isobel, all puckered up with hate. I turned and peered at it, her young face puckered up with hate.

'But what is this?' I whispered, thunderstruck, yet secretly delighted. 'Do you hate the man?'

'I hate the *girl*!' she answered, never moving, staring for ever at the door.

Then I knew. It was as I had thought. I saw that all was over. In my rage I fought her. She had no chance. With blow after blow, I killed my wife Isobel.

There was nothing more for me to do just then but to leave her where she lay.

I locked the door behind me.

I took off my black, funereal gloves, and tidied my collar in the dark; at the end of the passage I saw a light under Filippina's door.

'What is this?' I whispered. 'Lord preserve us!'

She lay shapeless on her bed. I turned her round, and saw the death-blood shining on her face.

'This is the work of Bidolack,' I thought, and in a flash his song came back to me:

'O heaven, to think of their white souls,
And mine so black and grim!'

I recognised the words from Hood's *Eugene Aram*. 'A while ago,' I thought, 'how true they were.'

'And Bidolack? Oh, well,' I thought, smiling across the bed in Filippina's shining bedroom, 'by now he's run off to the Mendip Hills, and presently the whole of Somerset will hunt him for the double crime, led by the look of things.'

They buried my servant Filippina, and they buried my wife Isobel; and they hunted for my lodger Bidolack, and never found him. I have heard that retribution always comes to him who deserves it. I wonder.

Whessoe

THOSE who had seen him, those who had endeavoured to speak with him, face to face, until suddenly they had realised that it would be ridiculous to carry the conversation further—these people searched diligently among the proper sources, and called him Whessoe. It may be that there was more than the merest ghost of a reason for such a name. Yet he was so secret, so illusive, they could not be sure.

His habitation was a great, silent, early Victorian house, and it stood on a semi-circle of drive behind two gates that swung rheumatically on their creaky hinges, off the leafiest avenue of that old watering town. There are many such houses, sunk in sleep, on the verdured, lazy borders of Chelsover. Their emptiness of all sound save the frequent mutter of rain-drops from the eaves; the filmy stare of their windows; their endless, aimless hours—these things give them the air of old, querulous people who have found no benefit in the health-giving waters of Chelsover, but have sat themselves down within sight of that hope-shattering spa, to watch others pass by them on the same misguided errand, beneath the whispering trees. Especially the two gates were two old snuffy gentlemen, who wheezed, and croaked, and told doubtful stories, whenever

anyone took them for a moment by the latches, and walked, with silent footsteps, up the lichened drive, to the old house where the old man lived.

They say that he wore knee-breeches, and that, whenever he took his walks abroad, a threadbare, plum-coloured surtout, with the tightest of waists, and a whole battalion of buttons, glowed like a dying smithy amidst the leaf-shadows. But Whessoe of Two Gates walked so rarely in the daytime, and seldom beyond the confines of his house: the night was his, and the very early morning, when the moon, shining into an open upper window, brightened the gleam in his eye, and darkened the lines on his face.

Then would certain belated residents of Chelsover, lifting their heads, gaze fearfully at the old man lurking there.

Those of them that knew his story. . . . Yet they never ceased to wonder, when that strange figure met their eyes. They wondered at the truth of many tales concerning him; they wondered at the relentless spirit that would not let him sleep. There were occasions when he was not to be seen at his accustomed vigil: times when these same residents peered anxiously over the lower windows, to catch the fleeting glimpses of his ghostly figure as it wandered from room to room. It was so white, so frail, it shone so queerly in the dark passages and the half-light of the hall. Sometimes, when he caught sight of himself in the dusky, all but invisible, depths and boundaries of a mirror, Whessoe, too, would start and shudder at the spectral shape that had confronted him there. His face was as white and crumpled as a ball of paper; his shrunken legs appeared as though they might drop at any moment from the loosely buckled ends of his knee-breeches; his knuckles were as big as buttons—as big as the

buttons on his plum-coloured surtout. But the contemplation of this disturbing figure seldom held him for long; soon he would be through with the ghost-gazing, would be off again upon his nocturnal rambles, drifting and gliding, watching at the window, caring for no man, a shadow of fled glories passing through the house.

And as silently as Whessoe, the years passed too; time was long in bringing change to the sombre mansion; and the dread invasion, when it *did* come, came neither very suddenly nor very gradually: it seemed to slip into his life like a visitor who had hailed him before opening the door: it seemed, perhaps, even more vividly, to have slipped out from a world that had nothing whatever to do with his own . . . a world with a dry mouth, and a grisly tongue in its cheek, that caused him rather frantically to think of ghosts.

Ghosts in the old house! Ghosts within the gates! Impossible, thought the old man restlessly—yet in the same moment realised that the signs had come, and he had not heeded them. For a week, a month, the visitor had hailed, and Whessoe had not attempted to open the door. Surely they were incontestable, those once unmeaning events that suddenly he remembered one very early April morning in the shuttered drawing-room, where his eyes were opened by a sign which in its own turn was a prelude to a greater sign in store!

An odour had reached him, a sweet, ineffable odour that seemed to wrap his frail body in kindly, pleading voices of the Past; he fancied that a window must be open, and a shutter unlatched; but he knew that no flowers grew now in the unwalked wilderness of a garden, nor was there any scent in the sycamore tree whose topmost branches fell barely short of his bedroom window-sill. The incident had disturbed him, without giving cause for any particular

fear in his awakening mind; but sometime later, when he had left the drawing-room, and was moving noiselessly across the black spaces of the hall, a sound had started at his elbow, a tiny catch of the breath, as though—ah, yes—a ghost had sighed . . . and he had fled in a high frenzy up the staircase, to fashion the moonbeams of his bedroom into the forms and murmurs of ghosts. The moon left his window, and went her way; but still he sat on, round-eyed, probing shadows of the immediate past.

A week, a month ago, the signs had come, and he had not heeded them! A vague hint of *preparation*—he could not define it exactly—in rooms, and hall, and passages; a brighter, cleaner atmosphere, even at midnight, that seemed to envelope him at every turn of the stair—these were the little things, scarcely felt in the hour of their happening, that jumped to his memory now, and kept him vigilant for many weeks to come. Sleeping by day, and walking by night, his long-established mode of living was highly favourable to a proper study of ghosts. He would sit in the great, lofty bedroom whose windows looked over the sycamore tree: he would sit there very silently, with the door a little open, hoping for the arrival of those invading spirits whose voices he dreaded to hear.

It was a faded, murky room, that in which the crowning evidence of a supernatural world had come to him at last. The bed stood out like a draped coffin on a bier; heavy curtains hid the two tall windows that might have been the black mouths of tombs. One of these windows had been open, and the curtains parted, on the night when he heard the spectral cry. The sound had awakened him; and for many moments afterwards he fancied that he could hear the whistle of the wind. But the cord of the window-blind hung motionless in the still, night air; nothing stirred in that vast tomb behind two parted

curtains; and suddenly he knew that the sound was coming from within the house—that in some distant room a ghostly company was dancing to a quiver of spectral music, and a riot of fitful, elfin laughter.

Trembling in every limb, old Whessoe flung off the bed-clothes, and hurried to the door; but the lock was rusty, and the key refused to turn in his nerveless fingers. He went to the window, peeped down into the garden and up into the sky; he was scared, he was shaking, he wanted to hide the tempestuous music that danced in his ears. A sickle moon was rising above the avenue that led into Chelsover: already, through the mesh of distant leaves, she had begun to sprinkle her dust onto the sleepy head of the sycamore tree. And now a cool wind blew into the old man's face, and the far-distant shunting of a train told him that his usual hour for rising was near. But this time he did not rise. Instead, he lay again beneath the bed-clothes, with fingers pressed into his ears, and the sheets pulled over his thin, grey hair; and at intervals throughout the night, in his waking moments, and in his troubled dreams, he heard the company of ghosts, and the flying music, and the distant room, and the whole house, dancing and dancing. . . .

So the ghosts came, and Whessoe knew now that the manifestations were something more real than the vague voices of house and garden. He did not hear them on the following night. A week went by, and the heart of the house was wrapped in silence. His first thought was to locate the room of the riotous dancing; he fancied it must be the drawing-room; but when at last he ventured within it, no sign of the dancing was there. His heart thumped as he glided, silent as a shadow, across the moonlit floor. But

again the odour assailed him, subtle and frightening, speaking to him in voices of the Past. Old Whessoe caught his breath. So they were here always, now. In every crack and corner, watching him, watching him, never to go. He was able no longer to think of the house as his own.

When they came again, he was ready for them. He was sitting in his room with the door open, ready and waiting, dressed in the plum-coloured surtout and loose knee-breeches of a bygone year; and they began their display by creaking the stairs, and uttering little outbursts of laughter, until presently all individual sounds were swallowed in the dance. The music swirled, the voices rose and fell, the house rocked as before; and Whessoe stood in his doorway, round-eyed and with his mouth pursed as for whistling, trying to summon up courage to obey the almost articulate voices that he fancied he could hear, at odd moments, calling to him to join them.

Thenceforth, the wild, elfin music of the ghosts became an established custom in that house. Whessoe would await it in fear; but the fear was changed into a momentary wonder when the first gay notes arrived. He did not hear it every night. Often a whole week would go by, and the long, early hours of the morning brought no sign. He would sit in the great, lofty bedroom whose windows looked over the sycamore tree; he would sit there very silently, with the door a little open, hoping for the return of those invading spirits whose voices he dreaded to hear. And when they came, and the wrinkled cheeks of the house were smoothed out with the great burst of music, always the first fear would creep back into Whessoe; and it was many weeks before he ventured beyond the doorway while the ghosts danced.

But as time brought less restraint to the ghostly visitors, so also it brought a sense of boldness to Whessoe.

The anxiety of waiting for their return was lessened by these shortening intervals of silence; his first horror began to depart; and he found himself looking forward with increasing pleasure to those nights when music tossed above the whistle of the wind, and the wind tossed over the trees, calling his name:

'Whes-s-s-oe! Whes-s-s-oe!'

At first he was scared, sitting there, unable to tell the fancied voice from the real; then, from the wild elements of nature, he began to separate the wild elements of the house—the one became a stepping stone to the other—and when at last he realised that a spirit world was taking possession of the old building, superimposing itself upon everything within it, creeping into every crack and cranny, usurping the house's soul, Whessoe was not afraid. He felt soothed, and strangely gratified at so much ghostly attention. He became quietly interested, and began to think.

'What are these phantoms like?' he thought, and strove to picture them. He wondered whether they walked in the day-time, and whether they could be seen outside the realms of darkness; from his scanty knowledge of the ways of ghosts, he decided these two questions in the negative. And sometimes, in his cunning way, he tried to catch the tunes that were filling his nights with pleasure, that bid him leave their singers unmolested because they were as lovely as the shy songs of birds. And although there were moments when his curiosity urged him to put the phantoms to the proof in the broad light of day, yet always he remained loyal to the songs' bidding; but as the weeks passed, there came a more daring note to his nightly vigils.

There was a cracked, spare piano which in old days had been relegated to some dim room on the drawing-room floor; and one early morning, when the singing and

the dancing were over, and the house was quiet, Whessoe stole down, and seated himself in front of the instrument; and there, in the darkness, with notes that came softly at first and finally filled the whole house with song, he, as though to pay back the ghosts in their own ghostly coin, played many bars of his favourite *Lucia*.

When August came, and the thick trees of Chelsover lay like a dust-sheet over the town, the spirits kept away; and the old house slept dreamlessly with its head upon its arm. Whessoe was puzzled. He who once had known and welcomed solitude, fretted when he found it again. The round mouth of the night drew near him and pressed its soundless, thick lips to his ear; the empty corners stared at him with tightly lidded eyes. But such a state did not exist for long; the ghostly period had been of too short a duration to have become a necessity for his soul. On the approach of September, his feelings suffered a certain change. Whenever the wind sang, he did not hesitate any longer to attribute the singing to the wind; and it sang to him in warning tones that told him that the ghosts' music had been rather monstrously evil. He was not ignorant of such a popular opinion in regard to ghostly phenomena, and his grey head nodded sagely as he wandered from room to room. That strange air of preparation—that freshness in the rooms and passages—a sense of wings flying down the well of the staircase, and beating the whole cubical atmosphere of the hall—these facts that had disturbed his solitude as far back as the previous December spoke to him now of the evil nature of ghosts. To minds far less fanciful than his, the creatures might have seemed the more terrible because they had arisen from renovation and progress, and not from decay. He visualised a kind of perverted fungus, growing more readily in sweet and dry

places of the earth. And when he saw it like this, he shivered in the surtout, and rattled at the knees.

He wanted very earnestly to stamp out the evil. Therefore one morning, when the moon was still shining, and the whole world of Chelsover lay asleep, Whessoe crept down to the vast, shutterless library, and began to write. . . . He wrote long and laboriously, and without a pause; he wrote until the room grew cold and a breeze sighed, and shadows stretched sleepily in the garden just before dawn. It was late, very late in the day for Whessoe, with his crumpled face losing all its lines in the soft half-light; his shrunken body merging into the dark pit of the chair; and the old man put away the pen. But on the next evening he rose before midnight, and finished his letter; and his buckled shoes went noiselessly up the lichened drive.

The gate coughed and wheezed on its rusty hinges; the arched avenue beyond rained countless spears of moonlight and shadow. Screwing up his eyes, he saw that this road into Chelsover was not deserted. A figure stood by the far-distant pillar-box, a postman, collecting letters in the light of a lamp.

Whessoe halloed at him, and began to run.

'Hi-yi-yi!' But his rather thin, high voice trailed off dismally into the silence. 'Hi-yi-yi!' he called. Perhaps it was difficult for people to see his spare figure amid the spears of moonlight and shadow.

'Ahoy-y-y!' shouted Whessoe again, but the postman did not hear. The fellow shouldered his bag, and bustled away; and the plum-coloured surtout and faded knee-breeches moved slowly in the direction of the pillar-box. There was no need to hurry now, there was no need at all. . . . But there had been no need to hurry at any time during the whole hard business of the letter-writing.

Although he waited many days, Whessoe received no answer; nobody answered the letter that he had written to the Society for Psychical Research, at immense pains, on two sheets of note-paper, craving help.

Near the end of September the equinoctial gales set in, and the dark, cavernous avenue rocked its high head, and buried its feet in a spatter of autumn leaves. And the passing residents of Chelsover stopped in their walk with a renewed wonder, lifted their eyes towards an open upper window into which the moon was shining, and muttered in their hearts: 'There's that Whessoe again.'

There's that strange Whessoe, as white as a sheet, crouching at the window while the winds cry Whessoe! The spirit is gone from the old man now. A terrible weariness is within him, left by long weeks of waiting for a letter that has not come; and anger, too deep to raise a murmur in the shrunken body, is there; and hope is near dying, and will be quite dead soon, a dead thing drifting in the wake of the Past when a few more nights have run, and Whessoe has spent his final hours of sitting in the library until the day has broken, peering over long shelves, poring over old books in the still moonshine, hunting for some record of a riddle that he is unable to solve. And always the weariness and the anger are nourished by a return of that tremendous solitude whose embracing arms seem stronger now because he can hear the ghosts' music again. Soaring, whirling, thumping, flying, the phantom tunes are crowding his nights with a fresh fury, while Whessoe sits in his room, ignored. Hell is summoning its powers to drive him away, yet all its energies are concentrated on the house. The entity of the whole place is being usurped, its blood is being sapped, the spirits of evil are taking possession, there will be no house of his in Chelsover soon. . . .

The leaves of the sycamore shiver against the moon. But the shadow in the old man's mind is deeper than the shadows of the leaves that twist, and twirl, and mould a myriad jests, the whole night long, upon the staring face.

ꕥ

Near the dawn of a day in late October, Whessoe found the book for which he had been searching. It was big, and heavy, and time had steeped it in a musty odour; and on its front and side, in golden lettering, these words were seen: *The Chelsover Chronicles.*

He opened it thoughtfully; peered into its pages; then, with an impish action, weighed it in his hand. A bulky book; a book that required much time for reading. Ho, ho! Utterly foolish to read it here, where at any moment the ghostly crowd might break in upon his studies! So he glided noiselessly up the staircase, with the great book tucked beneath his arm.

As soon as he had entered his bedroom, he pulled up a chair, and began to read. But the windows were closed, and the thick curtains were drawn; and the wind soothed him with its subdued thunders, so that after a time he could not keep from nodding. And because he had not found the information that he wanted, he crept into bed, and there fell asleep.

He awoke some hours later, tired and uneasy; all through his slumbers he had been haunted by the persistent knowledge that he must continue to read. He listened; and thought that he could hear shrill voices out on the old road to Chelsover—boys' whistling voices—and sometimes the clatter of cart wheels, beyond the heavy curtains. It occurred to him mildly that daylight was come. But the great book lay on a table at his bedside; he stretched out

an arm, and took up the heavy volume, resting it against his propped knees.

An hour passed, and Whessoe discovered the secret of Two Gates. The print was small, on a leaf stained yellow with age; nevertheless, he was able to read it easily with his tiny, staring eyes:

'. . . *Let us conclude this chapter in the Chronicles of Chelsover, in the history of the Environments and of the Approaches, with the name of one Sylvester Whessoe, Colonel of Artillery, who, on his retirement from the Thunders of the Battlefield, spent the remainder of his years in the seclusion of his Ancestral Home. Doubtless the event would have been of little interest to my readers—*'

He looked up suddenly, straining his ears. Voices were coming up the stairs—*their* voices, talking and laughing—Sylvester Whessoe read on:

'*—had not the aged Colonel died rather suddenly, though not very violently, by means of his own hand. A gentle dose of Chloroform, taken in the Silence of the Night. . . .*'

They were coming now. The ghosts—the ghosts—they were nearing the door. . . . He took the book under the bedclothes, pulled the sheets over his head, and still he read on—'. . . *taken in the Silence of the Night. . . .*'

ꕥ

The door opened, and a girl's voice leaped into the room.

'Oh, dear!' it cried, 'how dark it is! As dark as pitch!'

Footsteps hurried across the floor. Then the curtains

swished back, the blinds tore up, and the vast old room was flooded with the afternoon light. Her eyes glistened as she turned to the young man at her side.

'How brave of you to want to sleep here! Yes! This is our haunted room—the room where our poor ghost lives. I've never seen him, but so I am told.' She filled the place with laughter. 'The bed's too terribly comfy, they say.'

She shuddered a little comically as she approached it. 'Behold our famous bed!' She flung back the bedclothes, piling them up.

On the cold sheet lay a heavy book, thickly coated with dust that was disturbed but lightly where the sheets had brushed it; and when she saw it lying there, her laugh went, and her heart stopped, and she stood as white as a ghost.

Interlude

I WAS sitting alone in the coffee-room of the Marine Hotel, Shorehampton, eating my lunch, and counting up the days when summer should come again to enliven my bones; sometimes I stared through the window, at the empty parade and the wintry seas beyond; at other times, leaning back in my chair, I ran my eye over the grey walls, that were almost hidden in obscurity; and my meditations were disturbed by the entrance of a tall man, carrying a square box. Standing motionless in that dim light, he seemed, with his chalk-white, tropical clothing, like a ghost among tombs, rather than a customer seeking his choice from the many tables. Coughing raucously, a waiter drifted from the shadows, flicking the seats of the chairs as he passed; the stranger spoke to him courteously before striding towards the windows, depositing his big box on the carpet, and seating himself at a table next to mine.

I could see, now, that my companion had a face of extreme sunburn, flashing teeth, bright blue eyes, a very low collar, and long wrists; and when, without the least embarrassment, he addressed himself to me, I discovered that his frown was as impetuous as his smile.

'Well, well, well. You should not have come to Shorehampton,' I answered, 'if it affects you in that sad way. It is very stagnant. Why, when I was a boy, I used to stay here often, with my father, and I swear that nothing has changed since that far-off time. In those days they had the same carpets that they have now, the same rather dirty table-cloths, the same jug of water on the sideboard, the same dead smell about the hall. The same curtains, the same loose stair-rods, the same MacWhirters and Landseers. Even the same little waiter, by the cut of his clothes. Even this identical fire, that has taken all these years to burst into flame!'

'I know! I know! Such places are no better than ice-houses!' Whereupon, he told me a story of the Gaboon River. Then, as though he wanted to dash to pieces the impression that I had formed of him, he jumped up from his chair, and opened the window, so that the blasts came in, blowing the breadcrumbs off our plates, and sending a lively panic through the room.

'See what you have done to that fire,' I murmured; 'look at the weedy thing!'

But the man in the white clothes would not listen to me; he had lifted up the box; and I watched curiously while he stood it on the window-ledge, and opened it with a tiny key.

The box was resting on its side, and, as the lid dropped, it presented the interior to the distant shore. My eyes swept over the desolate beach, and fell at last on the green waves of the sea: a patch of light was floating there, as though a cloth of gold had risen to the surface. A few young boys had been playing by the edge of the sand, and now we could see them kicking off their boots, pulling down their stockings, and otherwise preparing themselves for a plunge into the sunny waters; their tiny figures,

scarcely larger than sandhoppers, were thrown into the wildest commotion, and their cries came up to us on the wind.

Knitting his brows, the stranger shut the box, and lifted it to the floor, on which it came to rest with a radiant and metallic clang; at the same instant, the light went from the waves, and I could hear the children shouting with voices that were no longer jubilant, but amazed and mournful.

'That was a very pretty experiment,' I said, looking thoughtfully at the box, from which years of travel had obliterated its owner's name. Hearing these words, the stranger seized his luggage, and bade me accompany him on a little expedition over the town.

As we passed through the empty crescents and terraces of Shorehampton, I had the greatest difficulty in keeping pace with his strides. He, like the stone or stucco fronts of the houses, was utterly silent; and he gave me no idea of our destination until, in the High Street, we stopped at Westaway and Gapp's, the leading linen-drapers. It was a spiritless place, that had not altered since I was a boy; somewhere along its thread of cramped departments swelled the tones of Mr Westaway, encouraging a customer with a new line in body-linen. We entered, and watched for some minutes the languid business that was being transacted there.

'Sign, please!' called a high-pitched voice.

At that moment the stranger opened his box, and the linen-draper's shop was filled with sunshine.

'Dear me!' exclaimed Mr Westaway.

His little eyes began to look about in bewildered fashion. Running to the door, he stared perplexedly into the heavens.

'This is a very extraordinary thing.'

Indeed, it was very extraordinary; for sunlight has often poured into a shop, but when has it ever poured out of a shop? Plunging through the corridors, Mr Westaway called loudly for his chief assistants; and before his voice had ceased to echo, the little man began to write out tickets at a great pace, extolling the excellence of his summer wares. Bathing-dresses were put up at an exorbitant rate. 'This Style, 19s11d.' 'Very Fashionable, 17s6d.'

By this time, many of the residents of Shorehampton were scanning the windows, or pushing their way through the narrow door; and as soon as they had entered, they began to mop their brows in prospect of the sea-bathing that was to come. The chairs were soon filled with impatient customers, women pointed, and shop-girls reached up their arms for selected articles.

Then, in the very midst of the buying and selling, when 'Sign, please!' was resounding throughout the linen-draper's, and Mr Westaway was coining money hand over fist, my friend shut up his box, and we went again upon our travels, he and I, stamping our feet, chafing our hands, and never halting until the bandstand rose before us on its stretch of ornamental grass, with the winds of the adjacent ocean playing beneath the gilded cupola. Two lovers sat in the outermost ring of seats. It was obvious that a sad quarrel had divided the young people; for their faces, each with its trembling lip and furrowed brow, were turned in opposite directions, and their hands lay idly in their laps.

Onto this dismal scene my friend opened his box, and the Shorehampton bandstand was flooded with sunshine.

The gay sight caught the notice of a passer-by, a short, stout man with muffled neck and puffy cheeks; tilting back his bowler hat, and gurgling exclamations of delight, he hurried away, for he happened to be the town trombonist. The news spread quickly to the bandmaster, and

from him to the other members of the Shorehampton band; and within a short space of time a great crowd had collected, in eager anticipation of such unseasonable music. Voices buzzed, people changed their seats for better positions, a number went up, two taps came from the conductor's stand; and there, with baton raised in the glow of the sunshine, and the winter seas pounding beyond, the bandmaster struck up a lively tune.

My attention was now drawn to the two lovers, who had joined hands, and were looking rapturously into each other's faces. 'See what you have done,' I murmured, smiling at my friend; but again he shut down the lid; and on our way from the riotous scene we could hear the music droop, the fiddle expire, the trumpet sink, as though the whole band were a bed of bright flowers drooping and dying. . . .

We found ourselves stumbling on shingle, with sea-spray stinging our cheeks. We found a boat, stranded, and here we sat, feeling the hush of the town behind us, watching the waves as they ran back into the sea.

'All things run back into the sea,' whispered my friend. 'The sea itself runs back into the sea.'

Whereupon he plunged his head into the box, and died of the sunstroke.

'And *I* come back to my Marine Hotel,' I thought, a trifle helplessly, some minutes later, surveying the dim tables of the coffee-room and the grey walls beyond. The water jug on the sideboard acknowledged a fitful spurt from the fire; but I was very glad that the strange man, before we left this mournful place, had never turned his box upon it.

The Spurs

I

SOME years ago I was idling through a strange part of the country, and on looking up, I saw a horseman, with a curved nose, and a small peaked beard, riding down the slope from the wood. He passed within a dozen feet of me, holding himself like a god; and as I lay there on the hillside grass I studied every feature of his lean, patrician face in the glow of the sunset that flooded it beneath the broad brim of his hat.

On reaching the strip of level ground at the foot of the slope, he rode on, until his horse came as near as it dared to the brink of the precipice over which we hung.

I continued to watch the cloaked and upright silhouette of the stranger, who appeared to be gazing into the depths; and everything was still, except for the breeched legs and the twinkling spurs, for they were shivering, as though through an ague; or twitching, as though through fear.

'It is really no business of mine,' I thought, about to spring to my feet. Just then the sun went down beyond the horizon of verdured, wandering hills; at the same moment, the rider pulled on his rein, swung round, spurred

his horse viciously up the slope, and threw me a look of anguish as he passed; and without a word I climbed after him into the wood, where the full light of the setting sun was still glowing.

I found him tethering his beast beneath the drooping boughs of the larches. Near him lay a low, timbered dwelling, supported on piles and fronted with a shadowy veranda. I heard a woman singing softly, and the gentle chink of china.

My horseman turned towards a flight of wooden steps. He appeared even taller than I had supposed—a kind of Quijote as straight as the stems of the larches, standing with his head flung back, and, as I fancied, waiting for me to approach him. From that moment he took the situation into his hands. He gave me the courtly bow that I had expected. The anguish on his face had gone; and with a sweep of his hat he invited me to ascend with him into his astonishing bungalow.

Standing in the open doorway of a room beyond the veranda, I heard and watched him striking matches and lighting his vividly shaded lamps and candles. One by one the stranger's treasures were revealed. Indicating the fine extent of his living-room (where size and silence were equally encouraged by the heavy, boldly patterned black and yellow rugs and carpet), my host invited me to sit where I would, and I chose a bow-shaped, tapestry-covered chair beside the long oak table that was nearly black with age.

Having welcomed me with such a flourish, he became preoccupied, to the verge of incivility. For more than a minute I watched him standing deep in thought before a painting of a mounted toreador that flashed from a dull red wall above a divan tossing with crimson, black, and yellow cushions. Turning abruptly from the bullfighter, he

made his way amongst the variously carved occasional tables, from one of which there rose a bronze, fantastic creature with a twisted tail; and finally he reached his grand piano, where brackets lighted up the score of a fandango by Albeniz.

I expected him to strike some disconnected chords in tune with his present mood; but instead of that he played and sang to a secret love, mockingly, vehemently, looking up at the ceiling:

'O Plácida Lola Dolores,
With your large dark eyes and your mouth purple-lipped!'

The strings were still vibrating when he left the room. Before they had quite ceased, I heard the woman's voice again, raised in a sudden laugh . . . and when my host returned, striking me afresh with his air of strange distinction, his dark face flashed as he invited me to dinner.

'You will dine with me.' I have never heard a more melodious voice than his. He fetched a bottle and glasses, and stood them on a little table. 'Meanwhile—to the appetite!'—and with a gesture he poured out a dark sherry.

We drew up our chairs. We sat near the open door, with the little table between us, and looked across the veranda into the wood, where the delicate pink of the sunset still lingered. A faint breeze ran through the larches, and I was content, for the trees were languid at the end of summer, and I was languid too.

I was content to let things drift towards me, or to see them slide away into the distance. My life had come to a halt in this strange room, in this comfortable chair. The horse was munching outside.

Presently the man beside me stirred.

'You will listen to my tale?' he asked; yet it was more than a question—it was a command.

II

'It is now many years I haven't been in Spain,' he began. 'During that time I have picked up richly the English language. I possess also the exquisite sensibility of the decadent aristocracy of Galicia.

'You may call me, if you like, Bizarro: Pedro Alonzo Calleja, the Marqués de Bizarro. In your language, bizarre —what does it mean? Eccentric; fantastic. Well, in the Spanish it means handsome and brave; and in the Basque—a beard.

'I was born at Pontevedra, in the north-west corner of Spain. Our windows overlooked on every side my father's sylvan property as far as the eye could reach. I grew restless. Professors came to the mansion, teaching me all they knew.

'One day I became a grenadier in the service of the King; and the down was scarcely sprouting on my lip when I was awarded the cordon of chevalier. I served in seven garrisons.

'Came now my father's death; and because of the dignity of my title, I said farewell to my uniform. Many men are very excited to serve under others, especially where there is a uniform concerned, for then the world can see how near they are to the supreme command; but Pedro Alonzo Calleja was never like this. I said also farewell to my mother, whom I left, in the extreme of affluence, under the care of my aunt Maria Isabella; and then, with laughter on my lips, but—such is the way of nature, that when we come to the point, we sometimes almost collapse—tears in my heart, I betook myself to Rio

de Janeiro, where the elegance and purity of my speech impressed themselves at once upon the business houses of that great metropolis. The wealth and reputation of my old Galician family were everywhere on the lips of the merchants. Many a partnership was I offered; I explained that I had no wish to absorb myself in so tiny a sphere. Very soon I had the chance to marry a dark Brazilian heiress—but what was that to me? I loved her not; I possessed a greater fortune of my own; the lady's birth was obscure; and the honour that I would have brought upon her must soon have ceased to afford me satisfaction.

'I plunged into the wildness of Brazil! I travelled north to distant Panama! In Nicaragua I busied myself with coffee and the cattle-rearing—for what is it that a one-time Señor Grenadier cannot do? I, who had served in seven garrisons! Let me tell you, señor,' he said, dropping his voice, 'of that little incident in Managua. I was wearing in those days the long black hair, the large beard—now cut small, as you see, and trimmed to a point—the great cape, enormous collar, and sometimes horn-rimmed spectacles for effect, the whole of me crowned with a wide-brimmed hat, all in the manner of Quevedo, that great sixteenth-century writer of whom Spain is so proud. On turning a corner of one of the streets of the capital—in the neighbourhood of the Palace—what did I see but three villainous Managuans, crouching in suspicious attitudes on the sun-swept Square? On beholding my tall and commanding figure, they threw up their hands, and fled; I rushed in their direction; and there is no doubt whatever that my action saved the life of the President. The matter was brought to his ears; and with tears in his eyes he pinned on my breast a medal for bravery, of the second class.

'Now let me tell you what happened next in my life, señor,' he proceeded, after a pause.

'I travelled south to Pernambuco, where I turned my varied talents to the sugar trade; and from Pernambuco I hurried north again, to Guatemala, on the same business. Then one day I sailed for Cuba, cradle of the sweet Havana!

'On the boat I met a Spanish noble named Perez. I cannot remember his rank. What does that matter? Is it not enough to say that I gave him my confidences? My rich Galician flavour captured his Andalusian heart! "Ah, tell me about my beloved Spain," he whispered. Since thirty years he hadn't seen her! I told him of Pontevedra, of my estates, and of my mother, the Marquese. When he heard of my successes with coffee, cattle, and sugar, he offered to take me into his tobacco business.

'The firm of Perez and Van Cuyp became Perez, Van Cuyp, and Calleja. Perez was a widower, and Van Cuyp was dead. Perez had adopted Van Cuyp's daughter, and very soon my delicately poised nature perceived the old man's dearest wish—that the object of his paternal solicitudes should marry a Calleja.

'Never do I let the grass grow under my feet. Plucking the strings of the Spanish guitar—a Panormo of the most exquisite tone—I sang to Grizelda lilting songs—songs of my own composing—"You are my Lady of Consolation!" "Grizelda, ere I wend my way!" "Grizelda, thou art plump and fair!" "Look into your heart, Grizelda!" —but even when she looked at the moon her Dutch orbs were without lustre. Why should one throw one's youth away, señor? How can I love a woman plump and fair? I preferred to spend my hours alone, at my window, overlooking the Florida Straits—wielding my pen; and many were the satires, histories, compositions of music,

and poems (amongst them my admired love-sequence, *To Grizelda*) that I committed to paper at that time. On reading them, Perez, who was a man of culture and experience, exclaimed: "To you, Marquis, I leave the expansion of our business!"

'We flourished. The Flor de Calleja became our longest cigar. . . . My picture is on the lid, you observe, the work of a Cuban painter. You must try one now, señor. Dinner is a long way off.'

We pinched the end of our cigars with reverence. The Marquis tossed the match on to the veranda.

'Expansion! That is what I really needed! Too long I had tarried in the same spot! Old Perez could see nothing beyond his island plantations, his desk, and his adopted daughter. One day I walked round to the office and spoke to him of my intention to return for a short time to Spain to plant a kiss on my mother's cheeks, and, after that, to open offices of the Calleja, Perez Company in Barcelona, Paris, London, St Petersburg. "Then you must visit my beautiful daughter," he said, "my beautiful widowed daughter who ran away to marry so foolishly in Andalusia." He gave me an address. A daughter in Andalusia? "I never mentioned her till now," he said. "She never writes to me. I never write to her. It is very sad." Even while old Perez was speaking, I saw that lovely Spanish province where the murmuring winds are forever shaking the fig-trees. With Grizelda Van Cuyp I closed my account. goodbye! goodbye!' Bizarro kissed his hand. 'On the next morning I set sail for Europe; for I must tell you that I have an eye for a picture, an ear for music, and a heart for romance.

Pedro Alonzo Calleja, the Marqués de Bizarro, paused. He seemed to be contemplating the end of a

period. 'What an ash!' he murmured, holding his Flor de Calleja in front of his eyes. 'A masterpiece!'

A slow breeze had begun to stir the larches. Bizarro's horse was munching with a sound equally restful; but from the depths of the bungalow I heard again the busy clatter of crockery subdued by distance, the sudden ring of a glass. . . .

The Marquis sighed, and said in a serious voice:

'The pictures and the music that welcomed me at Pontevedra were mournful to the extreme, for it was broken to me by my aunt's faint words that my mother had flown to heaven. Spring was now ablaze in Pontevedra, and our family chapel was buried in green; deeper than the chapel my spirits also were entombed; and in our spacious house I could never find them again.

'My aged aunt, croaking in her black mantilla, conducted me, as though for the first time I was seeing them in my busy life, through our majestic rooms hung with faded tapestries.

'You will have observed, señor, that I am a man who does not like to be mournful. I dressed myself in my grenadier's uniform, but what a figure I struck in the glass, what a figure! In the morning, with my cloak flowing from my shoulders, I bade my aunt farewell, and started south across our dreamy, vigorous Spain for Andalusia. I would call on my partner's daughter, pay my respects to her, and entrance her with my South American travels. I would tell her of our plans to open offices in Barcelona, Paris, London, St Petersburg. I would give her a box of my Flor de Callejas, and after that. . . . But in the end I never reached the village where old Perez' daughter lived.

'I stopped short of it by a matter of twenty miles. I climbed into a tiny town shadowed by the strong Andalusian sunlight. Singing came from the church at the

top of the hill. Señor, I entered. I sat near the open door and sang to the music.

'People took no notice of me. Would you believe it? I might have been one of themselves! Presently I saw four figures standing with their books in their hands near the altar rails. A glance was sufficient to show me that they were not humble persons. The sun was playing on the veiled hair and shoulders of the younger woman, who was standing between her large female companion and the shorter of the two elderly men on her left. Whether my voice had reached her, who can say? She turned her head, and looked across the church, and our eyes met.

'Let me tell you that it is not necessary to see a woman's eyes, to know that they are looking at you: such attention is observed in the set of the head, in the stillness of a hand. Across the throbbing of the church I felt her lashes against mine.

'The singing came to an end, and the young woman returned her book to her duenna. For a few moments I gazed at the narrow, pointed windows aflame with red, blue, and gold; then, scarcely able to contain my rapture, I hurried out into the sun.

"Would you tell me," I inquired of an old fellow standing by the entrance, "who are those four gentlefolk worshipping near the altar rails?"

"Those, señor," he replied, "are the Lord of Florinda, Pedro Alonzo del Ronzuelos, the famous warrior, with his daughter Plácida and his son-in-law Gaspar da Sousa, a Portuguese. The other lady is the señora's duenna, as no doubt you have guessed. They come here once a year, on Ronzuelos' birthday, and the Mayor himself gives up his seats for them!"

"And on other days?"

"They worship in the private chapel of the Castle, señor."

'While we were talking, the service came to an end, and the music wafted the object of my tender interest into the sunshine. As she was about to pass me, she hesitated, bowed in confusion, and looked away; and again let me tell you, it is at such moments, when beauty is withdrawn ere it has yet been seen, that the full marvel of it is to be imagined and accepted with complete confidence. She was beautiful; and as soon as I beheld the ugly, dull-witted, stunted Portuguese—he scarcely reached to my shoulder!—assisting with his arm the slow but upright warrior walking at her side, I knew that she was mine. Within the hour I discovered the names of my angel—they were Plácida Lola Dolores.'

We helped ourselves to sherry.

'I now began to rent a sunny room looking on to a patio. Señá Valdemoro, the proprietress, was able to tell me many things. From her I learnt that my Plácida was in the habit of attending early mass in the family chapel, sometimes alone, and at other times accompanied by her duenna, Donna Eulalia de Trastamara, an impoverished gentlewoman of ancient lineage. I obtained also from Señá Valdemoro further gossiping, for you will understand that my careful and cultured speeches were well suited to encourage this natural occupation of a thin woman with cracked lips. Learn, then, that two years previous to my entering the Andalusian scene the Lord of Florinda had sunk into poverty. Not only was he at his wits' end to keep his daughter, his Castle, and his lily gardens together, but he was in debt also, even to the extent of owing a little money to Donna Eulalia de Trastamara. It is true that he and his daughter's duenna were of almost equal birth, and that this final levelling to an almost equal penury brought

them still closer together, thus eliminating all personal embarrassment arising from the financial transaction; but when my landlady expressed surprise that the lonely widower had not offered her also his hand and heart, I pointed out that a true aristocrat would never do such a thing without offering money into the bargain; in addition to which, are not two empty stomachs, thus legally joined, more painful than one?

'In this black atmosphere sank my poor Plácida. What would have happened if Gaspar da Sousa had not inflicted himself upon these humdrum lives, who can tell? His riches, pressed from Portuguese grapes, were immense. His desire, truly commendable, was to establish himself within the bosom of the Spanish aristocracy. For the sake of the old man's honour, he laid his hand and heart at Plácida's feet; Pedro Alonzo del Ronzuelos, who loved his daughter as dearly as she loved him, was as overjoyed as Plácida herself at saving the family shield; and for my own part, I saw very clearly, in the powerful sunlight of Señá Valdemoro's patio, that there was no need to worry my head about a Portuguese interloper whose father-in-law was everything to him and his wife less than the dust.'

My host broke his cigar ash delicately into a brass bowl.

'Not many days I had to wait,' he continued, staring into the deepening shadows of the larch wood, 'before I spied her entering the chapel alone. I took up my position near the door; and when she emerged at last in all her wondrous beauty, and passed me by, with face averted, I knew that she dared not trust herself within reach of my arms. She was there again on the following day; and this time she came up to me, and laid her hand on my arm. "My friend," she whispered, "you mustn't come here." It was as though she had said: "I love you!" Forthwith, in

order that she might end her scruples in coming to me for protection, I began to pursue my plans with the subtlety that had attended all my dealings in wool, sugar, cattle rearing, coffee, and tobacco.

'My landlady had a little dog named Cabanaquinta. His delight was in snapping at people's heels; and to the end that I might employ him with dignity in this capacity I trained him with a little whip, and threw him titbits as an apology. After some days, instead of wishing to devour my heels, he took to licking them; and in due course, having spied out the land, I hid myself in a thicket at some distance from the chapel. Out came my sweet Plácida, with her duenna by her side; out rushed Cabanaquinta from the thicket. "To heel! To heel!" I thundered. Barking viciously, he gathered speed . . . and the duenna gave a scream. Señor, it was the sound of my life! I bounded forward to the rescue! I showered them with remorse! The ladies flowed with gratitude! I told them my name and title. They were enchanted!

'As I had fully expected, on the next morning Plácida drew me to one side.

' "Since you are so persistent," she whispered, putting her face as near to mine as she dared, and concealing her eyes with her long black lashes, "come to me this afternoon, in the silence. Search for me in the pine wood, amongst the statues." A tryst.

'It was clear to me that my lovely romance was proceeding apace.'

The Marquis blew his great curved nose, emitting a fine, trumpeting sound.

'I knew full well,' he said, 'the pinewood, rising beyond the Castle gardens. Chance had already drawn me into its silence, where a bygone sculptor of wild genius had built his imaginations amidst the towering stems. Here

tiptoed with extended nostrils sculptured lions; marble fauns endeavoured to spring away; satyrs and centaurs leered and postured, curving their heavy tails; and tall, white horses flashed at me on every hand from the purple shadows.

' "Decadence! I love the word, all shining with purple and gold!" That is what Verlaine said, but even he could not have loved it as strongly as a Calleja. I found my Plácida sitting on a horse in a gold and purple forest. What better place could I have wished for? I saw her looking down at me—my mocking, my beautiful one! Except for her dancing eyes, she was as still as the sculptured steed itself. I reached up my arms. And behold—the horse was real! She dug her heels into its flank; and with a flurry and a roll of pealing laughter the equestrian statue fled between the pines. Women are so elemental!

'That was the first time I had seen her beautiful horse. I saw it again, on the following day, cropping grass near the chapel. Plácida was nowhere in sight. How heavy the morning seemed! Then Eulalia de Trastamara waddled up to me, and pushed a little note into my hand. To open it was but the work of a moment. "Persistent friend! Meet me in the Castle gardens, this afternoon, by the lily ponds, and destroy this note as soon as you have kissed it." "I do so now!" I exclaimed, tearing it into a thousand pieces, and laughing into Eulalia's pleasant eyes.

'So it happened that I was there, at our second tryst, in a garden of vermilion roses, lily ponds, massed violets, and shimmering trees. . . .'

'And then, Marquis?' I ventured, after a time.

'The world was hardly big enough for us! No longer we were content with the Castle grounds; but, walking, talking, riding, my dear and I went farther and farther afield in Andalusia. She had now on most occasions her

white horse. Often Plácida would sit beside me on the bank, and then it was that she began to learn of the variety of my conversation. I spoke to her of sugar and wool. I disclosed to her my mastery of the whole range of tobaccos. I revealed to her the splendour of my poems, so rich in their Galician flavour, and I sang her a song on the spur of the moment:

'O Plácida Lola Dolores,
With your large dark eyes and your mouth purple-lipped!'

'We had our adventures; we had our dangers, too, though she realised it not. One day, near sunset, a bandit confronted us, a rough, impudent fellow, who went so far as to demand our money and to threaten our lives. Our horse, cropping the dark grass near us, took affright, and bounded away. Seizing Plácida by the arm, I sped after the fine, spirited beast; and the robber, who had found no more than the courage to lift his hand, fled.

'Consider my amazement when Plácida turned on me with blazing eyes!

' "Why did you not go up to him—fight him?"

' "He had no one to protect besides himself," I explained to her gently. "I had two people; and in protecting one, I protected the other. Do you not see, beloved?" She fell very pensive at these words.

'I seized with both hands the halcyon days! One morning I found her waiting for me with two white horses. How my heart leapt when I beheld her gift! I need not tell you, señor, that I accepted it without hesitation, for Callejas never embarrass ladies of delicate feelings. I sprang at once on to the creature; and a moment later I observed how gratefully my generous nature had been

received—for my beloved girl was putting up her face to be kissed.

'Thus there began for us days without number, days without end, when, flying together horse to horse, we felt that all the miles behind us, once travelled, were struck from the earth. "I love you, I love you, Plácida!" "For how long, Alonzo?" "Forever!" . . . To think of those days,' the Marquis told me, holding in front of his eyes the glowing Flor de Calleja, 'is to think of a thousand years; to speak of them is but to murmur a few broken words between puffs of a Cuban cigar.'

He filled our glasses. I heard the measured sound of Bizarro's horse at its feed. Presently my host stretched out his legs, and continued:

'I gave yet another example of my care for Plácida one endless, soundless day, when, starting out of the bushes close at hand, two rough fellows accosted us with a show of violence. My timid horse trembled beneath me as though he would panic; and, fearing that Plácida's might do the same, I seized the creature's bridle, and we fled from the scene.

'As soon as we were free of danger we slid from our horses; and when we were turning to sit on the wayside bank my sweetheart stood in front of me and stared into my eyes.

' "Would you have them rob us of our future?" I demanded. "This time there were two of them!"

' "Two cowards *are* sometimes weaker than one," said Plácida, dropping her eyes.

'I knew what she meant by that. It is true, señor—two cowardly fellows are weaker than one; for if one panics, then the other will panic too, and a double panic is disastrous. But—as I pointed out to her—although on that first occasion there was indeed only one bandit to take

care of himself, while I had two persons to protect, and one horse, on this present occasion I had not only two persons to look after, but two horses instead of one, and a double panic amongst the horses might have proved the death of us. To this she remained silent, and I am not surprised, for the arithmetic of bravery was never in her line. Throughout Brazil, many a businessman far less intelligent than Plácida had been impressed by the clear thinking of a Calleja.'

Bizarro apologized. 'I have troubled to recount all this because the incident caused me to be invited to the Castle.'

'You went to the Castle!' I exclaimed.

'Let me tell you how it happened. On the following morning, who should come tapping at my door but Eulalia de Trastamara, bearing a note from Plácida. Bidding the lady be seated, I tore open the letter, and was enchanted to observe the tenderness of its message. Reading between those precious lines, I discovered how shaken a woman can be by rough passages; and I respected her desire to be left alone for a few days in order that she might restore her placidity.

'In my happiness I turned to Eulalia. Taking her hand, I announced that the Callejas and the Trastamaras were kinsfolk—a pleasant fiction. Her face grew red and moist! She was carried away! She was in an ecstasy! In short, I could not have paid her a greater compliment.'

'And as a result you went to the Castle! What madness!'

'No, I did *not* go to the Castle. How could I, when there was Plácida's safety to think of? Putting my head in the lion's mouth . . . well, it was a thing that I wanted to do . . . but for Plácida's sake! . . . But you are right, señor, some people are very vain. The lady could not keep her news to herself. I ought to have known it, who knows so

much of women. I wrote to del Ronzuelos, sending him some subtle excuse, begging his acceptance also of a box of my famous cigars; and so the nearest that I ever came to the Castle was in the reading and the handling of his letter, a beautiful piece of penmanship, a graciously flowing hand on the finest of paper, worthy of a Spanish grandee. Greatly did I wish that I could have talked and laughed with that great warrior of lean height, whose chest could have displayed to the utmost advantage all his medals had he so desired it; but, as it is with me, so it would have been with him—one does not parade these things in front of every human eye.'

The Marquis pulled himself out of his dream.

'It was over a week,' he resumed, in a solemn voice, 'before I saw again my sweetheart looking down at me from her horse. "Heaven be praised," I thought, "the upheaval is forgotten! All is serene!" But when she spoke, I hardly knew her for the same girl. After some conversation that might have passed between strangers, she became very talkative; ah, but talkative in a very strange manner!

' "We've got to come to the point!" That was how she began, with a rush of words. We must come down to earth!

' "Why are you telling me this?" I cried.

'For answer, she swept her arm over the whole of Spain.

' "One day my father will pursue you. It is bound to come! Yes, Alonzo, you will be the one to suffer, not I! Gaspar will pursue you! Pursuit! From two quarters! How would you deal with that?"

' "I would stand at bay!" I cried, delighted.

' "Would you?" she said. "You would stand at bay?"

' "I love you, Plácida!"

' "You love me," she answered, looking down at me from the height of her horse, "but for how long, Alonzo, how long? Love can die, and I want to keep it forever; and how can I do that, unless I die with you?"

'At first I misunderstood her. Did she wish to perish at her father's hands? No, she said, her father loved the honour of his race more than he loved her. Why would he want to kill her? Then she told me that what she meant was suicide—a love pact!' He finished his sherry at a gulp.

'Bah! Women are so practical!

'I protested against her proposal at once,' he said indignantly. 'I told her how much sweeter it was to live than to die. My lady told me that I was very worldly. I—worldly! Why, I had not even asked her the method by which we should leave the world!

' "What is there wrong with this?" I asked, sweeping my arm over the whole of Spain, as she had done. She smiled at me. I felt a sudden need for action. Leaping on to my horse, I began to trot along beside her, on her own level.

'She was silent. "Plácida," I said. "Plácida!"

' "O my dear!" she cried, "my sweetest love!" and I thought she was about to burst into tears. "I have been rough with you, rough! But we never can get any further, never—until we die!"

'That night I considered deeply the problem while gazing into Señá Valdemoro's moonlit patio. Plácida was many millions of years younger than moonlight; so was I, and in that respect I stood on an equal with her; but, let me tell you, señor, a man is always wiser than a woman.

'On the next day we rode far into the country. Everything was quiet beneath the sun. A soft breeze hung in the air, as though waiting for something: one expected to see its shadow on the ground. Suddenly I lifted my

hand: the tones of a guitar were coming down to us where we had paused beside the Guadalquivir.

'We went towards the music and there we found a *venta*—an inn, señor—a small house as white as a snowdrop. Its red tiles were clustered with mignonette, and a honeysuckle clung between the fan-shaped windows. Also there were iron rings fixed to the walls, by which we could tie up our horses.

'On beholding this convenient place I bade my love dismount, and we walked to a quiet part of the garden beside the inn, where we sat on rickety chairs at a table and drank manzanilla. Ah, how it all comes back to me! Still I can hear the strings being plucked by fingers out of sight, the lilting voice, the clapped hands beating the time, the gusts of girls' laughter! I lifted my head and sang my beautiful song, driving all else from my ears:

' *"O Plácida Lola Dolores. . . !"*

'Seizing her hands, I showered them with kisses. Then after a time I put them down on the table, and said in a very heartfelt manner: "I am greatly relieved that you have changed your mind—how can we ever leave this!" and I swept my arm over the scene.

"I have not changed it," she said immediately in a low voice. "We die together."

'"How?" I snapped.

"We ride to our death," she said, looking towards our beasts.

'After that we led our horses away and we went and sat by the rushes. I said nothing to Plácida. Always, to the very end, she had no feeling for business. It would have been useless for me to try to make her understand that as a

cavallero, dedicated to her protection, and as a business-man, who had no thought for any undertaking that was not useful, I had two reasons for rejecting her impossible suggestion.

'During these musings I fixed my eyes on the river flowing sluggishly to its destined bourne. I could still hear at moments the distant guitar, and presently my dear girl began to tell me what she intended to do—my rich imagination had already foreseen it—she intended that we should reach some precipitous place, mount our horses, and cast ourselves into eternity.

'How quickly one changes one's mind, señor! This, let me tell you, is especially the case when one wears a cloak, a great hat, a trimmed beard, and carries oneself with an air, for such things enable one to step from grave to gay, and vice versa, at a moment's notice, and with the proper grace. Many an honoured deed has through such means been recorded in the annals of the Callejas! It has needed but the twitch of a cloak, the setting of the foot in the right direction—and behold, another illustrious name that will live forever! As soon as Plácida, by her earnest demeanour, had convinced me that she intended to carry out her side of the bargain, the rhythm of the wild guitar happened to blow towards me, and I found no difficulty in putting words to it at once: "Yes! let us mount our steeds! Yes! let us hurtle on! Yes! Let us die!" I was no longer a cavalier for Plácida nor a man of business, but an accomplice—an accomplice in the cause of love himself!'

Here the Marquis rolled the sherry round his tongue, holding the antique, delicate glass against the light during the proceeding, and at the same time I caught the smell of cooking on the air, the merest whiff. While I was still trying to put a name to it my host began to tell me the particulars of what I supposed would be the final passage of his tale.

'For days I thought of nothing but our great plan. It was in my dreams when I slept. I watched the ground rushing up to me as I dropped, I felt the wind in my mouth, and, thinking I was being pulled down by the horse, I wanted to detach myself from his back! Yes, señor, I could hear nothing, for everything was too loud, yet I saw through Plácida's eyes. Pursuit! Pursuit! Yet how one likes to linger on the very verge of immortality! Few were the days of respite when I rode again in the company of my beloved. The livelong hours were gone. With each cigar I felt the approaching end.

'How fearless, how cruel, is a woman in love! It is then that she approximates the magnitude of a man! One day I asked her: "Should we not think of the horses?"—it was my desire to make certain that she had forgotten nothing, you understand. She answered: "It will be over so soon. And, señor, she *had* forgotten nothing! The very precipice from which we were to cast ourselves—even that she had found in good time . . . yet I like to think of it as somewhere come upon by chance—an adventitious climb one early dawn to some high place above the mists. We stood outside a little grove of mountain trees, I remember, and looked ahead into the sky beyond the brink of the precipice. How the scenes of life come back to us, at such moments! Pernambuco—Nicaragua—sugar, tobacco, wool, coffee. . . . Ah, well: "Tomorrow," as your Milton says, "Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new!" That was the attitude I struck as I flourished the cloak about my shoulder.

'We took our horses from their feed, and mounted them. The animals stood side by side. We leant from our saddles, and kissed. Oh, but every moment was too long for us! I tweaked my cloak again and in the end I let her go. She hurtled to destruction, and I was left behind.

'Bah! Women are so theatrical!'
He flicked his ash on to the floor.

III

I turned in my chair and looked at him and then I looked down the bright length of the room. The utter silence of the bungalow overwhelmed me as though with a prolonged shout; and in the large and awesome stillness—held, as it were, in its place by the gorgeously-glowing objects that it contained—Bizarro's quiet, prosaic words, when he spoke again, came as a true relief: they absolved me from the task of my trying to think of something 'hurt' to say to him, something to add to the 'But, Marquis—' that I vaguely remembered uttering as a singularly feeble protest.

'I rode off at once from the scene of the pact. I stabled the horse, and sat at home for the rest of the day, reading, writing, cutting the leaves of books. In the morning came Donna Eulalia de Trastamara, looking very bedraggled and with eyes red from weeping. I told her gently that such tragedies must often be expected where love pacts are concerned . . . that at the crucial moment blood often congeals . . . but she heard me not. She fell to weeping bitterly but in silence. I patted her hands as they lay on my shoulders, then bid her depart. As she went, she handed me a parcel. In it I found two spurs.

As Bizarro paused, I noticed that the moon had risen over the larch wood, for the place was full of shadows instead of the earlier shade.

'There was a letter too—a letter,' he said dispassionately; and he began to quote it word for word. ' "If you come with me, I shall know it all the time we are

falling, and my last moments on earth will be triumphantly happy; and if you fail me at the very brink—as I think it is in your nature to do, either for the sake of prudence, or for the good name of your family, or for the sake of your business undertakings—then my unhappiness will be shortlived; for without you in another world, how could I go on living?

' "Should you fail me through *cowardice*, then, since pity is akin to love, I would love your cowardice. I have gone, and you are reading this. I have sent you two spurs. One day, perhaps, you will know what to do with them. You will ride on—ride on—ride on—you who have served in seven garrisons.

' "Plácida." '

Bizarro was lying back in his chair with his legs extended, looking down at his feet from which he had not removed the spurs; and before he spoke again I listened to the woman's low-pitched singing voice that for some time past had been coming to me on that penetrating and puzzling odour of cooking.

'Bacon and fried bananas,' Bizarro murmured, wrinkling his nose.

That was it! A Spanish dish that I had not tasted for years. . . .

'It is tragic,' said Bizarro, 'when one has to flee one's country.'

'So you *did* feel that?'

He shot me a glance from the corner of his eye.

'What else could I do, when Plácida had gone? I went to Pontevedra, the town where I was born. I found my aunt mooning through the galleries; and although she looked very old, enough to drive one away, yet I knew that if I stopped in my native country for the rest of my life I would return to the mansion and find her older; and

when I shook out my uniform I knew that one day I would try to put it on. The tragedy of that humiliation—imagine it!—the humiliation of knowing that a scion of an ancient Galician family had felt the urge to quit his native shores because he was, as you say, "at a loose end!"

'You could have gone to Brazil.'

Bizarro rejected the thought. 'I would have had to call on Van Cuyp's daughter first, and I had no wish to do a thing like that. It is impossible for me to explain to you, señor, all the—the shades of feeling and circumstance that brought me here at last to your northern clime. Fifteen, twenty years I have lived in this bungalow, perhaps longer. A young woman from the village attends to me daily, just as her mother did before her. She sweeps my floors and cooks my meals and polishes my brass. It is pleasant down there in the village, and I often wonder what has made me come up here to live amongst the larches.'

'Perhaps, Bizarro, it was because of the adjacent precipice,' I murmured, just loud enough for him to hear. 'Tomorrow to fresh woods. . . .'

'You cannot think that I was wrong, señor? She wanted to die!'

'Since you ask me,' I said, 'I am bound to admit that what you did was rather—rather reprehensible.'

He jumped to his feet. He was hurt to the quick! He stormed, and strode about. Going up to the divan, he stood and faced the glowing picture of the toreador on the wall, and told me that he had no words for me.

'Really, Marquis, you forget that you are my host.'

'I forget nothing! I forgive nothing!' He whipped round. 'Allow me to ask you—who showed the greater love?' His eyes fluttered ceaselessly over the room.

'Surely it's hardly necessary—' I said softly.

'Plácida wanted to drag me to death while her love

lasted!' His every word was aflame with a fearful indignation. 'She revealed to me the shortness, the shallowness of her love!' Fool! (I thought) you are trying to build up a case for yourself! Leave it alone, Bizarro! Much good it will do you!

'Would not Plácida be very old if she were here now, señor? Spanish women age very quickly. Yet I am still nursing in my heart those summer days when a soft wind was forever shaking the fig-trees! With the most perfect care I have bred from the horse that she gave me then the horse that you now see here! She should be pleased with that! Such care! Such love! Such everlasting—'

'Cowardice!'

I spun round in my chair at the intense, low-pitched voice, and at the same moment I heard Bizarro catch his breath on the edge of a word. At the far end of the room, beyond the piano, but wholly visible, a woman was standing. Her arms hung rigid at her sides, and her hands were clenched. Large and young, she looked with scorn beneath her thick, dark brows at Bizarro, while the strong light added its own great stillness to her full-blown dignity and to the bronze, fantastic creature with a twisted tail that rose from the little table beside her.

I remember my astonishment at seeing her in the room: she spoilt the artistic plan; but whether I should call her presence near the end of Bizarro's love-story right or wrong appeared to me a matter of small concern when compared with my sudden realisation that everything had now been taken happily out of my hands; there was no further need for me to pass judgment on my host.

He had turned to face her at once. Now at last Bizarro was standing at bay! Yet he shrank before the black depths of her eyes. I think she wanted to see him put up a fight—to see him try to brazen things out in front

of me with at least a show of bravery. On other occasions, no doubt, she had allowed him to get away with it; but tonight he replied with anger—and Bizarro's anger was very weak: it was scarcely more than self-pity.

'This injustice!' he cried, glaring across the room. His deep, melodious voice had risen to a querulous shout.

He never could escape from the relentless gaze of her eyes, from her low and contemptuous voice.

' "Plácida would be very old if she lived today," you said—but still you love her? How can you tell me a silly thing like that? You never saw her heart! I doubt if you ever saw her face, nor can remember it now! It was yourself you saw!'

Yet it was by her silences that she cowed him mostly. They forced him into silence that he hardly knew how to break. He strode to the piano, the spurs flashing at his heels. 'Ojala,' he sighed in a voice of infinite regret as he bent over the keys; 'oh, Plácida Lola Dolores . . .' but I failed to catch any beauty in the song, nor tragedy; only melodrama.

'Bah!' he exclaimed, springing to his feet, and turning away from the piano as though forever, 'but for these spurs I might have forgotten all about her!'

The young woman intercepted him at every turn. She was indeed quite relentless. 'I hate you! I despise and hate you!' The soft, rich passion of her voice, subtly edged between the white stretch of teeth, is as vigorous to me now as it was when I stood by, all those years ago, watching the final moments that were too few and had come too suddenly to be called a 'situation' in Bizarro's life. 'I despise, and hate, and pity you too!' Pity! Pity for a Calleja!

'*Bruja!*'

'I hate the sight of you, the sound of you, the thought of you, the stink of your cigars!'

'*Bruja! Bruja!*'

She was indeed a hell-cat, a furious woman. She had put her hand into the pocket of her overall—a very vivid green garment that went admirably with her black hair, I remember—and, transferring some of the tiny objects that it contained from one hand to the other, she began to pelt them at him, and I saw they were cigar-stumps.

'*Maldito sea! Caspita! Caspita!*'

'The stink of your endless cigars!'

'*Caspita! Bruja!—bruja! bruja!—bruja!*'

I remember the expression on his face as he ran towards the piano and with both hands crashed out a giant discord as though he would leave forever in that room the signature of his finished life. When he turned, she continued to pelt him with the pitiful cigar-stumps. One of them struck him on the nose. Another lodged in his beard. For a moment he stood facing us, drawn up to his great height, with his back to the open door that led to the ground.

'Puf!'

In a moment he was gone.

'Let him go! Let him go! Let him plunge to his doom!' And, God forgive me, I obeyed her. Although I had rushed forward I made no further effort to stop him. I watched him running down the steps, to the spot where his horse was tethered. . . .

While I stood staring at the man and his beast, a soft voice startled my ear. 'Will you let me pass, sir, please?' I stood aside quickly; and then I saw the miracle happen. She was running down the bungalow steps; and within a few seconds, dappled with moonlight, she had sprung like

a panther on to the back of the horse, into whose flanks Bizarro was already digging his spurs.

'What? What?'

I was too late. Though I jumped the full depth of the steps, I was too late. The horse had swept out of the wood, and was now bounding down the slope; and I saw it in the open moonlight gathering up its four hoofs before striking the turf on the verge of the precipice with one thunderous thump, leaving silence behind it—silence, and a vibration of the earth that I shall feel forever.

I returned to the bungalow because I was hungry and because it seemed to me the only place in which I could wait for the morning. I put out most of the lamps, leaving an afterglow on the black and yellow rugs and cushions, the burning picture of the Toreador, and all the other parading colours by which the melodrama had been flooded. The discord that Bizarro had struck—still floating in my head, if not in the room itself—was now a harmony from which all the discordant notes had ebbed; and under these two influences of softened colour and sound I began to examine the question of whether the Marquis had gone to his death on account of love, duty, bravado, cowardice, or fear?

One of these forces I struck from my list at once, neither did I suppose that Bizarro had suffered from a sense of duty; I was inclined to the thought that cowardice had been crowded out by fear and bravado, and even these, I decided, had been extinguished by anger; anger born of regret for his wasted life; anger brought to a head by the young woman who had proved to be so essential a part of Bizarro's destiny. She had taken over from Plácida; yet I did not think that she had ever made her presence

known to him—her presence on the horse, riding to her death behind the man whom she despised and loved. But who am I to penetrate the motives of a woman?

A more solid subject for thought was the fact that I had found myself in the unexpected possession of a bungalow; and even this was becoming every moment more unsubstantial because of the dimmed light and the fading aroma of bacon and fried bananas that once upon a time had been so pungent and disturbing. She had removed the frying-pan in her forethought, never thinking of me. What did it matter? Bizarro's chair, looking out across the veranda, was very comfortable; and I stayed there, unmoving, influenced deeply by the larches, for the wood was languid at the end of summer, and I was languid too.

Death's Door

AT three o'clock in the morning, a young man stood thumping at Death's Door. It had been a long climb up the hill; and at the summit he found the door closed against him.

'How stupid this is!' he cried.

But nobody answered. Very earnestly he wanted to die. For weeks he had been praying for deliverance—deliverance from some heavy trouble whose details he had forgotten during his long climb. Walking back to the edge of that small plateau which surrounded the House of the Dead, the young man tried to jog his memory by peering down through the thickly-clouded distance that separated him from the foot of the hill. And he discovered that if he stared intensely enough in any downward direction, he could see the chequered tracts of fields, the glinting course of rivers, the brown and green clusters of wood and coppice, and the vaster, variegated masses of the towns. But the clouds soon gathered again over these several glimpses; and certainly the shapes and colours had been too obscure to disperse the clouds in his brain. It was some trouble connected with an event of the future—he felt positive of that—the unbearable torture of suspense—rather than any immediate bodily ailment, or even the duller

progress of an incurable disease. With the exception of a slight irregularity in his breathing he felt curiously at rest in heart and limb. He turned back, and took up his old stand in front of the door. When would they open it?

'Why don't you open!' he shouted, and hammered again.

The door now claimed his attentions by its strange, enigmatical appearance. In essentials it was exactly as he had expected to find it—immeasurably large, and faultlessly compounded of matter and mind. What puzzled him was something that he could feel in its moral attitude, rather than something that he could see in its material state: the impression, powerfully conveyed to him, that it appeared both eager and reluctant to admit him yet. It was at once tender and cruel. It seemed to be expecting him, and in the same moment hinted that he had come too soon. He felt that he was a truant, that he ought to have stayed at home. The thought made him shudder; and again he became conscious of his unnameable trouble pressing upwards through the heavy clouds that hung between him and earth.

Brushing the lank hair from his forehead, he tried to collect his vague and jumbled thoughts. With bent brows, and muttering lips, he set himself questions concerning this door. Its size and colour; its thickness and weight; the ease or difficulty with which it might be swung on its awful hinges; whether it would shut in silence, or startle him with a clang. And as soon as the list was completed, he saw how foolishly he had been wasting his time. Surely the whole dread fabric was but a breath! It was then that he remembered the loud reverberations of the knocker, pounding and starting through the House of the Dead. . . .

True: the knocker itself was no less disconcerting. It, at any rate, had been real. He had held it in his fingers—and the hot feverish thing had deafened him with its

summons to open . . . to open that intangible door! Deeply troubled, the young man lifted and dropped his hands. Was it possible ever to answer these questions?

'Alas!' he cried, 'am I to get no farther than the knocker of Death?'

When the echoes of his voice had subsided, he raised an arm, and sent a great peal thumping upon the door.

The last clap of the knocker rolled and was tossed for many moments among the niches and halls and sarcophagi of the House of the Dead. The young man listened earnestly until the utmost tremor had died; then he became aware, with heightened consciousness, of the great building that stood before him. Yet he did not dare to lift his eyes beyond the knocker of the charnel-house. Instead, he let them wander curiously over the landscape: surely there must be some other hill, some other foothold besides that of the bleak plateau on which he was standing? But he could see none—only the grey twilight, hanging back, never consummating the dawn; and everywhere those banked and ballooning clouds, as stagnant as the core of the universe, as grotesque as a dream.

Shuffling his feet heavily towards the hill-brow, the young man fancied that there was something which he wanted to remember—it was very elusive—something that he had seen or heard and had not comprehended, somewhere very near him, and at some indefinite period; the thought came to him suddenly that it was related to the moment when he had beheld that utter stagnation of the clouds. Therefore, though it had been his intention to search again for the root of his heart's trouble, this time he did not peer down into the depths. Turning his face to the sky, he hunted earnestly for the thing that was eluding him; then, sifting it at last from the great hush above his head, he realised that the monotonous sound had never

been entirely absent from his subconscious mind—the monotonous thrum of a high wind.

Here was a problem that filled him with the deepest curiosity; and with straining ears, and restless eyes, he sought to reconcile the monstrous vigour of the wind and the rigid pageant of the clouds. The solution that presented itself at last—at the moment when he had begun to decide that any solution was impossible—appeared to him very convincing and very complete. The wind was blowing in from every quarter of the compass; it was radiating towards every surface-point from the centre of a vast cosmothetical sphere. Examining this theory during aimless wanderings between the hill-brow and the charnel-house, he saw how easily these clouds might be held in their several places by the equal pressure.

But his thoughts were as aimless as his body. He could not marshal them. His argument was rent by unmanageable flaws. He was cold, and sleepy, and wanted to die, and away went his fine theory as soon as he had found it.

So the young man continued to wander, and the wind to drum its doleful note over the hill-top. And the persistent sound became a lullaby, so that after a while he was enchanted by the low hum, by the laggard dawn, by the prevalent stagnation that now began to set a sporting-ground for Time upon the bleak and mournful spaces of the plateau. Time passed; hours swelled into days, and the days became weeks; and he, not knowing the long period through which he was drowsing, bestirred himself with the reflection that very soon they would be opening the door. Yet the door did not open. Its grim front loomed ever before him. A profound stillness stalked through the House of the Dead, and the infinite aisles were paved with the silence of all the tombs of the world's past.

'When will it open?' he murmured, and abandoned himself to the flight of the years.

When he awakened again, his apathy had increased, and every thought filled him with indifference, except the perpetual thought that he wanted to die. Even the secret of his unknown trouble had ceased to worry him; searching his heart, he fancied that he wanted to die for no other reason than that of his growing and rather incomprehensible weariness. Then, in opposition to this prevalent thought, there followed a period of many contradictory phases, of much idleness and terrible perturbation of mind, of clear-cut moments when he persuaded himself that he was not apathetic, but patient only . . . the door had told him so *very* clearly that he had come too soon. Also it was a period in which, one day, turning his face to the sky, he discovered that the ceaseless drumming of the wind was nowhere in the world around him, but in his head. In his head? Ha, ha! In his head. How funny. And he laughed. He laughed boisterously. He laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks, and he knew that he was crying. The thought angered him; and with a great shout he ran towards the charnel-house. But the knocker burnt his fingers, and he fled, ashamed. He stood upon the edge of the plateau, a tiny figure, deeply moved, lifting and dropping its hands. . . .

The action melted into the drift of the years. Time passed, and now he was on a new part of the plateau, with the door at a vast distance, and he was laughing as he totted up the aeons, trying to count them upon his fingers. Sometimes the clouds, invisibly moving, would mass in huge faces over his head, and he laughed at them, too. For a whole year he leapt on a single leg, up and down, up and down, on a single leg, fretting that there was no one to see him. It was a high time, a wonderful time in which his

senses were finely alert, and he was able to think out a million schemes, yet never to accomplish one; was eased of he knew not what, yet never sat and took his ease; a terrible time, in which he hunted for water and drank it only in his dreams, and peeped at the door in his waking moments, and clapped his hands, and danced and sang, and hunted for water, for water, for water . . . until one day his head was bigger than a cloud, and he remembered with perfect clearness of mind and vision the room on Earth in which he had wanted to die.

To die? Dear God, if only he could die! While there was time! While there was time. . . . He threw back his head, and with wide eyes sought mercy of Heaven. His trouble—God!—had it been THAT? A great voice started behind him, crying:

'I am ready for you. Are you ready for me?'

'I am not! I am not!' the young man answered, and clutched his head. He knew his trouble now. Its fingers were tightening round his soul. Bracing himself, he turned to look: and for the first time, for one brief moment, his eyes beheld and examined the full enormity of the charnel-house.

The echoes of the great voice were prolonged by the wind, which began slowly to ebb until its mournful note could be heard no longer over the hill-top. And now a most tender peace fell upon the plateau, and upon the young man. He slept; and if he dreamed at all, it was to dream that some unknown, momentous thing was happening to him, that the scales were being balanced, and that this was the moment of their equipoise. Yet it is unimaginable that he dreamed, so utterly remote was he from all mankind. It would have been possible to walk in that place, to tread the whole course of the barren summit, to peep at his door, at the mounting magnificence of the

clouds, and not to know that he was sleeping there.

And it was from this divine period of rest that he awoke, and found himself falling.

At first he did not know that he was falling. He supposed that he had walked to the extreme edge of the plateau, and there . . . in air . . . on the wreaths and flecks of clouds . . . was still walking, with his gaze fixed on the door. In another moment he had changed his mind: he was lying very lightly indeed upon the plateau: pressed down into its bleak surface, packed into the ballooning clouds and the whole great hump of hill, there was a supreme buoyancy, which in a strange fashion communicated itself to him.

And in this belief he remained, until suddenly he realised that he could see no longer the barren hill-top, the House of the Dead, or even the topmost reach of Death's Door. He was falling . . . falling. . . . A great sickness was in his throat. His lungs were two bursting clouds that he had left behind him, bumping on the brow of the hill. The far-away fields and towns and river-courses were tumbling up to him, he was falling, and dying. That for which he had longed so greatly—he was falling—and *dying*.

'Ho there! You at the door! How stupid you are! I am dying! Will you not open? Why do you not open? I am falling! I am falling! Why are you so stubborn and stupid? *Ah, Christ, save me!* CHRIST! Can you not hear me? I am dying! I am dying! I am falling! I am falling! I am falling! I am going! I am going! I am going! I am going! Back! Back! Back! Back! Back! . . .'

The prison doctor sighed.

'Well, nurse, we've pulled him through,' he muttered. 'Poor brute. In two months' time I suppose we shall have him well enough to be hanged.'

Gertie Macnamara

I CAN remember an old black mill, sir, stood hereabout; a pack of witches haunted it before my father's time. I don't suppose you believe in witches? Mr Timothy Weem told my father that when he was a little boy he used to spend night after night in the mill, chatting with the witches, and waiting on 'em, and that the name of the principal witch was Gertie Macnamara.

It all come of his having to set out one evening with a bottle of barberry juice for his uncle Gideon. Gideon Weem used to suffer from the jaundice, and young Timothy's mother was famous all over Runcton for her skill in medicine-making out of the sweet leaves of the barberry. Ragged clouds were running across the moon when the boy set out with the bottle; and as soon as he came in sight of the mill, Timothy thought to hisself what a wonderful night for witches. And those were true thoughts, as Mr Weem told my father near sixty years later: for there was the mill-door open, with sounds of swishing and droning and tinkling and gurgling coming through it; and when he peeped inside, sure enough, Timothy saw a number of witches riding about on their besoms, and others squatting and sewing witch-clouts among the rafters, and others sitting at table on the

miller's flour-sacks, drinking dropwort tea, and eating henbane and witches'-butter sandwiches, and talking steeple-hats.

All of a sudden there was a deep silence, and the witches stopped moving, and fixed their green eyes on the boy; and one of 'em, who looked to be the leader of the whole pack, came over to him, with a swishing of skirts and a rattle of bones, and eyed him slap into the middle of his marrow.

Well, sir, Timothy thought his last hour had come. She'd a high steeple-hat on, and a cloak over her shoulders, and a smartish costume of some sort of tattery witch-spun material; and she'd got a monster sickle nose, with hairs upon it, and a monster sickle chin, with hairs upon it, and tufts of hair on her cheeks, and tufts of hair on her lip; and she'd got knockety hands, and clappety feet, and beadly eyes; and she was so straggle-toothed that you could see right down her gullet into the fires of hell. She made a sign to the other witches, that they should stop whispering while she spoke to the boy. 'What do you want, young man?' she crackled; and he told her he was on his way with a bottle of barberry juice for his uncle's jaundice.

'A very sweet pretty complaint,' said the principal witch, 'and 'twould be a sad shame to destroy it. Therefore shall I and my lady friends breathe malignant curses into your bottle of barberry juice, and sour that evil linctus, and line the bottle with the tripe of toads; and I shall drop a sediment of snake-stone within it, to lie in your uncle's tummy until the Day of Judgment; and I shall stir the potion with a gecko's tail, and scent it with fitchet's breath, and I reelly don't know what more I shall do to the linctus—but I shall fill it with bubbles to give it a zest,' cried the principal witch, bubbling at the mouth, and

patting her back hair. Whereupon she told him that her name was Gertie Macnamara.

Aye, that was her name. Timothy Weem said so. He learnt a good deal about Gertie, that night in the mill. Her father was a pig-eyed nix from Achill Isle, and her mother was a lady's-maid out of Bayswater. When Timothy Weem was an old man, he told my father that you could hear the Atlantic Ocean thrashing through the wisps of her broom, and the Lunnon traffic rumbling in her innards. I reckon these sounds nearly scared him to death at first, for he'd never been to the sea, nor heard anything louder than Farmer Horton's farm carts; but it warn't very long before he discovered that the witch was her mother's child, inside and out, and the mill nothing less than a droring-room. 'You keep quiet, young man,' said Gertie Macnamara, 'and you'll come to no 'arm.' So Timothy Weem kept as quiet as he possibly could, watching her party manners, and sure enough, he didn't come to no harm whatsumdever. Now and again, it's true, there'd be a swish and a whirr in the open doorway, that made him jump on his flour-sack: but bless ye, it was only friends and relations dropping in on their besoms from beyond Sidlesham way, and Halnaker way, and Shripney way, and Chalder way—aye, and Timothy says, from Afriky way, one or two of 'em—for some small talk; and some of 'em brought their sewing, and others spell-boxes, and others insanity-bags, and others brew-books, and one of 'em brought a little friend along with her, that warn't a witch at all, but a pigwidgeon. Sometimes, in spite of their party manners, they eyed the boy with the greatest curiosity; but it was wonderful to see the power that Gertie had over 'em. She held 'em in the holler of her hand. Gertie did most of the talking, too:

'Bought a duck of a hat Tuesday,' said Gertie Macnamara, 'trimmed with toads' eyes and froth-hoppers. One-three, at Grimalkin and Hagseed's.'

'You never!'

'Wearing it Witches' Sabbath,' said Gertie Macnamara, 'at evencurse. A cup of dropwort, Mrs Itch-Weed?'

'Thankye, my dear.'

'I forget—arsenic?'

'Two lumps,' said Mrs Itch-Weed.

And after that, young Timothy felt quite at home. He handed round the cups of dropwort tea, and he handed round the plates of henbane sandwiches. He went and climbed into the rafters, and watched Jane Weddle using her new stitch on the witch-clout, though she told him it warn't the kind of garment a young boy should see; and he helped Old Mother Speltbone rinse her washing, which she'd scoured in a flour-bin. And he was perfectly friendly with the whole pack of witches when Mrs Itch-Weed and some of the other visitors got up to go.

'Well, so long, Gertie; pleasant nightmares. I must be off now. Sweeping a cloud-bank Chalder way. Goo' night, girls.' She whipped up her broom, and one of her hairpins fell out, and Timothy told my father years later that when he peeped through the door he could see Mrs Itch-Weed shooting away like a black rocket and sailing above the clouds in the moonlight.

'Proud as dirt!' said Gertie Macnamara suddenly, as soon as Mrs Itch-Weed's back was turned. With that, two voices tittered in the mill; and Timothy noticed that besides Gertie, only Mother Speltbone and Jane Weddle were there now. Laying full length on his flour-sack, he listened to the three witches while they talked of their friends, and he watched Old Mother Speltbone as she hung her washing on a moonbeam; now and again a cloud

passed over the moon, and the beam went in, and the washing flopped to the ground, and the sound growed so monotonous that Timothy shut his eyes and slept; and when he woke up in the morning the mill was full of daylight, and there in the road was an old cow mooing, and the miller coming to grind his corn.

Latish on in the forenoon, sir, Timothy Weem gave his uncle Gideon the bottle of barberry juice for the jaundice, and his uncle died at once in the parlour, and everybody said that Timothy's mother had lost her skill in making medicine for jaundice out of the sweet leaves of the barberry.

Time and often, Timothy went along to see his new friends after that, and the boy didn't come to no harm whatsumever. Ready to spring up at any moment to make hisself useful, he listened to the small-talk of the witches. Not but what he'd hear much gossip, mind ye, bar Saddadays. On other nights, there warn't no witches in the mill besides the three that lived there—Gertie Macnamara, Mother Speltbone, and Jane Weddle—and they were such thick friends that time and often they'd go for a whole hour without speaking. Timothy told my father years later how he couldn't hardly contrive to keep his eyes open, what with the silence, and the cronies lifting their skinny wrists in the air whilst they plied their needles up and down, up and down.

Then, come Saddaday, the mill was like a droring-room, Timothy said. A crowd of Gertie Macnamara's friends would fly in upon her, and Gertie, chatting over her shoulder, would pour out the dropwort and pizon it with arsenic in the busiest manner; and although she was

purty well flabbergaisted, what with looking after everybody, seeing that they'd got their henbane sandwiches and dropwort tea, and trying to remember who was for arsenic and who waun't, yet Gertie Macnamara herself would take a hand at entertaining, whensumever there was a drop in the conversation. She'd squint into her cup of dropwort, and start to tell misfortunes. There warn't a witch could beat her at it.

'Tch! Tch!' she'd click, all of a sudden, 'bless me innards! *You're* going to lose a lot of pizon one day, Mrs Itch-Weed! Well, I'll be bound! I *am* sorry for ye!' With that, she'd pat her back hair, and wink across at Mrs Wilberforce, of Gizzard Hill, for she hated every martal twig of the besom that Mrs Itch-Weed rode upon.

Them Saddaday night parties must have been rare sights, I reckon, especially when the sky was dark and scudding, for then's the time for witches. There'd be witches on the floor of Runcton Mill, and witches up the walls; and Jane Weddle, flying aloft on her besom, would hang a witch-ball from the roof, and all the burning eyes of the witches would shine back from the witch-ball, giving the light of a centre lamp; and if so be the night was extra hot and airless, all the witches would begin to nod, and the witch-ball would grow darker, eye by eye, and even Timothy's eyes would close and his chin would drop onto his chest. Then, seeing how 'twas, Gertie Macnamara would rap out loudly: 'Lawk, girls! Wheer's yer manners?' —and with that, the witch-ball would spring into flame, and Timothy would jump to his feet and set about filling the empty cups again, and maybe Mrs Esther Roadnight, the black-haired witch of Wittering, would start off, at a hem of a rate, divining by the dough of cakes.

Now, there happened to be living in the village, at that time, a rare old feller named Dudley Gimp. He was a liddle chap, turning white, neat as a cock-sparr'. His wife owned a shop a mile from the mill, and when she died she left him the shop, which is what he had married her for.

That shop sold almost everything you could think on, and a dunnamany things you'd never think on at all, yet I suppose it warn't much bigger than a hen-coop, inside and out. 'Twas a hem miracle to all the Runcton folks how Dudley Gimp could fish up what they wanted, without he tumbled the whole stock onto the floor; and I shouldn't wonder but what he might have made a better juggler than shopkeeper, all said and done.

Well, sir, accarding to Timothy Weem, the women were soon running after Dudley Gimp, and none of 'em runned harder than Mrs Pinkney and Mrs Rushbridger.

Middle-aged they were, them widders, in a manner of speaking. Dudley thought a rare lot of hisself, I can tell ye, and one day he would let on to Mrs Pinkey how she was the light of his eye, and another day he would let on to Mrs Rushbridger how she was the song of his heart; so it warn't to be wondered at that when these two widders woke up of a sunshiny marnun, each of 'em would say to herself—letting on that a customer had jest come into her shop, and was giving her the time of day—'Goo' marnun, Mrs Dudley Gimp. How's business?'

Well of course the liddle feller hadn't no more thought of marrying eether of 'em than he had of asking the Queen of Perjure to come and fiddle about with his bacon and firewood. Don't you make no mistake about that.

Now then. Timothy Weem used to go purty often to Dudley Gimp's, of a Sunday, and sit with the old chap in the parlour behind the shop, and one day he told Dudley all about the witches in the mill.

'You don't say?' cried Dudley, thumping his knee. And so it came to pass that on the follering Saddaday the shopkeeper and the boy set out for Gertie Macnamara's. 'Twas dark and raining, and in the lanes there warn't a human critter but theirselves. As soon as the black mill hove in sight at the far end of the village, Timothy Weem could see witches riding across the patches between the clouds, and swooping down to the mill, and circling round it, afore they went in; but to Dudley Gimp they warn't no more than shadders shifting against the sky, and Timothy told my father years later that folks can never see witches out o' doors, without they've seen 'em fust between walls.

Well, sir, to git back to my story. In they went, and Timothy done the honours. 'Ye've brought us sweetly purty weather, Mr Gimp,' said Gertie, arching her wrist and smiling as she shook the shopkeeper's hand; and then she told him wheer the hatstand was. Well accardingly, Dudley whisked off his hat with the air of a markis borned and bred; and afore he'd lived another moment he was sitting on a flour-sack in the corner, near wheer the besoms were stacked to drain.

The mill was crowded that summer night, and all the best witches had flown over. Mrs Wilberforce, of Gizzard Hill, was there, and Mrs Darlington, in all her finery, divining by shadders, by a suspended ring, by a balanced sieve; and Mrs Itch-Weed's cousin, Nellie Nightpiece, *she* was there, and Harriet Cowheel, the liddle pippin, and so was Mrs Esther Roadnight, writing in ashes, and forecasting death and disaster by sperrits seen in a magic lens. They all had summat curdling to do, new bits of gossip to

thresh to atoms, newfangled pizons to consider . . . but to tell ye the truth, sir, Dudley Gimp didn't think very much of these women, he said to Timothy they were gollops.

Howsumever, the upshot of it all was that the old feller became a chemist, which is near enough to being a juggler, I reckon. He took to making pills and boluses, knock-me-downs, pick-me-ups, potions, plaisters, pizons, and tinctums.

Mind ye, nobody had any idea he was making these things. Leastways, not for some time, they hadn't. He didn't even tell Timothy Weem he was making 'em. He must have been months and months experimenting with his pizons and boluses, and the fust time Runcton heerd about it was one spring marnun when Mrs Pinkney and Mrs Rushbridger happened to be in the shop together. It seemed to Dudley Gimp an opportunity too good to be lost. 'Lookee my purties!' he said, all of a sudden, winking back over his shoulder. With that, he showed 'em a lovely bottle of syrup, and a lovely bottle of pizon.

'Twas all over Runcton in five minutes how Dudley Gimp was a maker of syrups and pizons.

He had emptied two bottles of boiled barley-drops, and had washed 'em out, and in one of 'em he'd got the syrup, and in t'other he'd got the pizon; and he'd labelled the bottles accardingly, and as soon as the women were out of the shop he went and stood the syrup and the pizon on the manklepiece in his parlour, pizon to the right, syrup to the left; and next day, being a Sunday, he showed um to Timothy Weem, and told the boy he warn't in no hurry to let um go. 'I be too much of an artis',' said he. 'Why, it took me nigh on a couple o' months to concoct they,' said Dudley Gimp; and with that, he stepped back on the hearth-rug and looked at the bottles like he was a mother looking at twins.

Well, sir, what did Mrs Pinkney do but read a message in them two bottles? She reckoned that Dudley Gimp was trying to tell her how she was the syrup of his heart, while Mrs Rushbridger was the pizon of his dreams.

Mind ye, I don't say but what Dudley didn't take a stronger fancy to Mrs Pinkney than to Mrs Rushbridger.

She was better looking, in comparison. Don't you make no mistake about that.

She was plump and dreamy-eyed and the biggest lay-abed in Runcton, and what's more she was parfectly content as long as she could speak alone with Dudley once in the day. Mrs Rushbridger was the ezact opposite. She'd a bit of a wart on her nose, and mayhap that had summat to do with it. Howsumever, wart or nor wart, Mrs Rushbridger reckoned that she'd stand a better chance of happiness if it warn't for Mrs Pinkney, so one day she thought how she'd give Mrs Pinkney some of Dudley's pizon. Not much, mind ye, but enough.

Question was, how could she git hold of the pizon?

Well, of course, we can't look into a lady's head. But I reckon she figured it out how she'd go and have a talk with Timothy Weem, knowing that the old man and the boy were such thick friends. So off she started for Timothy Weem's; but on the way she found herself at Dudley Gimp's instead, with the shop empty, except for the old chap behind the counter.

'It queers me why you don't put that syrup in yer winder,' said Mrs Rushbridger, blurting it out. 'And the pizon, too, come to that. Don't ye want to sell um?'

'All in good time! All in good time, Pollie!' Wheerupon, the little feller turned to a door behind him—the door of the parlour at the back of the shop. You couldn't tell door from wall. 'Twas hanging with brushes and egg-whisks and pots and pans, and even the door-handle looked as if it was up for sale.

When he opened the door, she got a peep of the bottles on the manklepiece in the parlour beyond. 'There they be, and there they be as long as I want um to be!' he hollered out. With that, the little feller shut the door again, turned round, laid his finger alongside his nose, and winked at Mrs Rushbridger across the counter. 'Matter of fact,' he said, 'I've a mind to give um to my smart, fashnable friend, Gertie.'

'What's that ye said?' cried Mrs Rushbridger. 'Who did ye say, Dudley? Gertie *who*?' But Dudley Gimp warn't going to let out anything further, so off she went, and who did she meet but Timothy Weem, picking sloes in the hedges.

'Mus Gimp has jest been telling me all about his ol', fashnable friend, Gertie,' said she.

'Is that what he called her? Ol' fashnable friend? Why, he's onny bin to the mill once,' said Timothy, 'and then he said she was a gollop.'

'She's a gollop sure enough, I reckon!'

'Oh, but she beän't!' cried Timothy, 'she's Queen of the Witches! That's what Gertie Macnamara be!'

'I don't believe there's sich a thing as witches in the mill,' said Mrs Rushbridger, scratching her nose.

'Oh, but there be, ma'am—a tidy lot of um, I can tell ye! And Gertie Macnamara's the Queen of um. Don't you make no mistake about that!'

Well, sir, Mrs Rushbridger warn't the kind of pusson to let the grass grow under her feet. All day Saddaday and Sunday she thought it out, and on the Monday night she put on her best hat, and hurried off to call on Gertie Macnamara. The whole of the Runcton sky was under clouds, and there's never been a better night for secrecy, I shouldn't wonder. There warn't no witches in the mill besides its reglar occipants. Jane Weddle was darning

Gertie's stockings, and Mother Speltbone was washing cloaks in a flour-bin.

'Miss Macnamara? Good evenun, ma'am,' said Mrs Rushbridger, coming to the point at once, 'I'm Mrs Rushbridger, and I'm trying to git some pizon for a friend.'

'Sartainly, ma'am,' said Gertie Macnamara. 'Swift, meejum, or slow?'

Well, sir, Gertie Macnamara warn't too pleased when she heerd what pizon it was that Mrs Rushbridger wanted. 'I've a chice of pizons meself, ma'am, and they all work,' said she, droring herself up, and patting her back hair.

'O' course they do, ma'am,' said Mrs Rushbridger, 'but how could I screw out of it if I was to use one of um to pizon my friend Mrs Pinkney? Ev'ry martal pusson in the place would want to know how she come by it. If I was to use one of your pizons, 'twould have to be given in secret, and there's dangers in secrets. No, ma'am, it's got to be as open and honist as the daylight. It's got to be all above board and shipshape, so as the whole of Runcton shall know how the pizon got into my friend Mrs Pinkney. And the onny way to do that,' said Mrs Rushbridger, 'is to git a holt of this pizon from the shop of my friend Mr Gimp. Besides,' said she, 'I reckon 'twould look better, coming from a gen'leman, than from a woman.'

'I quite understand you now, ma'am,' said Gertie Macnamara, 'and it does great credit to your woman's heart, it does reely. 'Twould be a sad pity if the death of Mrs Pinkney was laid at our door.' So saying, she offered Mrs Rushbridger a drop of dropwort, and Mrs Rushbridger swiped it off without winking.

The two women set theirselves down at the dropwort tea-table, and Gertie Macnamara, rubbing her hands backards and forrards on her two nubbly knees, asked Mrs

Rushbridger what her plan was. Mrs Rushbridger said it was the simplest thing in the whole world. It was only to bewitch the bottles, so that the deadliness of the pizon should go into the syrup, and the goodness of the syrup should go into the pizon. 'I knows ezactly wheer them bottles be,' said Mrs Rushbridger, staring into space, 'you can see um on Mr Gimp's manklepiece in the parlour. Pizon to the right, syrup to the left. Them liquids beän't the same to look at, mind ye, ma'am, and that's why 'twill be necessary to command um to exchange naturs instead of commanding um to exchange bottles. And when it's all fixed up shipshape and above board, I'll git my old friend Dudley Gimp to sell a bottle of his syrup to my friend Mrs Pinkney.'

'I quite understand you, ma'am, said Gertie Macnamara, nodding her head. 'I knows the shop, and I'll git along there jest afore cock-crow. That bit of sarcery will be the easiest thing I've ever done—though difficult, mind ye, with it,' she added, wishing to impress Mrs Rushbridger. 'Another drop of dropwort, ma'am?'

Now, it stands to reason that Gertie's repitation for sarcery had been the cause of many jalous fits amongst the witches of Runcton and far beyond, and even her dearest friends would have given up their very besoms if so be they could only git the better of her without being discovered.

It so happened that Mrs Itch-Weed was lurking in the shadders of Runcton Mill that night—lurking for what she could larn in the way of gossip—and she overheerd the whole of this conversation. Well accardingly, she jumped on her besom in a trice, and flew off to Dudley Gimp's shop, and made her way, by sarcery, into the old man's parlour. The little room was black as magic, but by the light of her eyes she could see the bottles gleaming on the

manklepiece, pizon to the right, syrup to the left; overhead she heerd the old chap snawing in his sleep; and after she had spat a curse she lifted her arms towards the bottles on the manklepiece, rattled her fingers, and chaunted out as follers:

'Changed be the naturs of them two Bottles,
So Pizon cures
And Syrup throttles;
Thus do I beezle Gerts and sich breed,
Yours sincerely,
Mrs Itch-Weed.'

Thus the spell was pernounced, and there they stood a moment afterwards, a bottle of harmless pizon to the right, and a bottle of deadly syrup to the left; for I'll say this much of Mrs Itch-Weed, sir, she was as good at sarcery as what Gertie was, though without the manner, mind ye.

Well, of course, Mrs Itch-Weed didn't want to be catched out by nobody at the last moment, so off she flew to Appledram, wheer her people lived; then, jest afore the cocks began to crow, there in her turn stood Gertie, as planned and promised, in Mr Gimp's parlour, with Mrs Rushbridger sitting beside her to see that the spell was pernounced all shipshape and above board. The old feller was still snawing overhead, and the little room was still as black as magic, and by the light of her eyes Gertie could see the labelled bottles gleaming on the manklepiece, pizon to the right, syrup to the left; leastways, that's what she thought, not knowing that Mrs Itch-Weed had gone and beezled her; and after she had spat a curse she lifted her arms towards the bottles, rattled her fingers, and chaunted out as follers:

'Changed be the naturs of them two Bottles,
So Pizon cures
And Syrup throttles;
Thus do I cast me venom purty,
Yours with love and hisses,
Gertie.'

Wheerupon she patted her back hair, to show how difficult it had been.

As soon as Gertie had cast her spell, she and Mrs Rushbridger went off into the dawn, little knowing that they had done the ezact opposite to what they had set out to do, and that pizon was pizon, and syrup was syrup, jest as they was afore Mrs Itch-Weed had got going on 'em.

'Twas so arly in the day that no one catched sight of Mrs Rushbridger as she stole home to bed. Laying awake, she listened to the birds and thought to herself how everything had gone off shipshape and above board; and fust thing in the marnun she called on Mrs Pinkney, who was still fast asleep with the clothes pulled over her head.

'*That's* a nasty cough you've got, ma'am,' said Mrs Rushbridger, coughing as loudly as ever she could.

With that, Mrs Pinkney popped her head out of the clothes.

'A nasty cough you've got, a very nasty cough indeed, ma'am Didn't ye hear un?'

Well, sir, they argeyed it over and over, as to whether Mrs Pinkney had heerd herself coughing or whether she hadn't, while Mrs Rushbridger got more and more flabbergaisted at the way things were going; but all of a sudden Mrs Pinkney began to see reason, and grew as flabbergaisted as Mrs Rushbridger herself. 'Why, by Job,' she hollered out, 'I do believe I'm going to die!' '*That's* better!' cried Mrs Rushbridger; and thus encouraged, Mrs Pinkney

sat bolt-upright in her bed, while her friend advised her to go to Mr Gimp's as soon as she was dressed, and to ask him to sell her some of his syrup.

Well accardingly, Mrs Pinkney began to pull on her clothes at a hem of a rate, and it waun't many minutes before the two women arrived at Dudley Gimp's, Mrs Rushbridger looking as long as a doctor, and Mrs Pinkney giving out the most leddy-like coughs you ever heerd. 'Can't ye do better than that?' whispered Mrs Rushbridger. The shop was crowded, and that was exactly what Mrs Rushbridger wanted. Old Mrs Chiddle was there, and Dan'l Sparshot, and Flo Boyling.

'Marnun, Mr Gimp,' said Mrs Rushbridger, over Flo Boyling's head. 'I've brung pore Mag Pinkney along to see ye. She's got a cough, and wheer she catched it I *don't* know, but 'tis the fearsomest cough I've ever listened to, and I thought maybe ye might sell her an ounce of that syrup to drive un away.' With that, Mrs Pinkney coughed again, and Mr Gimp put his hand to his ear.

'It don't sound bad enough to me, Mag,' he said. 'You wait ontil you're coughing fifteen to the dozen and a bit over. You don't think as I'd throw the stuff away down *that* throat, do 'ee?'

'Ye should ought to hear her coughing in her sleep,' cried Mrs Rushbridger, skeered to find that things warn't going all shipshape and above board; but Dudley Gimp only laughed and winked at Flo Boyling and reckoned how he wouldn't ever be likely to find hisself in such a persition, and with that he turned to Mrs Pinkney and told her to come again when she had summat to cough about; and then a moment later, up went his eyes, and he began to chuckle and to thump the counter with his closed fist and to jerk out between his teeth: 'Lawk, by Job, what a fool I be! 'Tis high time I had a swig of it meself, I

reckon! I made it, didn't I?' With these words, he put his hand amongst the pots and pans and brushes and egg-whisks behind him, and opened the door that was never there ontil he *had* opened it—and before Mrs Rushbridger could make up her mind about the sitiwation, there was Dudley Gimp taking down the bottle of syrup from the manklepiece in the parlour, uncorking it, throwing back his head, and holding the bottle to his lips; and when at last Mrs Rushbridger hollered out, in a tremenjous voice: 'Lard a mussy, Mr Gimp, don't ye drink that syrup!' Dudley Gimp was laying on the floor as dead as he was before he was borned, and a bit further.

Now, I reckon you think I've got that wrong, but I haven't. Everything I've told ye is true. I told ye that Dudley Gimp was a chemist, didn't I? So he was. He made pills and boluses, knock-me-downs, pick-me-ups, potions, plaisters, pizons, and tinctums; but he was a very *bad* chemist, which is jest the sort of thing ye'd expect him to be; and that there pizon was sich hem feeble stuff, it wouldn't have worrited a fly for two minutes or a bit under; and that there syrup was the most deadly pizonous liquid in the whole of Sowsex, don't you make no mistake about that.

So there 'tis, sir, look at it how you will, the story that Timothy Weem told my father years later only goes to show how plots laid by Itch-Weeds and sich like be no hem use against Macnamaras.

Now, there's jest one other bit I'd like to tell ye, before I goes home to my supper. Mrs Rushbridger became a witch. Would ye believe it! Yet there's no doubt whatsumdever that she was a borned witch. Out of admiration for Gertie, Mrs Rushbridger went over to the witches, lock, stock, and barr'l.

She chose a night when the mill was humming like a beehive and the witch-ball was almost busting with eye-light. Mrs Darlington was there, and Mrs Esther Road-night, the black-haired witch of Wittering, and Nellie Nightpiece, *she* was there, and Harriet Cowheel too, the liddle pippin; and so was Mrs Wilberforce, of Gizzard Hill, divining by a cock picking up grains; and in the middle of 'em all were Mother Spelthone and Jane Weddle, plying their needles, lifting their skinny wrists in the air, up and down, up and down.

The Invalid

'DERE he is agäun! Hark at 'n! Hark at 'n Knockin' below!'

Her sister went up to the bed. With loving eyes Mary gazed down at the distorted, frightened face of Ann.

'Hark at 'n, Mary! Döan't ye hear en now? Bangin' at de kitchen door? He's standin' below! 'Tis gittin' much nearer and louder! Oh, why döan't ye spik! Why döan't ye spik and do summat, Mary, instead of gazin' dere?'

Her sister bent over the bed. With loving fingers Mary smoothed back some of the wild, dishevelled hair of Ann. Time was passing very slowly in that room.

But suddenly Mary straightened up her back, and walked towards the locked and bolted door, in front of which a great pile of furniture was standing, a monstrous barricade. She put up a hand with an aimless gesture, touched the leg of a chair or a table, dropped her hand again.

'Dere aun't no more I can do, Ann; what more can I do? Lookee, my purty, what I've done in here. I've pulled up de two chairs, and de big täable, and de liddle täable, and de liddle chest.'

'Den pile um up agäun, Mary! Täake um all down, and push yer bed agäunst de door as you done yasterday,

and pile up de farniture on en, säafer and tighter!' Mary took down a chair, and hugged her thin arms round the little chest; Ann encouraged her with two bright eyes peeping from the bedclothes: 'So's naun shall git in! So's *he* shan't git in! Do ye know what he's lik, Mary? He's lik a gurt skelinton, wud a gurt skull and gurt smilin' teeth; he's naun but a passel o' böans!'

'Dat be only what de picturs say, surelye. How shud a marn know what he looks lik? May be dere aün't no such a pusson, Ann.'

'Adone-do, wud yer blasphemous tark! Aün't us two bin hearin' all dat knockin' down below, time and often, dunnamany days?'

'Reckon it bëan't no more use tellin' ye dat 'twas me you heerd yasterday, out in de wood-house, gittin' logs fur yer fire—and when 'taün't me, 'tis de wind: you döan't believe dat no longer.'

The invalid laughed scornfully, a clear and lusty laugh. Mary crept up to the bedside, and poured out a glass of her sister's medicine.

'Dr Lollie wull be comm' dis evenun, or if he can't git away, den tomorrer marnin' he wull be comin'. He's darter said so, and dat's an unaccountable good marn, always doin' as he says. And do you know, Ann, Dr Lollie says dere bëan't so very much de matter wud ye, ye'll soon be up agäun and gooin' about.'

'Dat's a hem purty doctor!'

'But 'tis true, Ann! Ye'd no ought to miscall Dr Lollie. By Job! Reckon dere's a tidy number of years to goo yit, afore us finds ourselves lyin' in de churchyard!'

'Mary!' cried Ann, 'when be ye g'wine to give me dat medicine, instead of tarkin' dere? It justabout does kip me from gooin' to pieces. Eh, dearie, dearie, what a larmentable poor crittur I be!'

The candle made a grotesque shadow of the bottle and Mary's moving hand.

'Hrrglp!' gulped the invalid.

Three minutes later she was sleeping soundly.

Early in the afternoon Ann waked again; starting up from the bed-clothes, she cried that she could hear a great knocking at the cottage door below.

'Dere's bin no knockin', Ann,' said Mary.''Twas you dreamin'.'

Nevertheless she held one of the chairs in her hand; she was standing near the barricade of furniture, and Ann began to scold her for such deceiving words.

''Tis no use pertendin',' the sick woman answered—'no use whatsumdever. Dere's bin knockin' agäun, and you were gittin' a new holt to de farniture afore I catched yer!'

''Twud höald a giant.'

'But it wudn't höald *him*! And ye dudn't think so, nuther—dat's hem certain! Build en up, Mary! Pull en all down, and build en all up agäun, säafer and tighter!'

So Mary took it all down, and built it all up again until it was as strong and as safe as a prison door. She did this very slowly, often pausing to drop her arms and to think; for it was an important and a difficult thing to do. And once her sister cried: 'What a time you do täake! Who knows when he mightn't be on us, knockin' at de door!' But it was built up at last. Mary's bed was at the bottom, and the chairs were at the top; and Ann, finding that the work had been done as near as possible to her satisfaction, began to fill in the long period of waiting by staring about the room, listening to the rising wind as it swept over the roof and rattled the curtained windows, and at frequent intervals calling to Mary in her querulous

voice: 'Come here, Mary! No. Goo back to de door. I can just manage to pour en out fur myself. . . . Wheer are ye, Mary? Wheer ye got to? Come over. No! Goo bide by de door. It mustn't be left fur one moment now; you shud ought to know dat as well as I do!' Presently she asked for a fresh candle to be lit; and a blue-bottle fly made the queerest big shadows swirl over the room, while the invalid lay on her back for two hours, staring at the ceiling.

Towards sunset Ann grew restless again; she began to fret over the tiniest things—her pillow was uncomfortable, Mary must come and pat it; the medicine had left such a taste in her mouth, why hadn't Mary made her a cup of the weakest tea? But her greatest trouble was to wonder why the knocking had ceased, and when it would come again.

'D'ye think we can't hear en perhaps, wud all dat farniture stuck up dere? Better täake en down agäun, Mary; aye, täake a liddle bit of en down: den we shud ought to hear de knockin' below, surelye.'

'Guess it aün't naun to do wud de farniture,' said Mary. Yet she went to the door, and, standing on tiptoe, reached for the highest chair. She coaxed it forward by curling a finger round one of its legs, and pulled until it tipped over into her other hand. This she did, though with less difficulty, to the second chair; then she slid the chest to the edge of the smaller table and opened out her thin, weak, receiving arms.

'How slow you be!' cried the younger woman.

The chest tilted forward; a drawer fell out; over the floor bright, useless things were scattered.

'Oh, no,' said Ann, with her hand to her ear, 'I can't hear naun. And de chairs and täables wudn't mäake no gurt difference, nuther—we've heerd dat knockin' so often

wud um all stacked up dere. Better put um back quick, Mary—quick! quick! afore he comes! Aye, put um back, Mary, do. Aün't I töald ye dunnamany times to kip a good holt on de door?'

'Mayhap he'll not be comin' agäun,' said Mary.

'Dat's no answer whatsumdever,' said Ann.

Mary stooped slowly, and picked up one of the scattered trinkets that had fallen to the floor. It was tarnished and broken; and she was about to put it back into the chest, but changed her mind, and slipped it into the pocket of her blue print apron.

'Bëan't ye g'wine to do as I tell ye?'

'I be just g'wine, Ann . . .' The voice trailed off. Then she went over, and sat upon the edge of her sister's bed.

'I was just thinkin,' she said softly, 'when Dr Lollie comes tonight, I wull be pushin' de dresser away from de kitchen door, to let en in?'

'You wull.'

'And de round täable, and de fower chairs, and de heavy bread-pan?'

'You got um all heaped up?'

'Dey're all heaped up into a gurt mountin', säum as in here.'

'Den döan't ye have um down a moment longer dan be needful; and if dere's knockin' gooin' about when Dr Lollie comes, wait ontil 'tis over.'

'I've töald ye it won't be comin' agäun!' Mary cried, a flush mantling into her cheeks. Ann shifted a foot. Her sister was in her way. She hated people sitting on the edge of her bed.

'I'm dyin',' she snapped pettishly. 'You and Dr Lollie knows very well as I'm dyin'.'

'Eh, Ann, I cudn't bear to lose ye!' Mary put out her

hand as though to touch her sister's hair, but Ann wriggled down more cosily into the bed.

'Well, may be you *won't* lose me,' said the muffled voice, 'if only you kip *him* away. 'Tis a good thing I reminded ye of de kitchen door, surelye! So now goo back and do as I töald ye: goo stack up de täables and chairs: by Job!' cried the invalid lady, poking out her chin, and digging its rather angular point into the top of the bed-clothes, 'de devil hisself cud have walked in, wud you tarkin' dere!'

So Mary went back to the door, picked up the scattered trinkets, put them into the drawer of the chest, and stood the chest upon the little table; then she placed the two chairs in their former positions, coaxing them gently, and standing somewhat insecurely on the tips of her toes; and Ann, soothed by the recent conversation, slept. She slept through half of the guttering candle; and when she awoke at last, she saw her sister, asleep in a chair.

Impossible to believe it! How could she believe it?

'Mary! Come here!'

'I'm comin', Ann.'

From the immediate answer, and the absence of any startled movement in the figure, or sign of guilt, it was clear that Mary had *not* been sleeping, but resting only, upon a chair; yet wasn't that bad enough—the mere fact of taking the tiniest stick of furniture away from the door? This, of course, was what she had been going to do, a few hours earlier, when Ann had woken up to find her standing near the great pile, holding a chair in her hand!

'Mary! Mary!' But Mary would not come; and the younger woman stared at her speechlessly from the bed.

'I be thinkin' . . . thinkin' . . .' said Mary, and the candle went out.

'Fetch another candle!' Ann called timorously.

'I wull in a moment, surelye,' Mary whispered from the darkness.

'Mary!' cried Ann.

'Yes?' said Mary.

The night lengthened. Sundry small voices came up from the village; old Pilbeam's rookery was disturbed, setting up a great caw; and the wind, which had fallen away towards sunset, now began to rustle the hill-top cottage garden. But over by the doorway the silence was deep.

'Mary?'

'I be thinkin' . . . thinkin' . . .'

The dumbness of terror seized Ann. A moonbeam, freed by the rising wind from its cloud-prison, stole through a rent in the curtain, and crept round the room. Its path was too high to show Mary; but in due course it lit upon the great pile of furniture, that monstrous barricade: and the shapeless mass stood sentinel for a long time over the two sisters, until later the moonbeam was taken away. And later still, when the wind was at its highest, and it was difficult to distinguish its wild claps from door-knocks; when hearts are lowest, and folks die—*he* came.

He came in through the door, walking quietly through the carefully heaped up furniture as though it had not been there. He bore no resemblance to his pictures. Mary's heart was tranquil; she wondered no longer what he would do. He went by her chair, and up to the bed, and with his pitying, disdainful eyes looked down upon the hidden face of Ann. Then he turned, and gazed at Mary. He walked up to her, and they smiled together.

'Wull 'ee come?' he whispered.

Old Pilbeam's rookery broke out again. It went up in

a great cry, a chorus of voices, and ascending black wings, harsh, tender, uneasy, triumphant, reaching Heaven. . . .

'Oh, lookee, my purty!'

He bent over the chair.

With loving fingers, Death smoothed back Mary's dark, dishevelled hair.

Out of Leading-Strings

The Mirror

MRS BARRINGTON said to Nurse Taylor one summer morning: 'Oh, Nurse, I thought you and Pollie might like to take the children to Earl's Court Exhibition this afternoon, while I stop at home with the baby.'

Nurse Taylor hesitated, for Mrs Barrington had never looked after the baby through a whole afternoon; but she soon reflected that in such matters her mistress had a perfect right to do as she pleased; moreover, the baby would certainly be in the way at the Exhibition; and she accepted the proposal without any foolish show of enthusiasm, though Pollie nearly jumped out of her skin with rapture, and the little boy's face blushed with excitement.

On their train journey from Streatham, Nurse Taylor began to describe to the children the wonderful things they were going to see, and she spoke at some length of the Switch-back railway and the Water Chute; but the middle child took no notice of her nurse at all: there was a fat man sitting on the opposite seat, and she stared at him until his face, which at first had been cheerful and good-natured, grew almost as stolid as her own.

The moment they had pushed through the turnstiles

of the Exhibition, the two nurses clutched at the hands of the children, and the four pleasure-seekers set out along the broad, central avenue, to enjoy themselves amongst the sights and sounds. Pollie was grinning from ear to ear, and the little boy, who had scarcely begun to collect his thoughts, gripped her hand tightly in his excitement; but the middle child, holding Nurse Taylor's hand as limply as possible, took no notice of the showmen who were shouting at the entrances of the sideshows.

Instinct led the nurses to the Ornamental Lake, where flat-bottomed boats, having plunged down the chute, leaped again and again along the flashing water amidst a cloud of spray.

For some time, Nurse Taylor and Pollie and the two children watched the people enjoying themselves, and listened to the shrieks of fear from the women in the boats; and every time a boat splashed into the water, Nurse Taylor turned to the children and said to them: '*That* was a good one!'—for these two were considered old enough to imagine, and even to appreciate, the thrills of the Water Chute, but too young as yet to experience them in reality. After a while, Nurse Taylor said: 'I really *ought* to have a try'; so she went; and Pollie and the little boy kept her in sight for as long as they could, following her tilted straw hat in the sunshine until it became confounded with others. 'There she is! Look! There she goes!' cried Pollie, suddenly pointing. The boat slid down the Chute at a great pace, the splash looked larger than any that had gone before, and when Nurse Taylor came back, Pollie declared that they had heard her screaming above everybody.

Nurse Taylor, feeling that she had been made to look rather silly, asserted that Pollie, too, must really go down the Chute; but the under-nurse refused to do so unless the

little boy went with her. 'Nonsense! He's much too young, cried the head-nurse primly; but she very soon consented, and Pollie and the little boy went down the Chute, screaming at the tops of their voices.

From the Water Chute they hurried to the Switch-back railway, and although Nurse Taylor preferred to look on, Pollie and the little boy enjoyed themselves immensely from start to finish. But when they turned to the middle child, she only shook her head, and they all thought that she was angry because they had not asked her, on account of her youthful age, to go down the Water Chute. And, moreover, seeing her stolid, unresponsive face, they knew that her youth was not the only reason why they had refrained from inviting her to go on the Chute or the Switch-back railway: they knew that they felt shy and ill at ease beside her, and had been shocked into silence because of her unsociability. She guessed their thoughts, for she was by far the most selfconscious, the subtlest, and in many ways the cleverest, of all the Barringtons; so that when Nurse Taylor snapped at her: 'Why don't you laugh, child? Others are laughing,' she was swept at once by a secret anger, her throat grew stiff, and her fingers dug into the palms of her hands. She wouldn't! She wouldn't! She wouldn't laugh! Why did they want her to laugh? She frowned at her brother, stared at his thin, satisfied face . . . listened for a moment, breathlessly, to the sounds of the Exhibition . . . And she knew now that she had always felt and behaved like this when other people were enjoying themselves.

As she and her brother and the two nurses went from one amusement to another in the sunny grounds of the Exhibition, the feeling grew stronger—the feeling of antagonism against those who were out for enjoyment, who shared pleasure like sheep. The very heat of the sun and

the glare of the white palaces annoyed her and encouraged this feeling; distant colours danced in front of her eyes.

'The Magic Maze!' cried Pollie, pointing eagerly, 'The Magic Maze!'

It was a series of wooden-walled, snake-like passages, lit by a roof of glass; and here, amid the echoing laughter of strangers and of her own kith and kin, the middle child succeeded in losing herself. Her clenched hands, sturdy body, and plump and freckled face were very still as she strove to revolve ideas in her mind, while in that welcome solitude she heard the head-nurse calling: 'Where has she got to? Where is the child?' She was quite unable to put her feelings into words: she could only be aware of them; and by this time she had begun to feel an enmity not merely against people, but also against the actual amusements of the Exhibition—she was being bombarded by them, played upon by everything that *moved*: by the Water Chute, the Switch-back railway, and the Mazes: yes, even this Maze was moving, subtly entwining itself about her, humiliating her, crushing her with its snaky walls. Well. She would have to let her body respond; but never her face. That could be always under her control. If they insisted that she should go on the Switch-back and in Mazes she would obey them . . . but her face would never alter its expression, no one must ever look for a smile on her face. For she had known, occasionally, how foolish it was to allow one's face to respond, to slip out of control—grown-up people took advantage of one then, and one became their tool.

As soon as the pleasure party was out in the sunshine again, Nurse Taylor renewed her authority by demanding loudly: 'Are we all here?' and, without looking at the middle child, she began to lead the way, though nobody knew where it led to. 'Haw haw! Haw haw!' Pollie kept

laughing to herself, stumping along, thinking of the Magic Maze and of how she had never succeeded in reaching the centre. There were so many side-shows to be seen, and the choice was so difficult, that Nurse Taylor could not make up her mind for ages; and when the little boy realised that the afternoon was slipping away, he remembered how Pollie, a year ago, had made them laugh by pretending to walk like a horse, and he wondered whether she would do it again for them when they reached home.

At last they came to the Hall of Distorting Mirrors. Pollie cried out at once that they must certainly go into it; and Nurse Taylor, making a joke, said: 'Surely your face is ugly enough already, girl?'

How she and Pollie laughed at that! And what laughter there was in front of the mirrors! 'Oh, oh, oh-h-h!' cried Pollie, 'look at me! Come and hold my hand,' she called to the little boy, 'and let's stand together!' Nurse Taylor passed very quickly from mirror to mirror, in case some stranger should catch sight of the ridiculous figure that she cut in the distorted glass. But the middle child stared ahead. She was afraid to look into the mirrors. Yes, now she was caught. The mirrors did not *move*—not even as the Maze had moved. It was she who must move . . . the mirrors were calling her. How could she stare any longer, and not look into the mirrors?

And very quietly, very helplessly, she looked into a mirror. The ridiculous, distorted face in the mirror was crying, but it was crying with laughter—she moved, and now it was crying with horror—she moved again, and it was crying with derision, sarcastically crying; her face, that had always been so stolid, was moving in the mirror, shaping through all the emotions of the human soul.

While she was looking into the mirror, she heard

Pollie's footsteps behind her. Clop, clop, clop, clop. Whipped into sudden action, she faced her under-nurse.

'Why, Girlie, what are you crying for?' It was a stupid name, 'Girlie', a babyish name, but Pollie had often called her that, and now, for some strange reason, the little girl liked it.

The Fence

Of course Nurse Taylor and Pollie, the under-nurse, were not really Barringtons, but Mrs Barrington considered that anyone living for a long time in her house, whether guest or servant, became almost a Barrington, and should be treated as quite a Barrington. Nurse Taylor knew this, and agreed to it, yet was inclined to resent it, for it classed her at once with Pollie and the other servants.

One afternoon, she and the three children were hurrying along a suburban avenue beneath the shade of the trees. They were on their way to listen to a band playing on a common; but the sun and the leaves threw so many shadows everywhere that the little boy thought he would never reach the end of the journey.

The youngest child was riding in the dark-green perambulator, and her brother and her sister were walking on either side of their tall nurse. Presently the avenue turned to the left, but still there was neither sight of the common nor sound of the band; the hot sun filtered through the trees, and the distance in front looked as far as the distance behind.

'Are you sure she didn't tell you what it was?' inquired Nurse Taylor thoughtfully. The little boy shook his head, and gazed into the distance.

'Won't even open his mouth today,' thought Nurse Taylor. 'He's in one of his moods.'

'She didn't tell me either,' said the middle child suddenly and quite loudly. This was true. She had seen it for herself; and although the middle child told lies whenever the occasion suited her, she found it convenient now to tell the truth. 'Such a lovely present . . . such a *beautiful* present,' she whispered. The little boy nodded his head several times in succession, very emphatically.

'I wonder what it can be?' Nurse Taylor murmured, breaking into unaccustomed softness. And she tried to picture the present that Mrs Barrington had in store for her. The colour rose into her pale cheeks, and her thin, handsome face stared up the avenue of trees. Pollie was away at her mother's; Nurse Taylor's hands were full today, but her head was fuller. What could her present be? It was sure to be something good, expensive . . . a reward for 'honesty' . . . for 'faithful services.' She frowned a little, for she did not class herself with those who are known as 'honest' and 'faithful.' She was a superior nurse in more ways than one, a lady's nurse: yet even that scarcely described what she really was. . . .

She had a life of her own. She had admirers—several of them. She received more letters than anyone else in the house, excepting Mrs Barrington. Pollie hardly ever heard from a soul.

There was a great deal in common between herself and Mrs Barrington, she thought. For example: each of them knew her proper place, and kept to it. Mrs Barrington seldom interfered with the nursery: whenever she did so, Nurse Taylor admitted afterwards—sometimes to herself, always to Mrs Barrington, but never to the other servants—that her mistress was justified. It was this honesty that gave her a kind of secret fellowship with Mrs

Barrington, for it showed quite clearly how faithful she was, it showed that she had the welfare of the children at heart; and for this reason she knew that the present was certain to be a good one, a little piece of jewellery, a buckle, a brooch, a bangle hung with tiny enamelled objects, such as Mrs Barrington wore . . . 'I *expect* she told you not to tell me, dear!' Nurse Taylor suggested. But still the little boy would not open his mouth in reply, and the middle child stared into the distance. So the nurse continued to think her thoughts amid the shifting lights of the avenue.

She heard the rattle of cartwheels behind her, and a smart young butcher, dressed in blue, came and was gone in a burst of trotting and whistling. That, she knew, was Pollie's one and only lover; and, gazing into the chequered depths of the avenue that had swallowed the shining butcher's cart, she thought of the postmen and policemen who wanted to marry the head-nurse of the Barringtons.

Beside her ran a wooden wall, or fence, common to suburban neighbourhoods; its high, perpendicular strips of wood were overlapping towards her, and as she walked along with the children, and her steps grew slower, she could see between the spaces, and could catch glimpses of the gardens beyond. There were flashes of white roses, and streaks of sunny lawns.

'When I come to marry,' she thought, 'I shall be very successful, and quite happy. Mrs Barrington is sure to give me a handsome wedding-present, such as a leather dressing-case with my initials on everything . . . and I shall have a garden with striped deck-chairs under the trees. . . .'

Her handsome face drooped a little over the perambulator. 'Yes, dear?' she murmured. The youngest child had lost her doll; and without thinking, Nurse Taylor extracted it gently from its hiding-place.

But the middle child could contain herself no longer.

'If you *want* to know what the present is, I'll tell you,' she whispered.

'Look, Nannie, quick!' cried the little boy, baring his teeth.

'When we get home,' said the middle child, 'Mummie will give it to you.'

'Give me *what*?' Nurse Taylor almost screamed.

'My tooth,' said the little boy, pointing to the dark gap.

'The first *Barrington* tooth,' the middle child murmured, dropping her eyes.

Nurse Taylor turned the perambulator, shaking the child within it, and a deep flush swept into her cheeks. 'We're going home now,' she said.

'But, Nannie, we haven't *been* anywhere!'

Not been anywhere? *She* had. She had been a long way, farther than she had ever been before. She was truly insulted by what she had heard. She would give notice at once. Or had she no prospects in view, and must she live forever with the Barringtons? She would accept the tooth; she would even pretend that she was honoured by it; and as soon as she had reached her bedroom, she would throw the tooth under the wash-hand-stand, and never look for it again. . . .

The high perpendicular strips of the wooden wall beside her were now closed against her, overlapping away from her, and she could see no longer into the gardens.

Revolution

One day Pollie electrified the Barringtons by announcing that she had a young brother named Willie, and that he was ill in the hospital; and as soon as they had succeeded in readjusting their idea of their under-nurse, the Barringtons told Pollie how pleased they all were to know that she had a young brother, and how sorry they were to hear that he was ill in the hospital. Then they all began to feel rather awed and excited about his accident, for, as Nurse Taylor explained one morning at breakfast in the nursery, no doubt Willie would have to have both his feet amputated.

News of the projected operation soon reached Mrs Barrington, who said regretfully in her soft voice, nodding her small, dark head at her under-nurse: 'And I am sure he would have needed his feet a *lot*, Pollie.' Pollie burst into tears; and as though the doctors had heard the conversation of the Barringtons at Streatham, Willie did have both his feet amputated. There was a hard frost in London on the day that Pollie and her mother went to see him in hospital. Pollie's mother looked pale and thin, sitting near the door of the Hammersmith bus; her gloved hands lay like wood in her lap; she was dressed very neatly in black, and appeared as though she were going to a funeral. But the little under-nurse's cheeks were as red as apples, and the breath was puffing out of her mouth like steam from a kettle. While the horses were whacking their feet loudly on the frosty road, and the conductor was punching the passengers' tickets, Pollie began to think more clearly than ever about her brother's operation. She imagined the gleaming of knives, the rasping of saws, the faces of the doctors bent low down over the body; and presently she

shut her eyes tightly, and wondered whether Willie had felt anything. She wanted to go back at once to the Barringtons, to talk and laugh with the children in the nursery.

'Here we are!' said Pollie's mother suddenly, as the bus drew up; she had been to the hospital several times before, and now felt almost as at home there as though she were a patient herself. Over the hall and endless stone corridors there hung a pleasant, peculiar, smell that frightened Pollie at first and made her feel sick, but after a time she did not notice it. Nurses hurried past her and she smiled at them, and she stared at the doctors in their white slops.

They found their Willie lying back in his bed in the children's ward; he was as quiet as a mouse, but from one of the other beds there arose a continual wailing. 'Dearie dearie!' whispered Willie's mother, staring into a distant corner; 'tch, tch!'; then, rubbing her stiff hands on her knees, and nodding her jet-trimmed bonnet, she said repeatedly to her son: 'Well, lovey, we'll soon have *you* home again, I'm sure!' Her voice was suddenly so loud and cheerful that Willie thought he was going to die. And immediately after she had spoken to him, Willie's mother would turn her head and smile at her daughter, whose face beside Willie's looked as red and as shining as a tomato. So an hour went, while Pollie kept on grinning at her mother, showing her large teeth and glistening gums. But Willie's feet were hurting him the whole time, although they were not there.

And presently, on her way home, Pollie began to think of her own feet. She thought what a terrible thing it would be if she, too, were to have an accident, and if both of her feet were to be amputated, and the doctors and the pretty nurses were to see what black feet she had. 'Oh, oh,

they must be quite black by now!' thought Pollie. She wriggled her toes, and both her feet felt as heavy as lead; she feared she would never reach home. And when at last she was home again, she hardly liked to walk across the nursery floor because of the black feet in her boots. 'How's Willie?' the Barringtons cried. 'How did he look? Does he miss them much?' they wanted to know. But all that she could do was to say 'ever so', or just 'yes', or 'no, Master John', or 'not so bad, I think', to these eager questions, for she felt quite excited, and had forgotten her brother's feet in thinking of her own.

The little boy John slept in a room with Pollie; and that night, when he was fast asleep, and there was no one to hear her or watch her, Pollie looked at her feet by candle-light. Yes, there they were, both of them, just as black as could be—especially the tops of the toes, and the backs of the heels, and across the arch where the insteps and the ankles joined. She hid them at once in the shadows beside her bed; then she pulled them up again on to the eiderdown, wetted her handkerchief with her tongue, and discovered that she was able to make a good impression on her toes and insteps. Encouraged, she filled a basin with cold water, taking great care not to awaken the child; after that, she pulled up her nightdress, clipping it tightly between her fat knees; and with soap and a sponge, she washed her feet until they were perfectly clean.

In the morning she hardly ever stopped talking about Willie and his feet. 'Willie,' she said, 'poor Willie! Mother hoped he'd be a Messenger Boy.' In the evening, when Mrs Barrington, wrapped in her smart cloak, had gone to the theatre, Pollie undressed and had a bath all over. For the first time since she had been with the Barringtons, she got into the bath properly. Now she sank like a porpoise,

with only her head remaining above the hot water; now her plump body, standing up in the steam, grew shiny with soap from neck to knees; she held the sponge above her head, and in her exuberance she sang loudly, tossing the wet, dark hair out of her eyes, her famous nonsense song that the children loved:

'Coymi nairo,
Kilda care-o
Coymi nairo, coymi;
Pim strimma strammadiddle
Larrabona ring timma,
Rig nam bullytimma coymi!'

From that time onwards, Pollie took a bath whenever she could; and she went about singing her nonsense song so often that everybody grew tired of it; and when Willie was home again, and she went to see him and her mother, she used to delight in carrying him about the room, for the sheer pleasure of feeling him in her arms; and as she walked, she would sometimes catch her feet on purpose in the rather ragged carpet, and pretend to be on the verge of stumbling, so that he should not feel embarrassed, nor herself 'superior'.

The Doll

The youngest child had been put to bed for the night, though the sky still glowed with the March sunset, and people were still hurrying home from their work. The youngest child had lost her doll; but many of the people in the streets had lost their parcels, or their buses, or their heads, or themselves, or their reputations, while others had

lost a mint of money and hadn't the heart to open their newspapers.

On certain occasions, such as this evening, when the unintelligible shouts of the newsvendors sped down the street, Cook would waddle up the area steps, hugging her elbows, for she liked to have a paper of her own to read in her bedroom; and should it contain a love-serial, the kitchen-maid was at once jubilant, and walked on her toes with excitement, for she thought there was nothing so urgent as love.

'A Young Woman Shot.'

'Eh, the pore soul!' whispered the fat cook, rustling her paper in the servants' hall.

'—At ten minutes past seven last evening a report of firearms was heard in Cross Keys-square—'

Cook ran her greasy finger down the column, and sighed, for the news must wait. There was so much to be done in a hurry, what with Mrs Barrington going to *The Shop Girl* at the Gaiety Theatre, and dinner being early. An ox-tail simmered in a stewpan, a smell of savoury herbs hung in the air; and upstairs in her bed the youngest child lay fretting and tossing because she had lost her doll between the sheets.

The gentle sound travelled as far as the day-nursery, but nobody heard it. Nurse Taylor was interrupting the whirring of her sewing-machine at frequent intervals, in order to read out aloud, from an evening paper that Mrs Barrington had sent up to her, the important account of the Palfrey wedding; while Pollie, the under-nurse, was ironing, planking down the iron now and again with a soft thud on to its metal stand. The paper rustled, and the elder woman read out in her clear, significant voice: ' "Extra police had to be drafted to hold back the crowd." But I'm not at all surprised,' she murmured thoughtfully, gazing

towards the window; the light over the Streatham roofs was dying, and the chimneys were losing the sharpness of their silhouettes against the sky. 'Well, I suppose it's all over by now. Light the light, Pollie, and draw the curtains. We can hardly see beyond our noses.'

Fish-tail flames popped up at both ends of the mantelpiece, gay light flooded the room. Nurse Taylor had intended to read to herself the full account of the Palfrey wedding; but now, sitting in an easy-chair, the nurse caught sight of a greater, more pregnant item of news, and started at once on the Cardew Divorce Case, smiling at the quips of Justice Bingham. 'Well, I ne-ver. Fancy that, now,' she murmured, tapping her nail on the paper, and looking at Pollie from the corner of her narrow eye. The clock ticked; the cuckoo came out, and bowed seven times to the two women, while the churches echoed him with their multifarious voices; the lamp-lighter entered the dying street, and the youngest child fretted and grieved in her bed because she had lost her doll.

After a time, one of the gas-brackets was seen to be smoking fiercely; the glass globe surrounding the flame was blackened with soot; as soon as Pollie had adjusted it, she went over to Nurse Taylor, and, leaning her arm on the back of the chair, began to read out, in her loud young country voice, a draper's advertisement that had caught her eye:

' "COSTUMES, CAPES, and JACKETS for Spring Wear."

' "THE NEW EMBROIDERED CAPES, in every shade of cloth."

' "Young ladies' BLACK CLOTH JACKETS." '

Her eye shifted, and she read from the opposite page:

' "Murder at Ipswich Barracks.—Quartermaster-sergeant Parkin was murdered yesterday at the Ipswich Militia

Barracks. Parkin was with a man named Walsh, a sergeant-instructor . . . when Walsh took down a carbine . . ." '

'Soldiers, you see,' said Nurse Taylor, rather mincingly. 'I expect it was over a girl.'

'I sometimes wish I wasn't a girl,' whispered Pollie, staring across the room.

A policeman sauntered down the street, pointing his lantern into the areas and on to the doorsteps, and articulating, with the beat of his heel and toe: 'Law . . . and Order . . . Law . . . and Order.'

The town hummed; the noise was everywhere, and nobody heard it; but the shrill, intermittent blowing of a cab-whistle, irresolute on the wind, yet promising to endure for evermore, filled the night-nursery faintly and sweetly with sound.

A sigh of contentment passed through the lips of the little girl. All was happy now, everything was clear and the road made ready for sleep. She folded her arms carefully, and her thoughts went out of her, for she had found her doll.

Mrs Sayce's Guy

I

THE November wind had sobbed all night over Hannibal Terrace as though its heart were breaking. But dawn put an end to the monotonous sound, smiling at first, a little wanly, into those squalid windows, and eventually packing the narrow street with mist, and roofing the mist with a sulphur-coloured sky. Later, on to this shadowy daylight a back door was opened, and Mrs Sayce stood, dimly visible at the head of her yard, clutching at a plaid shawl and earnestly passing her tongue over her lips:

'Ber-tie? Break-fust!'

She could hear the voices of her neighbours. The dark morning seemed to invest each one of them with a peculiar detachment: the voice of Mrs Parslow; the voice of Molly Gunn; Lizzy Dixon's querulous outcry; the measured, mournful tones of Thomas Cooling; Macquisten's brutal laughter; Nancy Tillit, Arthur Tillit's widow, calling stridently to Lily and Jack; the united, youthful clamour of the Glydds; Henry Glazer's mincing, almost gentlemanly accents; the quick, high, frequent giggle of Edie MacKatter.

'Ber-tie? Break-fust!'

Wasn't she an artful one? But whenever she opened her mouth, there was Macquisten's mongrel dog opening his; the whole terrace reeked with the unsavoury yapping. The voices of the Tufnell children made a high shindy ten houses away. A boy's head popped out of a window, and called. Close at hand it was possible to hear an undercurrent of more intimate things. Mrs Norgate's baby was choking in a room next door; someone had lost, or another had stolen, something, somewhere—it was not to be found—it had fallen under the table—it had gone down the sink; while the everlasting cluck of a hen served to bind the whole conglomeration of near and distant sounds together.

Suddenly Mrs Sayce began to cry.

The tears were running down her cheeks. And in the tiny kitchen, where damp clothes sagged between the walls, there was no further necessity to hold back her sobs while she crumbled her stale bread, or lifted, but never as far as her lips, a cup of weak and flavourless tea. A cat was walking over the floor. Now it strutted in grotesque fashion, with erect tail, and sidelong glances at the woman at the table, who had buried her face within her hands; now it squatted upon its haunches, hind leg up, and tongue working roughly over the fur; a thin creature, finely marked, that came to her at last, and rubbed its wasted body against her leg. The action recalled her to her senses; with an impetuous movement she caught up the animal, and carried it to the bedroom above, where the ceiling was like a black cloud over her head, and the wallpaper had a saffron ground spotted with blue flowers.

A guy was there, sitting stiffly in an elbow-chair, leering through the eye-holes of a magenta mask. Its body was the essence of dislocation. Its hands were black cotton gloves stuffed with straw.

The cat began to struggle in its mistress's arms, uttered a whimper, and ran from the room; and Mrs Sayce, starting out of her reverie, saw a cloth cap lying in a chair—a woollen muffler hanging on the knob of a cupboard door—the bed, tumbled and glimmering, pushed into the angle of two saffron walls. In addition to more important duties, there was the bed to be made. Whilst turning the blanket, she kicked against a pipe, a man's pipe, that had fallen to the floor; and her hand fell upon a boy's firework, a Catherine-wheel, that was to have spun round and round. She threw the pipe across the room, but she held the other for one short moment, pressed to her heart. As soon as she had tidied the bed Mrs Sayce sat on the foot of it, rocked her body, stared at her toes, fell at last into complete stillness; then she snatched her clasped hands from between her knees, clicked her tongue, and began those final touches that her son Bertie would have given to the Guy.

Some faded piece of finery, found in a drawer; anything that might bring a shrug of jealousy from other children. Button up the coat. Wind the muffler on. Anything that should lend an air of conspiracy—there's a big knot!—and gunpowder to the whole business. And allow the ends of this muffler to hang over the chest. Presently she stood back, with her hands pressed to her eyes.

Into the tiny, grotesque body, Mrs Sayce had pushed, and prodded, and stuffed, and bundled, all the deformity of the world. Beneath a boy's cloth cap, and from the voluminous folds of a muffler, the magenta face shone forth with a fierce, disturbing beauty. Stark and evil, it seemed to glow with a deeper light than that which was coming through the window. She carried down her precious burden, and sat it in an old perambulator that

was covered with the thick dust of a year. One must go very carefully now. The thought occurred to her that this was the most important moment of her life. Force the shoulders down a little. Tuck in the coat. Set the cap jauntily over the eyes. . . . Lifting her head, she listened to the voices of far-distant children, chanting the Guy Fawkes song:

Please to remember
The Fifth of November . . .

The rhythm was both cheeky and inspiring. After a while, it was broken, from somewhere in the terrace, by the quick, high, frequent giggle of Edie MacKatter. Mrs Sayce wheeled her perambulator to the door; and through the dark November streets she pushed her little Guy.

II

She had slipped out of Hannibal Terrace with scarcely a sign from her neighbours. Only once did she hear the voices of people who had recognised her—two voices, that spoke in thick, sudden tones from the morning mist:

'Elf!'

'Yus?'

'Look, Elf! Ain't that Emma Sayce pushin' a guy?'

'Mebbe,' said Alfred Glydd; 'mebbe it is. . . . Sayce come 'ome larst night. I 'eard 'im singin'. . . . Dassay 'e come back for little Bertie.'

' . . . It *were* Emma Sayce. . . . She were pushin' Bert's guy. . . .'

'Mebbe,' said Alfred Glydd. 'Too far orf now, for a bloke to see. . . .'

. . . And after that, the bend of the road had hidden her, and she had gone on and on, past Durrant and Lowe's, and the shop where she bought her candles. 'Too far orf now, for a bloke to see.' But never too far for her to hear the buzz of their voices, in every beat of her timorous heart. No, never too far for that! She crossed the Avenue, skirted the High School, and tilted the pram towards Tinker's Heath.

She walked far that day. She was a little woman, pushing a Guy. Beyond Pewter Hill, the road to the Heath was long and lonely; but the length and the loneliness pleased her, for she was an artful one, and asked nothing better than to be left alone with the dark morning and the magenta face of her goblin Guy. 'Ber-tie? Break-fust!' Lor'! Hadn't she been an artful one? Hadn't she, now? Hadn't she been a cunning one, jest!

Here and there, the fog was lifting; and once, far ahead, she thought that she could see the figure of a man on that dim road. . . . But he went away, slamming a gate behind him. . . . Near Rington Cemetery, a sad-faced woman called to her, and she received the penny with a queer blend of pride and distraction, thanked the lady kindly, and hurried on. Hurried on, up the road to the Heath that was so long and lonely. She was a little woman, pushing a Guy; and she was tramping, tramping, until her thin shoes began to blister her thin feet.

On the empty Heath a wind was moving, catching at the fringe of her shawl, peopling the air with voices.

Amongst them she could hear the voices of children, the buzzing of the Glydds, the drunken tones of her husband, whom she hoped never to see again. . . . And suddenly a voice that began to materialise into a face, a face that she had not thought to see there, the thin-lipped, high-cheeked, brutal face of her next-door neighbour,

Macquisten. It came towards her out of the pale mist, a thrusting, triumphant face, that followed her, and would not leave her, as she drew back trembling on Tinker's Heath:

'Come 'ome drunk, ain't 'e—larst night?' it was saying. 'I 'eard 'im! Went orf agin, drunk—ain't 'e, larst night? Wheer's Bertie?' It seemed to have no other thought but that. 'Come 'ome drunk, ain't 'e—larst night? I 'eard 'im! Went orf agin, drunk—ain't 'e, larst night? Wheer's Bertie?' She turned to go; but the face followed her along the Heath: 'Took the kid away wid 'im, ain't 'e—larst night? I 'eard 'em! Left yer alone agin, 'as 'e—Missus? Lor' lumme! No 'usband, no kid!' She tried to go from him; but still the face followed; and when at last it changed its question for another, Mrs Sayce answered proudly, standing her full height, and looking at the Guy: 'Well, it's a great day wid the children, Mr Macquisten. It's Guy Forks Day. Yass! And you knows orl right I'm doin' wot Bertie would of wished!' Macquisten's dog came running up, and sniffed and barked at the Guy; and she hurried away, horrified, to the dwindling sound of the barking and Macquisten's brutal laughter—hurried away, and away, across Tinker's Heath, and down Dornford Ditch, and over the bridge by Fell Junction that spanned the railway-line.

III

She had come to the outskirts of a town, and was walking towards the river down a steep alley, while the perambulator tugged at her wrists as though it were eager to tip its burden into the water. During her journey, she became aware of a hum of voices behind her back, and

heard the rapid ringing of a fire-bell. She had been going to the river: but here was a fire. So she turned her perambulator; and, allowing its handle to push against her breast, ascended into the glaring dusk of a day that never had been very light.

She emerged from the mouth of the alley with her face shining. A fine scheme was forming in her head; but the countless units of her thought were like the sparks that drifted and tossed above her, brief visions that came, and went, and made room for more. She was carried along by the hurrying crowd, she was surrounded by rough, indefinite voices that asked a thousand questions at the corner of the old church of St Mary's. And presently she looked on something that was brighter than a vision, and louder than a voice; that whirled his tortured red arms above and before her, and cracked his crimson fingers, and threaded them through the house.

A burning house. A tall house where the roof and upper windows had already fallen in. It stood upon the corner of a timber-yard; and, when she turned her head, Mrs Sayce could see that some of the falling debris was burning too.

Her fine scheme now came fully into flower. 'Better than the river,' she was thinking, 'better than the river.' She wanted to see some expression of approval crack or wrinkle the stiff, still surface of the magenta mask. There was a street that rose in a half-circle round the timber-yard, as a staircase mounts and circles the hall of a house. When she had come to the top of it, Mrs Sayce found herself in the company of children mustering their guys. Clutching at her plaid shawl, she tried to count the goblin creatures that were passing on every hand. The glow of the fire seemed to invest each one of them with a peculiar detachment: pink guys, blue guys, yellow guys, green

guys, black guys and snowy guys, stout guys and starving guys, guys that were bright as a blessing, and guys that were grim as a curse; and they seemed to talk and laugh with one another, to hold deep conversation, to nod their masked and portentous faces as the wheels of the perambulators went round.

Two or three of the bolder children were moving towards the crazy wooden fence that skirted the brink of the yard. Elsewhere, she could hear the hissing of the engines, and could see their columns of stiff, glittering water, steady as beams of moonlight. Near her, two people were talking. The voices were hushed, and awed, yet tinged with shocked enjoyment; from them, she learnt that a woman had perished in the fire, whilst her boy had been saved. 'There. Bless 'er 'eart!' 'Pore innercent kid.' Mrs Sayce tightened her fingers round the handle of the perambulator, and began to cry.

She did not know that she was crying. She knew only that the goal was near. Bertie himself would have come up to this fence, searching—searching—for a gap through which he could drop his guy. A fierce light shone above the jagged top of the palings. She looked about her, and saw that the guys, riding up in their prams, and barrows, and boxes on wheels, were being hurled already (as light as straw, and a few old clothes, were they!) over the wooden fencing, and into the timber-yard below. 'Run away, you boys! You can't stand there!' She heard the voices of policemen, the cries of disappointment from the boys and girls. A wind sprang up, a wisp of hair tapped her on the cheek, and Mrs Sayce shivered in her shawl. She crept away, and, mounting the street to a spot where the crowd was thinner, lifted her Guy out of its pram. There was a crimson gap in the fencing. She tried to approach nearer, but the heat stopped her. Everywhere she could hear the

voices of children; the thump of the axes; men calling, and the fire hissing. In the middle of it all, a heavy footstep came, and Mrs Sayce turned her head.

When the colour of the policeman's sharp, red face, and the stillness of his helmet, had reached into her mind, she did not know what to do. She may have been an artful one in her back-yard at home, but now all her cunning deserted her, and she did not know what to do. What could she do? She hugged her arms about the Guy. But the policeman took it from her, and the policeman lifted it up. . . .

He lifted it up, and Bertie's mother cried in her heart: 'If only his eyes could peep through, now! If only Bertie's eyes could peep through the mask, and see me, for one last moment, standing here!'

But there was no one to help her. All her senses were strangely acute. She could see everything very exactly; very crimson in the light of the fire. She could hear the whole world humming, near and far. The clucking of the hen in Hannibal Terrace. Yet everything around her was very still.

Everything except this man who was standing before her; whose slight, slow movements were bringing the day to its appointed end. He lifted it up, the tiny, delusive, goblin bundle, that surely was too heavy to be stuffed with straw.

'Oh, Mister! Mister!'

The policeman muttered: 'Lord o' mercy, what a heavy guy!'

'Mister! Mister!'

'Lord o' mercy, what a heavy Guy!'

And as she raised her hands to Heaven, he began to take the mask off Mrs Sayce's Guy.

Expectation of Life

'SARAH'S a hundred. Just on.' It sounded unbelievable. It took your breath away. 'Three weeks from now, and Sarah will be a hundred.' Think of it! Even Emma Trustworthy, Sarah's sister, monstrously old herself, acknowledged that the event was an exceptional one—important—historic. Only another three weeks, and Sarah, bless her heart, will be a hundred. And there will be a bit about it in the daily papers, and merrymaking (except, perhaps, for poor old Sarah), and presents from the scattered members of the family, and—grandest of all—a telegram from the King.

After a week that seemed a hundred years, the house was saying: 'It's only a fortnight now.' Old Sarah was living with her son-in-law, Bob Bartlett, whose wife Lily had insisted that Sarah's maiden sister, Emma Trustworthy, should also make her home amongst them. '*You've* got your hands full, Bob!' his friends were saying, remembering that in addition to these ancient relatives he had an ageing, ill-tempered, unmarried daughter living permanently at home, and a jolly son who stayed with them for weeks on end between his bouts of employment; but Bob only rubbed his hands together, and everybody realised at once that he was essentially a family man and

that he had the situation well in hand. Young Bartlett, gone forty and looking it, was at home even now, cracking his jokes, hobnobbing with his father, bowing to Emma Trustworthy, falling in step with Lily's simple earnestness. 'Mother a hundred in fourteen days!' Looking at Lily's face (smooth and oval still, and dark-skinned, like the whole of her late father's family), one was momentarily hurt by its sudden folds and furrows that seemed to express the anxiety with which the entire house awaited the fulfilment of Sarah's hundredth birthday.

'Let her sleep as much as she wants!' they said.

'Don't forget her barley-water!'

'Keep her as warm as we can, mind you!'

'A fire in her room!'

'A fire always burning in her room!'

Yes indeed. After all, the main thing is to look after Sarah, they said. It was winter, and Bob was lavish with his coal. Flames shot up the bedroom chimney so loudly that Emma Trustworthy, sitting with her hands on her knees beside the black, fluted chimney-piece, shuddered and muttered and was reminded of her Bible and of the world to come. 'Mercy me, you don't believe in that!' cried Hilda Bartlett one evening, over her shoulder, and Bob laughed. Bob was a loud, nervous, hearty laugher, and his manner of laughing was non-committal; he showered his outbreaks of merriment equally upon the opposing parties, he even produced the effect that he was laughing at himself. Hilda, ill-tempered and ageing, did not resemble her father in any particular, except that during these endless days she, too, was strung up to breaking-point, anxiously awaiting the centenary of old Sarah. She had brought in the barley-water, and her mother's dark, slender hands were once more smoothing down the quilt.

Ceaselessly and extravagantly, from morning till night, the members of the Bartlett household cherished the person who was to bring them a little temporary fame. They sat and talked to her, and read to her, mouthing at the tops of their voices, and when she fell asleep they watched the rising and falling of her sunken chest. Sometimes in the small hours she was wakeful, but seldom peevish, for there were always hands to come and turn the pillow or to light the gas ring, there was never long to wait for something warm and soothing for her inside. She took her engrossing, coming event with a sly humour. 'Like waiting for a birth!' she told them, stretching her mouth in laughter, and exhibiting those few teeth that had resolved to see her through to the end. Then everybody laughed and said: 'Without the danger, though! Without the danger!' They listened several times a day to the story of her voyage to Van Diemen's Land in a sailing-ship. Young Bartlett was always ready for that: 'You mean Tasmania, Ma'am!'—but she insisted: 'No! Van Diemen's Land! Van Diemen's Land!'

Especially her lifelong vices, tobacco and alcohol, were not withheld from old Sarah during that tense fortnight. Her daughter Lily objected to this, and searched high and low for the Medical Dictionary; but Bob had hidden the book from everyone's eyes save his own; meanwhile young Bartlett had great pleasure in lighting his grandmother's cigarettes, in pouring out her whisky, almost neat.

'Don't you worry, Ma,' said Bob to Lil, 'she's used to drinking and she's used to smoking, and if you cut 'em off she's as dead as nits.'

To strengthen his words, he fetched his book on centenarians (centurions, he called them, humorously), and pointed out that some of them had smoked and that others

had not, that some had drunk water all their lives and others whisky neat.

'Cigarettes? Whisky? Nice red lobster?' he declaimed.

'La, la!'

'They'll be killing you with kindness, Mother!'

'Eh?'

'They'll—be—killing—you—'

'I bet ye'd like to, the whole lot of ye!' quacked Sarah loudly, 'when all's over!' There was a metallic ring about her voice that got on the nerves and ran like bell-wires through the house.

Young Bartlett was treating it all in the grand manner, drenching it with the rays of publicity. He was becoming open-handed. He took his father to the Rose and Crown, sprawled magnificently on the high pub-stool, drank from the bottom of the tankard's heart to 'Old Methewselah' so that all could hear. He spoke as though he were scarcely one of the family; as though he were generously concerned in watching a friend wax impressively old. He looked and spoke like a convivial schoolmaster—an older, thinner, shrewder edition of his father.

Hilda Bartlett grew very sweet-tempered during this anxious time. 'Poor old thing. I wonder what it feels like to be a hundred,' she murmured, with wide, wistful eyes; in contrast to the sleeping woman in front of her, she felt romantically young.

Only Emma Trustworthy held back from these demonstrations of hope and anxiety. 'A birth, did she say? Well, bless me soul, she's right! You'd think it *was* a birth, with all this fuss going on, and "Where's the barley-water?", "Keep the fire in!", and I don't know what!' Emma's heavy jowls would glisten and flicker all day long in the firelight, while she sat in thought beside the chimney-piece, with her hunched shoulders draped in her

shawl and her mittened hands lying in her lap. There she was, a figure of brooding, nearly as old as her sister, yet with that sufficient inferiority of years that made her a burden to the house instead of a heroine.

One day she could stand it no longer. She reminded them of the nearness of her own centenary.

'I'm ninety-seven and a half. In less than three years I'll be a hundred! Jest think o' that! D'ye hear me?' she croaked.

Hear her? Lord save us, are we all deaf? Bob Bartlett fetched a Commercial Guide from the bookcase, and read aloud to her the Mortality Table, or The Expectation of Life.

'Now, just you listen to this, Auntie,' he said. 'It's as plain as your fist. When a man reaches the age of fifty, he can expect to live another twenty years, or, in other words, he'll die at the age of seventy; and when he's reached the age of sixty he has another fourteen years to live—only six years less than t'other chap—and should die when he's seventy-four; but if he reaches seventy-four—no more than fourteen years beyond sixty, mark you—he's only got another *seven* years to live instead of fourteen—you see how quickly it dwindles, don't you

'I don't see what it's got to do with me!' cried Emma Trustworthy, refusing to be bewildered by the expounding of The Mortality Table.

'You will soon,' said Bob, 'it's as clear as your fist. Now, just you listen to this, Auntie, for it concerns you and it concerns Sarah. At ninety-seven—which is what you are, isn't it, not counting odd months?—you've got another year and a half to live, according to the book, so you'll never live to see a hundred, and at a hundred—which is just on *her* age—Sarah's got another year to live, so the book tells me. And what does that mean, if the

book's right? It means that you'll be dead and buried at ninety-eight and a half, mark you, and that Sarah will live to a hundred and one, you see if she doesn't!'

'How can I see, if I'm dead and buried?' snapped Emma Trustworthy.

A week before the birthday, Bob dashed off to the village where Sarah was born. 'I'll get the villagers to pray for her,' he said to Lily, stooping over his thickest pair of boots and rubbing the black polish generously into the cracks; 'I'll get the Parson to pray that she makes it.'

At these words, the fear that had been lurking for some days in the hearts of the Bartletts now flushed up into their faces, and every eye was asking: 'Will she make it? Will old Sarah make it?' Yet she had never been so fit in the whole of her life, never so vivid, never so sharp on the uptake, never so graphic when telling the story of her journey under full sail to Van Diemen's Land.

They were grouped around her—all but the absent Bob, and Emma, sitting by the chimney-corner—Lily, Hilda, young Bartlett, and three or four minor members of the family, down for the day; they were grouped around Sarah, shouting at her, laughing with her, contradicting her in the boldest and most engaging fashion, when in burst Bob, his face alight with news.

'Well, Grannie,' he chirruped, 'what d'you think? What *do* you think?'

'Nothing good of you, I can tell ye!'

The kettle sang on the hob.

'You're a hundred and one!' he roared, blurting it; out. 'I looked it up in the village book. A hundred and *one*—just on! Gosh! Did you ever hear such a thing?'

As soon as these words had passed successfully down the ear-trumpet, the very old lady struggled to the knobs

of her elbows, and stared in bewilderment at the circle of major and minor Bartletts. Everyone was still, except old Emma, lost in thought, stretching out her hands to the blaze.

'Mother's gone!' cried Lily Bartlett suddenly, pressing her hand to her side.

Indeed she was. The heart's blood had refused to flow in tune with Sarah's shifted mental current, and within an hour she was dead.

Dr Morncroft rubbed his hands together noiselessly, only too glad to be able to record on his certificate such a ripe age. Three days later they buried Sarah. They buried the coffin in flowers. Outwardly it was a fine funeral, almost a gay one; inwardly, it fell flat. She had missed a hundred; she had failed by a week to reach a hundred and one. As though ashamed, the hymns crept through the chapel; at intervals the Bartletts rocked their heads, and sang; but Emma Trustworthy, wrapped in fluttering thoughts, in calculations running far into the future, was deaf to the ceremonial voices.

Two days after Sarah's funeral, young Bartlett found work as a seedsman's traveller. 'Consider the lilies of the field' he murmured, kissing his mother, nudging his father, winking at Hilda, bowing profoundly to Emma Trustworthy, hoping that she would never, never die. It was a dark morning, with the lights all over the house, and Emma, feeling restless and agitated after her nephew had gone, trudged into the garden, and found Bob.

'D'ye see? D'ye see?' she cried into the murkiness. 'I was always too and a half years younger than pore Sarah. And so, when you found that Sarah was a year older than we all thought, why then, that brought *me* up a year too, didn't it? It makes me ninety-eight and a half, Bob! Fancy that! And you said I had another year and a half to live, so

I'll reach a hundred after all!'

'I'm not so sure of that,' said Bob, scratching his head. 'Now, just you wait a minute, Auntie. Come indoors. We'll take a squint at the book.'

There was gas in the house. The flames sang, giving out an impatient sound. Bob took down the book, and read for a space, and cleared his throat, and tapped his knuckle on the passage in question.

'What did I tell you? Listen to what it says—it's as clear as your fist—"Ninety-seven: expectation of life—one and a half years; *ninety-eight*: expectation of life—*one* year; *and ditto up to the age of a hundred.*" So you see, Auntie, you won't reach a hundred, even now.'

'I will! I will!'

'Do as you like about it. But even if you live to be a hundred, what's the use? It's a hundred and one we want. A hundred and one, mark you, a hundred and *one*!'

Emma, poor body, laid it to heart; and when she goes to bed, she tosses and turns on her pillow, restlessly visualising the one over a hundred, wearing herself to a shadow, taking years off her life.

A Passage in the Life of Dr Wilks

NURSE BAILEY felt the doctor's pulse; then she listened to his heart; finally, she held a mirror to his lips.

'Not a breath.'

Even doctors breathe their last—said the late Dr Wilks, smiling at her from the pillow.—If your round, baby eyes had been older, my dear, and you yourself younger, upon my soul, I might have suffered a twinge of regret at not being able to kiss the glass that has mirrored your face so many hundreds of times. . . . No answer. Yes, I'm dead, it seems. How very interesting!—

He watched her podgy fingers as they returned the mirror to her vanity bag. Snap. Poor Dr Wilks. All over now.

The room was still with sunlight.

The little nurse closed the doctor's eyes, switched on the bedside lamp, and stared through the four tall windows into bright August weather.

Rousing herself, she went her dutiful round of the thick, richly brocaded curtains. The gardener's broom lay idle at the grassy foot of the birch tree. The ticking of the bedside clock grew louder. Then Nurse Bailey rustled to the door, and stood decorously on one side.

'You can come in now, sir.'

Thank you, Ann.—

'I shall telephone to Dr D'Arcy.'

Just as you like. I am very grateful for all you have done,—he added.

His plump and dapper figure surveyed the rose-red room with the eyes of the connoisseur. He smiled at the curtains drawn against the sun. He nodded at the death-bed lamp shedding its rich, secret glow. Here was life perfected! The room had scarcely altered since he called on Mrs Wilks. Here was the white-enamelled bed as he remembered it, with its gilded wicker panel at the foot. There was poetry in the very fact that the enamel had reached the colour of old wax.

Hullo!—said Dr Wilks, sitting up.

And how are we today?—smiled the visitor, placing his hands on his plump knees.

Nurse Bailey's mirror says I'm dead. It's Mr de Ath, I believe?—said Dr Wilks.

By all means, if you wish it so,—replied the other, though, for my own part, I prefer to call a spade a spade;—and here, by a dexterous movement, he whipped off his gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and polished them vigorously with a dark-blue, white-spotted handkerchief.—That's my favourite joke!

But I know Nurse Bailey, poor dear. She is a trifle slovenly in regard to the exact sciences. I had better make sure about you,—added Mr de Ath, reaching for the doctor's pulse.—Ye . . . e . . . s. Um? Open your mouth, doctor. A leedle wider. Wider. Thanks. Say ah.

Ah!—said Dr Wilks.—Ninety-nine.

M—thank you, yes. You are ready to come along with me, I really do believe.

Are you not sure?—demanded Dr Wilks.

In days gone by,—said Mr de Ath,—I was much too certain of myself. Through ghostly aeons I worked alone, with all my life in front of me; and I cannot count the number of journeys that I made to the world, only to be turned away by the flutter of an eye-lid. People—he continued, after a brief pause—have always appeared to me more living when they are dead, then when they are alive; that was my great difficulty; than, in the course of the centuries, I discovered that the livelier a person is to me, the deader he is to the doctors; but what a struggle it has been, fixing a standard for that liveliness!

You seem a little misty in my eyes,—said Dr Wilks hopefully;—a trifle blurred.

Surely, doctor,—said Mr de Ath,—you have not forgotten so soon the familiar glaze—and here he peered into the dancing eyes of Dr Wilks.—In my opinion you have indeed attained the degree of excellence!

In your opinion! Why should I be satisfied with that? Might I suggest, Mr de Ath (as one professional man to another) that we call in a second opinion?

As regards your suggestion,—smiled Mr de Ath, tweaking the lapels of his coat,—let me remind you, my dear doctor, that none but I can judge a person's fitness for arrival into my world.

My proposition—replied Dr Wilks, with a touch of severity—related to the question as to whether I am ready to *depart* from mine.

That is our difficulty,—said Mr de Ath, reflectively,—and I cannot see how it may be surmounted. Neither, I feel certain, can you. I applaud your suggestion; yet, surely, Dr Wilks, you must admit that no leach on earth would willingly call in a second opinion to determine whether his patient is dead. I am positive that Dr D'Arcy —who had your case in hand, I believe—would never consent to such a course. Besides, who is to put the

question to him? Not you, of a certainty, and not I: not you, for the very good reason that you would have to be alive to tell him your wish; not I, because he would have to be dead in order to hear and see me.

It is a difficult situation—mused Dr Wilks.

Let us say, rather, that *you* are a very difficult situation—corrected Mr de Ath.—Really, Monsieur, you are being most stubborn. Bless my soul, I never had any difficulty with your own patients, Dr Wilks!

You forget, Mr de Ath, that Bailey has never worked with me in any of my cases.—

I have not forgotten it; but I hold to my opinion regarding the nurse's mirror: you are no more substantial than an image in a glass.—He paused, patted his chubby fingers several times on the rose-coloured quilt, and continued:—Come, come! As a man of substance, I cannot see why this should be so disappointing to you, Dr Wilks! Consider what you gain! Having come so far, why throw away an opportunity to see forgotten faces, to hear remembered voices?—

The doctor, who was still in the prime of middle age —a period when the slightest readjustment of thought will send a man roaring back into his twenties, or sobbing forward into the shadows—remained silent. In desperate cases, he had never hesitated to deal with the moment, regardless of his patient's past history and the problematical future. What did this moment hold for Dr Wilks? A vision of his wife, sweet soul, as she lay in this very bed, racked with unbearable pain; and as she was now, waiting for him in peace. Without a doubt, she, too, had argued right and left with Mr de Ath, and in her ecstasy of her relief from pain she had danced in this very room before she went to heaven. Whereupon, throwing off the bedclothes, Dr Wilks began to dance away like mad.

Leaping to the wardrobe, he took out his doctor's hat, and clapped it rakishly on his head; then, seizing his stethoscope, plugging it into his ears, and listening to imaginary chests in mid air, Dr Wilks continued to kick away to his heart's content.

I protest!—cried Mr de Ath.—Surely you are not going to continue to dance with your pyjamas on, Dr Wilks?—

My doctor's modesty forbids me to dance naked, especially in front of *you*, sir!—

Sapristi!—exclaimed Mr de Ath, breaking into Spanish, which he had picked up in Spain,—it is certainly a danse macabre!—Whereupon he polished his eye-glasses vigorously, and put them on again as quickly as possible.—I remember when I attended the seven Maccabee brothers—upon my soul, I thought they would never stop dancing! For hours they held up the world! And Mrs Wilks, also,—he continued after a pause, dropping his voice, and watching the doctor with a tender eye,—I thought she would never cease tripping about in her Paris hat, la belle madame!—

For the life of me,—cried Dr Wilks, dropping his stethoscope on to the floor, and footing it neatly between the earpieces,—I cannot see the sense in going along with you, when this is dead enough for me! My weeks of pain are dead and buried! Look—I could cross continents! I have not even lost my breath!

You have no breath to lose,—smiled Mr de Ath.

So much the better,—said Dr Wilks; and he gathered speed, preparing to dance on for ever.

Dear me! Dear me!—exclaimed Mr de Ath—and here he rubbed his plump palms together, in order to hide his irritation—it is scarcely seemly that you and I should be fighting against each other, doctor!

Excuse me,—answered Dr Wilks,—but surely it is a doctor's duty to fight against death?

Do you fight against birth?—cried Mr de Ath.—Upon my soul, you dote on him! Yes, you dote on him; yet why? I have never been able to understand your excessive fondness for my opposite number. Is he not responsible for all the troubles in the world?—whereas I take them away; or at any rate, I take away a great many of them.—

Dr Wilks hung his hat in the wardrobe, sat on the edge of the bed, and stared into Mr de Ath's spectacles.

We fear you sometimes. Even the initial of your name reminds us that you reduce all men to dust, and dust looks the same, whoever it was. Your name, in short, is immutable; and that alone gives it a great dignity. On the contrary, every time birth comes to life, we name him to our fancy. . . . It is sometimes a great pity—murmured Cuthbert Wilks—that he is never spry enough to be consulted.

Yes!—rejoiced Mr de Ath,—and then they get the law to fix it on you!

The doctor bounded to his feet, wincing at the sudden movement.

The very word!—he shouted—and here the gleam, the twinkle, the merest spark that for some time past had flecked the doctor's eye, expanded to a glow.—Neither he nor you, my dear de Ath, can disregard the Law! A man is not dead until he is *legally* dead: and here I remain, body and soul, until Dr D'Arcy has signed the certificate!

On uttering these words, he planted himself a trifle breathlessly in the middle of the room.

Tcha! A mere formality, senhor!—exclaimed Mr de Ath with the utmost irritation; whereupon he began to pace the floor.—Frenchmen, Spaniards, Portuguese, you are all the same to me! Am I not the final word of the Law

of Nature? When have the bushmen kept registers of their dead? Did I not make life itself intrinsically reasonable from that moment when I called on Mr Abel?

—It is a far cry from Abel to Wilks!—retorted the latter.—A lot has happened in the interval!—

—Nothing has happened, as far as I am concerned. I never deal with the living. You are all the same dead man.

—Speak up,—said Dr Wilks.

—What do I care,—continued Mr de Ath,—whether the population dies off within reach of its doctors and lawyers, or in desert places? *Donnerwetter!*—he added, breaking into German, which he had picked up in Whitehall—I get you all in the end!—

—Very well, then. You can wait for D'Arcy's signature, while I continue dancing!—Here the doctor jerked and stumbled at a sudden grip of pain.

Mr de Ath, who had put his hand to his ear in order to hear the better, hesitated, and proceeded:—There have been occasions when I have *wanted* to release a man from unbearable agony before his time was up, doctor—yes, there have been multitudes; but in that capacity I am powerless. I can pull no one into my world; but must wait for life itself to send him when it thinks he ought to go. Was not this the mercy that it showed to Mrs Wilks?—

—Louder,—called Dr Wilks, making an effort to dance.

—I can influence a man to this extent,—continued Mr de Ath, raising his voice:—I can make myself seductive to him—

—You are far from seducing me!—cried Dr Wilks, recoiling.

—What did you say?—asked Mr de Ath, putting his hand again to his ear.—Why are you being so stubborn, my friend? *Why go back to your pain?*—

I can hardly hear you—ah, nor see you!—exclaimed Dr Wilks, in alarm. And drawing nearer, he stared at Mr de Ath.

I wish you'd speak a little louder, shouted de Ath from afar.

Fear seized the doctor then; fear, and inspiration, while the sweat of agony dripped from his body.—It is a doctor's duty to save life, not to save death,—he burst out, digging his knuckles into his belly;—but to save the life of death—that is another matter!—

He washed his hands beneath the running tap, and prepared a syringe, in a panic. He sterilised the tube, he measured out the drops with infinite care . . . and when he turned at last from the cupboard of drugs, he held a lethal weapon, poised and ready. Nurse Bailey would have done otherwise. She would have given him a vital injection to pull him through the rapidly approaching crisis, something to keep him fully alive, in agony, if only for a few days longer. Here he looked across the room, and saw no more than a misty presence, a thickening of the air where de Ath had stood. The clock was thumping in the silence; then, baring his own firm, quivering thigh, the doctor pinched the flesh, and slowly pushed the needle into it.

To banish pain is a doctor's duty; it eases for good the patient's mind; in addition, it brings great happiness to the doctor; and after all, there was only himself to think of—no other—only himself, only Cuthbert Wilks.

The syringe had scarcely fallen to the ground when Wilks was aware of the slowing of his heart and of the passing of pain. He danced a little, stepping warily amongst the splinters of glass.

I remember—said Mr de Ath, returning his handkerchief to his pocket—calling on Mr Shakespeare. A most

modern man! Of course, I was wearing other clothes than these. I remember his first words as we flew away. 'A swanlike end,' he whispered, holding my hand, peering down at the clouds. 'A swan-like end, fading in music.' A quotation, let me remind you—from himself. Whom else was there to quote from, all those years ago?—

But Cuthbert Wilks was not listening. 'What fools we mortals were!' he decided, gazing triumphantly at Mr de Ath, who was even now achieving the full solidity of Death. 'Take me!' he cried, in exultation. 'I succumb! I succumb! Receive thou! Receive thou! Receive thou!' Then, holding both his sides, as though in laughter, and looking upwards, he thrust himself forward.

'*Recipe! . . . Recipe!*'

ꕥ

When Nurse Bailey came back into the room, she hid herself behind one of the heavy, brocaded curtains, and stared through the open window into bright August weather. Nothing moved in the garden below; but beyond the far hedge a flock of birds was flying, and she could trace the shadow mounting the field to the skyline more precisely than she could follow the flock itself, which, to her eyes at that moment, appeared nebulous against the blue. The more remote it flew, the more it melted into the sunlight; and presently it merged into the sound of the doctor's car turning the bends.

Comforted by the plump and dapper figure of Dr d'Arcy that now took possession of her mind, the little nurse came back into the room and settled herself as primly as possible in the bedside chair. Glancing down at the quiet face on the pillow, she was glad that the lidded eyes would never know that she was crying, making her face hideous.

'How splendid,' she thought, dazed with a kind of female ecstasy, 'how splendid a partner I have been! How well we have worked this out together, Dr D'Arcy, you and I!' And for the hundredth time she went over his words that had given her the hint of what she should do.

'If the touch of the finger-tips on the wrist is not sufficiently delicate, and the ear not sensitive enough to catch the beating of the heart, there is always your little mirror, my dear, when human senses fail.'

Of course, he hadn't put it in exactly those words. But was there not a hint to her, conveyed in the not quite remembered words that he had actually used? She heard his car, at this very moment, swerving off from the village; soon there would come the crunch of the wheels in the drive, the ring of the bell, the creak of the baize-covered door from the kitchen, the barking of the dog in the hall.

There was something else that Dr D'Arcy had said, and she linked it up with the other.

'You'd let a patient die, I really do believe, when perhaps a shot of something underneath the skin, at the proper moment—but there,' he had added, snatching off his glasses in his dear, familiar way, polishing them vigorously with his beautiful, white-spotted handkerchief, and quizzing her with his bright blue eyes, 'it *all* depends on what your *mirror* says!'

She heard the barking of the dog.

It all depends on what the mirror says. . . . 'I had better save our consciences, my dear,' she whispered, smiling.

Taking her mirror out of her vanity-bag, Nurse Bailey wetted a corner of her apron with her ugly little mouth, and wiped off the waxy preparation—the stuff that she was in the habit of rubbing on the surface of the glass, to keep it from clouding.

The Strange Disappearance of Monsieur Charbo

IN that tiny place, we could have heard the gentlest of voices. And the stranger's voice was not gentle. It boomed. It boomed with the note of big dinner-gongs.

Imagine it! At Bourdaloue's, in the Rue Balbec—that wonderful voice! I turned round sharply in my chair, and looked at him. I said to myself: '*Mon Dieu*, what will become of us all?' He was big, he was fat, he was like a Périgord pig, he was like a shipped goose; his great beard was as black as a fried mushroom; and his lips were as thick and as pink as a couple of Alsace sausages.

At Bourdaloue's, in the Rue Balbec! It was enough to make an angel weep; and I am not an angel. But I assure you that this small establishment was never very far from Paradise. Let me tell you the dishes that they served there. The *sole Bourdaloue*, the *entrecôte Bercy*, the *poularde Wladimir*, the *bécasse à la fine champagne*, the *crêpes Suzette*. For the spring, perhaps, *a gratin de crevettes roses et de morilles*. It would be a sacrilege not to mention the delectable wines: the Vouvray, the Château Yquem, the Château-Haut-Peyraguey, the Musigny 'des Amoureux'—above all, the Chambertin, with the sunset in its heart.

Look at those red clouds, over the river. It is marvellously silent here, in your river-tavern; before the coming of the bearded man, it used to be the echo of silence in the Rue Balbec!

Yet he has had his uses, yes? For the story that I am about to tell you is of this man. I have spoken of his appearance. Now I shall speak of his disappearance.

His disappearance. . . .

Aïe, aïe! what are you laughing at? One moment. You yourself have put an idea into my head. Whenever I look at a man, I know very well that some years earlier he was quite another person. Is it not a fact, that every five, or ten, or twenty years—myself, I do not know the time, to be sure—each man has a new length of hair on his head, and a whole new surface of skin on his body? We have only to look at our hands—at our faces in a looking-glass—then at some old, faded photograph taken in babyhood, to know that this is true. Pouf!—we are gone! We have disappeared! We are quite another person!

Listen. For many months I saw Monsieur; for many months I heard his voice. Every day, at the same hour: Monsieur Charbo, bellowing like a bull, with a serviette under his chin. Sometimes he would come alone; at other times—emphatically he would not. On those occasions he would be accompanied by a little friend, a 'pretty girl', with a great mop of curly hair the colour of Calvados brandy, a very wide, red mouth, and eyes—*ma foi*, they must have been two inches long. One could see that she was rather timidly fond. He called her Sylvette, in a voice that he would try to soften occasionally, Sylvette, Sylvette, Sylvette. . . .

I suppose I saw her half a dozen times, no more. He was happier when he came alone, I think; though it seemed to me that he was always very happy and selfish.

Here, now, is the manner of his daily arrival. For just one moment the open door would be darkened: and there was Monsieur Charbo, look! see! immense, black-bearded, fat as flesh, striding to his table, booming out to Grégoire: '*Bonjour, Grégoire! Ma sole Bourdaloue!*'

A little man, that Grégoire. A little, meek man, with wrinkles in his voice; whenever Sylvette was away, Monsieur Charbo would be commanding him, or teasing him, or cracking a joke with him, at short intervals, throughout lunch-time. And at first we were shocked, immensely shocked. Never before had we known such a great calamity in that tiny temple of the Rue Balbec, where food and silence used to be the only gods. Bourdaloue himself, the good Bourdaloue, with his white jacket, and fat, round chin on which you saw a little beard that shone like an oasis in the desert—Monsieur Bourdaloue was very angry with the new customer, and requested Grégoire not to answer 'that man' when he called so loudly; but the stranger had an appetite, and was a gourmet into the bargain; so, therefore, Monsieur Bourdaloue thought the better of it, and on many occasions afterwards I saw him serve the client with his own hands. '*Bien perdu, bien connu*,' I whispered, and lifted my glass in honour of the silence of past years.

Yet I did not show my resentment. I was calm. I listened and watched. There was a little table in the window, and from here I had been in the habit of peering into the street whenever the exigencies of the meal permitted me; but at last I changed my chair, and looked only at *him*. I was very sly. I said to myself: 'Be careful, Jules Levasseur; take care that he does not see.'

Yet in spite of my terrible slyness, he did see. Yes? For one day, on his way out, he stopped at my table, and handed me a pencil note: '*Les félicitations de Sosthène*

Charbo.' It was the first time that I had heard his name, and there was something in it that made me feel afraid. For a moment I could not collect my thoughts. Next moment I felt ashamed; and because of my agitation, I tore up the note. The room was very tiny. I did not know what to say. When I had thought out my fine speech, it was too late. Grégoire stood at my elbow, offering Cognac. It was very awkward. And Monsieur Charbo was bowing and smiling. Then he put on his hat, and strode away into the Rue Balbec.

What a predicament! It was not a pretty smile. All the blood in my body was frozen, my teeth chattered, and for days afterwards I was unable to fix my mind upon the incomparable *caneton à la presse*. For this reason, and because also I wished to make amends for my impoliteness, I decided to watch no longer the immense Charbo. He took no further notice of me: very good, I would take no further notice of him. I saw him come; I saw him go; I heard his voice behind me; sst!—in a few days I was back again at my old tricks, I was watching every movement of his fat body! But discreetly, now. Whenever he looked up from his plate—and I had learnt to time his actions to a nicety—I looked down at mine. There was a mirror in a gilded frame, and here I could watch my enemy without being seen by him; and it is possible that I was soothed by the mirrored Charbo, for after a while his actual presence ceased to trouble me. I grew accustomed. As time passed, we took him for granted, all of us. He became an institution in that place. So it continued. The weeks flew, the months also; a whole year came to an end; and always there was Monsieur Charbo, booming like a bull, with his great beard, black as a mushroom, nearly hiding the napkin under his chin. Then one day we had that famous murder in the Rue Darn. You have heard of it, yes?

The murder in the Rue Darn? Rue Darn. . . . Ah, yes, now you remember. It had come at a time when your own murders were rather 'few and far between'. A horrible affair. 'Some girl or other'—is that what you said?

'Some girl or other!' Why do you put it so coldly as that? The poor little one! How she would have been delighted to sit by our sides at this window, looking across the river! Here comes a small cloud, drifting this way, like a feather; it reminds me of her. Alas, alas! To you it was but a tale; to us, who at any moment might take it into our heads to stroll up the Rue Darn—what a tragedy! You have an English word, Monsieur. Her end was shocking. I implore you never to ask me things that I cannot tell. *C'était un carnage inexprimable, l'œuvre d'un chien d'enfer!*

Poor little thing. Dead without a name. No trinket in her dress. No finger-marks on the white paint, on the articles of toilet, on the white china door-handle. No weapon thrown away. Nothing but footprints, footprints, in the thick dust of the faded carpet.

Everywhere one would hear talk of 'The Murder in the Rue Darn'. It penetrated even the secluded atmosphere of Bourdaloue's, in the Rue Balbec; it whispered and boomed in the daily conversations between the little Grégoire and the fat Charbo. The talks they had! We others, we have listened by the hour to their two voices, the big voice and the little voice, that were thick and thin, like soup. Grégoire said that, and Charbo said that. But never did they come to any conclusion. How could they? It was interminable! In those days I used to sit with my chin on my propped hands, looking out of the window, or I would lean back in my chair, sipping my miraculous Louis Philippe brandy, and the still more astonishing coffee: thinking of past years. Years that used to kneel in silence at the ghostly, kingly feet of Brillat-Savarin. All gone! All gone! . . .

How little you use your English rivers. In half an hour I have seen but two tugs, and two barges, turning the river-bend. And it makes the year go very slowly, very deliberately, here at the tavern: well, that is what I like: I like to go very slowly, very deliberately. We were terribly slow in the Rue Balbec! Just our few selves, a few tugs, pulling our lives along. And as time passed, I began to realise that I was listening to his voice long after it had ceased to talk of the almost forgotten murder in the Rue Darn. But my ears were inattentive; I was full of thoughts; gazing downwards, into the depths of my Calvados brandy, I could see the bright colour of her hair—and her big eyes looking up at mine—and could hear—at last—like a tiny dirge—the tinkle of the dead girl's name—Sylvette—Sylvette—Sylvette—Sylvette, until it drowned all other sounds at Bourdaloue's.

You will find these Larranagas in splendid condition. I I brought them over with me from France, from Paris—it is now many years ago. A thousand devils! Why did I not jump up in my seat, and denounce him there—before them all—before the whole room!—before—before—he disappeared? Listen! It was so clearly the fault of my friend Maillabuau of the Paris police.

Maillabuau. No, you would not have heard his name, he did not come into the Paris journals, he had retired, and did not come into them at all. Yet he might have done so much while there was still time! He permitted my Charbo to slip through his fingers. That I can swear! Oh, the imbecile! Like a fat olive! Sosthène Charbo, murderer of Sylvette—there was nothing more clear to me than that. . . .

He should have been more sympathetic, my poor Maillabuau. Why are you smiling, *hein*? Ah, zut! it is because you are like him, you also are *imbécile*, you laugh

at my instincts, you turn into ridicule all my impetuous ways!

So! I have offended you. Permit me: another beer? Please, yes! Another mug of this good beer. *Merci*, Monsieur! There is an enormous restaurant, a great, gaudy place, in the Rue des Petits-Champs; all day it is full of a vast assembly of people, and it was here that I had my first consultation with Maillabuau, in a big room that was very private because it was very noisy. I remember the inferior kidneys *cocotte*, the clatter of the service, the sharp, English voice of a woman who called for her bill; then suddenly Maillabuau, wagging his long head over the Touraine:

'Zut! Sylvette and Charbo!'

'But you should see Sosthène Charbo!' I shouted, 'you should see Charbo! You should see his face!'

'So, therefore,' says Monsieur Maillabuau, greatly diverted, 'you wish me to suspect this murderous-looking villain. And why, my little Jules? Because they have found some poor girl who cannot be recognised!'

'Why!' I cried, astounded; 'you do not assist me?'

'There are other people in the world, Monsieur, besides Sylvette and Charbo!' answered my poor friend.

'Sylvette is no longer in the world, Monsieur,' said I; and again I told him that I had not seen her since the murder in the Rue Darn.

Bah! What are instincts to a man like Maillabuau? Delicate flavourings are beyond his palate! Yet I said to myself: 'By and by you will be able to convince him, Jules Levasseur;' and during the following weeks I did not lose my appetite for the superb Bourdaloue dishes, but ate, on the contrary, with an extra eagerness, in that tiny room where the buff walls were gently lighted by a single long, low window, and Charbo's beard hung like a black curtain

over his black heart. What a terrible picture the big man made! Had it not been for his magnificent taste in food and wines, I should have judged him the greatest devil in all Paris. As it was, I vowed that I would prove him devil enough in the eyes of my friend Maillabuau. 'Just you wait, friend Maillabuau,' yes? Just you wait! That is what I said continually; and often, during my thinking and planning, I would forget to order a bottle of my favourite Chambertin with the larded guinea-fowl, or a Pouilly with the *moules marinières.*

Sometimes I saw Maillabuau, and he would call out:

'Well, my little Jules! How goes it?'

'Magnificently,' I would reply.

Again, because Monsieur Maillabuau was a retired detective of police, and possessed, therefore, many important friends in high places, I used to call on him, in the evenings, at his rooms in the Boulevard Beaumarchais; and in spite of the amusement with which he regarded the whole affair, I would pretend that I was making great progress, that things were coming to my ears, etcetera, *hein?*

In addition, I must tell you that I went many times to the neighbourhood of the Rue Darn, and there made friendship with the widow Paetsch, whose German husband had left her a grocery in the Rue des Trois Fontaines. While purchasing cheap, unwanted things over the counter, I lifted up my hands in horror of that cowardly assassin who had brought so evil a reputation to the Rue Darn.

'*La pauvre petite,*' said she, shutting her eyes; '*ah-h-h, la pauvre petite*!'

'You knew her, Madame?' I continued.

'Perhaps—perhaps—but I have so many young customers—they come—and they go,' sighed Marie Paetsch

remorsefully, slipping my money into the till; and often I was able to call on my friend Maillabuau with little bits of gossip, little bits of advice.

As, for instance:

'What is it, Jules?'

'It is about our friend Charbo.'

'*Sans doute!*'

Then I would tell him some information that I had received.

'Zut! We must have more than that, Monsieur!' Maillabuau would exclaim; so, therefore, on the next evening:

'What is it this time, Monsieur Levasseur?'

This time it was something vastly more important, something that would make his eyes open, 'a choice morsel'. Madame Paetsch, casting her mind back, had remembered very distinctly that on one occasion, shortly before the murder, she had sold a pound of *pralines* to a pretty girl whose hair was the colour of Calvados brandy.

'Good: proceed.'

'And that Madame had not seen her since,' I added.

'Good: proceed.'

'Bagatelle!' I cried angrily. And away I went, for the circumspection of that man was beyond measure.

Alors, one day Monsieur Maillabuau, catching me by the arm, conducted me into the restaurant in the Rue des Petits-Champs.

'It is about Charbo,' he whispered, over the *sole maison*.

'But this is good!' I cried, 'this is magnificent! This is the very thing!'

'No it is not!' snapped Monsieur Maillabuau.

'Proceed,' said I.

'Charbo used to live in the Rue Caulaincourt. He was a musician, a composer, and played on the flute—'

'He played on the flute!'

'*Voila!*'

'It is beyond conception!'

'They have told me that he used to play in the orchestra. "What orchestra?" I demanded; well, but they did not know. His friends were poets and painters and journalists; he was very reserved, and did not make himself at all popular with the members of his own profession. Sst! Do not interrupt me. I hunted about, and discovered more than one of the theatres where they had known him. His name, they said, was always Sosthène Charbo; a big-bearded man. Then one day he disappeared from Montmartre. On making further inquiries,' ended Maillabuau, in his dry, professional voice, 'I learnt that Sylvette Loury was a friend of his.'

'Well, you have done magnificently!' I exclaimed. 'Loury—Loury.'

'*But we all know that!*' cried Maillabuau, in a kind of despair, throwing up his hands. 'We know that Charbo is Charbo! We know that Sylvette is Sylvette! We know that they knew one another! What, then, do we not know? Everything! We do not know that the murdered girl was Sylvette Loury—and Sylvette Loury was nothing more than a name and a pretty face in Montmartre, my little Jules!'

'Ah-h-h, truly, it is very difficult!' said I; but I went to bed happy that night, knowing that the great Maillabuau had come to his senses.

Alors, one morning I called out to him: 'What a pity it is that I tore up his note!'

And all this while you must figure to yourself the fat Charbo, sitting at his table, day after day. . . .

Here comes another tug; here come two barges. With what a persistence they plunge through the waters!

There used to be many peaceful pictures before he came to Bourdaloue's: for example—my coat and hat on a chair beside me—twelve Forains, in black frames, scattered over the buff walls—a little clock that seemed to grow fatter with ticking—Grégoire coming and going—Monsieur Duval sitting at his table—Monsieur Bellechasse sitting at his—Monsieur Barféty, Monsieur Prouteau, Monsieur Pihan, Monsieur Roux, each engrossed at his own table; and now—behold!—our immense Charbo had himself become one of the pictures! We took him—as you say—for granted. Sometimes I would hear his loud voice—but it was such a familiar sound that for days on end I would not hear it at all. Time was passing now very smoothly and swiftly. Monsieur Prouteau was away once, for three weeks, with a hæmorrhage in the nose. When he returned he was quite pale; but Bourdaloue soon brought back the blood into his face. We were all businessmen there: not one of us would be absent for more than six days' holiday in the whole year; and as for myself in particular, excepting for the two occasions when I lunched with Maillabuau in the Rue des Petits-Champs, I was not absent at all. Another year passed, and only Bourdaloue's bill of fare reminded me of the changing seasons. That is because I was no longer consumed by impatience; because, also, I was filled with a great confidence for the future; because, also, I was remembering always new things against Charbo —old things—things that he had said, perhaps, to Sylvette, across the table, in the old days. Therefore I do not know when it was that I decided to follow him home. . . .

Consider, Monsieur: in my thoughts I had never separated him from Bourdaloue's! What foolishness! 'We must change all that!' I said. So I chose a day when the *suprême de soles* was not so ravishingly cooked as usual, when the guinea-fowl was not so fat as she might have

been, and a *je ne sais quoi* hovered over the *flan aux quetsches*. What had happened? There were whispers of domestic trouble in the home of Monsieur the Cook: his son had arrived from the French Congo; his wife was ailing; *voila!* we knew well enough what it was—it had happened before—Madame was going to have a baby. So, therefore, we had to make shift with the poor cooking, *hein?* I peeped at Monsieur Bellechasse. Already he was reaching out for his coat, his hat, his gloves. I peeped at Monsieur Duval, at Monsieur Barféty, at Monsieur Prouteau, at Monsieur Pihan, at Monsieur Roux. All, save Monsieur Prouteau, were gathering up their things, and rolling their cigars in their mouths. '*Bonjour, Monsieur.*' '*Bonjour, Monsieur.*' '*Bonjour, Monsieur.*' '*Bonjour, Monsieur.*' Even at that time, I felt that things had come to an end; that I, at any rate, would not be lunching at Bourdaloue's any more. '*Bonjour, Grégoire.*' '*Bonjour, Grégoire.*' '*Bonjour, Grégoire.*' '*Bonjour, Grégoire.*' '*A la bonne heure!*' I thought to myself; and peeped at the bearded man over my coffee cup. He, too, showed signs of the general dissolution. Presently he whipped the napkin from beneath his chin—Grégoire came running up—the bill was settled—and there was Monsieur Charbo, setting forth into the lovely April air.

I followed. On the pavement a crowd of people wandered to and fro, up and down, here and there—they jostled me—it had been raining, but now the sun was glistening on the wet street, and somewhere or other I could hear a caged bird singing; there were two working men carrying a great box between them, and all the while calling out: '*Mesdames, Messieurs! Mesdames, Messieurs!*'—but I kept my eyes on the back of Monsieur Charbo the whole time. There he went, straight ahead, never looking back, trying every moment, as I could see, to get into his

stilty stride. But the children and the pretty women had been drawn by the sunshine to disport themselves in the shadows and sunny spots beneath the Ailanto trees: and often I was greatly troubled concerning the back of Monsieur Charbo amongst this pleasant company—would I mistake it for that one, or that one?—and this will appear to you droll, without doubt—because, as you know, always I had been enchanted by his enormous raven beard (which I tried now, in vain, to see floating a little on either side of his bull-neck) and by his colossal size. Where *had* it got to, my Charbo's beard? and where were the glances of admiration or inexplicable fear—the hurried walk—or the averted eye—that I had expected to see exhibited towards my old Charbo? He turned a corner, and I said to myself: 'Aha! Aha! I shall have a better chance to follow him there!' But when, at last, I entered the spacious Avenue Mathilde, and was staring along its perspective of blank walls, skinny trees, and sagging pavements that ran down into the roadway with all the mournfulness of sands running into the sea, Monsieur Charbo had disappeared.

Very strange, yes? Very strange and memorable. Very *curious*.

It is possible that you are anxious to learn the precise locality of this Monsieur Charbo. But upon my word, it comes to me that I have never told you the precise locality of Bourdaloue's, that is to say, of the Rue Balbec! Well, the Rue Balbec is situated, without doubt, in the Ternes-Pereire district, or still farther north—it is, perhaps, a street off the Boulevard Pineau, or perhaps, after all, it is in the Levallois Perret district, a street off the Rue Cave, which is near Clichy, where the oil and starch factories are; and, at any rate, the spacious Avenue Mathilde is one of those unfrequented avenues a long way north of the Bois, an avenue *manquée*, full of a mournful charm when you have

walked along it for a great distance, and have left far behind you the bustle of a little street like the Rue Balbec. . . . And always that is the sort of answer that you will receive from the epicures, whenever you have demanded of them the precise locality of their Bourdaloues. Listen! Myself, I did not go a very great distance up the Avenue Mathilde, but stood gazing at a figure that began to emerge out of the mists of my perplexity, and which, to be sure, I had been aware of all the while without being *quite* certain whether it really existed—the figure of a shabby man, who walked some little way in front of me, at a brisk step, with his eyes glued to the ground. Thinking that he might be able to assist me, I ran after him, and implored him to tell me quickly, quickly—had he seen a big man, with a black beard, passing that way?

'No, no, Monsieur,' said he hurriedly, after a little hesitation, 'I have not seen such a man as you describe'; and his thin cheeks, weak chin, jutting nose, and shifty, hungry eyes, seemed all to be twitching slightly in the fresh wind.

Very strange and memorable. *Very curious.*

His scraggy neck, rising from his low and not particularly white collar, appeared to me the spirit of the Avenue, a thing forlorn. But, while I was scanning his features in my strained and irresolute manner, there came upon me one of these *coups de pied, coups de poing, coups de bâton, coups de sifflet, coups de tonnerre, coups de vent,* and *coups de dent*: that is to say, I was kicked, and fisted, and cudgelled, and whistled at, and thunder-clapped, and winded, and bitten, all at the one moment, by the Imp of Knowledge; moreover, to my very great annoyance, I discovered that I was asking the stranger's name.

'*Pardon, Monsieur*—it was a question which I had no right to ask. A very impertinent question, that! A matter

for my deepest apologies!' He accepted them silently, bowing low, and holding his hat in his hand; then, in his scanty voice, that trembled, I thought, with a note of defiance, he informed me that his name was Adrien Tanrade.

'Adrien Tanrade,' I murmured, thinking all the while of my great discovery: 'but yes, of course, it is Adrien Tanrade!' The wind blew dismally down the back of my neck as I gazed at his fine, prominent nose. 'Why, it is *that* which has given the game away,' I nodded, 'for is it not true, what I have heard said, that the nose is the only feature of the face that rarely changes with the passing of time, or on a restricted diet?' But even while I was so speaking, he had continued upon his journey, dwindling in my sight under the still, wintry trees, to that unknown haven of his, where, without doubt, in the evenings, he took out his music-stand, and piped on the shepherd's flute pastoral songs.

Ah, gentle Monsieur Tanrade! Yes, gifted Charbo! Sad musician! Slayer of Sylvette! Only one thing is there to be said of these two persons: *What an Artist!*

A little bit daily off the beard, just a skimming of the black surface: in effect, no more than a faint sprinkle of the best Arabian *moka* on the white face-towel that he flings every morning over his shoulders and over his chest while he wields the scissors; and a little bit off the voice, just one vibration: in effect, no more than would fill the throat of a cheese-mite (living in one of our delicious Port-Saluts of Normandy, for example)—one vibration in the whole day, Monsieur—oh, what an artist, the miracle of that one vibration!—and a little bit off the weight: that is to say, a little bit off the appetite: in short, a little bit off the meal: and such a very little more, at each sitting, that weeks go by before Monsieur Grégoire is tempted to put

these abandoned portions on one side for his own eating. Not by a snap of the scissors, nor by the smallest tremor of the vocal chords, nor by the slightest tip of the scales, did Monsieur Charbo exceed his daily reduction of beard, and voice, and grandeur. Cannot you admire the supreme *delicateness* of this wicked man? Just so much a day—Just so much a day—So much? No, no, Monsieur—so little!

And we who saw him, lunch after lunch, at Bourdaloue's, in the Rue Balbec, how would we have noticed the slow change in him, eh? Is it not the same with all of us, in our own homes: that is to say, with those of us whose whole lives are spent in one tiny, monotonous place? Every day we look in the same glass, and every day we see exactly the same person. We live, perhaps, with our father, our mother, or with our wife, our child, or with our brother, our sister, and always it is the same person that enters the room.

On the following day I went again to the Rue Balbec.

The sun was bursting bright; little trees in tubs twinkled with new shoots on both sides of Bourdaloue's open doorway; somewhere or other the canary bird was singing in its cage, and the April air was of that quickening kind that made me wish for a *gratin de crevettes roses et de morilles*.

But I did not enter, nor did I sit at my delightful window-table ever again. What would you have? It is hurtful to my dignity, thought I, to be sitting in the neighbourhood of *that monster*. I had arrived late, so that the commonplace, sordid, vulgar, daily rite was in full swing under my very nose. I judged that Monsieur Prouteau was enjoying his larded guinea-fowl. Preposterous person! Ridiculous people! Oh, you ridiculous people! Pigs! Sots! Guzzlers! Fools! Blind fools! Idiots! Stay-at-homes! 'You should follow him into the open,' I shouted

(but I shouted it to myself, in the depth of my heart I shouted it), 'into the wild places, into the Avenue Mathilde; you should open your eyes, instead of only your mouths, you fat, guzzling lunatics, you—poor—fish!' Then, with the canary bird trilling its song of remarkable freedom somewhere above my head, my eyes, running hither and thither, saw Monsieur Duval sitting at his table, Monsieur Bellechasse sitting at his, Monsieur Barféty, Monsieur Prouteau, Monsieur Pihan, Monsieur Roux—and Monsieur Adrien Tanrade. . . .

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How peaceful it is by this river bank. Let us walk as far as the bend. And how leafy, too. Yes, how leafy! Look at all these green leaves! It is a real Paradise. *Tiens!* Little did I know that Spring was upon us. I had an idea that everything was still black trunks, and bare boughs.

The Thorn

A POOL of November sunlight lay in the bowl of faded rose-petals, on the nest of tables beneath the window. Miss Martindale smiled, and put down her sewing. How often had Dr Collins told her not to work so soon after her lunch! But time was short—and so was life itself, with birth, marriage, and death almost on the top of each other —and today the was working roses on to her grand-niece's wedding trousseau.

The firelight flickered over her white hair.

'*I* used to see a lover's face in the fire,' she nodded, gazing quizzically towards the far end of the room. At that instant she heard a rustle among the faded petals beside her.

Perhaps a draught had stirred them? Surely not, when the door was shut, and her niece Susan had bolted the french window? She straightened her glasses, stared through the window, and heard no sound from the gusty breeze that shook the twigs and evergreens of the garden. Then Mary peered into the bowl, and thought that she could detect a gleam of white on each yellow petal.

Why was she not more regular with her pepsine tablets? Mary Martindale opened her mouth, and turned her head away in time for the sneeze that almost jerked

her passementerie cap over her eyes. That was her indigestion back again! What would Dr Collins say? She looked a second time into the bowl, and saw that the white gleams were more than mere reflections from fire or window. These dead rose-petals were beginning to live.

'Dear me,' sighed Mary Martindale, lifting her hands, 'I'll never get my sewing finished!' Here she picked up the garment, and bowed her head over her embroidery of full-blown roses. In a moment she was patting everywhere for her needle. Good gracious! Susan! Susan! Where has it got to? My needle has come off the thread! It has fallen on to the floor! . . . But of course she was always losing her needle, always finding it again . . . and had not Dr Collins warned her not to strain her eyes? When she looked at the petals once more, she saw that they were beginning to unfold, to reach definite outlines. Yellow was clearing to palest cream.

She took a petal into the palm of her hand, and found that it was growing pliable. She watched the wrinkles flatten out into the satiny surface; and as she dropped the petal back into the bowl, she caught the scent of roses.

Here Mary shut her eyes, and heard a fluttering beside her; and when she looked again, the petals were rising and floating above the table. She watched them flit towards an empty vase that stood at a corner of the tall mantelpiece; and suddenly she held her breath, entranced by a trick of some ghostly Merlin, whose fingers, shaped invisibly before her, and dispensing with their wizard's conjuring-cloth, now shook out from the secret folds of the air a green stalk, with its attendant leaves. The stalk swayed and dipped, while the advancing petals fluttered above it, clustered, and grouped; the green stalk slipped into the vase; and Mary Martindale was beaming at a snow-white rose in the first freshness of its youth.

The vase had filled with water to the brim, and here and there a drop was sparkling on the leaves and petals.

The drawing-room, too, had changed. The fire was gone, the very coal and sticks were gone, the embers had been swept away, and summer shone through summer curtains. The air was lazy with the buzzing of flies, and for a moment Mary Martindale felt inclined to abandon herself to the sleepiness of the hour; then, with a chuckle, she jumped from her chair, and her glasses jumped from her nose. She ran to the open window, and gazed at the hot burst of garden that greeted her there. The lawn was mottled with sunshine and shadow. Overhead, tossed the shrill cry of the swifts. Near her, a rose tree was in bloom.

She tried to catch sight of the swifts in the patches of blue between the tree-tops. For more than a minute—for more than an hour—Mary stood there, listening. The scent of the rose-tree came to her on a flicker of wind. The sun burnt a sudden pain on her cheek.

A swift, darting by his hole under the eaves above her, screamed, and startled Mary Martindale into movement. She crossed the sunny lawn, and mingled with the shadows at the far end of the garden.

The beaded lace on Mary's cap and dress sparkled at moments when the sun found her. The smell of new-mown grass was everywhere; and far off, in the spotted region of dark-green and yellow under the trees, Phillips had stood his mowing-machine. The garden was sleepy and full of sound. Mary never ceased to hear the whistle of the chaffinch and his ringing, musical 'pinck' as he called to his mate. A linnet, with his summer crest of bright vermilion, flickered by, and perched for an instant on the handle of the lawnmower. Apples thudded to the ground. The clock struck in the drawing-room.

Four o'clock? A whole hour yet till tea! In summer at five; in winter at four; there was plenty of time to pick some flowers, and to do a bit of weeding. So Mary Martindale turned back to fetch her scissors and her basket from the hall—but on her way, she paused. The rose was in the garden now, a few feet short of the blossoming tree, a foot above the highest blooms and branches.

It was set in air, motionless, as though on wings so swiftly moving that Mary could not see them. She went to it across the sun-drenched lawn, and found that the flower was smaller than when she had last seen it: one or two of the inner petals had begun to fold over its heart. The garden lay now under the bluest and sultriest day of June. A privet hedge was shaking with the passage of some bird buried within it, and insects spun continually round the old lady's head. She heard the apples thudding to the ground. She heard the clock chime in the drawing-room.

Mary remembered the roses that she had been working on to her grand-niece's wedding trousseau, and she cried: 'Dear me! I ought to be hunting for my needle, instead of watching a rose!' A honey-bee, humming from flower to flower, alighted on the rose, and crept into the petals.

The old lady put up her hand to adjust her glasses, and laughed aloud when she found that they were no longer there. The bee flew away, and she watched it into the sky . . . and her head was still lifted heavenwards when the lark began to sing. The explosion of song caught her unawares, though she had been prepared for it. The throbbing in the sky was answered by a tremor in the hovering rose. The song ended: and the silence that filled the garden was deeper than any that had gone before: the most cunning musician could not have paused as eloquently, with uplifted bow.

In this silence Mary Martindale lifted her lips and shut her eyes, and heard and felt the lovers' kiss, given and taken above the rose.

The clock struck in the drawing-room. The waning flower began to move towards the blossoming tree; its shadow crept along the lawn, and when Mary opened her eyes at last, the bloom was twinkling on the branch.

It was tucking away the petals, and creeping into the bud. Mary watched, while the perfume of the white rose mingled and circulated with the sap of the tree. An eye was closing . . . a moon was dying . . . to become no more than a distant star, shining amid the branches. . . .

Before the last flicker was dead, Mary Martindale thrust out her hand, and her finger was pricked by a thorn.

When, at the same moment, Susan ran into the room, and switched on the light, she found her aunt hunting in the bowl of dead rose-petals; and the old lady, blinking her eyes, muttered that she had lost her needle.

'You've opened the window, too,' cried Susan. Then she looked at the fire, and saw with dismay that it was out.

'Oh, what an icy room!'

Even that was not all. Her aunt's glasses were on the floor; and, stooping down, 'Why, dear,' cried Susan mournfully, 'you've pricked your finger!'

So it was. The needle, lost in the bowl of withered rose-petals, had pricked her finger. Her niece tore up a strip of linen from the work-box; but, when the girl had gone away—then, undoing the bandage, and waiting until

the little bead of blood appeared again: very quietly, very secretly, and gently smiling, Mary Martindale lifted her finger to her lips.

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe

'AND now,' said Harlock solemnly, pushing back his chair, 'and now to business.'

We rose to our feet at the far end of the studio, and watched him delicately pinching out the half-burnt candles on the shining dinner table. It was a scene that we had all been waiting for, from past experience—a transformation from the choice and orderly to the grotesque, for it left us standing in the large and leaping firelight.

Sitting at the chimney-side, ready to have our breaths caught by Harlock while we filled our chairs with comfort, we were in another room altogether. Witticisms lay behind us, arguments had been thrashed out and buried, the bowl, for the time being, had flowed; and towering shadows, the perfect background for ghost-stories, had taken their place.

We waited for our host's thin, fire-crimsoned face to reveal to us that his mounting list of horrors was about to be capped by an effort supremely terrifying for a Christmas occasion . . . but the slow, grim smile never came. He kicked the pine logs into a fiercer blaze; then fell to groping in the remotest corner of his studio.

When he returned, bringing from the shadows an unframed canvas, we supposed that the supreme effort had

surely arrived: the story was to be too disturbing for even the remotest of smiles. He stood the canvas on a chair at one end of the fireplace, so that we all had a fairly good view of it. The quality of the painting and the subject of the picture appeared to give to each other a dark and sinister life under the shifting light of the flames; but it was not until the clock had struck, bringing him up with a start, that Harlock began to tell us the following story:

'I found it in a corner of a shop in Fulham Road. It's a good piece of painting, as you can see—even by firelight; but that was not the reason why I bought it. The reason was not so—so aesthetic as that. I bought it because I knew the subject, and because I knew why the painter had painted it. *His* reason was not aesthetic, either—the man is quite unknown to me, by the way—and I don't expect he cared how little he got for his picture. He wanted to thrust it out of his sight . . . and he got rid of it because it had served its turn—the painting of it had prevented him from going mad.'

Harlock put his finger-tips together.

'I myself had done the same thing, you see. But I never sold my picture. I never tried. Perhaps my professional instinct is not so developed as his. As soon as I had painted it, from memory, putting in that finishing touch, that pinpoint of light in the landscape, I took a knife, and slashed the thing to pieces.

'No doubt,' he continued, hesitatingly, looking round briefly at our row of faces, 'you are wondering why, having got rid of it in such a deliberate manner, I bought its counterpart the moment I saw one in a shop. The reason is very simple. I was overjoyed at finding that another person besides myself had been to the place. . . . I always think of it as the loneliest *inhabited* house in

England. The atrocious puffball weed told me that the house was indeed the very same. Without doubt, *he* had tasted the cheese and cider there . . . had stayed there half the night . . . had handled the same set of instruments. . . .'

Harlock stared into the heart of the fire.

'Very vividly,' he continued, in a thoughtful voice, 'I remember that slow and oddly clear September evening when, having walked for the better part of a day, I found myself, with the sea waves at my back, staying inland at a house, a cottage, a habitation—call it what you like—that sprawled beneath a thin protection of stunted and ragged trees at the back of a field of washed-out poppies, under a rising moon. A solitary light was shining below the thatched eaves, and I walked towards it over the poppy field.

'A nice sort of place to come upon when you're tired and hungry and have lost your way! Look for yourselves. Did you ever see a more god-forsaken spot, such ragged trees, such a sprawling and shapeless dwelling? And yet, you know, because of its very shapelessness it *had* a shape—the picture has caught it perfectly, and so did mine. Can you imagine such a ridiculous combination of things as a bloated pancake with a blanket of heavy thatch on the top of it? That's how it looked, in detail, when I was right up to it. All the straw colour had been soaked out by the sea-wind. And look at that feathery, puff-ball weed! It shows like a ground-mist in the picture, doesn't it? Up to the thatched eaves in many places; even higher. Heaven knows how I found the door at last, and the courage to thump it. I shall never forget that dead and dismal thumping on the door. Then I tried the latch, and found myself at once in a room that seemed to spread over the whole house. For all I knew, it *was* the house. The endless sagging beams helped to make it look like that, I think. And at first I could see nothing else in particular—nothing

but the lamp on the huge round table, and a multitude of tiny windows with that weed shining beyond them. Then I saw some plates and dishes on the wall, the swinging of a pendulum—and after that . . . I always wish I had never seen the large and pale and flabby woman who was moving towards me from the far end of the room. She was unspeakably large. I stood my ground, staring, and I believe I counted the thumping clicks of the pendulum clock; they must have been, at any rate, the only links between myself and the busy world outside. They pulled me together at last, I suppose, for suddenly I blurted out that I had lost my way and had seen her light; and as she approached the table, smiling at me enormously, she sucked in her tiny lips until they almost disappeared. But the horridest thing about her was that she seemed to have earth in her hair.'

Here Harlock paused; but only a stranger would have broken the silence. 'I have never seen a fatter woman,' our host continued. 'She panted at the slightest exertion—gently enough—it was the only sound that ever came from her—but sufficiently to show me that she was certainly flesh and blood. Otherwise I might have had my doubts about her. For even at a distance the house had looked haunted. Something in the very set of the trees—the flock of feathers on the evening light—and the soughing of the sea. . . . And because of her shortness of breath I began to suspect that her fatness was constit-utional. Oh, you mustn't think that I was working it out as clearly as this! It was merely a matter of instinct, I suppose, roused by my hopes of a good square meal. And in the end, of course, I found I was right: my spirits had risen too high. Risen at the prospect of a well-stocked larder, I mean. For she motioned me up to the table, and I sat on a stool, an antique thing, hollowed and polished with years of sitting;

and then she took a loaf of bread and half a cheese from a cupboard, and poured me out a bowl of cider, and I wanted to cry. Or very nearly.

'She sat there facing me across the table, large and still and silent in her wan, robe-like dress, while in my hunger I tried to swallow my tough bread and crumbly cheese and to wash them down with hurried gulps of cider from the bowl; and whenever I glanced at her over the rim I saw her horrid smile. My hostess sat with her clasped plump hands on the table, smiling at unknown things. Hostess? What a funny word to use! I watched her get up noiselessly, and then—I wish I could make you hear the sound that followed. She went round the room, swishing the little window-curtains on their metal rings and rods: swish, swish, swish, swish, a ripple passing round the room, blotting out the moonlight, blotting out those pictures of feathery, puff-ball weed.

'She left me abruptly after that—abruptly for her, I mean—and I wondered, with rather mixed feelings, whether she had gone to prepare a room for me—a bed. Perhaps it was because of her unbroken silence, and the even flow of her movements, that I took her hospitality, such as it was, as a matter of course. I don't remember asking myself whether she would expect to be paid for my night's lodging; she and money seemed so utterly unrelated to each other, I suppose. But I do remember that this sudden and welcome change in the evening's entertainment left me somewhat breathless—a bit frightened. Should I run away? While there was time? The same old situation that you come across in books. Such nonsense! But that's exactly how I felt, just then. The cider didn't help me. The cheese was appalling. Dry, crumbly stuff. Sour, too. Tasting rather of earth.

'I was to get many things into my head that night, but

never the cider. This woman's flowing bowl was not of that kind. I could have shattered the silence without an effort, if it had been. In the end I made my effort, and succeeded—but what a fool I felt! "I must do my best," I thought, "to keep my spirits up. *I shall see it out!*"—and the sudden sound of my voice startled me and made me laugh. I began at once to examine the room with deep interest. Here and there the ceiling bulged to such an extent that I *knew* I would bump my head against it sooner or later—running from the house in a moment of panic, for instance—it's funny what nerves will do! I liked the clock high up on the wall—and that was scarcely higher than head-level. It was one of those ancient timepieces built when time was really slow, with a round, brass face, a leisurely pendulum, and two brass weights on chains—by which I gathered that the clock would strike at any moment now—it was nearly nine—and I was curious to hear its voice. The plates and dishes on the cloudy dresser gave out a sort of phosphorescent light. They had no other use, I thought, but to be seen and wondered at; for a large oak chest was standing in front of the range. The mouth of the chimney above the chest was hollow, dark, and dead. There was no fireside. No chimney corner. Nowhere to sit and tell stories. . . .

'I never heard it strike,' he said, with a kind of regret. 'She came back before that happened. I heard the last of its loud ticks as she closed the door upon them; and I felt quite lonely then, lonely and rather bewildered, for while I was following her along the countless passages and ups and downs of her strange residence she looked like a thick mist rolling in front of me . . . if you can imagine such a silly thing as a solid mist panting for breath.'

Harlock turned, and gazed for several moments—with a certain look of distress, I thought—at the picture in the

chair. 'I want you,' he said, 'I want you to get the hang of that room she took me to. I mean especially the feeling of it. But to begin with, it was a very big room, and she had lighted it with six or seven candles. Quite a showy display! Three of them were standing on a large, square table in the middle of the floor. The floor itself was covered with some kind of cork matting. She had stood two candles on a chest of drawers. She had even placed a candle on a chair in one of the corners, near the huge, painted, wooden bed. All the furniture was very massive, and painted. After the candles, it was the colour of the room that I noticed chiefly. The walls were panelled—shallow panels from wainscot to cornice—and painted a bluish green—I may as well call it viridian; a very light and faded but still rather shiny viridian. The furniture was of the same colour; so was the bed-linen, and the billowy eiderdown; so were the heavy, shallow window-curtains; and because of this prevalent colouring, and in spite of the size of the furniture, the room looked empty and asleep. I sat on the edge of the high bed, on the top of the thick eiderdown, with the toes of my shoes just touching the floor. My mind was all on the room in which I was sitting. I was trying to get the feeling of it. And do you know what it was? You can't. It was *children*.

'It had been a nursery. But whose children, whose nursery, how can we ever know? Hers? That would be the most natural thing in the world . . . and the most horrible. And in any case,' said Harlock thoughtfully, after a pause, 'the question didn't seem to matter very much to me then, and I don't know that it does now. The feeling was there —the feeling of the nursery itself, I mean, of—merely of children long departed. And that also—I remember thinking to myself after a time—didn't matter any longer.

The history of the room was over. Over and done with. Or was it, perhaps, only "over", and not yet "done with"?

'At this point in my speculations I took off my heavy walking-shoes, and lay flat on the bed, under the thick eiderdown, which I pulled up to my chin. I had left all the candles burning, for I was afraid to sleep. I spent some time tracing with my eyes the very faded pattern on the ceiling, pretending that the pattern was a maze and that I was walking about in it, a game that I never get tired of; but even if I had gone to sleep I suppose the little bell would have woken me. You know how it is, in a strange room—things are watching you all the night, and you awaken early, suddenly, all alert: you wake up to listen for something that you have just heard. For some time I had been listening to the far off flump of the slow waves on the shore; and suddenly I heard the tinkle of a bell on the beach. They had washed up a bell? In a few moments, of course, I knew that it had tinkled in the room. I let the thought sink in. Then I threw off the eiderdown!

'It was only a momentary panic. One of those unreasoning fears that children do have, you know. In fact, as I roved about in my socks, searching for a toy, the room appeared quite friendly. I felt that I had known it all my life—The Viridian Room. I heard the bell tinkling again, jerkily, intermittently. At last I stood in front of a tall cupboard. It wasn't locked. And there were no shelves in it—nothing to throw shadows. On the floor, at the back, I saw the bell shining in the candlelight. It was one of those tiny, round bells that toy reins have on them. I couldn't see why it had rung. By that, I mean, of course, *how* the bell had rung . . . the material reason. . . . I took it out,' said Harlock, 'I took it out and tinkled it; and presently I went and looked at the box of chalks on the table.

'It was open. I had seen it all the time—seen it without realising exactly what it was, I mean—seen just its existence, and not its purpose; for who would expect a box like that to contain chalks all of the same colour? After tinkling my bell for some time I dropped it on to the table and sat there facing the open cupboard and toying with my chalks, and presently I wanted a sheet of paper to write on. I found it in the drawer beside me, an exercise-book. I pulled up my chair, spread my elbows, and wrote at once, in viridian green, on a new page:

One, two, buckle my shoe;
Three, four, knock at the door;
Five, six, pick up sticks;
Seven, eight, lay them straight;
Nine, ten, a fine fat hen;
Eleven, twelve, dig and delve.

'You remember that nursery rhyme? Until then I had forgotten it. I used to think it was full of sense, even when taken in a lump; and while I was still sitting at the table, looking across it into the open, lighted cupboard, and thinking over the words that I had just written down, I saw the mouse. At the back of the cupboard, against the wall, I saw a mousehole. Clearly the source of the tinkling! While I watched, two black shiny eyes appeared, and the furry shadow glided along the floor of the cupboard and into the room, where it took to moving in fits and starts.

' "Hi there! What are you up to, you little beggar?" I called out, starting off in pursuit, and brandishing one of my heavy walking-shoes—but not with any serious purpose; you know I would never hit a creature, don't you? I simply followed the mouse across the room as far as the chest of drawers; and there I found a pair of shoes on

the floor . . . kicked off into the corner between the chest and the wall.

"*One, two, buckle my shoe.*" '

Harlock had dropped into his gentlest voice.

'They *did* have buckles on them. Buckles as bright as silver. So I put on the shoes, and buckled them up, and found that in them I could walk as stealthily as a cat. I prowled with such gentleness over the room that I hardly made a candle quiver; and presently I stopped in front of the narrow door, the door that I haven't yet told you about.

'You see it the moment you enter the room—a rather low and narrow door on the far side of the table; but you don't *really* see it until later, when you are standing right in front of it, looking at the little knocker—the kind that you sometimes see on the study door in a vicarage.

"*Three, four, knock at the door.*"

'I knocked at the door.

' "Come in!" called an incredibly high-pitched, thin, and windy voice. I went in, shutting the door behind me.'

At this point, Harlock jumped to his feet, and proposed loudly a round of drinks. He switched on a blaze of light, and we heard him boiling his electric kettle behind our backs.

'All that I could see at first,' he continued, in a steady voice, a minute or so after he had returned to his chair, and while we were still sipping our whisky toddies in the restored fire-light, 'was a regiment of moonbeams slanting into the room through uncurtained lattice windows, and a man facing me across the floor, motionless, waiting—

myself, in a mirror. What a fool one feels, when one's two selves are brought thus face to face—each of them scared of the other! The first movement—the sudden tentative trial—and the spell is broken, and you turn eagerly to look for the thing that you *expect* to find. I saw her, at hand, lying on her large bed, slowly kneading the eiderdown beneath her with her fat fingers, pulling in her lips, watching me with her small eyes; and the floor and the bed and the woman were patterned with lattice windows. The bars of shadow and light showed me her rounded, massive bulk to perfection. Five, six, pick up sticks.

'And where do you think I found them? Why, on the bed itself, of course! A couple of bedstaffs. Do you know what a bedstaff is? It's a loose cross-piece of antique bedsteads, often used as a handy weapon. I took them from the head and foot of the bed, and while I was doing so the face of my hostess was twisting about with a kind of cringing, mock terror. Five, six, pick up sticks—seven, eight—lay them straight! I remember that while I was wielding my cudgels I glanced in the mirror and saw the shadows of the window bars slipping along them. Lay them straight, lay them straight! Seven, eight, lay them straight! I laid them good and straight. Once I felt a shiver in my arm—I had hit the ceiling.

'As soon as I had satisfied myself that the flutters of her heart had ceased—I can still feel her wrist between my finger and thumb, you know—I dropped my bedstaffs for good, and hurried off to open one of the two other doors in the room—The Garden Door, I fancied the children had called it. How breathless was the scene through The Garden Door! I held my breath and gazed all over the great neglected garden; then I returned to the woman and picked her up, and I swear she was no heavier than a puff-ball. But what an armful she made! What an armful!

What a fine fat hen! I carried her into the garden and over the rank grass and plunged with her into the cluster of weed beyond. I had seen it through The Garden Door, shimmering in the moonlight. The stuff stood higher than my head, and was here in great profusion—a forest of weed. I don't know how long I took to reach my destination. Probably not very long; but when you're pretending to be a pirate—or something of that kind—carrying your booty into the depths of the woods, to bury it, well, you don't care at all how long you take to reach the burial place. I came upon it in a moment, without warning—a sudden breaking from the weed into broad moonlight. "This is the place," I remember saying—"this is the spot they have chosen."

'A spade lay ready to my hand, and fluff from the surrounding weed was drifting and settling all the while on to the tumbled earth.

Eleven, twelve,
Dig and delve.

'I put down my burden, and took up the spade; and in that spot I dug and delved.

'When I came out of the weed,' said Harlock, in his softest voice, 'I saw that the feathers were sticking to my clothes like splashes of plaster.' The fire had burnt low, we could scarcely see each other's faces, and only his voice was holding our little group together. 'And I think it was the sight of those feathers,' he said, 'that sent me tearing back in a panic over the lawn, slapping my clothes all the time. Escape! I had no other thought but that. The children's rhyme had worked its way with me. Escape from the house and the clump of weed and the infamous thing that

I had buried there. I ran through the bedroom and into the viridian nursery and kicked off the buckled shoes—kicked them into the corner, as all the others had done!—and while I was sitting on the bed, putting on my walking shoes, and looking towards the open cupboard, I saw the mouse returning to his hole beside the little bell. . . .

'What was the use of my shutting the cupboard door with a bang? The Viridian Room hardly echoed to it. And even the loudest noise would not have convinced me that in that silent house such a sudden crash must certainly have brought things to an end. I even took steps to prove to my satisfaction that I was right. I ran back into the bedroom, back into all those spears of moonlight; and then—I wish I had never opened the Garden Door again. It was not what I actually saw, but what I knew I would see if I stayed for more than a very few moments. . . . Looking across the wild, moonlit grass, I saw at least a *shaking* in the tops of the weed—and it wasn't the wind, you know—the movement was working its way towards me, slowly, jerkily, inch by inch. . . .

'Fear, of course, won in the end. It sent me racing back into the depths of the house, where I caught my head a whack against the ceiling of the living-room, for the lamp was out. She had put it out. The clock was thumping loudly; and I was scared to death that she might find me there before I got away.

'I hardly know how I got away in time. Hunting for the door, plunging through the puff-balls, sprinting over the poppy field—have you ever seen poppies by moonlight? Sanity! That's what I was after! Sanity, and the breath of the sea! Well, there was no breath, the wind was dead, there were no waves; but I scooped up the water in my two hands, and cooled the bump on my head. . . . And

after that I went back to the foreshore and watched the house until I saw her light gleaming again. . . .'

Harlock stared at the dying fire.

'I suppose I ought to have known it at once,' he said, as if to himself. 'Especially from a distance. Known that the spot was haunted, I mean. It was there, staring me in the face—the queer shape, the mist of puff-balls, the heavy thatch, the very set of the trees.'

Then one of us, softly, as if to take the edge off the silence that followed, ventured a remark.

'I suppose the real ghost was the children.'

'*She* was not!' Harlock burst out. 'She was something far worse than that!'

Nothing further was said while we watched our host returning his picture to the remote corner.

Aimless Afternoon

EVERINGHAM, with his knees up to his chin, was sitting on the beach at Shorehampton, staring over the sea; and the sunlight, from behind the lower edge of a cloud, was coming down in a big, faint fan, smearing a white streak along the very thread of the horizon.

After staring for a long time at a point midway between the cloud and the water, Everingham turned his head. The beach was almost deserted at this hushed and played-out end of the summer season. A hundred yards to his right, four or five people were sitting, grouped and motionless, and a white-hatted man with his back to the indolent waves was on the point of taking their photograph. Everingham waited for the click of the shutter; then, seeing the man approaching the group of people, he persuaded himself that he had heard it.

The fan of sunlight was dissolving now into the dull sky; the white streak was fading as though the sea were lapping it off the horizon; and Everingham lingered on until his eyes and ears were certain that not a glimmer remained. He thought that he had heard the faintest sound as the last spark died. Hearing was very acute on such a day as this, and he fancied that with the smallest effort he

might project himself long distances, and there exist in mind, if not in body.

The wind began to blow, yet he still lingered; then he sprang up in a flurry, as though there were duties of great importance that he must do. There was none. He intended —what was it that he intended to do? To turn away from the sea. Yes, certainly that. To wander back to the Marine Hotel? He stooped, and picked a piece of seaweed from his trousers, and saw the group of people from the corner of his eye.

Everingham climbed the noisy slope of shingle, and, coming to a flight of steps in the wall at the back of it, reached a broad and ornamented terrace, where a pavilion of glass faced him. On the outside of one of the panes, the bill of a departed pierrot troupe was still showing. In summer the building was full of sun and sound and flies; but now the air was cold and dead, and only a single, human voice could be heard buzzing, intensely pronounced. Inside the door, to the left, there was a small bar where soft drinks, cigarettes, and chocolates were for sale, and Everingham said to the young woman who presided at it:

'Ten Players, please!'

She looked up, smiling, from her knitting of sky-blue wool, and reached for a packet, bright in its wrapping of cellophane paper. He did not need these cigarettes. There were a hundred in his hotel bedroom. He had spoken for the sake of speaking; particularly, perhaps, for the sake of crushing that monotonous voice. It had certainly paused— but Everingham, staring round the pavilion, soon saw that the late speaker had no other thought beyond his companion in the faded yellow beret. The youth had paused because he was casting about for something clever to say, and because the girl, perilously tilting her glass on

the marble-topped table between them, was expecting his next remark to outshine all those that had gone before; and the effort had fixed the young man's mouth and eyes into three circles, from which nothing emerged but the darkness of despair.

Impulsively, Everingham went towards their table. To his delight they smiled at him as he was passing; and he, surprised and flattered, smiled at them. He caught their serious eyes. For a moment the glass walls expanded, to enclose the whole of the throbbing world.

Fearful of breaking, by speech, the spell of this encounter, he hurried away through the door at the far end of the pavilion, thence climbing further steps to the parade above. He entered one of the deserted shelters that were set at intervals along the Shorehampton parade, and shivered as he gazed at the sea. 'Yes. Even the Marine Hotel is better than this,' he murmured, starting up; and five minutes later he stood in the hall that was forever impregnated with the smells of sea-mist and cooking.

'What do I want with my key?' he muttered, dropping his hand from the rack that held the keys, and mooning back to the hotel entrance. A waiter was standing there, deeply occupied, wetting the stub of a pencil; his fingers were almost hidden by his dirty cuffs; behind him stretched a plot of grass, the railings of the promenade, the thread of the horizon.

Everingham sighed, and, putting his hand into his pocket, ran his fingers over the cellophane wrapping of the cigarettes; but already the thrill of the contact was passing away. Turning abruptly, he reached for his key from the rack, and hurried into the coffee-room that crushed him at once with its grimy walls, its ceiling almost out of sight, its napkins folded and waiting. He stood at a table, and drummed, with his key, a song of love that the pierrots

had sung in the summer; and through another door he passed into the depths of the house. Climbing the staircase, softly creaking every stair as he walked, Everingham rose towards the roof of the Marine Hotel, Shorehampton. He saw the dull white figures of chambermaids flitting along the corridors that stretched away from the successive landings. 'Hi, there! Are you all daft?' he shouted, and wondered why he had chosen that particular adjective. No one answered him; and presently he turned the key in his lock, and pushed open his door.

The young man asleep on the bed stirred at the jarring sound of the key in the lock. Everingham sighed and walked steadily onwards, the light of the room fading from his eyes. He bent down, smiling, towards the sleeper, whom at that instant he did not see. 'Hey! Wake up! Wake up!' he whispered resonantly into the young man's ear: and Everingham, waking up, and becoming momentarily blinded by the glare from the window, turned in a panic on his bed.

The voice that he had heard in his ear, the touch that he had felt on his shoulder, soon resolved themselves into gestures that had come from within himself and not from without. Lying for another full minute on his back, he watched, beneath the mottled ceiling, the oscillating of a fly that had overlived in this mournful room. 'Oh, fly to hell!' moaned Everingham at last, and sat upright upon the bed. His eyes no longer saw the light of day intensified, as they had done on his awakening. He stared at the drab routine of the sky. The sight of it took him to the window, to view the scene that he knew too well, to gaze at the horizon of the sea. The waves of the sea were all crushed out by the heaviness of the afternoon. Standing there at the window, he remembered his dream. He had found himself in the pavilion. He had asked the woman at

the bar for cigarettes, and with a frown she had reached out a hand from her knitting of sea-green wool. He could hear, even now, the thud of the packet on the counter, a packet of Players in shop-soiled cellophane wrapping. And he hadn't needed cigarettes. He'd got a hundred in his hotel bedroom. He had spoken for the sake of speaking, he remembered now; for the sake of shattering that deep silence. He had gone away, pursued by the clicking of the knitting-needles that seemed to accentuate the emptiness of the tables and to contract upon him the four walls of the pavilion.

That was all. A barren scrap of dream. He turned his back to the window, and stared into the room. The farthest corners were towering store-cupboards of shade. He had chosen this large, unfathomable room because he wished for the physical freedom that only space can give —but how could he be free, when for ever clamped by his thoughts? Across the floor, and scarcely throwing a flush on the surrounding air, a fire was faintly glowing, and by it sat a woman. A woman? . . . But who was she? . . . And how did she come here? . . . He dared to approach her; stood, and watched her face. A woman sitting by his hearth, asleep, her lashes almost touching her cheek; smiling, waiting.

Though the fire did not cast its glow upon him, at least her mouth had kindled a smile upon his. She would be embarrassed if he awoke her now. He must leave her here, to sleep on, undisturbed, and later he would call a chambermaid.

Walking on tiptoe, searching the room for his hat, he stopped at intervals to listen to her breathing; then, leaving the door unlocked and putting the key into his pocket, he paused at the brink of the staircase. Where should he go? It pleased him to know that she was there, asleep, behind

his door. A small and misty skylight hung above his head, sprinkling upon his hair the temper of the afternoon. Where should he go? To the sea? Oh yes, why not? He would go and lie on the beach, and wait until the sea washed him away. His arms were hanging limply at his side. He dropped his hat, and stooped to pick it up, and saw the gleaming of his door-handle from the corner of his eye.

Accompanied by the creaking of stairs, Everingham descended to the ground floor of the Marine Hotel, Shorehampton. Passing through the coffee-room, his thin and languid figure looked as unsubstantial as a ghost. The hall was empty; no one loitered at the entrance; the smell of the Marine Hotel dwindled behind him. At the foot of the steps there were two stone urns, enlivened with dead geraniums; a faint wind rustled through the stems, but its note was soon supplanted by the crunching of shingle, and as Everingham stood on the quiet sand there was not a whisper along the whole shore. In the clear, grey light of the afternoon he could see great distances. 'This is better!' he muttered, starting to walk westwards at a quick pace, ready to feel the springing of the sand beneath his feet. On his right hand, far ahead, there lay the glass pavilion, looking as heavy as lead beneath the sunless sky; and when he had come abreast of it, his pace was slacker, and he felt as though he wanted to sink down on to the sand, and die. His heaviness of mind and body brought him to a standstill at last; he could go no farther; and sighing, he drooped down to the moaning man who slept on the sand at his feet.

'Wake up! Wake up!' cried Everingham.

Then Everingham woke up. His cheeks were pressed between his drawn-up knees, and his eyes, narrow with dreams, were directed towards the sand and wormcasts and

fan-shaped cockle-shells at his feet. The cool air soon brought him to full consciousness of his surroundings; looking round to his right, he saw the family group, moving now, and the photographer on the point of attaining it; and as soon as the man in the white hat had reached the people, they stood up, as though something were ended, and began to walk away. Everingham turned his head, and looked at the sea, hoping that it might furrow into waves. As he stared at the sea, he remembered his dream. He had awakened panic-stricken in his hotel bedroom, thinking that he had heard a voice in his ear. The voice was in fact no more than his own, speaking —who knows?—from some inner dream that had just ended; and for some minutes he had continued to lie on his bed, watching a fly beneath the ceiling. He had found himself later at the window, staring dejectedly at the scene beyond; and finally he had stared into the room itself, running his eye over all the familiar things, the monstrously patterned wall-paper, the crumpled counterpane on the bed, the corners towering with shade, the pleated and glimmering sheet of paper hiding the mouth of the fireplace and shaped like a fan.

A scrap of dream, over when scarcely begun! But all his life was dreams, calling and shaping and coming to nothing. The sea and the sky were uniform in colour now, and almost in texture—grey and without lustre. Everingham lifted his head, and gazed at the horizon. Only that was real and always there. It ran like a thread between heaven and earth; and as he gazed, the thread rolled up from either end, and formed a knot, pressing against his eyes.

The Announcement

TOWARDS three o'clock on a hot August afternoon, a tall and rather studious-looking man emerged from a side street and began to walk unhurriedly along the main thoroughfare amidst the noise of the traffic. People frequently knocked against him, and he lifted apologetic eyes from the pavement.

When he discovered that he was about to enter the Public Library, a bitter smile leapt into his face, and he stood still for a moment, staring at the two sunny spots on his shoes. Force of habit had guided him here, half way up the Library steps; the destination that he had contemplated was a hundred yards farther along the high-road.

He found himself standing at the barrier where books are returned and fines are paid. The thick-lipped, familiar face of the young woman smiled at him, and he felt comforted; smiling back quickly, he said to her: 'I haven't come to return a book, but to borrow one,' and for more than an hour afterwards he was browsing amongst books.

At first he strolled beside the shelves of fiction. Austen, Balzac, Chekhov, Conrad, Flaubert . . . the names recalled to him very vividly, on this hot afternoon when every minute seemed an hour and all his mind was waiting in suspense, characters and scenes that had filled him with

pleasure and a promise that he would enjoy them again; sometimes he touched a book impulsively with his thin fingers; but not until he reached Gautier did he take a volume down, and then, standing back from the shelves, he read, for the sixth or seventh time in his life, the description of the old house in *Captain Fracasse*. The wildness of the picture fitted his mood. He heard once more the croaking of frogs in the drive. He saw again the red-tiled roof with its leprous patches, the rifts through which the bats were flying, the broken shutters, the statued grotto in the garden of weeds. Yet after a while he drifted back along the library shelves; refreshed his heart with the names of Singapore, Makassar, and Carimata; listened to Freya Nelson (or Nielsen) playing fierce love music in one of the Seven Isles.

His mood for whatever book he was reading never lasted for long. Soon he wanted another atmosphere, another author—and he chose them deliberately. Deserting Conrad, he searched for the mountainous landscape in Chekhov's *Duel*. The characters were at a picnic in the shadows of evening. Scattered stones lay in the meadow, convenient for sitting on; a rug was spread on the ground, and a fire was burning. On all sides, the mountains rose up into the sky. They were a solid frame that seemed to hold the jerky, tenuous nerves of the picnic-party together.

The Lending Department was large and cool; beyond its western windows a garden glittered in the sun. The quiet man wandered from book to book. There had been times when his thoughts ran on murders and thefts and strange, death-dealing inventions; there were nights when the grim art of the detective story had soothed him and sent him to sleep soundly. Such tales he now began to sample, turning the thick leaves to and fro, reading the

propitious names of the chapters. Yet all the while, there stood on his face a look of distress, even a fleck of horror.

From fiction he turned to the 'non-fiction' shelves, and his pale hand, shining in sunlight, took down a copy of H.B. Irving's *Book of Remarkable Criminals*. Once it had been in his mind to produce such a book—to write of a man like the Reverend Selby Watson, who murdered his wife on a Sunday evening from an access of melancholia. Here, too, was Dr Castaing, looking more like a priest than a doctor, with his long face and regular features, hair brushed back from the forehead, and downcast eyes. The reader lifted his eyes, and saw on the shelf above, *The Story of the English Cardinals*; and he studied the clerical faces carefully, hiding the mouth or the eyes with his thin hand.

Biography held him for a long time. He read of musicians, of artists, of inventors, of explorers; until there came to him at last an overwhelming desire for maps and geography, for books of travel, especially for the innermost meadows of England and for descriptions of those counties that he had never seen. He reached up for Rutland, and read through a page of its typical scenery; he found and examined a book on the Thames Valley villages, staring for long at its illustrations . . . at the oldest bridge, lying in low meadows. . . .

Turning again to the shelves of fiction, he looked for those novels that he had intended to read, and would never read now: *The Chartreuse of Parma*, by Stendhal—surely the greatest of novelists, he thought with enthusiasm; Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*; the *Erewhon* satires of Samuel Butler; the stories of Count de Gobineau; and many more. He did not want to take them down and dip into them. He merely wished to stare at the titles. Here was the second volume of *Scarlet and Black*; he was reading the first volume—he had it at home; in certain passages,

through the subtle turning of a phrase, he had guessed already the terrible end. And walking wistfully beside the shelves, he came to Merrick. He liked Merrick. *Conrad in Quest of his Youth* was a favourite of his. But the book was out, and, feeling at once—as he stared at the place on the shelf where the quest for youth should have been—a dryness of mouth, and a bitter taste on his palate that made him shiver, he hastened towards the barrier. The young woman smiled with her thick lips; her very round glasses caught the sunlight, and her eyes were hidden.

'No, I've not chosen a book,' he said gravely, and passed out into the entrance hall.

Here on the wall was a marble tablet; he read the name of a former Mayor, and for days afterwards it was ringing in his head. Children ran in from the street with loud cries. They had books under their arms. They pushed against him, and entered the door of the Children's Department.

He walked up a passage that led to stairs, but he did not know where he was walking. In the ill-lighted tunnel he saw a shelf that was strongly made and well supported; on it stood huge, bound copies of *The Times*, and each thick volume comprised a year. In a spirit of anger he lifted one down, carrying it with surprising ease in his two arms; and at a table in the Reading Room he turned the yellow pages that had been as white as linen nearly fifty years back. He had not seen the announcement before. Had his mother kept it?—had her hands preserved it?—

WARRINGTON-COOMBE.—On August 10th, 1885, at 41 Durham Street, Fulham, to MARY, wife of R.H. Warrington-Coombe—a son.

At the foot of the Library steps, a baby in a perambulator scowled at him with its ugly, puckered face. The traffic deafened him and the sun blinded him as he pushed his way defiantly through the crowd. They were adding a wing to a general store, and he could hear the hammers as the workmen erected the scaffolding. When, at last, he entered the building that he had first contemplated, his knees were shaking, and he felt cold. The Police official, sitting at his desk in a bare room that smelt of ink, gazed at the man through blue and benevolent eyes. Then he stared at the hands and the tongue, and listened.

'My name is John Warrington-Coombe,' said the man from the Library. 'I live in Durham Street. I have lived there all my life.'

He flicked his tongue over his lips, and the desk shook.

'I have come to give myself up,' he whispered harshly. 'I have murdered my mother.'

Crescendo

MRS GROTE took me into the front bedroom, and then she closed the door upon us. Many parrots stood or climbed around us—ten of them, I remember, ten African parrots in ten bright cages; and as soon as Mrs Grote began to talk the creatures started murmuring, nibbling their grey breast-feathers and raking their red tails, and bowing low over their perches.

'This is the room,' she whispered, as though she were influenced by the purling and muttering of the birds. 'Fifteen years ago that sailor come, and 'e 'ad this very room you're standin' up in. Yes, sir. 'Is name was Jack Bellow; and 'e come on a Toosday in winter and stayed three weeks.

' 'E left 'is photo standin' on the mantelpiece, and I 'id it for a day or two from the p'lice officers, and two years later I tore it up and threw the bits away. It was a livin' likeness, too: as you might say, it was Jack Bellow all over. Long brown face, 'igh cheek-bones, curl of 'air on the top of 'is forehead. Time and again I've boarded sailors, and I've always remembered the names of their ships, but I've clean forgotten the name of 'is. 'E come up from the docks one arternoon in late November, in a cab chocked fore and aft with parrot-cages. "Christ!" I says to

Grote, starin' out of the parlour winder, "jest you look at this sailor!" I'd known 'em bring a parrot or two before, but never as many as a dozen at one time! And when 'e went away, 'e left 'em 'ere.

'First and last, 'e 'ad a reel sailor's appetite. Nothin' pleased 'im but the very best of everything—and 'e could well afford it, too. They always can.' She smoothed her dress with her crumpled hands. 'You never saw a chap so spry as what that sailor was. 'E kep' us laughin' most of the time. We give 'im this very room you're standin' in, sir, the best in the 'ouse. And as soon as 'e'd stowed them cages in it, down 'e 'opped, and joined us in a cup o' tea, with rum in it—rum as 'e'd brought along in 'is luggage —and almost at once we bust out laughin'. We couldn't 'elp it. 'E was like that. Laugh and the world laughs with yer. Ask me the names of the places 'e'd never been to, and you'd strike me dumb. 'E'd been to every mortal country under the sun! Chiney, 'Meriky, Afriky, 'Straley, Caribboo. . . .'

A siren hooted faintly from one of the ships in the docks; and I remembered that the fog all day had been as thick as a loggerhead. I stared at Mrs Grote, and she continued:

'Jack Bellow took 'is meals with us whenever 'e didn't 'ave 'em down town. 'E sat on the left-'and side of the table, facin' the winder, and 'e kep' us laughin' all the time we was eatin'. Now and again 'e'd bring in sumpthin' special for dinner or supper, and I'd 'ot it up for all of us, and sometimes in the middle of the meal 'e'd 'op upstairs with tit-bits for 'is birds. Them parrots didn't often worry us, like some we've 'ad. They was mostly quiet and clickin' their tongues and chucklin', like what they are at this very moment. But now and again they'd scream that 'orrible, you couldn't 'ear yerself think, let alone speak.'

She dropped her voice, and whispered, twitching her nose: 'Yes, and one fine day 'e brought in an extra special tit-bit, only it wasn't for us, or the birds. It was for 'imself. A smart young woman for 'imself.

'A young woman. That's right. Brought 'er 'ome with 'im one evenin', near supper-time. That's all right and nat'ral, isn't it? Nothin' odd in that! Pretty creature she was, too, dark and thin, with a mournful smile and the softest voice you ever 'eard. Pardon? Dark and thin, mournful smile—mournful! 'Eart-rendin'! Took 'er off to 'is room, Jack Bellow did; so I got down me best and biggest dish, and cooked 'em a supper of steak and carrots —no, sir, *carrots*—and carried it up to 'em, jest as I was, in me bed-slippers. "Thank ye, Mrs Grote!" 'e says. And then 'e turns to 'er and says: "Mrs Grote will end by chokin' yer with kindness, Polly!" '

She simpered at that, and twitched her nose.

'Pardon? No, sir—that's what 'e called 'er—Polly. And some days 'e'd call 'er Pretty Polly, or Pore Poll, same as the birds. 'E used to take 'er straight up to 'is room, amongst the parrot-cages. . . .'

'Just a little louder, Mrs Grote!'

'Parrots. Birds. Cages! Can't you 'ear, sir?'

'That's much better!' I told her.

She twitched her nose, and continued, mouthing a little:

'I don't suppose we met 'er more than three times altogether, Grote and me! Not to speak to, I mean. We didn't even know 'er reel name! We didn't like to ask, I dunno why. We 'eard 'em laughing—love and laughter, as they say! But what with 'er mournful smile and 'is sailor's laugh, we found it difficult to turn our 'earts against Jack Bellow and 'is young lady, and so we thought we'd ask

'em down sometime to take a bit of supper with us in the parlour, only—one night—'e killed 'er. . . .

'Get that, sir? 'E killed 'er! Murdered 'er . . . done 'er in! *The sailor done 'er in.* Can't you 'ear me? Yes—that's right—'e done 'er in! We 'eard the parrots screamin'! Leastways, that's what we thought at first. But it wasn't only parrots, see? *Not only parrots, see?* Oh dear, can't you 'ear me? . . . Parrots! Birds! A lot of screamin' *parrots*! . . . No, sir, *birds*—not *words*—you couldn't 'ear no *words*—no *talkin'*—jest *screamin—screechin'!* And it wasn't only parrots, see? . . . *Not only parrots, see?* . . . Oh, dear! . . .' She paused, and drew a breath, and continued, almost in despair: ' 'E must of been creepin' after 'er then, 'olding out 'is fingers. Fingers! *Fingers!* Creepin' and crouchin'! Screamin' and screechin'! Can you 'ear me? *Blast the swabs!*' she shouted, putting her fingers in her ears: and so she proceeded, her voice rising and falling until at length she had found an even pitch: 'There was our little supper for 'em, cookin' in the kitching! *Pork and apple.* Smell it all over the *'ouse!* And when I'd dished it up for 'em I found that *sailor gone*, and there was 'er layin' on 'er *bed of withered roses*, as you might say. Layin' on this *very bed you're sittin' on*—with the *prints of 'is fingers on 'er throat. Prints of 'is fingers! Strangled! Can you ear me, sir? Did you get all that?* 'ER BED OF WITHERED ROSES? *The p'lice was on 'is track before you could say Jack Robinson—aye, or Jack Bellow, eether!—but they never found 'im! The fog was very thick that night, as thick as a loggerhead, as Bellow used to say! Couldn't 'ardly see the lamp-posts in front of yer eyes, and it was thicker in the mornin'! All that day they 'unted 'igh and low for Jack, but what was the use of it? Like 'untin' for a needle in a bloody 'aystack—*' She snatched her fingers from her ears, caught the sudden crash of sound, and twitched her nose. I remembered well that trick of hers.

She hadn't altered. My old landlady hadn't altered. I swear she hadn't altered in fifteen years.

She made a trumpet of her hands, and stood on the tips of her toes.

'THAT SAILOR SAILED TO CARIBOO AS SURE AS YOU'RE STANDIN' THERE!'

A moment later, Mrs Grote's face cracked into a hundred wrinkles, and she started silently laughing at the ridiculous figures that we both presented; I, too, joined her, I let myself go, I fairly bellowed; neither of us could hear the other; and amid the uproar of the parrots, that were now screaming and shrieking at full strength, Mrs Grote and I left the front bedroom, closing the door behind us.

Life and Death of the Princess Gertrude

AT Beeding village in Sussex, you will find a half-timbered house, or large cottage, with bay windows; and fifteen years ago the owner told me its secret while we sat in the parlour there. A writing-table stood between us; on it he had laid his thick spectacles; at his back was a shelf with all his published books. We were in the middle of summer. The street and the hawthorn hedges were white with dust. Across the fields a church spire twinkled in a grove of elms. Fifteen years is a long time, and my friend is now dead. What else could I expect? Even at that remote period he was an old man looking into the past

I

Near sixty years ago, he said, I built a castle in my mind's eye, filled it with great halls, lofty kitchens, intricate corridors, and tapestried mural chambers; threaded it with spiral stairs, and threw up bastions at strategic corners; pierced its walls with lancet windows, and postern gates from which rope ladders hung down into the ditch below.

Heavenward, it showed me the familiar silhouette of turrets and battlements—often against an amber, evening sky. I could see everything; I had it complete. Even to the curve and colour of the first bend of steep roadway, cut through the solid rock, that could be seen dropping out of sight whenever I peered down from a certain high-set window in the castle walls. Even to particular pictures; wood-carvings, pieces of ordnance, a lute lying idle in one of the galleries. It was to be, I thought, the *mise en scène* of some story that I intended to write, a story with which my youthful pen was to conquer the world. Also it was to be situated above one of those black, foreboding escarpments on which the eye opens leisurely when the river-boat has just turned some legendary corner of the Rhine. For this reason, I was soon in great difficulties concerning my ditch: I fancied that its presence in the picture was a little incongruous: then, looking about me, I discovered that it was no more than a natural groove, or channel, in the rocky and lichened heights behind the castle; and sometimes I would throw a bridge across it to where the road began. You will laugh when I tell you that this picture came to me on the top of the Peckham 'bus. And at that moment our own Thames was nowhere in sight. We were clattering gaily by Camberwell Green; children were calling; and the driver was flicking his whip on the horses' backs.

But I clung to my romantic vision. It was too good to be thrown away, too clearly planned and too firmly substantiated within my mind; 'one day,' I said, 'this castle must be soaring in pages of print.' And in order that it might possess the first ingredient of a human story, I installed, as chatelaine of its halls and treasures, a fair-haired German girl. I think her name jumped to my mind in a moment, the Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein.

She was very young when I created her, a mere slip of a girl, as we say; a husband, whom she had never known, lay in the big cemetery at Düsseldorf, one year dead; and soon, no doubt, the mind of the forlorn widow began to turn to more important questions than the probable appearance of the sculptured angels, garlanded flowers, and verses on her husband's tomb—I mean, of course, to the question of her *raison d'être*, of her immediate, enigmatical future. . . .

All day she must have been asking herself: 'Why am I here? Why has he made me? What does he want me to do?' And I had no projects for her. Poor Princess! How pitifully her life had begun! For what purpose had I put her there, in that castle where the shouts of the builders had scarcely faded from turret and battlement; where the sound of the hammer and the saw and the chisel was but recently the scratching of my pen upon the writing-paper? Did I wish her to sit patiently, in a richly carved chair, until something happened—to listen, until suddenly she might be permitted to hear the voice of somebody calling —calling over the water—to find her way into the kitchens—or to climb to the remoteness of a turret chamber, where shafts of sunlight sloped through narrow windows, and filled her with a greater longing for the forbidden country beyond?

I have, in fact, not the slightest doubt that she did these things: and that, having accomplished them, she felt no happier than before: and I fancy that her only consolation was to be found in those moments when, at the close of some particularly irksome morning or afternoon, or in the red of evening, the Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein jumped up from the chair or embroidered couch in which she had been so foolishly waiting, urged by the sudden thought that it did not

matter what her actions might be—that her animated existence was the sole object of her creation—that nothing concerned her save the all-important fact that she could *move*. She could move, and in no uncertain manner, for she had legs, and they were young; whereupon, I do believe that she used to dance in front of the mirrors, or form plans to hold some kind of gymkhana for herself in the larger rooms and corridors of the castle. But, of course, she would have to go warily, lest somebody for whose appearance she was not ready should surprise her at the corners of staircases, or when she jumped or ran or danced in the high-roofed banqueting hall (I had often an impression that the castle resembled in many particulars a baronial mansion of Tudor times)—should leave her standing with open mouth, whence no words could come because I had not taught her the words that she must say. And I had nothing, nothing whatever for her to do.

The road—it was more correctly a precipitous path—never showed her the shape of a human figure, nor rang with the sound of a footfall, on the one short length of it that was visible to her when she peered down almost daily from an upper window. Did she open one of the postern gates, there was nothing but the rope ladder dropping idly beneath her, with its taut rungs never trodden by human feet, and the ditch below sweeping in a slow curve to the right and to the left, where a garrison of men could have been gathered for a sortie under cover of the further ramparts, but wherein now there were nothing but massive forms of light and shadow marching to the baton of the sun; where, sometimes, according to my mood, in imagination I could see the dry bottom of the ditch, and sometimes motionless, twinkling water that made it unnecessary for me to look up into the cloud-puffed depths of the sky. She lived on, peeping out of the

windows, wistful-eyed, nourished only by my own conscience, by the same energy that had created her and the vast building in which she lived; and there she lay, upon my desk, she and her castle, awaiting the time when I might have need of her, and could send her adventuring into the world.

And the pity of it was that for many years the poor girl had nothing to do. . . . I hope you don't think me very whimsical? These whimsical ideas of mine. . . . Why, from the very beginning, I was intensely practical! Was it not for purely practical reasons that I had created her? Afterwards, as you know, through the tremendous sale of the 'von Geyerstein' books, it was she who created me. But at first I was very dilatory. I had schemes for her, oh yes, draughted them roughly into note-books, on the backs of letters, on any odd scrap of paper, you know how one works; then I tore them up; and how many times used I to wake in the night, with my thoughts turning at once in her direction, to visualise her as sleeping now in this room of the castle, now in that, or possibly walking some narrow corridor that I had planned to the minutest detail—that corridor, for instance, which led to the oriel window (the only one of its kind in the place) overlooking the distant town of Mainz (then shining brightly beneath the moon) through which she was about to gaze in an endeavour to drive away the troubles that had wakened her from her sleep? Naturally, I had good reasons for my dilatoriness. My own life—my literary life—was in the making, and I had to go carefully before I leapt; and there were other stories to be started and finished, and there was plenty of time. Also I drew a certain confidence from the fact that the Princess Gertrude was young and exceedingly lusty; her face, her neck, her arms rippled with as much glow and vigour as my mind was able to shower upon

them, and very often her hair would be caught by the sweet wind that blew across the river from the vineyards beyond. Surely she never tired of gazing down, from her turret, upon the rocky terraces, trembling to think that one day she might walk among them!

When, at last, I hit upon a story for her, she was already getting on in years. That is to say, she was no longer a young girl. You see how conscientiously, and how consistently, I was planning the whole work? Her life —her body—was to age naturally, in an actual manner, from that moment when I had brought her into being. The Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein. A woman in the prime of her life. With the calendar lying on the desk before me—it was June, I remember . . . and the year? . . . hm . . . hm . . . 1875—I looked over my study, deep in thought. At that time, I was living in one of the poorer parts of Kensington. There was a ruler at my elbow, and I took it up, beating it lightly into my flattened palm. She would have grown, perhaps, a trifle thinner; for I believed her constitution to be of that kind which knits the muscles, pulling the frame together; and she was always rather bigly-boned. Yes, decidedly a potential heroine for the series of stories that I had in contemplation—stories of a somewhat fast and sensational kind. Call me, if you like, almost the first of the modern sensationalists. What a splendid adventuress the woman would make! And I began—quaintly enough, I suppose—to contract her name to the diminutive 'Trude'. I liked the sound of that final 'e', with its tiny upward turn. I could see that it might carry her far in her enterprises. It could answer no purpose if I were to tell you her first story, which I began to write with great vehemence there and then. I started the long

series quite ambitiously, with political intrigue, and much familiarity of conduct in Berlin society.

My first sign to Trude that I needed her was a man's voice hailing from the roadway. She looked up quickly over the latest piece of that growing collection of embroideries with which she had been occupying a great part of these early, ineffectual years; her hands fluttered to her heart, and slowly, very slowly, the blood ebbed from her face; she walked to the window, and saw beneath her the figure of a man in a cut-away coat and riding-breeches, sitting on a white horse. The man and the horse were extraordinarily motionless—there was a kind of expectancy in the two figures—the horse's head was as rigid as the figurehead of a docked ship, and the man was staring up at Trude's window with his fixed, scrutinous gaze. Then she ran out to speak with him. Whilst he stooped from the saddle, they had a long, low conference together; presently she ran back into her castle, the man and his horse pattered away, and throughout the evening there was a sound of boxes in her bedroom, the heavy, leather boxes of the period, a sound of cupboards being emptied and of the boxes being filled, of excursions of her hurrying feet along the stone corridors, to some distant quarter of the castle and back again. She slept ill that night—I was aware of her excitement—of the number of times she turned her pillow—of the smiling into the darkness. When I awoke in the morning her room was empty, she was gone, the Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein had become a rising factor in Middle Europe.

II

And for a week, a month, I, who had created her, found the greatest difficulty in recognising this new-fledged, vivacious Trude who threw her eyes about like a play-actress, sold secrets, set the women against her, snapped her fingers, and tilted her chin. . . .

Well. It is a strange, contradictory power, and you cannot deny it; I mean the power by which sometimes authors are held in the hollow of their characters' hands. Did she steal a document from the Count's bureau, then *my* finger, too, would be at my lips, and my eyes peeping watchfully over my shoulder. The things she did! As bold as brass! And very often these early stories would be centred on amours of a piquant though not very terrible kind.

But in those Victorian days I was scarcely surprised to discover that one or two of the English papers were writing articles on the pernicious trend of the new fiction. What! Trude—Trude and I—took no notice of that; on the contrary, she persisted more flagrantly than ever in her gallivanting. Also she extended the scene of her political activities, running down to the island of Caprera, and there holding long interviews with Garibaldi, at that time an old man of nearly seventy (and an old bachelor, too, seeing that he was no longer united to the Countess Raimondi); it was thought that he might be game enough yet for an occasional crack against the Germans. As he listened to her rather gabbling, earnest account of things possible, I fancy his fingers would tap, and his eyes twinkle through the villa windows to La Maddalena, or to white sails slanting over the sea. Also one summer she took a big 'palace' on the Rio della Paglia at Venice,

became the heroine of a dozen of my shorter, more picturesque stories—'Gondolaria', I called them—and for two years never saw her castle on the western bank of the Rhine. When she returned home, the Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein found awaiting her, in one of the many ante-rooms that I had built for private conversations, a stunted, squarish woman with thick arms and a heavy nose—a black dress shaking with sequins—a voice raised imperiously over some ridiculous wrong—and this was the opening scene of perhaps the most successful of the earlier Geyerstein tales. By that time, I had published half a dozen books of short and long stories, my reputation—better call it my popularity—was growing by leaps and bounds, Pawson and Wainwright wanted as much of Gertrude as I could give them. You can see those volumes in the book-case behind me—the books that you say you have never read—*Adventures of the Princess Gertrude*, *Arnholdt Castle*, *Further Adventures of the Princess Gertrude*, *Gondolaria, Queen of the Rhine*, *A Princess Interferes*. . . . Trash. All trash. . . . Yet they had their day. Most of my stories at that period were published by Messrs Pawson and Wainwright, from their early premises in Essex Street; Andrew Wainwrigbt is still living, you know, and often he and I talk over those old tales and times.

Trude! What a time you had! Yes, what a time she had, coming and going, swaying empires, breaking men's hearts and sometimes being left in the lurch; the perfect adventuress! One autumn—you can turn back to this in the old papers—Sir William Harcourt, the Home Secretary of those days, caused a warrant to be applied for, with Pawson and Wainwright and the Elephant Press as defendants. The charge was not unexpected, either by them or by

me: a charge of libel against some Prince of the Austro-Hungarian Court; the magistrate stroked his chin; and the book was withdrawn before any disastrous damage had been done. That book, with the others, stands on the shelf behind me; it became the turning-point of my career. In the spring of 1884, I took a house in Swan Walk, Chelsea, where I looked through the beautiful iron gateway of the Physic Gardens. There my imagination found a new impetus in the shrubs and plants that held a million grains of apothecary's poison in their innocent hearts. This was the beginning of my brightest period. And it went on for years.

Then one day the Princess Gertrude returned to her castle, arms hanging, with nothing whatever to do; for there was an interval of a whole year during which my invention failed me, I wrote no books, I was travelling in South America for the sake of the experience, and with deep sympathy for her I set about composing new pastimes for my poor Trude—games of Patience played with tiny packs of beautifully pictured cards—songs that she learnt and sang to the accompaniment of a lute in the twilight—a new dress, at which she was to work for who knows how long . . . until I should call her again, and she could dazzle me with its brightness. . . .

It was during this period, too, that Trude, having returned with knowledge of the world, discovered the dungeons. The world, here, was indeed but a sprinkling of light upon the floor; the walls were a-glimmer with snow-white fungus; and in this place she would spend hours at a time, round-eyed, looking at the instruments of torture, conjuring up the screams of the past. And from the dungeons, she would hurry away at last to the spiced air, the silken altar, the statued niches, and carved corbels of the tiny, six-sided chapel at the top of the keep.

When I returned to Chelsea, she took quite frankly to petty but spectacular crime.

It was a short, bright series, loudly coloured, yet it did not fit as naughtily as it should have done into the 'nineties, when Wilde and Beardsley and the *Yellow Book* were powers in the land. Powers, too, in a softer, more domestic mood, were Holmes and Watson, and Martin Hewitt, and the *Stories from the Diary of a Doctor*, and because of these persons, soon my poor Trude began to wear very thin—she tottered, and must receive stimulants to pull her together. I could not find them. The old tricks were useless now. Who wanted the old tricks? The thefts, the stratagems, the love-makings, and the peccadillos? Yet what else could she do? Trude and I were unable to think of anything else. I still wrote my stories; published them; it was expected of me; they were not really wanted. Then one day I heard the critics saying that it was time I killed Trude.

'Killed Trude?'

'Yes.'

Trude. . . . Oh! . . . Why that? But I knew that they were right. Kill Trude. That's it. Kill her dead. Kill her off. Bury her deep. Had it come to that? My wonderful Trude . . . . I must shut up shop. I must write my last Geyerstein tale.

So I took a cottage—this cottage—in the village of Beeding. I dare say you saw quite a lot of the village as you came up the road. It is very small. The Adur runs near, to the west; on warm evenings I walk as far as the river banks, and there, in miniature, I build a fanciful representation of Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein's castle. Sometimes I have an inspiration—a new story jumps into my mind—but it is of no use, now. How she would have

liked it! How well she would have played it! No one better. What a pair, she and I!

I had come to this place for the purpose of cutting myself adrift from the old associations. Nothing would have distressed me more, than to slay Trude amid the familiar signs of success in my Chelsea home: then, to look up, and, out of my window, to see the quiet plants in the Physic Gardens. Yet even here it was not easy—at first it was impossible—to endue myself with a murderous mind. The place was like a painted picture; and look at that glimpse of the sunny street! Through the whole of one spring I dallied in this very room; moreover, I began to write another of my Venetian tales, in which not a vestige of harm was to come to my dear Trude.

Near the end of this story, I was possessed by a powerful longing for the dear lady's decease.

'If I don't kill her now,' I argued, 'Trude will go on living long after I am dead.' And the thought of her death, with no one sitting beside her, in the years to come, on the canopied bed with its pillars of fine Riemenschneider woodcarving, while the sun, or the moon, or the stars, shone, or beamed, or twinkled, into the lancet windows of the castle, filled me with the acutest dismay.

At about this time, do you remember, Conan Doyle slew Sherlock Holmes at the hands of Moriarty; and when I heard of this event, I nodded my head, telling myself that all was settled now between Trude and me; that Trude must die of the fever in Lithuania; or drown in the waters of the swift Rhone; or fall with a bullet through her heart in a box at the Milan Opera House; or drop with a dagger between her ribs, at the mouth of an alley in Barcelona. It was then, of course, that I made my great discovery . . . the discovery that I loved her better than anything else on earth.

And my love was not due to the solitary fact that through her I had been able to hold my head very high above water for upwards of forty years. It was due also to a colossal pride. Pride that I had created her, that the whole wild series of Geyerstein tales was utterly and triumphantly mine. The blending of these two passions decided me finally on one part, at least, of the course that ought to be taken. How could I allow my dear Trude to die in Germany, with leagues of ocean between us? Better far that she should rest in my own country, where she had never been. And I cannot tell you all the cunning ways by which, in this final adventure of the Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein, I sought to ease the burdens of her journey to England—taking upon myself the duties of some spiritual tourist-agent, noting that the boat then sailing from the Hook of Holland was a good ship, well appointed, with the littlest capacity for rolling, and a cabin amply suited to the Princess's high-born constitution; urging my imagination to surround her with sweet faces and pleasant voices on the Harwich quay, and in the London train to ply her with a luncheon-basket from the depths of which I swear that I could catch the aroma of hot coffee, *foie-gras* sandwiches, and currant buns. In the whirl of London I lost her for a moment—found her—lost her again . . . then caught a glimpse of her back as she entered the Sussex train. At my elbow, the pot of untouched tea was nearly cold, the pages of my manuscript were piling in front of me, and presently I began to ask myself at what time she should arrive? At about this time? I looked at the clock: the hands were pointing to a quarter to seven. On an evening like this? I looked at the window: and the beautiful evening was already turning red. At that moment I saw a group of shadows moving grotesquely on the flat of the village street . . . the persons to whom they

belonged were hidden from me by the intervening abutment of my cottage wall . . . but in the quiet air I could hear voices, and I could hear, too, something that one of the voices said . . .

'Dat liddle white house yarnder, leddy.'

In such a manner she came to me, with a gentle knock that sent a flutter through the hall.

III

You may be certain that I was very curious to see this Trude; and I did not doubt that she was equally inquisitive to set eyes on me. I hurried to the door, and stood aside when she entered, so that the first thing that I saw of her was the side of her bonneted head. There was a finger of grey hair tapping her cheek; and especially it was her nose that told me I had not lived in vain. It was most beautifully modelled, a clear-cut and delicate thing, being neither too pushful nor too lazy; but her walk, alas, was full of weariness, she stooped a little at the shoulders, and I noticed that her lips and ears were faintly tinged with blue.

She was now turning towards me, with an ease and confidence that pleased me the more because I knew that she, too, was as nervous as a schoolchild.

'Oh! Won't you give me your hand?'

That, in fact, is what I *wanted* to say (wondering, at the same time, whether she would be confused by the English fashion); but this strange blending of shyness and composure frustrated any immediate attempt at conversation, hurried us through the hall, and brought us to a rather tensive standstill in my writing-room. Here the declining sun was twinkling on the tea-pot; the globular

surface of the latter showed me the walls and window extended almost to bursting-point, and after gazing at the fiery picture for an unconscionable period, 'Shall I,' I murmured, turning to the Princess, 'ask Maggie to make fresh tea?'

She listened attentively to my voice, which she heard now for the first time. Ach, zo. Ach, zo. And once or twice her head nodded. Presently her cheeks flushed, and she answered my question in a low, guttural English that enchanted me with its wrong words and Germanesque phrases. 'Wonn-der-ful,' I heard her saying, 'to have tea at you.'

She showed, too, now that the ice was broken, and she and I were standing on the footing of almost old friends, a woman's lively interest in my room: her eyes, travelling over the four corners, soon found the sheets of my uncompleted manuscript: she walked towards them, her shadow fell upon the scattered papers, and so did her hand, in light, caressing touches that reminded me of persons reading from Braille.

'Dear stories. . . . But what, now,' she added, turning over the leaves, until she came to that unfinished paragraph in which her own presence had taken up the narrative, and I had put down my pen, 'shall you do by me?'

We laughed; it was not my intention, I told her, to send her out adventuring until she had refreshed herself with hot tea and toast, and was properly rested; Maggie coming in at that moment, I desired the girl to prepare these delicacies as quickly as she was able. 'Maggie doesn't take after her mother,' I said to the Princess, nodding across the street; 'the girl's a great dawdler.' Thereafter we talked of indifferent things until the tea came, and the Princess's bonneted head was bending above the tray.

While she sat there, sipping her tea, and presiding over the tea-table, I took stock of her. A tall woman, rather bigly made, and by now so sadly gaunt; yet always with an adorable mixture of waywardness and tractability playing through the strong hands, from which I gathered that at heart the Princess Gertrude von Arnholdt-Geyerstein was entirely beautiful. She had believed in her world of wickedness no more than I. We had cut our capers, we had put our tongues in our cheeks. And now that it was all over, and the first inquisitivenesses of our meeting were ended, and she was sipping her 'English tea', I noticed again the blueness of her lips and ears, and decided that perhaps she had become vaguely 'asthmatical'. At any rate, the slight oppression of her breathing caused a certain monotony to fill the room; and while she looked down at her plate, with faintly humped shoulders, I began to amuse myself with a mental abridgment of her life history. And what a history! I ran over some of her escapades. I wondered which of them had diverted her most. Perhaps she guessed something of my thoughts, for suddenly she looked up, smiling, and saying: 'yes?'

'A little more tea?' I murmured. 'You must.'

She nodded her head.

'Was it the adventure with Count Karlbach, or the theft of señora Lucilla's jewels?'

'Ach, Gott! Ach, Gott!' Such a pretty laugh! I could have kissed her, but did not dare. Instead, I postponed the potato soup, the roasted fowl, and the cheese savoury—dishes that would have clashed too heavily with her tea—and on my return from the kitchen, began to pass the time in questioning the Princess closely on the hundred and one ramifications of the castle—the *exact* shape of its rooms —was it true that there existed a second version of Hans

Holbein's Solothurn Madonna in one of the bed-chambers?—could she see both Köln and Mainz from the oriel window?—or whither led that winding corridor that I had seen so often, through the low archway near the foot of the keep? For long she continued to enlighten me upon these subjects; but eventually her answers became so hazy, and lazy, and far between; then there were such awkward silences; that at last I was scarcely surprised to hear a snore starting from the Princess's chair.

'Dear God!' I muttered, 'why, she is an old woman, worn out!' Whereupon I hurried to the door, and called to Maggie that she was to prepare the sunny bedroom over the porch: but my voice awakened the Princess, who set up a sharp fit of coughing, and held a tiny unstoppered bottle beneath her nose.

'Hch! Hch! I cuff—I cow—How is it,' she asked me, 'when I make so?'

'You *cough*, Trude,' I answered, calling her by that name for the first time.

'I *koff*. Oh, your wonn-der-ful English language!'

I was now very concerned about my dear Trude, and insisted that she was to run off to bed without loss of a moment. This she did, under Maggie's care, ascending the stairs with the childish curiosity that had attended all her past adventures, and leaving me alone with my manuscript, in which I began to write up the dialogue that I had just spoken and heard; but alas! a terrible catastrophe befell my little household: for in the morning a fever set its icy hand upon me, took away my appetite, quickened my pulse, and in a hundred wretched ways caused me to fall as ill as an old wife's medicine-chest.

And because of the new interest that had entered my life, at first I would not listen to reason, but sat on the edge of my bed, goggling at Maggie, and imagining my

darling Trude seated already at the breakfast-table, with a fork in her hand, and her mouth full of bacon. The thought of the bacon was too much for me! In a short while I was back again beneath the bedclothes, and Maggie was running up the street for Dr Barnet, that tubby little man.

The sight of my old friend cheered my heart. He wore his riding-breeches, and there was a dianthus in his buttonhole, a lovely flower, which the rest of us would have called a pink.

Hm, ha. While he looked down my throat, and pressed his fingers to my pulse, I tried to catch sight or sound of Trude, and commanded Maggie and the doctor that on no account was she to come into the room.

Vainly I cried to them: 'Don't let her in!' She ran into the room; she was about to throw her arms around me; with the utmost difficulty she was hustled away. My throat tore me to pieces. There was a spinning-wheel in my head. And although, indeed, for two days I did not see her again—as soon as the nature of my illness had declared itself, there stood she: and I have now, after these many years, an impression of nothing but Trude, Trude, Trude, hovering at my bedside, or sitting in some chair by the open window; dosing me with spirit of mindererus for my fever, or with ipecacuanha, and never ceasing to indulge my thirst with diluent drinks and iced water; dieting me with warm gruels thinned with milk; and easing my throat with solutions of chlorate of potash. She physicked me, too, with blue pill and colocynth; and at the beginning of my convalescence, would feed me with eggs and milk-puddings, and later with whiting, turbot, and other forms of the flakier fishes, and a veal broth that had been a great favourite of hers, one year, in southern Germany. Grudgingly I told her that it was madness for her to be doing

these things: that Maggie's mother should have performed them, seeing that she was the village midwife, and therefore in every way a most competent person: Her Highness answered, that Dr Barnet allowed it because my case, from the very outset, had shown signs of progressing in a normal and highly satisfactory manner; also because she herself had been a sufferer, and was now immune, from the same fever.

'When was that, Trude?' I wondered, looking towards a bookshelf, on which were a few of my own novels, bound in tooled cloth of fading colours; 'something that you did without my knowledge?' She tried to tell me in her pretty English, fell surprisingly into vast difficulties, pulled from a pocket a dictionary of minute proportions; smiled, I thought, a little forlornly . . . and after a time, I did not see her in my room again. . . .

IV

She was gone; or had it been a trick of my departed fever, and Trude had never come into this room at all? I hunted for signs of her existence, seeking to persuade myself that there were no traces of Trude's fingers on bottles and glasses; that it was Maggie's mother who had attended me through my illness, pouring out my medi-cines, and sitting at the open window until her head nodded; I peered into the village, and there, even now, was Mrs Sparshot, bustling along her garden path, a tiny figure, her apron flying in the wind as she came up the street.

On that day, I remember, I was sitting in a chair for the first time; the weather was brightly boisterous, a young fire, made from sweet-smelling logs, smoked in the grate; and I could hear Dr Barnet, on his arrival, wailing

loudly to Maggie and her mother, somewhere in the lower parts of the house. 'Oh, Maggie, Maggie!' I heard him crying; 'oh, Mrs Sparshot!' and he was such a long time coming up to my room—then I heard him humming and hawing on the landing below mine—that at last I could contain myself no longer: but, running out, and calling over the banisters, demanded that I should be given the truth without further delay.

And it would be impossible for me to tell you the nervous manner in which, clapping his hands a little more briskly than usual, and utterly incapable of throwing off the frowns and jerky intonations and movements that he had brought into my room, Dr Barnet during the next ten days tried to persuade me that 'Mrs Arnold' was merely resting.

'Promise that you will let me see her . . . promise that you will let me see her . . . ' I kept on repeating, while the doctor gazed at me blankly, his right hand pulling down the back of his coat.

'Well,' he would snap, turning suddenly on his heel, and leaving me always to conjecture that he had given his word; alas—before I knew where I was, I had contracted an earache, which required that I should have olive oil and laudanum poured everlastingly into the painful cavity; my head was swathed in a bandage from ear to ear; my temperature, too, had strange bouts of rising and falling, and I returned to my bed, where for a long time I lay very deaf to the world. And in addition to these doleful complications, at the end of a fortnight my tubby doctor's face had fallen as long as a graveyard, and to my daily enquiries the little man began to reply very evasively; staring out of the window, he hoped to put aside my questions by commenting on sounds and movements that he heard and saw in the street below, so that in the midst of such a vast

amount of mental and bodily affliction my only consolation was this: that Trude and I were in a like case, lying on our beds of sickness, with but my floor and her ceiling between us.

The room of the Princess Gertrude was a tiny, square domain of chintz; chintz chairs, chintz dressing-table, a short chintz sofa; there was a sturdy beam across the ceiling, a glass-panelled cupboard built into the thick wall, while a pleasant colour was cast by a bed-side lamp suitably shaded, or in the day-time by the sunlight filtering through rose curtains; and the window looked over the porch, so that the lazy crunch and voices of the Beeding villagers, early astir, would come up in the morning, and mingle with the waning voices of sleep.

And here she died. An impulse, that I do not pretend to explain, awakened me, and leaving my bed I peeped at the windy weather soon after dawn. The sun was already half hidden in vapours, and I saw, in the middle sky, dark clouds running and massing, ultimately to appear in the shape of a huge castle, turreted, and perched on a rock. Flush with my eyes spread the roofs of the village of Beeding; the shingle spire of the church rose palely from the depths of one of the many clumps of swaying trees; and below me, on the village street beneath my window, I fancied that I could see the figure of a man in a cut-away coat and riding-breeches, sitting on a white horse. The man and the horse were extraordinarily motionless—there was a kind of expectancy in the two figures—the horse's head was as rigid as the figurehead of a docked ship, and the man—so it seemed to me—was staring up at Trude's window with a fixed, scrutinous gaze. Presently he rode away, and no doubt it was but Farmer Kempster off to the fields; yet the incident was enough to fill me with sad convictions, and it has been always a matter of great

sorrow with me that I was unable to hold her hand when Trude died.

On the next day they came in to shut the window, but I forbade them to do such a thing, and in a few minutes I heard the bell tolling. I heard it when the pain in my head was too mighty for thought, or anger, or sorrow, I took it with me into my dreams, I heard it tolling in every corner of the cottage when I went down at last, on the morning of a tremulous autumnal day. On one of the landings I met Maggie; she stood to let me pass, holding a cotton duster in her hand.

'Oh, Maggie, Maggie! And did she have all the same medicines that I had?'

'She had um all!'

'The spirit of mindererus, and the ipecacuanha? The chlorate of potash, the blue pill and the colocynth?'

'Same as you had um! . . .'

'Same as I had um? . . .'

I remember that Dr Barnet called, and I asked him to stay to lunch, which he did, eating voraciously several cuts off the cold joint, and holding his Mèdoc to the light. Afterwards we strolled into the garden at the back of the cottage, sat on two chairs, and spoke about the hollyhocks, and the Michaelmas daisies. There was a humming of insects; it was hotter now than summer had been. The little man wore an Evening Primrose (or œnothera) in his button-hole; presently I asked him to tell me as minutely as possible the illness from which she had died.

She had died of a dropsy, said the doctor, arising out of an attack of scarlet fever contracted while nursing: an anasarca, or, in other words, of an effusion into the pericardium, or sac surrounding the heart.

'Yes, doctor,' I muttered.

Which organ, he added, was already greatly debilitated

by chronic pericarditis, due, no doubt, to an active life that eventually had become too strenuous for her constitutional powers, and to an insidious and highly troublesome emphysema.

'Yes, doctor,' I said.

The little man turned quickly to me. 'You noticed her lips and ears, how blue they were? And her humped shoulders, and her loud breathing? Yet she must have been a healthy woman in her time, your sister? What is it I have heard—that she lived all her life in some foreign country—'

'In Germany . . . in one of those old castles on the Rhine. . . .

'She ought never to have travelled so far!' he muttered almost angrily, on a rising intonation, and jumping to his feet.

'No, doctor,' I answered.

He shook me by the hand.

'A whisky and soda before you go?'

V

And now she lies here. I am always thinking of that. There is plenty of time, plenty of time. For all my days without her are inexpressibly long and languid, and I feel that I shall never die mortally, as Trude died. At dusk I go about the village, and talk to the villagers, but they are all so lifeless, such puppets, such stick-in-the-muds! with their crooked fingers going up to their hats, and all of them cut to one slow pattern. Trude! I think of you then! Maggie has told me that after death her hands were still warm. Well. The strangest of all her stories was this—the story that I am telling you now. And I never finished writing

it—those of her public who remember her, why, they must think her still living! I have often wondered whether Beeding folk ever knew that once, for five whole weeks, they had a Princess in their midst. There was an honour that would have set them by the ears!

I believe you are wondering if it has ever occurred to me to go to Germany, on a voyage of exploration, to seek those turrets and battlements that had come to me so very clearly on the top of the Peckham 'bus. How foolish you are! Why, if I were to ask travellers from Köln to Mainz questions about her castle in Germany, probably they would think deeply, click their heels, and for the sake of politeness towards me add that no doubt, yes, in addition to Stolzenfels, Drachenfels, Rheinfels, and others of a demonstrable nature, there may be some part of that portion of the Rhine banks looking exactly like a castle, at sunset, formed in the dark cliffs. No. No. I am contented to think that it vanished in a moment, on the death of Trude. Dear lady. What a proud and cock-a-hoop person you have made of me! For it has been said, very often, of some author, that his characters lived; how often has it been said of any author, that one, at least, of his characters—*died?*

Written With My Left Hand

Nugent Barker

Tartarus Press

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by Nugent Barker

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