MADAME FEARS THE DARK



Margaret Irwin

Chatto & Windus

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SEVEN STORIES AND
A PLAY

By

Margaret Irwin

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To
E. J. I.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

MANY of the stories collected in this book first appeared in the following magazines: the *London Mercury* ("The Book," and "Mr Cork," under the title of "Goe Pritty Babe"); *Lovat Dickson's Magazine* ("The Earlier Service"); *Nash's Magazine* ("Monsieur Seeks a Wife," "The Curate and the Rake," and "Time Will Tell"); the *Bermondsey Book* ("Madame Fears the Dark"); and the *Weekly Sketch* ("Where Beauty Lies"). My acknowledgments are due to the Editors for permission to reprint.

M. I.

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The Book

The Book

On a foggy night in November, Mr Corbett, having guessed the murderer by the third chapter of his detective story, arose in disappointment from his bed and went downstairs in search of something more satisfactory to send him to sleep.

The fog had crept through the closed and curtained windows of the dining-room and hung thick on the air in a silence that seemed as heavy and breathless as the fog. The atmosphere was more choking than in his room, and very chill, although the remains of a large fire still burned in the grate.

The dining-room bookcase was the only considerable one in the house and held a careless unselected collection to suit all the tastes of the household, together with a few dull and obscure old theological books that had been left over from the sale of a learned uncle's library. Cheap red novels, bought on railway stalls by Mrs Corbett, who thought a journey the only time to read, were thrust in like pert,

undersized intruders among the respectable nineteenth-century works of culture, chastely bound in dark blue or green, which Mr Corbett had considered the right thing to buy during his Oxford days; beside these there swaggered the children's large gaily bound story-books and collections of Fairy Tales in every colour.

From among this neat new cloth-bound crowd there towered here and there a musty sepulchre of learning, brown with the colour of dust rather than leather, with no trace of gilded letters, however faded, on its crumbling back to tell what lay inside. A few of these moribund survivors from the Dean's library were inhospitably fastened with rusty clasps; all remained closed, and appeared impenetrable, their blank, forbidding backs uplifted above their frivolous surroundings with the air of scorn that belongs to a private and concealed knowledge. For only the worm of corruption now bored his way through their evil-smelling pages.

It was an unusual flight of fancy for Mr Corbett to imagine that the vaporous and fog-ridden air that seemed to hang more thickly about the bookcase was like a dank and poison-

ous breath exhaled by one or other of these slowly rotting volumes. Discomfort in this pervasive and impalpable presence came on him more acutely than at any time that day; in an attempt to clear his throat of it he choked most unpleasantly.

He hurriedly chose a Dickens from the second shelf as appropriate to a London fog, and had returned to the foot of the stairs when he decided that his reading to-night should by contrast be of blue Italian skies and white statues, in beautiful rhythmic sentences. He went back for a Walter Pater.

He found *Marius the Epicurean* tipped sideways across the gap left by his withdrawal of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It was a very wide gap to have been left by a single volume, for the books on that shelf had been closely wedged together. He put the Dickens back into it and saw that there was still space for a large book. He said to himself in careful and precise words: "This is nonsense. No one can possibly have gone into the dining-room and removed a book while I was crossing the hall. There must have been a gap before in the second shelf." But another part of his mind

kept saying in a hurried, tumbled torrent: "There was no gap in the second shelf. There was no gap in the second shelf."

He snatched at both the *Marius* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and went to his room in a haste that was unnecessary and absurd, since even if he believed in ghosts, which he did not, no one had the smallest reason for suspecting any in the modern Kensington house wherein he and his family had lived for the last fifteen years. Reading was the best thing to calm the nerves, and Dickens a pleasant, wholesome and robust author.

To-night, however, Dickens struck him in a different light. Beneath the author's sentimental pity for the weak and helpless, he could discern a revolting pleasure in cruelty and suffering, while the grotesque figures of the people in Cruikshank's illustrations revealed too clearly the hideous distortions of their souls. What had seemed humorous now appeared diabolic, and in disgust at these two favourites he turned to Walter Pater for the repose and dignity of a classic spirit.

But presently he wondered if this spirit were not in itself of a marble quality, frigid and life-

less, contrary to the purpose of nature. "I have often thought," he said to himself, "that there is something evil in the austere worship of beauty for its own sake." He had never thought so before, but he liked to think that this impulse of fancy was the result of mature consideration, and with this satisfaction he composed himself for sleep.

He woke two or three times in the night, an unusual occurrence, but he was glad of it, for each time he had been dreaming horribly of these blameless Victorian works. Sprightly devils in whiskers and peg-top trousers tortured a lovely maiden and leered in delight at her anguish; the gods and heroes of classic fable acted deeds whose naked crime and shame Mr Corbett had never appreciated in Latin and Greek Unseens. When he had woken in a cold sweat from the spectacle of the ravished Philomel's torn and bleeding tongue, he decided there was nothing for it but to go down and get another book that would turn his thoughts in some more pleasant direction. But his increasing reluctance to do this found a hundred excuses. The recollection of the gap in the shelf now occurred to him with a sense

of unnatural importance; in the troubled dozes that followed, this gap between two books seemed the most hideous deformity, like a gap between the front teeth of some grinning monster.

But in the clear daylight of the morning Mr Corbett came down to the pleasant dining-room, its sunny windows and smell of coffee and toast, and ate an undiminished breakfast with a mind chiefly occupied in self-congratulation that the wind had blown the fog away in time for his Saturday game of golf. Whistling happily, he was pouring out his final cup of coffee when his hand remained arrested in the act as his glance, roving across the bookcase, noticed that there was now no gap at all in the second shelf. He asked who had been at the bookcase already, but neither of the girls had, nor Dicky, and Mrs Corbett was not yet down. The maid never touched the books. They wanted to know what book he missed in it, which made him look foolish, as he could not say. The things that disturb us at midnight are negligible at 9 A.M.

"I thought there was a gap in the second shelf," he said, "but it doesn't matter."

"There never is a gap in the second shelf," said little Jean brightly. "You can take out lots of books from it and when you go back the gap's always filled up. Haven't you noticed that? I have."

Nora, the middle one in age, said Jean was always being silly; she had been found crying over the funny pictures in the *Rose and the Ring* because she said all the people in them had such wicked faces, and the picture of a black cat had upset her because she thought it was a witch. Mr Corbett did not like to think of such fancies for his Jeannie. She retaliated briskly by saying Dicky was just as bad, and he was a big boy. He had kicked a book across the room and said, "Filthy stuff," just like that. Jean was a good mimic; her tone expressed a venom of disgust, and she made the gesture of dropping a book as though the very touch of it were loathsome. Dicky, who had been making violent signs at her, now told her she was a beastly little sneak and he would never again take her for rides on the step of his bicycle. Mr Corbett was disturbed. Unpleasant housemaids and bad school-friends passed through his head, as he gravely

asked his son how he had got hold of this book.

"Took it out of that bookcase of course," said Dicky furiously.

It turned out to be the *Boy's Gulliver's Travels* that Granny had given him, and Dicky had at last to explain his rage with the devil who wrote it to show that men were worse than beasts and the human race a wash-out. A boy who never had good school reports had no right to be so morbidly sensitive as to penetrate to the underlying cynicism of Swift's delightful fable, and that moreover in the bright and carefully expurgated edition they bring out nowadays. Mr Corbett could not say he had ever noticed the cynicism himself, though he knew from the critical books it must be there, and with some annoyance he advised his son to take out a nice bright modern boy's adventure story that could not depress anybody. It appeared, however, that Dicky was "off reading just now," and the girls echoed this.

Mr Corbett soon found that he too was "off reading." Every new book seemed to him weak, tasteless and insipid; while his old and

familiar books were depressing or even, in some obscure way, disgusting. Authors must all be filthy-minded; they probably wrote what they dared not express in their lives. Stevenson had said that literature was a morbid secretion; he read Stevenson again to discover his peculiar morbidity, and detected in his essays a self-pity masquerading as courage, and in *Treasure Island* an invalid's sickly attraction to brutality.

This gave him a zest to find out what he disliked so much, and his taste for reading revived as he explored with relish the hidden infirmities of minds that had been valued by fools as great and noble. He saw Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë as two unpleasant examples of spinsterhood; the one as a prying, sub-acid busybody in everyone else's flirtations, the other as a raving craving maenad seeking self-immolation on the altar of her frustrated passions. He compared Wordsworth's love of nature to the monstrous egoism of an ancient bell-wether, isolated from the flock.

These powers of penetration astonished him. With a mind so acute and original he should have achieved greatness, yet he was a mere solicitor and not prosperous at that. If he had

but the money, he might do something with those ivory shares, but it would be a pure gamble, and he had no luck. His natural envy of his wealthier acquaintances now mingled with a contempt for their stupidity that approached loathing. The digestion of his lunch in the City was ruined by meeting sentimental yet successful dotards whom he had once regarded as pleasant fellows. The very sight of them spoiled his game of golf, so that he came to prefer reading alone in the dining-room even on sunny afternoons.

He discovered also and with a slight shock that Mrs Corbett had always bored him. Dicky he began actively to dislike as an impudent blockhead, and the two girls were as insipidly alike as white mice; it was a relief when he abolished their tiresome habit of coming in to say good-night.

In the now unbroken silence and seclusion of the dining-room, he read with feverish haste as though he were seeking for some clue to knowledge, some secret key to existence which would quicken and inflame it, transform it from its present dull torpor to a life worthy of him and his powers.

He even explored the few decaying remains of his uncle's theological library. Bored and baffled, he yet persisted, and had the occasional relief of an ugly woodcut of Adam and Eve with figures like bolsters and hair like dahlias, or a map of the Cosmos with Hell-mouth in the corner, belching forth demons. One of these books had diagrams and symbols in the margin which he took to be mathematical formulae of a kind he did not know. He presently discovered that they were drawn, not printed, and that the book was in manuscript, in a very neat, crabbed black writing that resembled black-letter printing. It was moreover in Latin, a fact that gave Mr Corbett a shock of unreasoning disappointment. For while examining the signs in the margin, he had been filled with an extraordinary exultation as though he knew himself to be on the edge of a discovery that should alter his whole life. But he had forgotten his Latin.

With a secret and guilty air which would have looked absurd to anyone who knew his harmless purpose, he stole to the schoolroom for Dicky's Latin dictionary and grammar and hurried back to the dining-room, where he

tried to discover what the book was about with an anxious industry that surprised himself. There was no name to it, nor of the author. Several blank pages had been left at the end, and the writing ended at the bottom of a page, with no flourish or superscription, as though the book had been left unfinished. From what sentences he could translate, it seemed to be a work on theology rather than mathematics. There were constant references to the Master, to his wishes and injunctions, which appeared to be of a complicated kind. Mr Corbett began by skipping these as mere accounts of ceremonial, but a word caught his eye as one unlikely to occur in such an account. He read this passage attentively, looking up each word in the dictionary, and could hardly believe the result of his translation. "Clearly," he decided, "this book must be by some early missionary, and the passage I have just read the account of some horrible rite practised by a savage tribe of devil-worshippers." Though he called it "horrible," he reflected on it, committing each detail to memory. He then amused himself by copying the signs in the margin near it and trying to discover their sig-

nificance. But a sensation of sickly cold came over him, his head swam, and he could hardly see the figures before his eyes. He suspected a sudden attack of influenza, and went to ask his wife for medicine.

They were all in the drawing-room, Mrs Corbett helping Nora and Jean with a new game, Dicky playing the pianola, and Mike, the Irish terrier, who had lately deserted his accustomed place on the dining-room hearth-rug, stretched by the fire. Mr Corbett had an instant's impression of this peaceful and cheerful scene, before his family turned towards him and asked in scared tones what was the matter. He thought how like sheep they looked and sounded; nothing in his appearance in the mirror struck him as odd; it was their gaping faces that were unfamiliar. He then noticed the extraordinary behaviour of Mike, who had sprung from the hearthrug and was crouched in the furthest corner, uttering no sound, but with his eyes distended and foam round his bared teeth. Under Mr Corbett's glance, he slunk towards the door, whimpering in a faint and abject manner, and then as his master called him, he snarled horribly, and the hair

bristled on the scruff of his neck. Dicky let him out, and they heard him scuffling at a frantic rate down the stairs to the kitchen, and then, again and again, a long-drawn howl.

"What *can* be the matter with Mike?" asked Mrs Corbett.

Her question broke a silence that seemed to have lasted a long time. Jean began to cry. Mr Corbett said irritably that he did not know what was the matter with any of them.

Then Nora asked, "What is that red mark on your face?"

He looked again in the glass and could see nothing.

"It's quite clear from here," said Dicky; "I can see the lines in the finger print."

"Yes, that's what it is," said Mrs Corbett in her brisk staccato voice; "the print of a finger on your forehead. Have you been writing in red ink? "

Mr Corbett precipitately left the room for his own, where he sent down a message that he was suffering from headache and would have his dinner in bed. He wanted no one fussing round him. By next morning he was

amazed at his fancies of influenza, for he had never felt so well in his life.

No one commented on his looks at breakfast, so he concluded that the mark had disappeared. The old Latin book he had been translating on the previous night had been moved from the writing bureau, although Dicky's grammar and dictionary were still there. The second shelf was, as always in the daytime, closely packed; the book had, he remembered, been in the second shelf. But this time he did not ask who had put it back.

That day he had an unexpected stroke of luck in a new client of the name of Crab, who entrusted him with large sums of money: nor was he irritated by the sight of his more prosperous acquaintances, but with difficulty refrained from grinning in their faces, so confident was he that his remarkable ability must soon place him higher than any of them. At dinner he chaffed his family with what he felt to be the gaiety of a schoolboy. But on them it had a contrary effect, for they stared, either at him in stupid astonishment, or at their plates, depressed and nervous. Did they think him drunk? he wondered, and a fury came on

him at their low and bestial suspicions and heavy dullness of mind. Why, he was younger than any of them!

But in spite of this new alertness he could not attend to the letters he should have written that evening and drifted to the bookcase for a little light distraction, but found that for the first time there was nothing he wished to read. He pulled out a book from above his head at random, and saw that it was the old Latin book in manuscript. As he turned over its stiff and yellow pages, he noticed with pleasure the smell of corruption that had first repelled him in these decaying volumes, a smell, he now thought, of ancient and secret knowledge.

This idea of secrecy seemed to affect him personally, for on hearing a step in the hall he hastily closed the book and put it back in its place. He went to the schoolroom where Dicky was doing his home-work, and told him he required his Latin grammar and dictionary again for an old law report. To his annoy-ance he stammered and put his words awk-wardly; he thought that the boy looked oddly at him and he cursed him in his heart for a suspicious young devil, though of what he

should be suspicious he could not say. Nevertheless, when back in the dining-room, he listened at the door and then softly turned the lock before he opened the books on the writing bureau.

The script and Latin seemed much clearer than on the previous evening, and he was able to read at random a passage relating to a trial of a German midwife in 1620 for the murder and dissection of 783 children. Even allowing for the opportunities afforded by her profession, the number appeared excessive, nor could he discover any motive for the slaughter. He decided to translate the book from the beginning.

It appeared to be an account of some secret society whose activities and ritual were of a nature so obscure, and when not, so vile and terrible, that Mr Corbett would not at first believe that this could be a record of any human mind, although his deep interest in it should have convinced him that from his humanity at least it was not altogether alien.

He read until far later than his usual hour for bed and when at last he rose, it was with the book in his hands. To defer his parting

with it, he stood turning over the pages until he reached the end of the writing, and was struck by a new peculiarity.

The ink was much fresher and of a far poorer quality than the thick rusted ink in the bulk of the book; on close inspection he would have said that it was of modern manufacture and written quite recently were it not for the fact that it was in the same crabbed late seventeenth-century handwriting.

This however did not explain the perplexity, even dismay and fear, he now felt as he stared at the last sentence. It ran: "Contine te in perennibus studiis," and he had at once recognised it as a Ciceronian tag that had been dinned into him at school. He could not understand how he had failed to notice it yesterday.

Then he remembered that the book had ended at the bottom of a page. But now, the last two sentences were written at the very top of a page. However long he looked at them, he could come to no other conclusion than that they had been added since the previous evening.

He now read the sentence before the last:

"Re imperfecta mortuus sum," and translated the whole as: "I died with my purpose unachieved. Continue, thou, the never-ending studies."

With his eyes still fixed upon it, Mr Corbett replaced the book on the writing bureau and stepped back from it to the door, his hand outstretched behind him, groping and then tugging at the door-handle. As the door failed to open, his breath came in a faint, hardly articulate scream. Then he remembered that he had himself locked it, and he fumbled with the key in frantic ineffectual movements until at last he opened it and banged it after him as he plunged backwards into the hall.

For a moment he stood there looking at the door-handle; then with a stealthy, sneaking movement, his hand crept out towards it, touched it, began to turn it, when suddenly he pulled his hand away and went up to his bedroom, three steps at a time.

There he behaved in a manner only comparable with the way he had lost his head after losing his innocence when a schoolboy of sixteen. He hid his face in the pillow, he cried, he raved in meaningless words, repeating :

"Never, never, never. I will never do it again. Help me never to do it again." With the words, "Help me," he noticed what he was saying, they reminded him of other words, and he began to pray aloud. But the words sounded jumbled, they persisted in coming into his head in a reverse order so that he found he was saying his prayers backwards, and at this final absurdity he suddenly began to laugh very loud. He sat up on the bed, delighted at this return to sanity, common sense and humour, when the door leading into Mrs Corbett's room opened, and he saw his wife staring at him with a strange, grey, drawn face that made her seem like the terror-stricken ghost of her usually smug and placid self.

"It's not burglars," he said irritably. "I've come to bed late, that is all, and must have waked you."

"Henry," said Mrs Corbett, and he noticed that she had not heard him, "Henry, didn't you hear it?"

"What?"

"That laugh."

He was silent, an instinctive caution warning him to wait until she spoke again. And this

she did, imploring him with her eyes to re-assure her.

"It was not a human laugh. It was like the laugh of a devil."

He checked his violent inclination to laugh again. It was wiser not to let her know that it was only his laughter she had heard. He told her to stop being fanciful, and Mrs Corbett, gradually recovering her docility, returned to obey an impossible command, since she could not stop being what she had never been.

The next morning, Mr Corbett rose before any of the servants and crept down to the dining-room. As before, the dictionary and grammar alone remained on the writing bureau; the book was back in the second shelf. He opened it at the end. Two more lines had been added, carrying the writing down to the middle of the page. They ran:

Ex auro canceris
In dentem elephantis.

which he translated as:

Out of the money of the crab
Into the tooth of the elephant.

From this time on, his acquaintances in the City noticed a change in the mediocre, rather

flabby and unenterprising "old Corbett." His recent sour depression dropped from him: he seemed to have grown twenty years younger, strong, brisk and cheerful, and with a self-confidence in business that struck them as lunacy. They waited with a not unpleasant excitement for the inevitable crash, but his every speculation, however wild and hare-brained, turned out successful. He no longer avoided them, but went out of his way to display his consciousness of luck, daring and vigour, and to chaff them in a manner that began to make him actively disliked. This he welcomed with delight as a sign of others' envy and his superiority.

He never stayed in town for dinners or theatres, for he was always now in a hurry to get home, where, as soon as he was sure of being undisturbed, he would take down the manuscript book from the second shelf of the dining-room and turn to the last pages.

Every morning he found that a few words had been added since the evening before, and always they formed, as he considered, injunctions to himself. These were at first only with regard to his money transactions, giving assur-

ance to his boldest fancies, and since the brilliant and unforeseen success that had attended his gamble with Mr Crab's money in African ivory, he followed all such advice unhesitatingly.

But presently, interspersed with these commands, were others of a meaningless, childish, yet revolting character, such as might be invented by a decadent imbecile, or, it must be admitted, by the idle fancies of any ordinary man who permits his imagination to wander unbridled. Mr Corbett was startled to recognise one or two such fancies of his own, which had occurred to him during his frequent boredom in church, and which he had not thought any other mind could conceive.

He at first paid no attention to these directions, but found that his new speculations declined so rapidly that he became terrified not merely for his fortune but for his reputation and even safety, since the money of various of his clients was involved. It was made clear to him that he must follow the commands in the book altogether or not at all, and he began to carry out their puerile and grotesque blasphemies with a contemptuous amusement,

which however gradually changed to a sense of their monstrous significance. They became more capricious and difficult of execution, but he now never hesitated to obey blindly, urged by a fear that he could not understand, but knew only that it was not of mere financial failure.

By now he understood the effect of this book on the others near it, and the reason that had impelled its mysterious agent to move the books into the second shelf so that all in turn should come under the influence of that ancient and secret knowledge.

In respect to it, he encouraged his children, with jeers at their stupidity, to read more, but he could not observe that they ever now took a book from the dining-room bookcase. He himself no longer needed to read, but went to bed early and slept sound. The things that all his life he had longed to do when he should have enough money now seemed to him insipid. His most exciting pleasure was the smell and touch of these mouldering pages as he turned them to find the last message inscribed to him.

One evening it was in two words only: "Canem occide."

He laughed at this simple and pleasant request to kill the dog, for he bore Mike a grudge for his change from devotion to slinking aversion. Moreover, it could not have come more opportunely, since in turning out an old desk he had just discovered some packets of rat poison bought years ago and forgotten. No one therefore knew of its existence and it would be easy to poison Mike without any further suspicion than that of a neighbour's carelessness. He whistled lightheartedly as he ran upstairs to rummage for the packets, and returned to empty one in the dog's dish of water in the hall.

That night the household was awakened by terrified screams proceeding from the stairs. Mr Corbett was the first to hasten there, prompted by the instinctive caution that was always with him these days. He saw Jean, in her nightdress, scrambling up on to the landing on her hands and knees, clutching at anything that afforded support and screaming in a choking, tearless, unnatural manner. He carried her to the room she shared with Nora, where they were quickly followed by Mrs Corbett.

Nothing coherent could be got from Jean. Nora said that she must have been having her old dream again; when her father demanded what this was, she said that Jean sometimes woke in the night, crying, because she had dreamed of a hand passing backwards and forwards over the dining-room bookcase, until it found a certain book and took it out of the shelf. At this point she was always so frightened that she woke up.

On hearing this, Jean broke into fresh screams, and Mrs Corbett would have no more explanations. Mr Corbett went out on to the stairs to find what had brought the child there from her bed. On looking down into the lighted hall, he saw Mike's dish overturned. He went down to examine it and saw that the water he had poisoned must have been upset and absorbed by the rough doormat which was quite wet.

He went back to the little girls' room, told his wife that she was tired and must go to bed, and he would take his turn at comforting Jean. She was now much quieter. He took her on his knee where at first she shrank from him. Mr Corbett remembered with an angry sense

of injury that she never now sat on his knee, and would have liked to pay her out for it by mocking and frightening her. But he had to coax her into telling him what he wanted, and with this object he soothed her, calling her by pet names that he thought he had forgotten, telling her that nothing could hurt her now he was with her.

At first his cleverness amused him ; he chuckled softly when Jean buried her head in his dressing-gown. But presently an uncomfortable sensation came over him, he gripped at Jean as though for her protection, while he was so smoothly assuring her of his. With difficulty he listened to what he had at last induced her to tell him.

She and Nora had kept Mike with them all the evening and taken him to sleep in their room for a treat. He had lain at the foot of Jean's bed and they had all gone to sleep. Then Jean began her old dream of the hand moving over the books in the dining-room bookcase; but instead of taking out a book, it came across the dining-room and out on to the stairs. It came up over the banisters and to the door of their room, and turned their door-

handle very softly and opened it. At this point she jumped up wide awake and turned on the light, calling to Nora. The door, which had been shut when they went to sleep, was wide open, and Mike was gone.

She told Nora that she was sure something dreadful would happen to him if she did not go and bring him back, and ran down into the hall where she saw him just about to drink from his dish. She called to him and he looked up, but did not come, so she ran to him, and began to pull him along with her, when her night-dress was clutched from behind and then she felt a hand seize her arm.

She fell down, and then clambered upstairs as fast as she could, screaming all the way.

It was now clear to Mr Corbett that Mike's dish must have been upset in the scuffle. She was again crying, but this time he felt himself unable to comfort her. He retired to his room, where he walked up and down in an agitation he could not understand, for he found his thoughts perpetually arguing on a point that had never troubled him before.

"I am not a bad man," he kept saying to himself. "I have never done anything actually

wrong. My clients are none the worse for my speculations, only the better. Nor have I spent my new wealth on gross and sensual pleasures; these now have even no attraction for me."

Presently he added: "It is not wrong to try and kill a dog, an ill-tempered brute. It turned against me. It might have bitten Jeannie."

He noticed that he had thought of her as Jeannie, which he had not done for some time; it must have been because he had called her that to-night. He must forbid her ever to leave her room at night, he could not have her meddling. It would be safer for him if she were not there at all.

Again that sick and cold sensation of fear swept over him: he seized the bed-post as though he were falling, and held on to it for some minutes. "I was thinking of a boarding school," he told himself, and then, "I must go down and find out—find out—" He would not think what it was he must find out.

He opened his door and listened. The house was quiet. He crept on to the landing and along to Nora's and Jean's door where again he stood, listening. There was no sound,

and at that he was again overcome with unreasonable terror. He imagined Jean lying very still in her bed, too still. He hastened away from the door, shuffling in his bedroom slippers along the passage and down the stairs.

A bright fire still burned in the dining-room grate. A glance at the clock told him it was not yet twelve. He stared at the bookcase. In the second shelf was a gap which had not been there when he had left. On the writing bureau lay a large open book. He knew that he must cross the room and see what was written in it. Then, as before, words that he did not intend came sobbing and crying to his lips, muttering, "No, no, not that. Never, never, never." But he crossed the room and looked down at the book. As last time, the message was in only two words: "Infantem occide."

He slipped and fell forward against the bureau. His hands clutched at the book, lifted it as he recovered himself and with his finger he traced out the words that had been written. The smell of corruption crept into his nostrils. He told himself that he was not a snivelling dotard, but a man stronger and

wiser than his fellows, superior to the common emotions of humanity, who held in his hands the sources of ancient and secret power.

He had known what the message would be. It was after all the only safe and logical thing to do. Jean had acquired dangerous knowledge. She was a spy, an antagonist. That she was so unconsciously, that she was eight years old, his youngest and favourite child, were sentimental appeals that could make no difference to a man of sane reasoning power such as his own. Jean had sided with Mike against him. "All that are not with me are against me," he repeated softly. He would kill both dog and child with the white powder that no one knew to be in his possession. It would be quite safe.

He laid down the book and went to the door. What he had to do, he would do quickly, for again that sensation of deadly cold was sweeping over him. He wished he had not to do it to-night; last night it would have been easier, but to-night she had sat on his knee and made him afraid. He imagined her lying very still in her bed, too still. But it would be she who would lie there, not he, so why should he be

afraid? He was protected by ancient and secret powers. He held on to the door-handle, but his fingers seemed to have grown numb, for he could not turn it. He clung to it, crouched and shivering, bending over it until he knelt on the ground, his head beneath the handle which he still clutched with upraised hands. Suddenly the hands were loosened and flung outwards with the frantic gesture of a man falling from a great height, and he stumbled to his feet. He seized the book and threw it on the fire. A violent sensation of choking overcame him, he felt he was being strangled, as in a nightmare he tried again and again to shriek aloud, but his breath would make no sound. His breath would not come at all. He fell backwards heavily, down on the floor, where he lay very still.

In the morning, the maid who came to open the dining-room windows, found her master dead. The sensation caused by this was scarcely so great in the City as that given by the simultaneous collapse of all Mr Corbett's recent speculations. It was instantly assumed that he must have had previous knowledge of this and so committed suicide.

The stumbling-block of this theory was that the medical report defined the cause of Mr Corbett's death as strangulation of the wind-pipe by the pressure of a hand which had left the marks of its fingers on his throat.

Mr Cork

Mr Cork

To the Pious Meritts of Mrs Anne Dorleton
In whose everlasting memory this is
inscribed by her afflicted Husband.

She Dyed in Childbed
Of her First Borne on the Vth of Dec. 1669.
Aetat. suae 18.

Had Death's Impartial Hand Beene Aw'd to Spare
The Chaste, the Wise, the Vertuous or ye Faire
Had Unfeign'd Piety, Unbiass'd Truth
Unboasted Charity, Unblemish'd Youth,
Had all that's Purely Good had Powre to Save
Soe Wish'd a Life From an Untimely Grave
Sure she had yet surviv'd: But Ah in Vaine
Alas Wee doe her early fate Complaine
The World's of Her, not she of it Bereaven
She looked on't, liked it not, and went to Heaven.

Goe pritty Babe and tell thy happy Mother
If thou hadst liv'd, thou hadst been such another.

It was a handsome epitaph. The servants sobbed over it as they laid their flowers on the freshly graven stone.

"My Nancy Pretty to the life, and at last they know it," said her nurse.

"And now I can have Bess to live in the house, which will save a mort of trouble," said her husband.

Succeeding generations glanced down at her epitaph and supposed a saint lay below.

It had been written, not by her afflicted husband, but by his chaplain, Mr Benjamin Cork, scholar and schemer, the bastard son of a footman and a lady of quality. He was tall, commanding in gesture, sudden in movement. Ambition, pride and disappointment had eaten away his flesh and burned in his sunken eyes. His scholarship was sounder than his scheming, he remained a Puritan too long, and did not change his colours fast enough when Charles II became King. Retirement as chaplain to a wealthy country gentleman was a lucky escape for him from a medley of intrigues, but he saw it as exile and found in it a boredom so acute that to his own mind it was madness. At forty, and for the first time, he fell in love, and told himself that in more than politics he had remained a Puritan too long.

His patron, Mr Dorleton, had had to marry the heiress to the adjoining estates so as to add to his own property a deer park that he coveted

for hunting. A further consideration was that the bride was too young and foolish to be likely to make any trouble over the matter of Bess Tiddle at the Lodge gates. Nor would her widowed mother, the Dowager Lady Grage; she reserved all the trouble for the matter of the settlements, on which she was sharply avaricious.

Bess was a large white heavy girl with a face like a pudding; "that slug," Mr Cork called her in his mind with a shudder of invincible repulsion whenever he passed her, and her sleepy eyes regarded him blandly like a cow's, revealing nothing of her perception of his feelings towards her.

The bride Mr Dorleton brought home on a winter's day was small and dark, agile as a monkey, the eyes in her sallow little face bright and quick to notice everything, the sharp white teeth that were her only beauty flashing into eager propitiatory smiles. She ate hungrily, and told them in a sudden burst of confidence that it was the first food she had had that day, it had been forgotten somehow in the fuss of the wedding, everyone had been up at dawn to see to the breakfast and everything had gone

wrong, and here she began to laugh, but stopped herself and looked so unnaturally solemn that Mr Cork had an uneasy suspicion she might be mimicking him.

"Well, what d'you think of that?" Mr Dorleton demanded of his chaplain as his bride retired, "Seventeen, and with no more sense than a brat of seven. Chatters like an ape. And a slut if ever there was one. She's got her eye on you, my Puritan saint. These ugly ones are the most determined. Not Benjamin my boy, but Joseph, that's your name. Don't take after your father, do you?"

Mr Cork watched him drinking and chuckling for two hours longer, then heard his uneven steps scrunching down the wet drive in the direction of the Lodge gates. For the friendless little creature that had sat at table with them, he had felt an involuntary pity such as might have disturbed him with a tearful child or a puppy with a hurt paw.

This unreasoning tenderness he believed to be alien to the rest of his nature and therefore despised it. But in the present instance it was mingled with disgust at his patron, at Bess Tiddle, and the dowager Lady Grage, and

he could justifiably encourage anything that ministered to his contempt for humanity.

And, as he came to remind himself, Mrs Anne Dorleton was included in this contempt. She was shockingly ignorant, he silently caught her out in various small lies, she hated her mother, and this, in spite of his opinion of Lady Grage and Lady Grage's treatment of her, he counted as a mark against her.

"But you said you hated your mother," she protested on perceiving his disapproval.

"I never said it."

"Well you said it inside. I saw you."

"That's right. At him, girl, at him. Bait the Puritan bear," roared Mr Dorleton across his tankard.

Mr Cork, who had never known the mother he hated for bearing him as a footman's bastard, knew that the admirable female virtues were filial piety, modesty, dignity in manner, decorum in conduct, discretion in speech. He could be in no danger of admiring his patron's wife, however much his patron in the zest for sport might urge him to it, encouraging them to talk and twit each other, "Hark ye now, hark ye, 'tis as fine as a play."

Mr Cork tried to inform her mind because he was sufficiently sorry for her to fear the possible results of her thoughtlessness; her pert fancy amused him, her interest, volatile as it was, flattered him, he saw she thought him a great man, learned and quietly powerful, he saw she was afraid of him; but one day he caught her out and found she was only pretending and laughing at him.

That was in the long corridor where seven windows looked out across the fields and driving rain, and she had met him walking up and down, had been gentle, and, as he suddenly discovered, mocking.

Anger stung him, something deeper than his constant pride had been hurt, he had betrayed his tenderest part to her, he had pitied what he took to be a defenceless creature and now it bit his hand. He turned sharply on her, and his face in anger could be terrible. The laughter rushed out of her eyes, they opened on him wide, pitiful, imploring; she turned and ran from him. For an hour he paced that cold corridor, and seven squares of bleak and storm-swept country gave him his only hope of escape.

Ambition had failed him, his friends had forsaken him, he had no faith in the religion he professed and made his trade. "We live but once," he told himself, and asked, "What is there left?"

His answer met him in the pulpit next day when, on opening the sermon that he had placed there ready early that morning, he saw scrawled across the first page:

"Dere Mr Corke praye doe not be angrie."

He stared at it so long the congregation thought he had lost the beginning of his sermon. At last he turned in the three-decker pulpit to address them, he reversed the hour-glass on the edge of the pulpit as was customary to measure the time of the discourse, and gave out his text, but no chapter and verse for it, saying only in the strained voice of one who dreams, "Pray do not be angry."

He spoke extempore and so well they wondered he did not always do so. For they listened, even the deaf sexton listened, though he could not catch a word that came from those white urgent lips. Mr Cork, who had been angry all his life, preached against anger.

"Of what help is it to you or any man that

you should eat your heart out in the cage of life?" he asked of all the complacent bovine faces, placidly upturned to his. The world was evil, men were brutal, women were false, these were the iron bars that bound humanity. Yet of what use to be angry since we ourselves are of the same stuff as those we rail against? Only by love could we understand this, for to hurt one we loved was to discover in ourselves a cruelty worse than the tiger's. "Wild beasts prey upon an alien kind, it is left for man to torture his friends. What is there in life," cried that white burning face, "if we leave it, not knowing love?"

At the word love, Bess Tiddle simpered and felt her earrings; Mr Dorleton woke from a brief nap and straightway fell into another; beside him, Nancy, whose eyes had not dared move from before her, now looked up, alert and quivering as if in answer to a call, poised for flight yet bound deep in the box pew to the side of her slumbering mate.

Pity and rage again tore at Mr Cork's heart as he looked down at her, and with them an emotion that now he could recognise and exult in, as he continued to preach in favour of love,

of life, and the unexpected beauties that grow in it and catch the weary traveller unaware.

All were agreed that it was one of Mr Cork's best though briefest sermons.

"Never even turned the hour-glass he didn't," complained the deaf sexton who had once been accustomed to see the sands run through a third time every Sunday. But those were the days of your three-hour sermons. In this weaker and degenerate age——

Admiration, awe, respect, these Nancy felt for the first time and took for love. With the frequent lack of humour of women in love, she wished she were a better woman for Mr Cork's sake. When he pointed out that that would scarcely further their intrigue, she cried a little, but presently laughed and said he was quite right, it was much better to be bad. The King was bad, so she heard, and the Court, the women there had hosts of lovers, why should people only be good in the country, and only the women there too? It wasn't fair. These justifications were for him, not herself. Mr Cork was always worrying, always reproaching, sometimes himself, more often her, most often humanity. She wished as he hated humanity

so much, he would let it alone more. He seemed to have expected it and him and her to have changed utterly from the moment when he saw her note in his sermon and preached about love.

"It *did* change," he cried, "the gates of Paradise were opened."

"Well, and you have come in," she answered, flinging her arms round him.

He suspected Paradise to be only another cage.

His self-interest was terrified of exposure, his pride despised his fear. Pleasure was an uneasy torment. He mocked her and hated himself for doing so, she stormed at him, flung away, did not come in to dinner, was found chattering with the stable boys or climbing trees in the orchard, red-eyed, rebellious. And then when he thought he had driven her from him and his heart for ever, she would come suddenly and silently to his side, drop down by his knee and hide her face in his hand, and an agony of protective passion would again beset him.

The late cold spring that year was to him like the frost-bitten blooming of his belated hopes.

He told Nancy she should find another gallant, he was too old for her, too glum, severe and carping; she lost patience and said she would not love him if he did not wish it. He spent much time going in to Oxford on pretence of scholarship but really on the maturing of a long-laid political plot, and was often away for days together.

Nancy was out of doors through nearly the whole of the long daylight, roaming the fields and woods of the Dorleton estate, no one knew where, or what she did. Her nurse complained that she had never dared run wild like this at home, but Mr Dorleton paid no attention. Now that she and his chaplain had ceased to make sport for him by twitting each other and for the most part just sat silent and glowering, he was glad to see as little as possible of them and have Bess up to the house more often.

That summer, his young cousin, Lord Halli-day, the head of the house, came to stay with him in order to negotiate some matters of the family estates. He arrived to find a vast mil-dewed mausoleum of a mansion and nobody about in it but some ancient hairy oafs and a white-faced wench whom, in spite of her jewels,

he could not believe to be Mrs Anne Dorleton. Mrs Anne, he was told, was "somewhere about," and the master at a cockfight at the "Bull and Butter." As the substitute Mrs Dorleton presented no attractions to him, he changed his dress after his journey and strolled out into the grounds to look for his truant hostess.

It was a cold, windy evening; golden clouds, torn from the sunset, raced across the darkening sky, and the wind across the grass, turning it gold and silver; birds broke into song and were suddenly silent; he thought he heard bells somewhere, but could not be sure. A donkey in the orchard scampered away from him as frisky as a colt.

He began to run downhill through the long grass and buttercups, when he stopped at sight of a cherry tree that was shaking more violently than all the others, fruit and leaves were tumbling from it, first one branch and then another heaved and trembled. He had the fancy that the tree was coming alive; as he approached it, an elvish golden face peered out at him, the setting sun shone on it, on the silvery leaves and the dark glossy bobbing cherries, outlining each of them with a gleaming rim.

Nancy saw through the branches a tall and very young man, the fair curls of his periwig dancing on his shoulders and buckles flashing on his shoes, his velvet coat slashed with satin, ribbon loveknots dangling all down his sleeves, lace tossing at his knees and wrists.

Here was the young gallant Mr Cork had so often told her she ought to have instead of himself that she had begun to pray for him at nights and pull the lobes of the fortune-telling grasses for his description. He would dwell in a palace, drive in a coach, dress in satin, so much they had told her and truly, as she had known at the first sight of him running lightly down the hillside towards her, curls, loveknots, laces, blown on the wind.

For a little time the air was full only of the twitter of startled birds, the rustle of leaves and laughter, the scrambling, sliding sounds of her descent as he helped her to a sprawling lower branch and perched delicately beside her, with due attention to his clothes. Not till then did they begin to talk, suddenly, rapidly, as though they would never stop.

They discovered each to the other, she handed him cherries out of her apron which

was all stained with their juice. She was lucky to be married, she said, at home her mother would have beaten and fed her on bread and water for this. Here there was no one to scold but Mr Cork, and he was away. A sullen, frightened look crossed her face as she spoke his name, it was as though she had not meant to do so, and she hurried to ask if he came from the Court. Why, yes, from Whitehall.

"A palace, I knew it," she cried, "and you came in a coach?"

No, he rode in this summer weather. But he had a coach, a coach-and-four, sometimes and six, and painted with the stories of Jupiter's loves.

He was not quite twenty, he had been born in exile when his parents were wandering with the truant King Charles, and the English Court was no more than a hungry band of gipsies, but he had had the luck to become a page at the French Court, had suddenly exchanged his patched rags for finery, and instead of adventures with gutter urchins he had taken part in the Royal ballets as a Cupid, a faun and a shepherd swain. The banquets there were enormous, King Louis had often begun by tossing

off thirty-two dozen oysters. Now the English Court was so short of money that King Charles sometimes had not enough stockings and cravats to wear while the rest were at the wash, and had had to have recourse to his wife's.

But nobody troubled now to keep up appearances, the wars and the travels had altered all that, they had come back to a franker, freer world where the only people who counted were the young and adventurous. My Lord of Rochester had scrawled an epigram on the door of the King's bedroom so impudent even old Rowley had taken offence, but the scandal had blown over. No one could be troubled to remember an affront or a debt or an obligation or a former love affair. No, nor an epigram; he could not or would not tell her Lord Rochester's.

He was Ned to his friends. She was Nancy with her nurse and the younger ones; when Nurse was in a good humour she called her Nancy Pretty, which was the name in these parts of a flower that grew in the cottage gardens. None So Pretty, it used to be, which might be a compliment, but not the way her young brothers and sisters took it, "She's none

so pretty," they would call to her, laughing at her. She described the flower with its cluster of tiny pink blossoms suspended so airily round their stalk that they seemed to be flying round it like a flock of doves round a dovecot.

"Why that's London Pride," he said, "and so would you be if you came to Court."

"Oh, but my mother says—" it was an unflattering description of her person and manners.

He looked at her gravely and did not call her lovely, for which she was in some odd way grateful. But he told her that mothers and manners were no longer the mode. Mr Dryden had remarked that "if a woman have but gaiety and good humour she may be forgiven the lack of beauty." To be natural and easy was all that mattered. An orange girl from Drury Lane was the real queen of the Court, the Duchess of Cleveland bawled a Billingsgate joke from her coach in Hyde Park to a fashionable playwright thirty yards away. As an extreme example of natural manners, he told her of a countess who, dressed as a page, held her lover's horse while he killed her husband in a duel, then fled with him across the

world. He laughed at the answering gleam in her teeth and eyes.

"Would you do the same if I killed your husband?"

"Sure, sir, if I went to Court I would follow the mode. And where are they now—'across the world'? Is it true what Mr Cork says, that the world is round?"

Yes, it was true. He had seen ships come up over the edge of the sea, that proved it to you. She had never seen the sea. And the world was round with a little flat place at top and bottom like an orange. But she had never seen an orange. He would give her one, he would give her the world if he could. She was made for the world and it for her.

"I will show you my house," she said.

"What—Dorleton Manor——"

"No, *no*. My house. I made it. No one else knows of it, not Mr Cork, nor even Nurse. Out of branches and bracken," she went on hurriedly, "down in the wood by the stream."

"Who is Mr Cork? You mentioned him before."

"He is nobody. He is the chaplain. He is very grave and severe but he has been very

kind to me. He is old—old——" she had never known how old till she saw Ned.

"He is her lover," thought Ned, and she saw him thinking it, and was glad, for she need not pretend.

The sun slipped down, the fields grew dark and the sky pale gold. She sprang from the branch, she must go back she said, apart from him, she would slip in by a back way and Nurse would bring her her supper in bed. When they met again they must pretend it was for the first time. He nodded. Both had learned to lie from infancy; only, for a few moments longer, they were still alone in a world where they need not lie.

"Wait," he whispered, and drew her to him where he stood, and kissed her.

The dew clung round their feet, the wind had dropped, the birds were silent. When she drew back, the sickle of the new moon was now clear in the sky.

"Oh," she breathed, gazing at him, seeing no longer the ribbons and laces of his Court clothes, seeing only the dimming face of her lover, and "oh," she sighed deep in her heart, "if only it could be for the first time."

Towards the end of Lord Halliday's visit, Mr Cork returned, dull and heavy with the failure of yet another scheme. At his first sight of my Lord he knew that his Nancy had found her younger, gayer lover, but he hurried the knowledge underground, he watched and argued with himself, he found a hundred proofs against it that only tortured him with uncertainty, giving him excuse to lie awake night after night to ask himself what he already knew.

She was gentler with him, kinder and more concerned. She was more mature, her eyes looked wistful, often he thought he saw regret in her face, the self-reproach that means the birth of a soul. He could flatter himself that her real love was for him, only her lighter fancy had gone out to that decked maypole, and now that he had ridden back to Court, to a hundred other loves, she would forget him almost as fast as he would forget her. It was necessary to tell himself this, to say amid his crumbling hopes, "At least I have not lived in vain. There is one creature that loves me."

With this new and tenderer assurance, he could afford to be gentle with her, nor did he

press his claims as a lover, knowing well that for some little time before Lord Halliday's visit she had found them irksome and repellent. When at last he began to urge them he met with even less success, and suspicion again reared its ugly head.

He urged her to the point when she admitted that she was with child, and she, taking fright at his look, swore that it was by him. He forced himself to believe her, for he too was frightened at what he might become if deprived of this last secret resource for his proud and empty heart.

The shame of his own birth and botched upbringing had given parenthood a romantic value in his eyes. He longed to protect his unacknowledged child, to help it in careful, unrequited ways, to find in its welfare some purpose less meagre than the schemings of his self-interest. Yet he knew that doubt would twist that relation also.

His solitary pacings in the long corridor or in the drive now led him further and faster afield; through those autumn months he would stride across country as though he would tear it; the brown earth and the birds in the sky

could bring no peace to that gaunt black figure aimlessly hurrying over the fields.

Rambling through the wood down by the stream one late wintry afternoon, he stumbled on a sort of hut, built as he thought by gipsies or wandering village boys round a natural hollow caused by the roots of a great tree in the sloping ground. Branches interwoven with bracken extended this hollow into a primitive little house where there was room to sit or lie though not to stand. There were holes in the roof, part of one wall had fallen in, the autumn rains had made the green bower bedraggled, brown and sodden. He looked in and saw black mud, a clump of toadstools, but stuck in the corners were bunches of shrivelled scarlet berries.

Something in this magpie decoration of the decayed, secret house, told him that it was Nancy's work, and some further fancy made his hands tremble, his face grim.

He set about on his knees to search the ground for surer evidences of her presence. Against a root of the tree he found a flat stone and tugged at it. It came up easily enough with a squelching sound as of a hollow beneath.

The mud oozed from under it, he groped in it with his fingers, felt something hard, found its edges and pulled up a square tin box, tore it open and stood staring at some mildewed letters, a lock of fair hair tied with a ribbon, a round, discoloured, wizened object which had once been a gilded orange.

He read the letters, put them in his pocket, returned the rest of the hoard to their hiding-place. He went back to the Manor as though devils were pursuing him; flinging away all caution for the first time in his plotting life, he made his way to Mrs Anne's room, pushing her nurse out of his way, calling her bawd with many variations.

There where the tall candles were guttering in the draught by the heavy curtained bed, he surprised Nancy in the midst of preparations for escape. That very evening she was to meet her lover on the road and travel with him to France, where their child would be born, even as Ned had been born there in his parents' flight from England. Later they would return to Court where, as he had so often told her, her true life awaited her.

Ill as she was, the belief animated her

with courage for the journey. The mournful December wind that sobbed in the trees, her husband's drunken snores in the hall below, her sickness, fears and suspense, were all part she felt of some nightmare from which she would presently awake to find herself living, as if for the first time, in a world where happy lovers were regarded with tolerance.

She was confronted with her former lover's set and staring face.

She knew at that instant that it was her hope that was the idle dream, and this dark room the reality.

She fought him with a despair that made her wild, taunted him with his discovery that her child was by a newer lover, declared that she had never loved him, did not fear him, would escape in spite of him. She knew it was false, that she might have escaped had she not herself bound a lover to her as her jailor, were she not also growing helpless from the child within her. A force stronger than herself had taken possession of her, and her imminent doom filled her with a terror and exultation that raised her to grandeur. She who had been none so pretty was, as he now saw, beautiful,

for the first and last time in her brief, squandered life.

The revelation drove him frantic; he wept, he crawled at her feet which he tried to kiss, he implored her to love him, to lie to him; then at her horror of him, he swore that he would expose her to her husband so that she should never reach her lover, and showed her the small damp bundle of letters screwed up in his hand.

At that, her sudden tormented beauty, her very life seemed to drop from her, she fell against the bed, a grey heap. He called the nurse, there was confusion, panic; he escaped but soon found the uproar had spread through the house, maids were running hither and thither, one groom had been sent for the doctor, another for the village midwife, for Mrs Anne was in great danger, she had been brought to bed three months before her time.

"Long, long may her lover wait," he said to himself, humming the words over and over in his head like the refrain of a song as he hurried through the corridors, up and down the stairs, on no errand, not knowing where he was going, what he was doing, seeing only a tall, fair, and

very young man who waited somewhere in the wet darkness, waited in vain.

The child was born dead. All through the night Nancy cried deliriously that she must ride away at once to meet her lover, they were going together across the world. And then she would babble that the world was round like an orange and her lover would give it her.

Towards morning she was quieter, they saw that her eyes were half open, gazing into the shadows at the foot of her bed. They spoke to her. She did not hear them, nor see them, but she was not unconscious, she saw the candle-light flicker on the bed-curtains and the pattern of fruit or figures show out here and there on the dark tapestry. She thought there was someone waiting for her there by the foot of her bed, a gilded orange leaned from the curtains towards her, she stretched out her arms to it, her nurse heard her whisper, "Give it me," and sobbed, "My lamb, my pretty, what can I give you?"

But Nancy did not know her nurse was there. The shadow that lurked in the curtains at the foot of her bed stepped forward to her. It

was not life that had been waiting for her all this time, but death.

"Not life!" she cried in a voice so pierced with anguish that all who heard it shuddered. She fell back, she was dead.

"Not for this world," they were saying within the hour, "No wish to live. 'Not life' were her last words, they were."

The bereaved Mr Dorleton came to his chaplain in his perplexity and besought him to write the epitaph for his late wife. Mr Cork complied. To recognise his love for the dead woman might have driven him mad, he had perforce to persuade himself of his hate. She had deceived and betrayed him, scorned him, withered all that was kind and noble in his nature. He had abased himself utterly before her, "but that was not myself," his pride implored. Only such devils as women could make a man so poor a beast.

One virtue he might have discovered in her, that for a little time she had felt admiration for him and even affection, but this was not to be enumerated in her husband's epitaph, nor was it a safe subject for his own contemplation.

He would heap on her instead all the virtues

she did not possess; he would call her fair, when never except for one hideous moment had she been beautiful; chaste, when in the first year of her wedded life she had had two lovers; wise, when no village half-wit could have shown more folly; praise the unfeigned piety that could conceal her messages of love in his sermons, and her contempt of the world in whose frenzied pursuit she had sacrificed her life:

> She looked on't, liked it not, and went to Heaven.

That line gave him hysterical pleasure. Now he must include the bastard which she had deceived two men into believing to be their own.

> Goe pritty Babe and tell thy happy Mother
> If thou hadst liv'd, thou hadst been such another.

Truth enough in that last line whatever there was in the rest.

Mr Dorleton came himself for the epitaph, he was in such haste to prove to his mother-in-law that whatever talk there may have been, it was not due to any lack of affection on his part for his wife. He read it, he was delighted.

Mr Cork observed that for some hours his face had worn a look of furtive satisfaction. Who else would "her early fate Complaine"?

Mr Cork knew now for ever that women were not for him, and could devote himself the more securely to his cause for that knowledge. He knew that her mother had been sufficiently scared by scandal to welcome even this end to it. Her lover riding back to London, baulked of his tryst, was probably even now relieved, would soon be thankful, that fate had rid him of such a ridiculous entanglement as running away with a woman with child. But in this he stretched his scorn too far, and pity, that insidious tormentor, once again caught him unawares.

Across the page whereon he had scribbled the many trial attempts for his rhymes, the flourishing capitals, the crossed-out words, the superimposed virtues, he fancied he saw his name in straggling, almost illegible characters, and her sole petition to him, "Praye doe not be angrie."

Suddenly he knew that his anger had killed her, that his epitaph, written in anger, was more monstrous than his murder. He cried out that he must alter it, but Mr Dorleton had already left the room. Mr Cork found himself alone.

The Earlier Service

The Earlier Service

MRS LACY and her eldest daughter Alice hurried through the diminutive gate that led from the Rectory garden into the churchyard. Alice paused to call, "Jane, Father's gone on," under the window of her young sister's room. To her mother she added with a cluck of annoyance, "What a time she takes to dress!"

But Jane was sitting, ready dressed for church, in the window-seat of her room. Close up to her window and a little to the right, stood the square church tower with gargoyles at each corner. She could see them every morning as she lay in her bed at the left of the window, their monstrous necks stretched out as though they were trying to get into her room.

The church bell stopped. Jane could hear the shuffle of feet as the congregation rose at the entrance of her father; then came silence, and then the drone of the General Confession. She jumped up, ran downstairs and into the

churchyard. Right above her now hung the gargoyles, peering down at her. Behind them the sun was setting in clouds, soft and humid as winter sunsets can only be in Somerset. She was standing in front of a tiny door studded with nails. The doorway was the oldest part of the church of Cloud Martin. It dated back to Saxon days; and the shrivelled bits of blackened, leather-like stuff, still clinging to some of the nails, were said to be the skins of heathens flayed alive.

Jane paused a moment, her hands held outwards and a little behind her. Her face was paler than it had been in her room, her eyes were half shut, and her breath came a little quickly, but then she had been running. With the same sudden movement that she had jumped from the window-seat, she now jerked her hands forward, turned the great iron ring that served as a door-handle, and stole into the church.

The door opened into the corner just behind the Rectory pew. She was late. Mrs Lacey and Alice were standing up and chanting the monotone that had become a habitual and almost an unconscious part of their lives. Jane

stole in past her mother, and knelt for an instant, her red pig-tail, bright symbol of an old-fashioned upbringing, flopping sideways on to the dark wood. "Please God, don't let me be afraid—don't, don't, *don't* let me be afraid," she whispered; then stood, and repeated the responses in clear and precise tones, her eyes fixed on the long stone figure of the Crusader against the wall in front of her.

He was in chain armour; the mesh of mail surrounded his face like the coif of a nun, and a high crown-like helmet came low down on his brows. His feet rested against a small lion, which Jane as a child had always thought was his favourite dog that had followed him to the Holy Wars. His huge mailed hand grasped the pommel of his sword, drawn an inch or two from its scabbard. Jane gazed at him as though she would draw into herself all the watchful stern repose of the sleeping giant. Behind the words of the responses, other words repeated themselves in her mind.

> The knight is dust,
> His good sword rust,
> His soul is with the saints we trust.

"But he is *here*," she told herself, "you can't really be afraid with him here."

There came the sudden silence before the hymn, and she wondered what nonsense she had been talking to herself. She knew the words of the service too well, that was what it was; how could she ever attend to them?

They settled down for the sermon, a safe twenty minutes at least, in the Rector's remote and dreamlike voice. Jane's mind raced off at a tangent, almost painfully agile, yet confined always somewhere between the walls of the church.

"You shouldn't think of other things in church," was a maxim that had been often repeated to her. In spite of it she thought of more other things in those two Sunday services than in the whole week between.

"What a lot of Other Things other people must have thought of too in this church," she said to herself; the thought shifted and changed a little; "there are lots of Other Things in this church; there are too many Other Things in this church." Oh, she *mustn't* say things like that to herself or she would begin to be afraid

again—she was not afraid yet—of course, she was not afraid, there was nothing to be afraid of, and if there were, the Crusader was before her, his hand on his sword, ready to draw it at need. And what need could there be? Her mother was beside her whose profile she could see without looking at it, *she* would never be disturbed, and by nothing.

But at that moment Mrs Lacey shivered, and glanced behind her at the little door by which Jane had entered. Jane passed her fur to her, but Mrs Lacey shook her head. Presently she looked round again, and kept her head turned for fully a minute. Jane watched her mother until the familiar home-trimmed hat turned again to the pulpit; she wondered then if her mother would indeed never be disturbed, and by nothing.

She looked up at the crooked angel in the tiny window of mediaeval glass. His red halo was askew; his oblique face had been a friend since her childhood. A little flat-nosed face in the carving round the pillar grinned back at her and all but winked.

"How old are you?" asked Jane.

"Six hundred years odd," he replied.

"Then you should know better than to wink in church, let alone always grinning."

But he only sang to a ballad tune:

"Oh, if you'd seen as much as I,
It's often you would wink."

"In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost——"

Already! *Now* they would soon be outside again, out of the church for a whole safe week. But they would have to go through that door first.

She waited anxiously till her father went up to the altar to give the blessing. After she was confirmed, she, too, would have to go up to the altar. She would have to go. Now her father was going. He took so long to get there, he seemed so much smaller and darker as he turned his back on the congregation; it was really impossible sometimes to see that he had on a white surplice at all. What was he going to do up there at the altar, what was that gleaming pointed thing in his hand? *Who* was that little dark man going up to the altar? Her fingers closed tight on her prayer book as the figure turned round.

"You idiot, of course it's father! There, you can see it's father."

She stared at the benevolent nut-cracker face, distinct enough now to her for all the obscurity of the chancel. How much taller he seemed now he had turned round. And of course, his surplice was white—quite white. What *had* she been seeing?

"May the peace of God which passeth all understanding——"

She wished she could kneel under the spell of those words for ever.

"Oh yes," said the little flat-nosed face as she rose from her knees, "but you'd find it dull, you know." He was grinning atrociously.

The two Rectory girls filed out after their mother, who carefully fastened the last button on her glove before she opened the door on which hung the skins of men that had been flayed alive. As she did so, she turned round and looked behind her, but went out without stopping. Jane almost ran after her, and caught her arm. Mrs Lacey was already tak-ing off her gloves.

"Were you looking round for Tom Elroy, Mother?" asked Alice.

"No, dear, not specially. I thought Tom or someone had come up to our door, but the church does echo so. I think there must be a draught from that door, but it's funny, I only feel it just at the end of the Evening Service."

"You oughtn't to sit at the end of the pew then, and with your rheumatism. Janey, you always come in last. Why don't *you* sit at the end?"

"I won't!" snapped Jane.

"Whatever's the matter, Jane?" asked her mother.

"Why should I sit at the end of the pew? Why can't we move out of that pew altogether? I only wish we would."

Nobody paid any attention to this final piece of blasphemy, for they had reached the lighted hall of the Rectory by this time and were rapidly dispersing. Jane hung her coat and hat on the stand in the hall and went into the pantry to collect the cold meat and cheese. The maids were always out on Sunday evening. Alice was already making toast over the dining-room fire; she looked up as the Rector entered, and remarked severely: "You shouldn't quote

Latin in your sermons, Father. Nobody in the church understands it."

"Nobody understands my sermons," said Mr Lacey, "for nobody listens to them. So I may as well give myself the occasional pleasure of a Latin quotation, since only a dutiful daughter is likely to notice the lapse of manners. Alice, my dear, did I give out in church that next Friday is the last Confirmation class?"

"Friday!" cried Jane, in the doorway with the cheese. "Next Friday the last class? Then the Confirmation's next week."

"Of course it is, and high time, too," said Alice, "seeing that you were sixteen last summer. Only servant girls get confirmed *after* sixteen."

That settled it then. In a spirit of gloomy resignation Jane engulfed herself in an orange.

There were bright stars above the church tower when she went to bed. She kept her head turned away as she drew the curtains, so that she should not see the gargoyles stretching their necks towards her window.

*

Friday evening found Jane at the last Confirmation class in the vestry with her father and three farmers' daughters, who talked in a curious mixture of broad Somerset and High School education and knew the catechism a great deal better than Jane.

After they had left, she followed closely at her father's elbow into the church to remove the hymn books and other vestiges of the choir practice that had taken place just before the class. The lamp he carried made a little patch of light wherever they moved; the outlying walls of darkness shifted, but pressed hard upon it from different quarters. The Rector was looking for his Plotinus, which he was certain he had put down somewhere in the church. He fumbled all over the Rectory pew while Jane tried on vain pretexts to drag him away.

"I have looked in that corner—thoroughly," she said.

The Rector sighed.

"What shall I say
Since Truth is dead?"

he enquired. "So far from looking in that

corner, Jane, you kept your head turned resolutely away from it."

"Did I? I suppose I was looking at the list of Rectors. What a long one it is, and all dead but you, Father."

He at once forgot Plotinus and left the Rectory pew to pore with proud pleasure over the names that began with one Johannes de Martigny and ended with his own.

"A remarkably persistent list. Only two real gaps—in the Civil Wars and in the fourteenth century. That was at the time of the Black Death, when there was no rector of this parish for many years. You see, Jane?—1349, and then there's no name till 1361—Giraldus atte Welle. Do you remember when you were a little girl, very proud of knowing how to read, how you read through all the names to me, but refused to say that one? You said, 'It is a dreadful name,' and when I pressed you, you began to cry."

"How silly! There's nothing dreadful in Giraldus atte Welle," began Jane, but as she spoke she looked round her. She caught at the Rector's arm. "Father, there isn't anyone in the church besides us, is there?"

"My dear child, of course not. What's the matter? You're not nervous, are you?"

"No, not really. But we can find the Plotinus much easier by daylight. Oh—and Father—don't let's go out by the little door. Let's pretend we're the General Congregation and go out properly by the big door."

She pulled him down the aisle, talking all the way until they were both in his study. "Father doesn't *know*," she said to herself—"he knows less than Mother. It's funny, when he would understand so much more."

But he understood that she was troubled. He asked, "Don't you want to get confirmed, Jane?" and then—"You mustn't be if you don't want it."

Jane grew frightened. There would be a great fuss if she backed out of it now after the very last class. Besides, there was the Crusader. Vague ideas of the initiation rites of knight and crusader crossed her mind in connection with the rite of Confirmation. He had spent a night's vigil in a church, perhaps in this very church. One could never fear anything else after that. If only she didn't have to go right up to the altar at the Communion

Service. But she would not think of that; she told the Rector that it was quite all right really, and at this moment they reached the hall door and met Mrs Lacey hurrying towards them with a letter from Hugh, now at Oxford, who was coming home for the vacation on Wednesday.

"He asks if he may bring an undergraduate friend for the first few days—a Mr York who is interested in old churches and Hugh thinks he would like to see ours. He must be clever —it is such a pity Elizabeth is away—she is the only one who could talk to him; of course, he will enjoy talking with you, Father dear, but men seem to expect girls too to be clever now. And just as Janey's Confirmation is coming on —she isn't taking it seriously enough as it is."

"*Mother!* Don't you want us to play dumb crambo like the last time Hugh brought friends down?"

"Nonsense," said the Rector hastily. "Dumb crambo requires so much attention that it should promote seriousness in all things. I am very glad the young man is coming, my love, and I will try my hardest to talk as cleverly as Elizabeth."

He went upstairs with his wife, and said in a low voice: "I think Jane is worrying rather too much about her Confirmation as it is. She seems quite jumpy sometimes."

"Oh—*jumpy*—yes," said Mrs Lacey, as though she refused to consider jumpiness the right qualification for Confirmation. The question of the curtains in the spare room however proved more immediately absorbing.

*

Hugh, who preferred people to talk shop, introduced his friend's hobby the first evening at dinner. "He goes grubbing over churches with a pencil and a bit of paper and finds things scratched on the walls and takes rubbings of them and you call them *graffiti*. Now, then, Father, any offers from our particular property?"

The Rector did not know of any specimens in his church. He asked what sort of things were scratched on the walls.

"Oh, anything," said York, "texts, scraps of dog Latin, aphorisms—once I found the beginning of a love song. When a monk, or

anyone who was doing a job in the church, got bored, he'd begin to scratch words on the wall just as one does on a seat or log or anything to-day. Only we nearly always write our names and they hardly ever did."

He showed some of the rubbings he had taken. Often, he explained, you couldn't see anything but a few vague scratches, and then in the rubbing they came out much clearer. "The bottom of a pillar is a good place to look," he said, "and corners—anywhere where they're not likely to be too plainly seen."

"There are some marks on the wall near our pew," said Jane. "Low down, nearly on the ground."

He looked at her, pleased, and distinguishing her consciously for the first time from her rather sharp-voiced sister. He saw a gawky girl whose grave, beautiful eyes were marred by deep hollows under them, as though she did not sleep enough. And Jane looked back with satisfaction at a pleasantly ugly, wide, good-humoured face.

She showed him the marks next morning, both squatting on their heels beside the wall. Hugh had strolled in with them, declaring that

they were certain to find nothing better than names of the present choir boys, and had retired to the organ loft for an improvisation. York spread a piece of paper over the marks and rubbed his pencil all over it and asked polite questions about the church. Was it as haunted as it should be?

Jane, concerned for the honour of their church, replied that the villagers had sometimes seen lights in the windows at midnight; but York contemptuously dismissed that. "You'd hear as much of any old church." He pulled out an electric torch and switched it on to the wall.

"It's been cut in much more deeply at the top," he remarked; "I can read it even on the wall." He spelt out slowly, "'Nemo potest duobus dominis.' That's a text from the Vulgate. It means, 'No man can serve two masters.'"

"And did the same man write the rest underneath, too?"

"No, I should think that was written much later, about the end of the fourteenth century. Hartley will tell me exactly. He's a friend of mine in the British Museum, and I send

him the rubbings and he finds out all about them."

He examined the sentence on the paper by his torch, while Hugh's "improvisation" sent horrible cacophanies reeling through the church.

"Latin again, and jolly bad—monkish Latin, you know. Can't make out that word. Oh!"

"Well?"

"It's an answer to the text above, I think. I say, this is the best find I've ever had. Look here, the first fellow wrote 'No man can serve two masters,' and then, about a century after, number two squats down and writes—well, as far as I can make it out, it's like this, 'Show service therefore to the good, but cleave unto the evil." Remarkable sentiment for a priest to leave in his church, for I'd imagine only the priest would be educated enough to write it. Now why did he say that, I wonder?"

"Because evil is more interesting than good," murmured Jane.

"Hmph. You agree with him then? What kind of evil?"

"I don't know. It's just—don't you know how words and sentences stick in your head

sometimes? It's as though I were always hearing it."

"Do you think you'll hear it tomorrow?" asked York maliciously. He had been told that tomorrow was the day of her Confirmation. She tried to jump up, but as she was cramped from squatting so long on her heels she only sat down instead, and they both burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry," said York, "I didn't mean to be offensive. But I'd like to know what's bothering you."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. But never mind. I dare say you can't say."

This at once caused an unusual flow of speech from Jane.

"Why should evil be interesting?" she gasped. "It isn't in real life—when the servants steal the spoons and the villagers quarrel with their neighbours. Mrs Elroy came round to father in a fearful stew the other day because old Mrs Croft had made a maukin of her."

"A what?"

"An image—you know—out of clay, and

she was sticking pins in it, and Mrs Elroy declared she knew every time a pin had gone in because she felt a stab right through her body."

"What did your father say?"

"He said it was sciatica, but she wouldn't believe it, and he had to go round to Mrs Croft and talk about Christmas peace and goodwill, but she only leered and yammered at him in the awful way she does, and then Alice said that Christmas blessings only come to those who live at peace with their neighbours, and Mrs Croft knew that blessings meant puddings, so she took the pins out and let the maukin be, and Mrs Elroy hasn't felt any more stabs."

"Mrs Croft is a proper witch then?"

York stood up, looking rather curiously at her shining eyes.

"Cloud Martin has always been a terrible bad parish for witches," said Jane proudly.

"You find *that* form of evil interesting," he said.

Jane was puzzled and abashed by his tone. She peered at the wall again and thought she could make out another mark underneath the others. York quickly took a rubbing and, examining the paper, found it to be one word

only, and probably of the same date as the last sentence, which had caused so much discussion about evil.

"'Ma-ma,' ah, I have it. 'Maneo'—'I re-main,' that's all."

"'*I* remain?' Who remains?"

"Why, the same 'I' who advises us to cleave to evil. Remembering, perhaps, though it hadn't been said then, that the evil that men do lives after them."

She looked at him with startled eyes. He thought she was a nice child but took things too seriously.

Hugh's attempts at jazz on the organ had faded away. As Jane and York left the church by the little door, they met him coming out through the vestry.

"Lots of luck," said York, handing him the paper. "Did you turn on the verger or any-one to look as well?"

"No—why? Aren't the family enough for you?"

"Rather. I was only wondering what that little man was doing by the door as we went out. You must have seen him, too," he said, turning to Jane, "he was quite close to us."

But as she stared at him, he wished he had not spoken.

"Must have been the organist," said Hugh, who was looking back at the church tower. "Do you like gargoyles, York? There's rather a pretty one up there of a devil eating a child—see it?"

*

On the Sunday morning after the Confirmation, the day of her first Communion, Jane rose early, dressed by candlelight, met her mother and sister in the hall, and followed them through the raw, uncertain darkness of the garden and churchyard. The chancel windows were lighted up; the gargoyles on the church tower could just be seen, their distorted shapes a deeper black against the dark sky.

Jane slipped past her mother at the end of the pew. Except for the lights in the chancel, and the one small lamp that hung over the middle aisle, the church was dark, and one could not see who was there. Mr Lacey was already in the chancel, and the Service began.

Jane had been to this Service before, but never when the morning was dark like this. Perhaps that was what made it so different. For it *was* different.

Her father was doing such odd things up there at the altar. Why was he pacing backwards and forwards so often, and waving his hands in that funny way? And what *was* he saying? She couldn't make out the words—she must have completely lost the place. She tried to find it in her prayer book, but the words to which she was listening gave her no clue; she could not recognise them at all, and presently she realised that not only were the words unknown to her, but so was the language in which they were spoken. Alice's rebuke came back to her: "You shouldn't quote Latin in your sermons, Father." But this wasn't a sermon, it was the Communion Service. Only in the Roman Catholic Church would they have the Communion Service in Latin, and then it would be the Mass. Was father holding Mass? He would be turned out of the Church for being Roman. It was bewildering, it was dreadful. But her mother didn't seem to notice anything.

Did she notice that there were other people up there at the altar?

There was a brief pause. People came out of the darkness behind her, and went up to the chancel. Mrs Lacey slipped out of the pew and joined them. Jane sat back and let her sister go past her.

"You are coming, Janey?" whispered Alice as she passed.

Jane nodded, but she sat still. She had let her mother and sister leave her; she stared at the two rows of dark figures standing in the chancel behind the row of those who knelt; she could not see her mother and sister among them; she could see no one whom she knew.

She dared not look again at the figures by the altar; she kept her head bowed. The last time she had looked there had been two others standing by her father—that is, if that little dark figure had indeed been her father. If she looked now, would she see him there? Her head bent lower and sank into her hands. Instead of the one low voice murmuring the words of the Sacrament, a muffled chant of many voices came from the chancel.

She heard the scuffle of feet, but no steps

came past her down into the church again. What were they doing up there? At last she had to look, and she saw that the two rows were standing facing each other across the chancel, instead of each behind the other. She tried to distinguish their faces, to recognise even one that she knew. Presently she became aware that why she could not do this was because they had no faces. The figures all wore dark cloaks with hoods, and there were blank white spaces under the hoods.

"It is possible," she said to herself, "that those are masks." She formed the words in her mind deliberately and with precision as though to distract her attention; for she felt in danger of screaming aloud with terror, and whatever happened she must not draw down on her the attention of those waiting figures. She knew now that they were waiting for her to go up to the altar.

She might slip out by the little door and escape, if only she dared to move. She stood up and saw the Crusader lying before her, armed, on guard, his sword half drawn from its scabbard. Her breath was choking her. "Crusader, Crusader, rise and help me," she

prayed very fast in her mind. But the Crusader stayed motionless. She must go out by herself. With a blind, rushing movement, she threw herself on to the little door, dragged it open, and got outside.

*

Mrs Lacey and Alice thought that Jane, wishing for solitude, must have returned from the Communion table to some other pew. Only Mr Lacey knew that she had not come up to the Communion table at all; and it troubled him still more when she did not appear at breakfast. Alice thought she had gone for a walk; Mrs Lacey said in her vague, late Victorian way that she thought it only natural Jane should wish to be alone for a little.

"I should say it was decidedly more natural that she should wish for sausages and coffee after being up for an hour on a raw December morning," said her husband with unusual asperity.

It was York who found her half an hour later walking very fast through the fields. He took her hands, which felt frozen, and as he

looked into her face he said, "Look here, you know, this won't do. What are you so frightened of?" And then broke off his questions, told her not to bother to try and speak but to come back to breakfast, and half-pulled her with him through the thick, slimy mud, back to the Rectory. Suddenly she began to tell him that the Early Service that morning had all been different—the people, their clothes, even the language, it was all quite different.

He thought over what she stammered out, and wondered if she could somehow have had the power to go back in time and see and hear the Latin Mass as it used to be in that church.

"The old Latin Mass wasn't a horrible thing, was it?"

"Jane! Your father's daughter needn't ask that."

"No. I see. Then it wasn't the Mass I saw this morning—it was——" She spoke very low so that he could hardly catch the words. "There was something horrible going on up there by the altar—and they were waiting—waiting for me."

Her hand trembled under his arm. He

thrust it down into his pocket on the pretext of warming it. It seemed to him monstrous that this nice, straightforward little schoolgirl, whom he liked best of the family, should be hag-ridden like this.

That evening he wrote a long letter to his antiquarian friend, Hartley, enclosing the pencil rubbings he had taken of the words scratched on the wall by the Rectory pew.

On Monday he was leaving them, to go and look at other churches in Somerset. He looked hard at Jane as he said "good-bye." She seemed to have completely forgotten whatever it was that had so distressed her the day before, and at breakfast had been the jolliest of the party. But when she felt York's eyes upon her, the laughter died out of hers; she said, but not as though she had intended to say it, "You will come back for Wednesday."

"Why, what happens on Wednesday?"

"It is full moon then."

"That's not this Wednesday then, it must be Wednesday week. Why do you want me to come back then?"

She could give no answer to that. She turned self-conscious and began an out-of-date

jazz song about "Wednesday week way down in old Bengal!"

It was plain she did not know why she had said it. But he promised himself that he would come back by then, and asked Mrs Lacey if he might look them up again on his way home.

In the intervening ten days he was able to piece together some surprising information from Hartley which seemed to throw a light on the inscriptions he had made at Cloud Martin.

In the reports of certain trials for sorcery in the year 1474, one Giraldus atte Welle, priest of the parish of Cloud Martin in Somerset, confessed under torture to having held the Black Mass in his church at midnight on the very altar where he administered the Blessed Sacrament on Sundays. This was generally done on Wednesday or Thursday, the chief days of the Witches' Sabbath when they happened to fall on the night of the full moon. The priest would then enter the church by the little side door, and from the darkness in the body of the church those villagers who had followed his example and sworn themselves to

Satan, would come up and join him, one by one, hooded and masked, that none might recognise the other. He was charged with having secretly decoyed young children in order to kill them on the altar as a sacrifice to Satan, and he was finally charged with attempting to murder a young virgin for that purpose.

All the accused made free confessions towards the end of their trial, especially in as far as they implicated other people. All however were agreed on a certain strange incident. That just as the priest was about to cut the throat of the girl on the altar, the tomb of the Crusader opened, and the knight who had lain there for two centuries arose and came upon them with drawn sword, so that they scattered and fled through the church, leaving the girl unharmed on the altar.

With these reports from Hartley in his pocket, York travelled back on the Wednesday week by slow cross-country trains that managed to miss their connections and land him at Little Borridge, the station for Cloud Martin, at a quarter-past ten. The village cab had broken down, there was no other car to be had at that hour, it was a six-mile walk up to the

Rectory, there was a station hotel where it would be far more reasonable to spend the night, and finish his journey next morning. Yet York refused to consider this alternative; all through the maddening and uncertain journey, he had kept saying to himself, "I shall be late," though he did not know for what. He had promised Jane he would be back this Wednesday, and back he must be. He left his luggage at the station and walked up. It was the night of the full moon, but the sky was so covered with cloud as to be almost dark. Once or twice he missed his way in following the elaborate instructions of the station-master, and had to retrace his steps a little. It was hard on twelve o'clock when at last he saw the square tower of Cloud Martin Church, a solid blackness against the flying clouds.

He walked up to the little gate into the churchyard. There was a faint light from the chancel windows, and he thought he heard voices chanting. He paused to listen, and then he was certain of it, for he could hear the silence when they stopped. It might have been a minute or five minutes later, that he heard the most terrible shriek he had ever

imagined, though faint, coming as it did from the closed church; and knew it for Jane's voice. He ran up to the little door and heard that scream again and again. As he broke through the door he heard it cry, "Crusader! Crusader!" The church was in utter darkness, there was no light in the chancel, he had to fumble in his pockets for his electric torch. The screams had stopped and the whole place was silent. He flashed his torch right and left, and saw a figure lying huddled against the altar. He knew that it was Jane; in an instant he had reached her. Her eyes were open, looking at him, but they did not know him, and she did not seem to understand him when he spoke. In a strange, rough accent of broad Somerset that he could scarcely distinguish, she said, "It was my body on the altar."

Madame Fears the Dark

Play in One Act

THE PERSONS

MADAME DE MONTESPAN, *former mistress of King Louis XIV of France*

MADEMOISELLE DE LIANON
MADEMOISELLE LA CHARRETTE } *her ladies*
MADEMOISELLE DES FLEURS

1st Visitor
2nd Visitor

The Scene: The bedroom of Madame de Montespan in Paris.

The Time: The latter part of the reign of King Louis XIV of France.

Madame Fears the Dark

THE bedroom of Madame de Montespan is painted with florid pictures of goddesses and cupids, recumbent among clouds and roses. The pink, sprawling curves of their ample figures are illumined by many candles in branched candelabra, white and gold.

On a dais, is a huge seventeenth-century bed hung with tapestry. The curtains are drawn back near the foot of the bed so that the light can enter.

Near the bed, a large crucifix hangs in the corner of an alcove, where two or three steps mount up to a praying-stool.

In front is a high carved chair, and on it an embroidery frame.

Three young ladies in full Court dress of the reign of Louis XIV are just falling asleep over various occupations.

MADEMOISELLE DES FLEURS *is softly playing a gavotte of Lully's at a harpsichord. The tinkling notes fall slowly like drops of water, sometimes between long pauses, while her head nods drowsily over the keys.*

MADEMOISELLE DE LIANON *and* LA CHARRETTE *sit on stiff-backed stools, playing cards.*

The head of MLLE LA CHARRETTE *drops over the cards, then falls back, and she gives a long yawn.*

DE LIANON (*sits bolt upright with a start*). What did you say?

LA CHARRETTE (*looks at her cards*). I said "Tierce to a King."

They continue to play, but LA CHARRETTE *soon nods again. The head of* MLLE DES FLEURS *falls forward on to her instrument, and her music to the floor.*

DE LIANON. Mademoiselle, you are asleep.

LA CHARRETTE (*wakes with a start*). Not at all! I was waiting for you to play.

DE LIANON. Ah, guilty! You have given yourself away. I did not accuse you, but Mlle des Fleurs.

DES FLEURS (*wakes at her name*). What are you saying about me?

LA CHARRETTE (*in a loud reproof*). That you were asleep.

DES FLEURS. How dare you! Do you wish to disgrace me with Madame de Montespan?

She tiptoes to the bed and looks in.

LA CHARRETTE (*yawning*). What is the time?

DE LIANON. Nearly two o'clock.

DES FLEURS. Look! Madame is fast asleep.

DE LIANON. Oh I am glad! She has not slept for so many nights.

DES FLEURS. How old she looks! One forgets it when she is awake.

LA CHARRETTE. If one of us kept watch—would it not be safe—for a few minutes——

DE LIANON. Mademoiselle! What do you suggest?

DES FLEURS. Surely you do not think of our going to sleep?

LA CHARRETTE. I can think of nothing else.

DES FLEURS. We must obey the orders of Madame de Montespan.

DE LIANON. You know how it upsets Madame to find even one of us asleep.

LA CHARRETTE. It upsets me to keep awake.

DE LIANON (*replaces a spent candle*). Were the candles shining into the bed?

DES FLEURS. Yes. How *can* she sleep with the light in her eyes?

DE LIANON. She cannot sleep without it. Madame hates the dark.

LA CHARRETTE. Madame *fears* the dark.

DE LIANON (*turns to the bed*). It is better not to speak of the dark.

LA CHARRETTE (*points to the window*). The dark is there, whether we speak of it or not.

DE LIANON. There is bright light in this room.

She leads her back to the card-table. DES FLEURS *takes up the embroidery frame and sits in the carved chair.*

DES FLEURS. I will finish my pomegranate. There are fifty-three seeds in it. *She yawns. The card-players continue their desultory game.*

DE LIANON. It is too silent. Madame must hear conversation when she wakes.

LA CHARRETTE (*rubs her eyes*). I can hardly see the cards.

DES FLEURS. That is not conversation.

DE LIANON. What shall we talk about?

DES FLEURS. Of—of the King's visit this morning.

LA CHARRETTE. Every morning at half-past eleven, King Louis visits Madame de Montespan and stays exactly quarter of an hour. He has done this for twenty-seven years. So what can there be to say about the King's visit?

DE LIANON. That it shows the King's respect for Madame de Montespan. He treats her, not as his discarded mistress, but as a deposed queen.

LA CHARRETTE (*impatiently*). All the world knows that. Let us talk of Madame herself.

DE LIANON. No. Let us talk of King Louis.

LA CHARRETTE. You are devoted to Madame. Why will you never talk of her?

DE LIANON (*in nervous haste*). Of course I will talk of Madame. I have heard that when she was the King's reigning mistress, she had twenty rooms on the first floor of the Palace, while the Queen had only eleven on the second floor.

DES FLEURS. The Queen's train was borne by a simple page—but the great Maréchal de Noailles bore the train of Madame de Montespan.

DE LIANON. She wore cloth of gold so fine, it must have been woven by the fairies.

LA CHARRETTE. She wears sackcloth now beneath her linen, and sharp-pointed chains. Why does she inflict such penance on herself?

DE LIANON. She is repenting of her sins against God.

LA CHARRETTE. If she did not fear God so much, we might be allowed to sleep.

DE LIANON (*coughs*). They say King Louis is growing very religious.

LA CHARRETTE. Because he cannot laugh without showing he has lost his teeth.

DE LIANON. But he still has a fine leg.

DES FLEURS (*has slid down in her chair and now raises her head*). I worship him in white stockings.

Her head drops again and she sleeps.

DE LIANON (*repeats sleepily*). White stockings—yes, white stockings. (*With a start.*) They are very becoming.

LA CHARRETTE. To King Louis.

Her head falls back against her chair, her cards slip gradually through her fingers to the floor.

DE LIANON. Yes. To King Louis.

Her head falls forward on to the table. All are asleep. Silence.

The bed curtains are suddenly drawn further back and the face of MADAME DE MONTESPAN *looks out. It has a haggard and terrible beauty; the eyes open wildly as she stares at her*

attendants. She gives a shriek of fear.

MADAME. I am alone!

They spring awake. LA CHARRETTE, *frightened, runs to* DES FLEURS *and clings to her.* DE LIANON *goes to the bed and kneels beside it, holding out her arms.*

DE LIANON. We are here, Madame, with you.

MADAME (*touches her on the shoulder*). You were all so still—too still. (*She draws back.*) I thought you were—*dead!*

ALL THE LADIES. Oh Madame!

MADAME. To sleep is a kind of death. Your souls were absent. You had left me alone.

DE LIANON. You shall never be alone.

A candle, burnt down too far, gutters and goes out.

MADAME (*points to it with a scream*). The candle! It has gone out! It is an omen of death. You would see me die, for want of care to watch a candle.

DE LIANON. We would die for you.

MADAME. Why talk of dying? We will have no more ill omens. Fetch more candles.

DES FLEURS *and* LA CHARRETTE *run out,*
DE LIANON *rises to follow them, but*
MADAME *catches her arm.*

No. Stay and speak to me.

DE LIANON. If I sat beside you, Madame, could you not close your eyes?

MADAME. When I close my eyes, I see images in the red darkness.

DE LIANON. Would you send for your confessor, Madame?

MADAME. I saw the Lord Cardinal this evening. He absolved me of all my sins, but would not let me speak of them.

DE LIANON. But Madame, is it possible——

MADAME. His Eminence obeys the King's orders.

DE LIANON. Does the King not allow you to speak of your sins?

MADAME. They are the sins of Madame de Montespan, who once ruled France and the heart of King Louis. These sins touch the King's honour. They must not be heard.

DE LIANON. It is monstrous! You are free to confess.

MADAME. To whom? No one will hear.

DE LIANON. At what do you stare so, Madame?

MADAME. At that corner. It looks like a church.

DE LIANON. That is because of the crucifix.

MADAME (*points as the others enter with candles*). That corner is full of shadows. Drive them out. Put more lights. Ah, now we have bright light everywhere. You are all in full dress? (*They come forward and curtsy.*) Good. We will hold our court. We may have an illustrious guest. Be ready to entertain him.

LA CHARRETTE (*to* DE LIANON). What guest?

DE LIANON. She is dazed. No guest could come at this hour.

MADAME. Why do you talk there in low voices? This is not a church. (*She laughs.*) And if it were, a church can be merry after midnight.

LA CHARRETTE. But Madame, no one goes to church after midnight?

DE LIANON (*hastily*). Madame only laughs at us, do you not, Madame?

MADAME. Yes, my good de Lianon. I was only laughing. You must laugh too and

chatter and move about. Let des Fleurs sing us a lively air.

DES FLEURS. I have a new song, Madame, called "The Faithful Lover."

MADAME (*gaily*). Ah, I have heard of it. He remembers the joy of a former kiss while tasting a thousand new ones. That is to be truly faithful. (*To* DE LIANON *as the others go to the instrument.*) Did King Louis remember mine?

DE LIANON. Could the de Maintenon make him forget? The prude, the elderly widow!

MADAME. She was the governess of our children. Now she is his governess. I was his queen.

DE LIANON. And are still, Madame. For still King Louis pays respect and honour——

MADAME. To himself. (*She turns and calls.*) A dance! A dance!

DES FLEURS *plays a lively air and* LIANON *and* LA CHARRETTE *dance with quick tapping steps, lifting their skirts to show their red heels.*

DES FLEURS (*sings as she plays*):

In a thousand thousand kisses
More or less,

Can you weigh just where the bliss is?
Can you guess
Which of all the fleeting fond delights
Will return to mock your faithless nights,
Laughing as you kiss another charmer,
"Pray, sir, do you find a new love warmer?
More softly delicious?
More sweetly capricious?
A more delicate treasure
Or rapturous pleasure
Have you to gain?
Oh no, no, sir,
You may go, sir,
Kiss your love and kiss again.
Go to, go to, you kiss in vain!"

MADAME (*claps her hands, laughing*). Charming! Now amuse yourselves, play cards, talk, talk! Place more candles in front of my bed.

They do so, and she calls low to DE LIANON *as she passes.*

De Lianon, do not let me listen to the silence.

DE LIANON. Madame, I will stay with you always.

MADAME. How long is always? Soon it will help me no longer that you are alive and can dance and talk in a lighted room. I shall be

alone then, silent, in the dark. (*She leans back and is heard behind the curtains.*) Till then, let me hear laughter and voices—human voices.

DE LIANON (*hastily, as she joins the others in front*). They say all the hooped skirts are to be bell-shaped.

LA CHARRETTE (*shuffling the cards*). I have bought some gold brocade stamped with roses for a petticoat.

DES FLEURS (*sits in her chair and takes up her embroidery*). Have you heard that the young Comte de Fiesque was ruined at cards and murdered a stock jobber? He is to be broken on the wheel.

LA CHARRETTE. How sad!

DE LIANON (*lifts a warning finger*). You mean, how amusing! (*Low and anxious.*) Has anyone laughed yet?

DES FLEURS. No. Tell us something pleasant and we will laugh.

LA CHARRETTE. I can think of nothing pleasant but bed, and that is not laughable—it is tragic. Oh if we could take off our stays!

They all sigh.

DE LIANON. We *must* not sigh. If we can

think of nothing to amuse us, we must laugh without. Now—all together—

ALL. Ha, ha, ha!

DE LIANON. It sounded a little forced.

DES FLEURS. Would Madame notice?

LA CHARRETTE (*has stepped cautiously to the bed and returned*). Madame sleeps again.

DE LIANON (*dealing the cards*). But we must go on talking.

LA CHARRETTE. It will not keep her from dying.

DE LIANON. Sh-h! Your thought might penetrate her slumbers.

LA CHARRETTE (*sits at the table*). And why not? Since Madame is so devout, why should she fear death?

DE LIANON. But she is penitent.

LA CHARRETTE. For having ruled France and France's greatest monarch for thirteen years. Is *that* a crime to wake her, shrieking, in terror of the dark?

DE LIANON (*quickly*). Oh look—des Fleurs is asleep again!

LA CHARRETTE (*leans across the table*). *I* will keep awake if you tell me why Madame fears the dark.

DE LIANON. I know nothing.

LA CHARRETTE (*puts her hand on hers*). Antoinette!

DE LIANON (*suddenly catches at her hand*). I can do nothing—and she is afraid.

LA CHARRETTE. Of what?

DE LIANON. I do not know.

LA CHARRETTE. You *dare* not know.

DE LIANON. Claire—what are you saying?

LA CHARRETTE (*sharply*). Someone is laughing. There! From the bed. (*She runs to* DE LIANON.) Who—*what* was it?

DE LIANON. It must be Madame. I have heard her laugh so in her sleep.

LA CHARRETTE (*looking round her*). How can you have stayed with her so long? This brightly lighted, painted room; it is haunted.

DE LIANON. The late hour makes you nervous, Mademoiselle.

MADAME (*laughing, cries behind the curtains*). They dare not accuse the Montespan. No one will know.

DE LIANON. She talks wildly in her sleep. It is better to wake her.

LA CHARRETTE. Than to listen?

DE LIANON. Yes, Mademoiselle — if you

would sleep well yourself. (*She goes to the bed and draws the curtains.* DES FLEURS *wakes.*) Madame, you called.

MADAME (*leans forward and speaks in her natural voice*). What did I say? (*A pause.*) Answer.

DE LIANON. Madame, you said, "No one will know."

MADAME. And nothing else?

DE LIANON. You said, "They dare not accuse the Montespan. No one will know."

MADAME. Not even the King? But the King *shall* know. I shall speak to him to-night. Why do you stare? Did you not send messengers to Court this evening as I commanded?

DE LIANON. Yes, Madame. But they brought no answer.

LA CHARRETTE. Madame, it is close on two o'clock!

MADAME. Do you hear the coach wheels?

DE LIANON *goes to the window behind the bed and listens. She turns and shakes her head to the others.*

DES FLEURS. It is impossible, Madame, that the King should come at this hour.

MADAME. Does Mademoiselle des Fleurs

decide what is impossible for Madame de Montespan and Louis XIV of France?

DES FLEURS (*curtsies*). I beg your pardon, Madame.

MADAME. Quick, my girls! Bring me my mirror, my combs, my rouge.

They flutter round her. DE LIANON *runs to fetch a box and drops it, scattering trinkets.* LA CHARRETTE *kneels beside her and puts a hand on her arm.*

LA CHARRETTE. *Who* does she hear approaching? Is it a greater King than Louis?

DE LIANON. I feel Death near.

MADAME (*to* DES FLEURS). The de Lianon can best arrange my hair. (*She comes down the dais on her arm and sits in the carved chair, where* DE LIANON *comes to her and arranges her hair. She calls to the others*) My Spanish earrings! My clasp of topaz and chrysoprase! And the great diamond that the King gave me the day my eldest son, the Duc de Maine, was born.

DE LIANON. Dear Madame, forgive my presumption. But if the King does not come——

MADAME. He will come, child, he will come. And I shall speak to him at last.

LA CHARRETTE (*to* DES FLEURS). But the King will not come?

DES FLEURS. Not for a thousand messengers! It is madness.

MADAME. Bring the King's chair and place it by me. Now see that the porter is roused.

DES FLEURS (*goes to the door, then returns*). Madame——

MADAME. Mademoiselle de Lianon and la Charrette, go tell the porter.

As they turn to go, there is a loud knock on the door. All, except MADAME, *start back.*

DES FLEURS. Who is that?

LA CHARRETTE (*clutches* DE LIANON. *In a whisper*). Is Death at the door?

MADAME. It is the King!

Another knock. She raps the floor with her stick.

Open—to the King!

DE LIANON. Madame, we do not know who it is—we dare not open the door.

MADAME (*rising*). Then *I* will open.

DE LIANON. No, Madame, you must not——

MADAME. Is that a word to use to me? His Majesty is waiting. *She steps forward.*

DE LIANON. Madame—your pardon—I will open.

LA CHARRETTE *takes her hand. They look at each other, then go together and pull open the heavy double doors, then fall back, averting their faces. Two gentlemen-in-waiting walk in backwards, bowing.*

GENTLEMAN-IN-WAITING. His Majesty King Louis.

DE LIANON *sinks to the ground as* KING LOUIS XIV *enters; a small man on high red heels, whose air of terrifying majesty makes him appear of commanding stature. He bows very low to* MADAME DE MONTESPAN, *less low to* DES FLEURS, *who curtsies, clumsy with surprise, and advances to kiss* MADAME'*s hand.*

LOUIS. I beg you, Madame, not to rise. It seems I have surprised your ladies.

LA CHARRETTE *helps* DE LIANON *to rise and curtsy. He acknowledges this belated effort with a frigid bow.*

I also am surprised—and enchanted—to find

I had over-rated the urgency of Your Lady-ship's summons.

MADAME. The matter is urgent, sir.

LOUIS. Your unfailing discretion must have found it so, Madame, to send messengers so late to Court. On leaving the ball at the Palais Royal, I ordered my coach to drive to your house—to find Your Ladyship better than my fears.

MADAME. Shall I apologise, sir, that I am not in the unconscious agony of death?

LOUIS. A deathbed is usually the reason for a midnight summons. Whatever the hour, the mother of my legitimised children can claim my attendance at it.

MADAME. I begged your presence, sir, that I might speak to you. After twenty-seven years, may I do that, alone?

LOUIS. Your wish, Madame, commands me as your conversation delights me.

He signs to his GENTLEMEN-IN-WAITING, *who go out after the ladies, leaving the doors open.* LOUIS *at once continues—*

Now that your young ladies have gone, I can tell you of a pleasant incident that enlivened

the Court this week at Fontainebleau. The Duc de St Aignan happened to hear that a certain Abbess, travelling incognito, was obliged to stop there in order to give birth to a child. He told the scandal to the whole Court as an excellent joke. It was then discovered that the unknown Abbess was his own daughter. And now it is the Duc de St Aignan who is the excellent joke.

He laughs delicately with tight lips so as not to show his teeth.

MADAME. Once it was my husband who was the excellent joke.

LOUIS. Ah yes. He objected to your position as my mistress. He was an original.

MADAME. He could not appreciate either the honour or the humour of his cuckoldom. Not even when Monsieur Molière wrote a play on it, for all the Court to laugh at.

LOUIS. Comedy is out of fashion now. I often send for Monsieur Racine to read us his tragedies in the evenings. There is nothing of the poet in his manners.

MADAME. But you, sir, have found my wit cruel.

LOUIS. Except when he pursues his own

thought, inattentive to the speech of others, even of the King. You were saying, Madame?

MADAME. That I have often railed and stormed at you.

LOUIS. Your Ladyship had always a fine courage.

MADAME. I have inflicted its own penance on my dangerous tongue. May it pray for absolution?

LOUIS. That is for your confessor to grant, Madame.

MADAME. He has not suffered from it.

LOUIS. Nor could I suffer where I admire. The passions of an angry beauty are never ungraceful.

MADAME (*with a flash of her old temper*). Not when she boxed your ears and mocked you for your lack of teeth?

LOUIS. Your wit, Madame, was sharp, your rage tempestuous, but you kept always the manners of a queen.

MADAME. I cannot keep them to-night. I must speak.

LOUIS. In that, I venture to know Your Ladyship better than yourself. Madame de

Montespan will never speak of what it is good manners to hide.

MADAME. You have forbidden your confessor to hear me. When I speak of my sins, he says I am raving, he calls for my ladies to attend to me. No other priest dares come to me. My sins are covered over, hidden, in the dark. Oh God, lighten my darkness!

LOUIS. Amen, Madame. In your repentance, you have the consolations of religion.

MADAME. Twenty-seven years ago, a monk called Guibourg was tried as a sorcerer and poisoner. His crimes were so horrible that the judge covered the face of the crucifix in Court, that God might not see nor hear. Since then, God's face has been hidden from me also.

LOUIS. Madame, I would remind you that Justice herself was forced to hide her face. The trial of that monstrous wretch was found to implicate half the Court. If Justice had proceeded, she would have accused those nearest the King's person, and so attacked his personal honour. The trial was broken short, the evidence destroyed, the witnesses were dismissed. That was at our command. And we have not revoked it.

MADAME. I am not now on trial.

LOUIS. Nor were you then, Madame. They dared not accuse the Montespan.

MADAME. "They dare not accuse the Montespan. No one will know." (*She turns to him.*) But *you* know, Monsieur?

LOUIS. Then what need to speak of it?

MADAME. Do you know all? *What* do you know? You come daily to see me so that all the world shall think you gave no credit to those hideous rumours. You have told me the gossip of the Court, consulted with me about our children. And I have never dared speak of what sits there always between us. (*He turns his head to her.*) Do you see it too? (*In a shriek*) Louis, what do you see?

LOUIS. I see a woman who is still of great beauty.

MADAME. Ah, your face has shut again! Do you hate me, Louis? Has it tortured you to come each day and look on me and pretend you do not hate me?

LOUIS. We do not pay visits to be tortured, Madame.

MADAME. Only to torture, then? (*She kneels to him.*) I shall soon hear nothing but the

silence. Let me have one word from you, a word of loathing if you will. But speak to me!

LOUIS. This exaltation Madame is the effect of your fever. Pray be seated.

He raises her and stands looking at her.

MADAME. Your face remains hidden from me. (*To herself*) What shall I say to God?

LOUIS. You can say, Madame, that for the most brilliant years of his reign, you were the chief mistress of Louis XIV of France. Whom Louis has honoured, God will not reject.

MADAME. Does Louis honour me now?

LOUIS. My daily presence here bears testimony to that.

MADAME. But in your heart, sir?

LOUIS. It would be discourteous to speak of one's heart to a former mistress.

MADAME. How can you honour me? You, who know that in my monstrous jealousy and pride——

LOUIS. Pride, Madame, is the prerogative of a commanding beauty. And Jealousy, the charming proof of a loving female's sensibility.

MADAME. Oh God, hear him! When the charming proof I gave was to plot his murder!

LOUIS (*rises in displeasure*). Madame, we do

not talk of murder on a pleasant visit. That you do so is a sign of your malady. We will therefore take our leave in the hope of your recovery. But failing that desired event, I recommend your soul to the King of Heaven.

MADAME. He should attend to the recommendation of the King of France.

LOUIS. I have found reason to appreciate His consideration. I trust, Madame, you will also find it.

He bows very low, kisses her hand and goes out.

MADAME (*falls back in her chair, and calls faintly*) De Lianon!

DE LIANON (*runs in*). Madame, you suffer! What can the King have said to you?

MADAME. Nothing! Will God too have nothing to say? (*Rising.*) The crucifix! The head is covered!

DE LIANON. No Madame! It is only a shadow that has fallen across it. (*She moves a candle.*) Now, Madame, you can see the face.

MADAME. It is hidden.

DE LIANON. Is there nothing *I* can say? Oh speak to me, Madame!

She kneels beside her chair.

MADAME. You, child! You who love me! That alone should keep me silent.

DE LIANON. Whatever you said, it would still be your face before me.

MADAME. What do you see in my face?

DE LIANON. A kind mistress. A loved and loving friend. A queen, crucified.

MADAME. But if you had seen it transformed—maddened by outraged pride, by jealousy, by hatred?

DE LIANON. Monsieur de Saint Simon says that the springs of love and hatred are the same. To be a good friend, one must also be a fierce enemy.

MADAME. So you would still see me as before?

DE LIANON. Your words could not change you to me.

MADAME. That first time! I hurried from the ball at the Palace in a mask, and a grey mantle over my cloth of gold. Those narrow streets were very muddy.

DE LIANON. You went into the streets alone at night, Madame!

MADAME. Have you heard the name of Guibourg?

DE LIANON. I do not think so, Madame. Who was he?

MADAME. He was called the Black Priest.

DE LIANON (*shudders*). I remember *that.* My nurse used to frighten me with tales of him.

MADAME. What did she tell you?

DE LIANON. That he was a wicked priest who held Masses to Satan in a Christian Church and killed children in sacrifice to him. And in return, Satan did what he wished and helped him to poison hundreds of people. Did he really do so, Madame?

MADAME. There is a little church to Saint Denis that stands by itself close to the river.

DE LIANON. I have seen it. It is cold and very dark, even at midday.

MADAME. It was not dark at midnight.

DE LIANON. Madame! Why do you look so at me? What are you about to say?

MADAME. Shall I say it, de Lianon?

DE LIANON. No! Your face has changed. I do not know it. (*She runs to the crucifix, crouching beneath it.*) Oh God, do not let her say it!

MADAME. I shall not say it. Come here

to me. (DE LIANON *approaches her, trembling*) Look at me. Look well. Have I changed?

DE LIANON. No, no, Madame.

MADAME. I am the same to you as before. You have this only to forgive, that in my cowardice I sought relief where I had no right to seek it.

DE LIANON. I have failed you, Madame. And now I would give my soul to help you.

MADAME. "No man may deliver his brother."

DE LIANON. Is there nothing I can do?

MADAME. You can bring the cards. We will have a game of piquet.

DE LIANON (*carries the card-table to her*). Madame—I pray you—let me seek a confessor.

MADAME. In all Paris you will not find a priest who would dare be my confessor. The King and the Lord Cardinal have forbidden it. (*She takes up the cards.*) I may not die tonight. Come, will you cut to me?

DES FLEURS *comes in.*

DES FLEURS. I hope Your Ladyship will not be displeased. The porter has allowed a

strange monk to be admitted to the ante-room. He wishes to speak to Your Ladyship.

MADAME *drops the cards.*

DE LIANON. Who is he?

DES FLEURS. He did not say.

MADAME. Go quickly and bring him. (*To* DE LIANON *as* DES FLEURS *goes out*) You spoke of a confessor. This unknown monk had come even as you spoke.

DE LIANON. But Madame—should we not ask——

MADAME. No, no. It is safer for him to remain unknown, since the King forbids me a confessor.

DES FLEURS *leads in a tall monk in a brown habit whose cowl is pulled down over his face.*

MADAME. You have come to hear my confession? THE MONK *bows.* Mesdemoiselles, you will conduct me to my prie-Dieu and then leave me.

DE LIANON (*catches at her hand*). Madame, we are to be trusted. Why should he keep silent before us?

MADAME. None are to be trusted. My own secret is not safe with myself.

DE LIANON. Yes, but Madame—why should he stand so still?

MADAME. What is the matter, girl?

DE LIANON. His face is hidden!

DES FLEURS. A confessor does not show his face, Mademoiselle.

MADAME. You are a fool. Come, give me your arm. What! You stand like a block! And this is the girl who would have run through the streets at midnight to find me a confessor! (*To* DES FLEURS) Mademoiselle, your arm!

She walks with her help to the alcove.

DE LIANON (*goes to her, holding out her hands*). Madame, you wished me to stay with you always. Let me stay now.

MADAME (*to* DES FLEURS). Take her away and make her sleep. She is over-wrought. Good-night, de Lianon. When you return you will find me at peace.

DES FLEURS *leads* DE LIANON *away, sobbing.* MADAME *turns beneath the steps of the* prie-Dieu, *facing the monk who stands still against the wall.*

My father, I had despaired of God's mercy. And He has sent you to me, out of the dark

streets of Paris, so that I shall not go to Him unprepared. At the very last, God shows His face.

The MONK *lifts his hand and pushes back his cowl, revealing his face, which he slowly turns towards her. She raises her arms, clutching at the wall.*

It is the face of Guibourg!

She crouches, her head bowed so as not to see him, her hands outstretched against his approach.

Oh God, hide me from it! Send your darkness upon me!

She rushes from the alcove and strikes at the candles, putting them out and crying:

Put out the lights! Let the darkness cover me!

The MONK *mounts the steps of the alcove and turns facing her. He is standing beneath the crucifix and the only lighted candles left are in the alcove, shining on his face.*

THE MONK. Will you not confess now, Madame? Would it be a waste of labour, since I can recite the full catalogue of your sins?

MADAME. Leave me alone!

THE MONK. Alone? But Your Ladyship has had a distaste for solitude, ever since your first visit to me. You remember your first visit. You wore a mask and a grey mantle over a ball dress of cloth of gold. The little church of Saint Denis was so conveniently near the river. A boat could slip along quite noiselessly in the night. Many things have been hidden, covered over by the darkness of those waters, Madame.

MADAME. Why have you come to torment me?

THE MONK. I have come to thank you, Madame. Since they dared not accuse you, they could not execute me. I was sent instead to an obscure monastery in the remotest province of France. There I became bored, which they called mad. Because I howled like a beast, they kept me in a place underground and flung food to me through a hole. I was there for twelve years. But I had companions in that place.

MADAME. Your companions! Shall I ever be alone?

THE MONK. When I escaped and came to Paris, I heard, Madame, of the fine repentance

you were making. All spoke of your devotion, of the severe penances that you yourself had imposed. They were of course entirely for the sin of having been the King's mistress. None spoke of how you had won to that position—by love philtres, by sorcery, by Black Masses said to Satan on the altar of Christ——

MADAME (*in a shriek*). Silence! Oh God, send your silence upon me!

THE MONK. But all this and much more, Madame, you were about to confess to me. You won the King by my sorcery. When he forsook you for another, you would have poisoned the King, by my sorcery. I have observed that the demand for love-potions is almost invariably followed by that for poisons. My knowledge of your sins, Madame, spares you the pain of confession. I can therefore pronounce absolution—according to the formula we have used before, in the little church of Saint Denis by the river.

MADAME (*rises from where she has crouched huddled on the floor*). You shall not speak those words. I have no fear of you now. You hate me, Guibourg, because I repent. Therefore you too must wish that you could repent.

THE MONK (*in a thin whimpering scream*). You shall not repent. You mock saint, you sneaker into Paradise, you will die blaspheming.

MADAME (*walks slowly towards him, with the help of her stick, her head erect, looking at him*). You cannot stand between me and God. Nor can any help me stand before Him. The Church, and the man I wronged, have refused pardon. Those who love me cannot bear my burden. I will die alone.

He has come down the steps of the alcove, cowering, as she advances, and she now stands on them.

THE MONK. I will go. There is death on your face. Shall I send your attendants?

MADAME. To what purpose? They could only go with me a little way.

THE MONK *goes out. She turns to the crucifix.*

I see the crucifix—but, above, His face. I shall see it better in the dark.

She puts out the candles in the alcove. The room is now in complete darkness and silence as she waits for death.

CURTAIN

Monsieur Seeks a Wife

Monsieur Seeks a Wife

Note.—The following story is an extract from the private memoirs of Monsieur de St Aignan, a French nobleman living in the first half of the eighteenth century.

I WAS twenty-four years of age when I returned in 1723 at the end of my three years' sojourn at the English Court, and had still to consider the question of my marriage. My father sent for me soon after my return and asked if I had yet given any thought to the matter. I replied that as a dutiful son I had felt it would be unnecessary and impertinent to do so. My father was sitting in his gown without his wig, for the day was hot, and as he sipped his chocolate he kept muttering, "Too good—too good by half."

I flicked my boots with my whip and did my best to conceal my impatience, for there was a hunt in the woods at Meudon and I feared I might miss it.

Presently he said: "There was no one in

England with whom you might have wished to form an alliance?"

"No, sir. The English actresses are charming."

This time he seemed better pleased for he repeated, "Good, good. That is an admirable safeguard to your filial duty in marriage."

He then threw me over a letter from an old friend of his, the Comte de Riennes, a man of little fortune but of one of the oldest families in the kingdom. I skimmed two pages of compliments and salutations which seemed tedious to me after the shorter style of English correspondence, and got to the body of the letter. It was in answer to a proposal from my father that the two houses should be united by my marriage with one of the three daughters of the Comte.

He expressed warmly his gratitude and pleasure and told my father that as he had only enough fortune to bestow a *dot* on one of his daughters, the two others would enter a convent as soon as their sister was married; the choice of the bride he very magnanimously left to my father, and my father with equal magnanimity now left it to me. As I had

seen and heard of none of them, I was perfectly indifferent.

"My motives are entirely disinterested," I said to my father. "I only wish to make a match that will be in accordance with your wishes and those of such an old friend of the family as Monsieur le Comte de Riennes. We had better therefore refer the choice back to him."

As I said this, I turned the last page of the letter, and saw that Monsieur le Comte suggested that I should pay a visit to the Château de Riennes in the country of the Juras and see the three daughters for myself before deciding which I should marry. The generosity of this offer struck me forcibly and I at once accepted it. My father also remarked on the openness and liberality of his old friend, and observed that as in the usual course the eldest would have been appointed to the marriage, it would show justice and delicacy in me to choose her, unless of course she had a hump back or some other deformity; "though in that case," he remarked, "she would surely have been placed in a convent long before."

I went out to find that I was too late for the

hunt at Meudon. It was the Regent[1] who informed me of this, for I met him strolling up and down one of the corridors in the Palace and gaping out of the windows for all the world like an idle lacquey. He was then very near the end of his life, though he was not old, and I remember being struck by his bloated aspect and thinking to myself, "If that man should have a fit, I would not bet a button on his life."

He did me the honour to ask me many questions about England, especially the rapid advance of scientific discovery in which he took a great interest.

"How times have changed!" he remarked. "When I was young, I was regarded as a monster and a poisoner because I was an atheist and dabbled in chemistry. Also in black magic; it was the fashion then," he added. "One must have some superstition, though I dare say you find it inconsistent to discard the superstition of religion, yet to retain that of sorcery."

As he liked nothing so much as plain speaking, I owned to this, and added in explanation

[1] Duke of Orleans, Regent of France during the minority of Louis XV.

that in England the superstition of magic had for some time been confined to the ignorant and vulgar.

"But in Paris," I continued, "it is no doubt easier to believe in the Devil than in God. In London they are equally *démodés*."

"It is monotonous now all the world is atheist," he complained, yawning. "I used to shock my old friend St Simon by reading Rabelais in church. Now, I think I shall confess and take the Sacrament. It is the only way left to cause a sensation."

He then remarked on my approaching marriage (for my father had spoken of it to him) and, turning back just as he was leaving me, he said, "The French Juras were a dangerous country once. Take care of yourself there."

His voice always sounded as though he were joking, but his melancholy and bloodshot eyes looked serious. I knew that a savage country like the Juras was likely to be infested with robbers, but I should ride well attended and said so. The Regent only smiled, and it suddenly struck me as he walked away that the danger he was thinking of was not connected with robbers, and I could not guess what it was.

I did not see him again before his sudden death, and three days later I set out on my journey.

The roads were bad and the inns worse, and I thought with regret of England, which seemed, especially at the worst inn, to be my adopted country. After an endless and dreary plain cultivated by wretched peasantry, I saw the rugged shapes of the Jura mountains against the sky and knew I was reaching my journey's end. The next day our horses were toiling steadily uphill, and the road was rougher, the countryside more deserted than ever. We entered a forest of dark pine trees which shed a gloomy twilight over our path, for it could now only by courtesy be termed a road. I began to be certain that we had missed our way, when I saw a creature approaching us who seemed to be human more from his upright position on two legs than from anything else in his appearance. I asked if we were on the road for Riennes, and though we had the greatest difficulty in understanding his dialect, it was at last clear that we were. He seemed however to be warning us not to take the wrong path further on, and walked

back a little way in order, I supposed, to direct us.

I dropped him some money for his trouble and he then repeated his warnings with what struck me as extraordinary urgency and even anxiety. He talked faster and more unintelligibly until the only word I could be certain of was the continual repetition of the name "Riennes," and he wagged his shaggy beard and rolled his eyes as he said it, with an expression that seemed positively that of fear or horror. I concluded that he was probably half-witted, and threw him another coin to get rid of him. At this he laid hold on my bridle and said two or three times, very slowly and as distinctly as he could, "Do not go to Riennes."

Convinced by now that the fellow was mad, I struck his hand off my bridle and rode on.

We came out of the forest to find ourselves surrounded by dark hills that rose sharply from the ground in jagged and hideous shapes. Their slopes were bare and uncultivated and many of their summits were crowned with frowning rocks. As I rode through this desolate and miserable country, a deep depression

settled on me. I had for some time been feeling the regrets that most young men experience when the time comes for them to arrange their affairs and decide on marriage. I was not yet sufficiently advanced in age or experience to consider youth and innocence the most attractive qualities in woman. But these would probably be the only charms in the raw country girl I was to marry, besides good health and perhaps a certain rustic, unformed beauty belonging to it. I had heard much of the unutterable tedium of the lives of the smaller nobility on their country estates, a tedium that left many vacant and drove some to madness, a tedium only to be surpassed by the monotony of the religious life, which poverty enforces so large a proportion of our daughters and younger sons to enter. Incongruously enough, I wondered at the same moment whether the eldest sister had red hands, and could have wept when it occurred to me that they might be no monopoly but general to all.

I thought with longing of my life and friends in London, of supper parties I had given on the stage, graced by the incomparable Mrs Barry, the admirable Mrs Bracegirdle, of the

company at White's coffee-house where the conversation was often as good as in Mr Congreve's comedies, of discussions on politics, philosophy, science, between men of wit and reason. But the melancholy that had now fastened on me was deeper than mere regret, and I could neither account for it nor shake it off.

We had to ask the way to Riennes more than once, and it struck me that the people who directed us showed more than the usual astonishment and awe natural to the peasant in an uncivilised country when suddenly confronted by a noble stranger and his retinue. In fact they seemed to show definite fear, amounting sometimes even to terror, so that I was inclined to think that the old Comte must be a harsh and cruel lord to his people.

Towards evening we entered a gorge where our path went uphill between precipitous slopes and vast overhanging crags of dark rock. They were huger and more horrid than anything I could have imagined, and in that stormy twilight (for the clouds hung low and completely covered the taller hills) they presented an aspect that would have been terrifying to

a weak and apprehensive imagination. We seemed no bigger than flies as our horses crawled up the steep ascent. A beetling crag overhung our path, and as I turned the sharp corner that it made, my mare suddenly reared and backed so violently that I was nearly thrown.

I urged her on with all my force and as I did so I glanced up and saw that what must have frightened her was the figure of a girl standing on the slope of the hill some way above us. She stood so still that at first glance she would have been indistinguishable from the rocks that surrounded her, had it not been for her long pale hair that the wind was blowing straight forward round her face. She wore a wreath of pale lilac and blue flowers and I could just seize a glimpse of eyes that seemed the same colour as the flowers, set in a white face, before her hair blew past and hid it completely.

That glance was all I could give, for my mare was rearing and plunging in a manner utterly foreign to her usual behaviour. Suddenly however she stood quite still, trembling and bathed in sweat. I seized the opportunity

to look up again, but the figure had gone. So still had she been while there, and so suddenly had she disappeared, that for an instant I doubted my senses and wondered if my eyes had played me some trick in that dim confusion of lights and shadows. But my impression of her had been too vivid for this doubt to last; I could even recollect the dark dress she wore, plainly cut like a peasant's. Yet I could not think of her as a peasant, nor as a person of quality. She seemed some apparition from another world, and though I laughed at myself for my romantic fancy, I defy the most reasonable philosopher not to have shared it if he had seen her as I did. My mare certainly appeared to hold my opinion and with the greater conviction of terror, for she sidled most ridiculously past the place where the girl had stood, and was sweating and shivering as I rode her on. And what struck me as still more peculiar, all my men had some difficulty in getting their horses to pass that spot.

Half an hour later we were free of that hideous gorge, and could see the towers of the Château de Riennes pointing upwards above

the fir trees on the hill before us. Relief at reaching the end of my journey fought with an apprehension I could not understand. I remember an attempt at reassurance by telling myself, "If my wife plagues me, I can leave her on my estates in St Aignan, and spend my time in London and Paris." But even this reflection failed to encourage me.

We clattered into the courtyard to be met with acclamations from grooms and lacqueys who hurried forward to take our horses. The Comte himself came out to the steps of the château and stood awaiting me. He embraced me warmly and led me into the lighted hall with many expressions of welcome and friendship. He looked a much older man than I had expected in a contemporary of my father's, and his mild blue eyes certainly gave me no impression of the sternness I had anticipated from the timid behaviour of the peasantry. Indeed there was a certain timidity in his own bearing, a weakness and vacillation in all his movements, as though he lived in continual and fearful expectation. But this did not in any way detract from the courtesy and cordiality of his reception of me and I might not have re-

marked it had I not been prepared for such a different bearing.

He led me to my room to remove the stains of travel and arrange my dress before being presented to the ladies of his family. Though early in the autumn the weather was cold, and a bright fire of pine logs blazed in my chimney. It was a relief to be sitting in a decent room once more, to have my riding-boots pulled off at last, and to put on a peruke that had been freshly curled and scented. My valet was a useful fellow and soon effected a satisfactory change in my appearance. I put on a suit of maroon-coloured velvet with embroidered satin waistcoat which I flattered myself set off my figure to advantage, and as I arranged my Mechlin ruffles before a very fine mirror, my gloomy apprehensions lifted, and it was with quite a pleasurable excitement that I looked forward to making the choice of my bride. I laughed at myself for my certainty that one or all would have ugly hands, and reflected that I should probably find a very good, pretty sort of girl and one that in this lonely place was not likely to be entirely unsusceptible.

Madame la Comtesse awaited me in a vast

salon of a style that would have been old-fashioned in the time of our grandfathers. The huge carved chair in which she sat, raised on a dais in semi-royal fashion at the end of the room, only served to make her appear the more insignificant. Her grey head was bowed, her long knotted fingers hung limply over the arms of her chair. But when she rose to greet me it was with the regal dignity that I remember my mother had told me quite old ladies had had in the days of her youth, a dignity that passed out of fashion with the late Queen Regent,[1] and is never seen now. I was shocked however at the vacant yet troubled expression in her dim grey eyes. She certainly did not look as old as the Comte, nor could she, I knew from what my father had told me, be far past the period of middle life. Yet her mind seemed feeble and wandering as in extreme age.

She made me sit on a stool beside her chair and strove to entertain me with a courtesy that could still charm, though I could perceive very plainly the effort that it cost her. Every now

[1] Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV and Regent of France during his minority.

and then she would stoop to caress a great white cat that rubbed against her chair and make some remark to it or to me concerning it. I did my best to make friends with the favourite, but I do not like cats, and this beast regarded me with a distant and supercilious air, impervious to all my advances though it never took its pale green eyes off my face. This persistent stare irritated me till I longed to kick it out of the room, and foolishly this irritation somehow prevented me accommodating myself as well as I might have done to my hostess' tentative and desultory conversation.

It was a relief as well as an excitement when Mademoiselle de Riennes and Mademoiselle Marie de Riennes were announced. A tall girl entered the room with her arm round a slight childish figure whose face was almost hidden against her sister's sleeve. The elder received my salutations with a certain amount of grace and finish, the younger with such confusion of shyness that in kindness I withdrew my eyes from her as soon as possible.

I was too anxious to see the elder to be able to see very clearly at first, but I perceived that

she was neither ugly nor foolish and the hand I was permitted to kiss was of a good shape and colour. Later as we talked I saw that there were certain points in her face and figure that might be called beautiful. Her olive complexion lacked colour, but that could be easily remedied. She had large dark eyes of a very fine shape, a well-formed bust and shoulders, a pretty mouth with good teeth, an excellent forehead and charming little ears. Yet the whole did not somehow make for beauty. It was incomplete or perhaps marred in some way. It is difficult to perceive the habitual expression of a young girl who is anxious to please, but I thought that the quick interest and smiles with which she attended to my conversation with her mother were not natural to her, and that from time to time a look of sullen and even fierce brooding would settle on her face, though momentarily, for the next instant she would rouse herself and seem to push it away.

Whenever I could do so without increasing her confusion, I stole a look at the younger daughter. She, undoubtedly, was possessed of beauty, of a fair, almost infantile order; her

lips were full and red and remained always just parted, her face was an exquisitely rounded oval, and her light-brown hair curled naturally on the nape of her neck in tendrils as soft and shining as those of a very young child. But she was extremely unformed, and I could not but feel that in spite of my vague disappointment in the elder, it was she who was in most respects the more suitable for my purpose. After allowing sufficient time for her to compose herself, I addressed some simple remark to Mademoiselle Marie that should have been perfectly easy to answer. She looked at me with an uncertain, almost an uncomprehending expression in her blue eyes that reminded me of her mother's, and stammered a few words unintelligibly. Her extreme timidity was perhaps natural to her youth and upbringing, but I thought I detected a vacancy and weakness of mind in her manner of showing it.

"Decidedly," I told myself, "this one is best fitted for the convent," and after answering my remark myself as though I had but intended to continue it, I addressed myself again to the eldest. She replied very suitably and prettily and I thought her manners would not be amiss

in any salon in London or Paris. We continued happily therefore in a conversation which if not exactly amusing was at least satisfactory and promising, when an absurdly small incident occurred that proved oddly disconcerting to Mademoiselle.

The cat, which had so far continued to reserve its obnoxious gaze for me, suddenly walked across to her stool, looking up in her face and mewing. She shrank back with an involuntary shudder. It was not this that startled me, for I knew many people have an unconquerable aversion to cats and I have seen the great and manly Duc de Noailles turn faint at the Council Board because the little King[1] carried in a kitten. But what surprised me in Mademoiselle de Riennes was the same backward, fearful glance that I had seen in her father, as though she dreaded, not the cat itself, but some unseen horror behind her. The next moment however she was replying naturally and with no more than a becoming hesitation to some remark I had addressed to her.

I wondered why the third daughter had not appeared, and the same wonder seemed to be

[1] Louis XV.

disturbing my hostesses for they looked continually towards the door. Madame la Comtesse remarked two or three times, "My daughter is late"; it was odd that she should so speak of her youngest daughter instead of reserving the expression for Mademoiselle de Riennes. She started violently when the footman announced, "Mademoiselle Claude de Riennes," and the eldest daughter leaned suddenly forward as though she would speak to me. She did not, but she fixed on me a look of such agonised entreaty that it arrested me as I rose, so that I did not turn on the instant, as I should have done, to greet Mademoiselle Claude.

When I did, I had to wait a full minute or two more before I could recover sufficient composure to address her as I ought. Mademoiselle Claude was the girl I had seen on the rocky hillside. Her smooth and shining hair was dressed high in the prevailing fashion, her hooped dress of pearl-coloured satin was suitable to her rank, yet I was certain that she was the same as that wild figure I had seen, with hair blown straight before her face.

What further startled me was that I found that until that moment I had not really

believed the apparition on the hillside to be a human creature. It was a disturbing discovery for a man of sense, living in an age of science and reason, to make in himself. I had certainly never before been guilty of imagining that I had seen a spirit. I could only conclude that the peculiar gliding grace with which she advanced and curtsied to me did indeed connect her with the nymphs of mountain and grove in classic lore, and considered how I should turn a compliment to her on the subject without exposing to her family how I had met her in that strange fashion. To my astonishment, however, she said in answer to her mother's introduction, "I have already seen Monsieur de St Aignan," but no surprise was shown by mother or sisters. Mademoiselle Claude's voice was low and very soft, it had a quality in it that I have not met in any other voice and that I do not know how to describe; I should perhaps do so best if I said that it seemed to purr.

She sat beside her mother and did not speak again; her eyes were downcast and her long pale lashes, only less pale than her skin, languished on her cheek; her face was small and

round, ending in a sharply pointed little chin. She wore in her bosom a bunch of the same light lilac and blue flowers that had been in her hair when I had first seen her, and the peculiarity of wearing such a simple posy when in full dress, caught my attention. I asked their names, hoping to hear her speak again, but she only smiled, and it was the eldest daughter who told me that they were wild flowers, harebells and autumn crocuses, and that the latter with their long white stems and faintly purple heads were called Naked Ladies by the shepherd folk. Mademoiselle Claude raised her head as her sister spoke and handed me one to see. Her eyes looked full into mine for an instant and again I could not be certain if their pale colour were more like the blue or the lilac flowers, and again the compliment that rose to my lips evaded me before I could speak it.

The cat had deserted the chair of Madame la Comtesse and was rubbing backwards and forwards against Mademoiselle Claude, at last taking its eyes off my face and staring up at its young mistress. It was evident that she had no share of her sister's aversion to cats. Suddenly it leapt up on to her shoulder and

rubbed its head against her long slim throat. Madame de Riennes stroked her daughter's head and that of the cat. "They are both so white, so white," she murmured, and then, speaking I supposed to me, though she did not appear to be addressing anyone, she said, "The moon shone on my daughter when she was born."

I was embarrassed how to reply, for these disconnected remarks seemed to indicate premature senility more clearly than anything she had yet said. Fortunately at this moment the Comte entered and we went to supper.

I sat of course between my hostess and Mademoiselle de Riennes whom I wished to engage again in conversation. But her former ease seemed to have departed, she answered me with embarrassment and sometimes with positive stupidity. She now avoided meeting my eyes and looked repeatedly across the table to where her sisters sat opposite. I could not be sure which of the two she was looking at, for both sat silent with their eyes downcast.

The rest of the evening was spent in the salon, where Madame la Comtesse requested her daughters to show me some of the results

of the labours that filled their days. Mademoiselle de Riennes led me to a tapestry frame that struck me as the most perfect exhibition of tedium that could be devised. Mademoiselle Marie showed me a book of Hours that she was illuminating; my admiration was reserved for the fair fingers that pointed out their work to me. If the hands of Mademoiselle de Riennes were good, those of Mademoiselle Marie were delicious, not so fine in shape, but softly rounded, helpless, and dimpled like a baby's. I began to wonder if I might not have judged hastily of her parts. Though the second in age, she appeared the youngest of the three; she was evidently slow in development, and who could tell but that after marriage had placed her in a suitable position, she might become the most brilliant as well as the most beautiful of them all?

Politeness obliged me to turn at last to Mademoiselle Claude who was sitting as still as ever, with hands folded in her lap, and ask what she had to show me.

"Nothing, Monsieur," said she, smiling, but without looking up.

"Mademoiselle is so idle?" I asked, hoping

to tease her into a glance. But I did not win it, and at that moment Madame de Riennes suggested we should dance. It proved impossible as the daughters did not know the modern fashion of dancing and I knew no other. Madame de Riennes sat at the harpsichord and played an old-fashioned air to which her two elder daughters danced a *pas de deux*. I was surprised to see that again Mademoiselle Claude did not perform, and asked her if she did not like dancing.

"Oh yes, Monsieur," she replied, in that soft purring voice of hers, "I like it very well."

"Then do you not care to dance with two or three?"

"Monsieur is right, I prefer to dance with many."

"Then Mademoiselle, you can have but few opportunities for dancing here where I should imagine balls are a rarity. Do you not find it very dull?"

"No, Monsieur, I do not find it dull."

All the time she seemed to be smiling, though as I was standing above her and her face remained lowered, I could not well see. The hands that lay so still in her lap were like the

long white stems of the flowers she wore with the ridiculous name—they were so slim and bloodless. As I looked at them I felt an unaccountable wish to draw away from them. I could in no way explain it; I have felt a repulsion to hands before now, but to none that were beautiful. But I decided quickly that it was only an absurd fancy that likened them in my mind to hands of the dead, and so still and white they were that this was not surprising.

When the dance was finished, Madame de Riennes rose from the harpsichord and patted Mademoiselle Claude's cheek.

"My daughter can sing and play," she said. "She sits so still, too still, but she can sing very well."

Mademoiselle Claude fetched her lute. As she sat with the instrument on her knee, her limp fingers plucking idly at the strings, I thought to myself, "She is the last I would choose to be the mother of my heirs." There seemed nothing alive about her, from her dead hair, so nearly white, to her pale and smiling lips. In the corner of the wainscot where she sat, her pearl-coloured skirts spread round her and reflected on the polished floor, she had the

appearance of a moonlit cloud, possessing no doubt a certain strange beauty but more as a picture than a woman.

She began to sing; I did not think a great deal of her voice, having heard better, but it had a certain charm, being low, caressing and of a peculiar timbre. She sang an air from an opera now out of date, and then a song in which the tune was unlike any other I had ever heard. It was very simple and had a certain gaiety, it seemed to follow no known rules of method and harmony. There were two or three notes that recurred again and again like a call, and the melody between moved backwards and forwards as in the movement of a dance.

It seemed older than any other music, I cannot say why, unless it was that as I listened, my imagination conjured up visions of sacrificial dances performed in the most ancient times of Greece or Egypt. While in England, I had stayed at a country house whose owner had had the humour to take an interest in the old songs and ballads of his countryside and even to profess to admire them. He had played some of them to me one evening when he had tired of

the cards, and I could not but admit that there was something in their rude simplicity that pleased the ear. They were for the most part wild and plaintive, frequently unutterably dismal. But old as they had sounded, this tune that Mademoiselle Claude was singing seemed infinitely older. There was nothing plaintive in its wildness. It belonged to an age when men had not yet learned to regret, to distinguish between good and evil, to encumber themselves with the million hindrances and restrictions that separate men from beasts.

A strange restlessness and discontent seized on me. I felt a ridiculous but none the less powerful loathing of my condition, of the condition of all men in this dull world, of the morals and customs that force our lives into a monotonous pattern from the cradle to the grave, of the very clothes I wore, stiff and cumbrous, crowned with a heavy peruke of false hair. I longed to fling them all off and shake myself free, and with them every convention that bound me to decency of conduct. In committing these words to paper, I am aware that I am describing the sensations of a lunatic and a savage rather than any that should be

possible to a man of birth, sense and cultivation, living in a highly civilised and enlightened age. But if I am to be truthful in these memoirs I must admit that at the moment I failed completely to observe how shamefully, and, what perhaps is worse, how absurdly inappropriate my sentiments were to a gentleman and a courtier.

I raised my eyes to find those of Mademoiselle Claude fixed upon my face. She was still singing, but I could not distinguish the words nor even recognise to which language they belonged. Her gaze did not startle me for I seemed to know that it had been resting on me for some time. I saw that her eyes, in this light at any rate, were neither blue nor lilac as I had thought, but pale green like those of the white cat that stood, arched and purring, on the arm of her chair; and, like the cat's, the pupils were perpendicular. Heedless of manners, I looked hard to assure myself of the fact; and her eyes which had been so bashfully abased all the evening did not flicker nor turn away under my stare but continued to gaze into mine until I became conscious of nothing but their pale and luminous depths. They seemed to grow

and to diminish, to come near and to recede very far away, and all the time the tune she sang moved up and down as in the measure of a dance, and the words she sang remained unintelligible yet gradually appeared to be familiar.

Suddenly the song ceased, and I started involuntarily and shook myself as though I had been rudely awakened from an oppressive dream. I looked around me, hardly able to believe that my surroundings had remained the same from the time when Mademoiselle Claude had begun to sing. Mademoiselle Marie, seated on a low stool next to her elder sister, was leaning so close against her that her face was completely hidden and her whole body was as stiff and motionless in its crouched position as if it had been paralysed. Mademoiselle de Riennes sat as still as she, but her eyes now raised themselves to mine slowly and with difficulty and I caught a glimpse of the same expression of agonised entreaty that had arrested me when I first rose to greet her youngest sister. It was only a glimpse, for the next instant they fell again as though not bearing to look longer into mine. In some way that

I must fail to express, she appeared smaller and more insignificant. I wondered that I had ever thought of her as possessing good looks and distinction of manners.

Madame de Riennes had fallen into a doze and it may have been this that gave her, too, a slightly shrunken appearance. Certainly it struck me that she was much older and feebler than I had comprehended. I do not remember how I took my leave of them for the night, I only remember Madame la Comtesse murmuring weakly as she wished me good rest, "She is so white, my daughter—too white, too white."

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The comfort of a good bed again after so long and uncomfortable a journey was by far my most important reflection on reaching my room, and as my valet prepared me for that blessed condition, the experiences and fancies of the past evening resolved themselves into the opinion that my imagination had been highly strung by the fatigues of the journey and the strangeness of new surroundings, and that in reality the family of the de Riennes

were a very good, kindly, though old-fashioned sort of people, and that I had three pretty girls to choose from, though it was still a little difficult to know which to choose. "Mademoiselle Marie is the prettiest," I told myself on climbing into bed. "But Mademoiselle de Riennes has the most sense," I added, as Jacques drew the curtains round me, "and Mademoiselle Claude"—I began as I laid my head on the pillows, but I found that I did not know what I thought of Mademoiselle Claude and was just dropping off to sleep without troubling to consider the question when I remembered that I had noticed something very strange about her eyes when she was singing. For a moment I could not recall what it was, then suddenly it occurred to me, and with a sensation of horror that I had not felt at all at the time I had observed it, that the pupils of the eyes instead of being round were long and pointed.

I was exceedingly sleepy when I thought of this, but I woke myself by repeating several times as though it were of urgent importance that I should remember it—"The eyes are not human. Remember, the eyes are not human."

I repeated it until I forgot what it was that

had struck my observation, yet it seemed an imperative necessity that I should remember what it was that had filled my whole being with that sense of utmost horror. In my efforts to do so I fell sound asleep.

Nothing is more irritating than to be wakened out of a deep and dreamless slumber by some small, persistent noise. The noise I heard in my sleep kept awakening me again and again until at last, tired of perpetually dropping off and being aroused, I sat up in bed and listened. I heard something rustling outside my door, a soft running tread every now and then up and down the passage, and then, what I knew had awakened me so many times, something scratching at the door itself. I decided I must go and see what it was but felt the most absurd and shameful reluctance to do so.

I put out my hand through the curtains to reach for my bedgown on the chair beside me. Instead of the accustomed touch of velvet and fur that I expected, my hand seemed to be grasping a long cold finger. I recoiled in violent agitation, and as I snatched my hand away and covered it with my other as though

to assure myself of a human touch, I thought I felt the finger drawn slowly across my forehead. I shuddered from it, and yet my horror was mingled with an inexplicable pleasure. Trembling with excitement rather than with fear, I now drew aside the bed curtains, leapt out and opened the shutters.

The moon was nearly at the full, and by its brilliant light I could see, laid on my bedgown, the white and slender stalk of the wild autumn crocus that Mademoiselle Claude had presented to me. It surprised me, for I had no recollection of laying it there and indeed thought I had dropped it into the fire. In any case there was a satisfactory explanation of the cause of my ridiculous terrors! and the touch on my forehead must have been an imaginary result of them. It was odd though that as I took up the flower, the sensation of it seemed completely different from the thing that I had first grasped, and I marvelled that I could ever have mistaken it for a finger.

All was so silent now that I got back into bed, first laying my sword on the chair beside me, and was just falling asleep when again I heard the rustle outside, and a soft stroking rather

than scratching against my door. I stretched out my hand for the sword and found that it was shaking. This evidence of my womanish apprehension was so unaccountable and utterly confounding that I began to wonder if I were not already paying the price, though certainly an over-heavy one, of the pleasures naturally pertaining to a gallant man. I resolved that now I was about to marry, I would make a different disposition of my life, abandon such pleasures, and settle on my country estates at St Aignan. At this moment I heard that same furtive noise again on the door, and the idea that my plans for reformation were the result of the scratchings of a cat caused me to burst into a roar of laughter which wholesomely restored me to my natural self.

I snatched up my sword and ran to the door. I could see nothing but darkness, but I heard a faint "miaw" somewhere down the passage and went quickly and cautiously towards it, calling "Puss, Puss, Puss," laughing to myself at the thought of the murder I was contemplating on the favourite of two of my hostesses, and already planning the apology I should have to make. The door into my moonlit room had

swung to after me and I had to feel my way in the blackness. Suddenly I felt claws round my leg and knew that the cat must have rushed at me from behind. I struck quickly down with my sword and thought I hit something soft and springing but could not be quite sure. There was no savage "miaw" in response to show I had hurt the brute. I went back to my room and on examining my sword in the moonlight, found that there was a small streak of blood on it. I thought with satisfaction that that would probably keep the beast away from my door, and settled myself for sleep. I was wrong, for all night I was disturbed by subdued sounds of scampering and scuffling in the passage, and more than once I thought that I felt the lightest pressure of a cold finger on my eyelids.

When Jacques brought me my chocolate in the morning, he found me more worn out and irritable than after a night of debauch. He exclaimed when he saw my sword on which the blood had dried, and I told him to clean it, saying that the cat had been disturbing my rest and that I had struck at it. My head throbbed and ached so uncomfortably that I decided I would refresh myself with a good ride before

meeting any of my host's family, and ordered my mare to be saddled at once. As I went down into the courtyard, I saw the white cat sleeping in a sunny corner of the steps. I turned the animal over with my boot, and it stretched out its paws and clawed playfully at the air. I could discover no sign of any wound anywhere upon it. I asked the groom what other cats they had, and he replied that this was the only one in the château. I got into the saddle, too much mystified to care to think, and rode as hard as I could.

The morning was fresh and pleasant, and the country looked excellent for boar-hunting. I was wondering what entertainment in that way my host meant to show me after my long abstinence (sport in England being of the tamest) when my attention was struck by a huge stone a little way off. I was riding across a fairly smooth slope of moorland with hills on my right that rose in abrupt and monstrous shapes as though thrown up by some violent cataclysm of the earth, while on my left stretched a vast plain as far as I could see. The whole was desolate because uncultivated, but in the morning sunshine the hideous aspect of the

country did not oppress one as in the gloomy twilight in which I had first seen it. The stone I had noticed was conspicuous for its size and solitariness, for there were no rocks near.

I was riding up to it when suddenly my mare behaved in exactly the same manner as the evening before, shying violently and then rearing and plunging. I succeeded at last in quieting her sufficiently to keep still, but it was beyond my power to make her advance another step. I had always treated her with the consideration due to a lady of high breeding and mettlesome spirit, but on this occasion I must admit her whims drove me to a pretty considerable use of whip and spur. But all to no effect. She would not advance one step nearer the stone. I dismounted and was about to see whether I could not drag her thither by the bridle, when I noticed footprints at my feet, just in front of my mare's forefeet that were so obstinately planted on the ground. There was nothing odd in finding footprints on the moor, but what was odd was that they did not advance straight in any direction but curved sharply round. I followed them a little way and saw that the marks were exceedingly

confused, as though many pairs of feet had trodden close upon each other in the same spot. The grass in fact was all kicked up, and when I had followed this rough curve a little distance I saw that it was part of the outline of a vast circle in which the stone was, more or less accurately, the centre point.

I had no sooner made this perplexing discovery than I observed a respectable-looking man in black approaching me, whom I presently perceived to be a priest. He greeted me in an abrupt and not over-respectful fashion, asking if I were not afraid to go so near the fairy ring. Few people, he said, would care to adventure themselves so close to it even in broad sunlight. I observed smiling that the fairies in this part of the world must be remarkably substantial to have kicked up the ground so vigorously, and asked if he could not give me some more reasonable explanation of the footprints. He looked at me with a suspicious kind of sullen stupidity that made me conclude he was probably very little above the level of a peasant himself.

I left him to walk over to the stone which I examined with some interest. The ground

had been much disturbed close under it, and the stone itself, which was flat on the top like a table, was covered with dark stains. It occurred to me that here was a possible explanation of my mare's refusal to approach any nearer. Horses are notoriously sensitive to the smell of blood, and I was certain that the stains I was looking at were those of dried blood. I went back to the priest and asked him what the stone was used for.

"It is never used, Monsieur," he cried, "no one in the country would go near it."

"Then," said I, "what are those dark stains on it?"

His little dark eyes looked at me anxiously and shiftily as though he disliked the subject.

"A holy man and a son of the Church, Monsieur, can know nothing of such things. Some say that this stone is haunted by devils and that they or the fairies, who resemble them, dance in a ring round it." He crossed himself and continued, "I say that it is better not to speak of these things but to pray against temptation and the wiles of the devil and to implore the help and protection of Holy Church." He added that he was the *curé* of Riennes and

chaplain to the convent near by, and invited me to look at his church which was not far off. I found myself walking with him, more out of inattention than politeness, my horse's bridle on my arm.

There was nothing to interest me in his church, a wretched chapel built at the rude Gothic period and even more chilly and uncomfortable than such buildings usually are. My bad night must have left me peculiarly fanciful for I disliked entering it even for two or three minutes, and as I hurriedly left it, I found myself glancing over my shoulder to make sure I was not being followed, though by whom it would be impossible to say, as the church was empty. I noticed the rudely carved faces of devils over the door as I went out, and commented on the barbarous taste of an age that admitted such monstrosities within the church itself.

"They were wise, they were wise," said the priest and then muttered something I did not quite catch about the advisability of making the best of both worlds. I turned sharply round on him to see if he were joking, and saw him with his head bent sideways and a silent

laugh twisting his face in a manner so inexpressibly repulsive that I actually shuddered. His face had appeared almost diabolical in its look of malignant cunning and something else I could find no name for, but it altered instantly as I looked at him to its former stolid expression. I gave him something for his church, and mounting my mare with a disproportionate sense of relief at having got rid of him, I rode back to the château.

I met one of the grooms at the gate, and throwing my bridle to him, walked through the gardens. As I had hoped, I saw the curve of a hooped petticoat on one of the seats, and hurrying towards it found Mademoiselle de Riennes and Mademoiselle Marie seated together, the younger reading her breviary aloud. Her hair caught reflections of gold in the sunlight in a way that enchanted me, and I lost no time in informing her of the fact in terms sufficiently metaphorical to be correct.

My compliments were received with a foolish stare, not even a blush to show they were comprehended. If a woman cannot take a compliment, she is lost. I turned to her sister to be met with better success, while the

younger's attention returned to her breviary. Mademoiselle de Riennes tried to distract her from it, fearing I think that I might be offended.

"No, no," replied the fair *dévote*, in an anxious and pleading manner, "I promised Mother Abbess of Lianon I would always read first. But I will not disturb you by it—I can read elsewhere."

She was about to rise but I sprang up from the grass where I had been sitting at their feet and detained her.

"Do not, I beg of you, Mademoiselle," said I, "deprive me of an example as charming as it is edifying. I can never hope to see again such usually opposed qualities in such perfect conjunction."

Then remembering that I was wasting my breath, I asked her as one would ask a child if she were very fond of the Mother Abbess she had mentioned. She did not pay full attention to my question at first and I noticed a habit she continually had of brushing her hand across her eyes and then staring, as though she were not certain of what she saw. Then she answered, "Oh yes, very fond. One is safe with her."

I glanced at Mademoiselle de Riennes to find how she took this odd remark, but was surprised that she seemed to have received it with an unreasonable amount of perturbation. She rallied herself quickly however and said to me, "My sister has always wished to enter the convent at Lianon, which is an order stricter than the convent here at Riennes. She has the vocation."

I wondered whether Mademoiselle were entirely disinterested in giving me this information, and I asked her what were her own feelings with regard to the conventual life. She replied in an even tone without a trace of that desire to please that had shown hitherto in all her remarks, "That it is a useful necessity. That as it is no longer considered humane to expose newly born daughters to the wolves on the hillside, their parents must be able to place them later in convents where they may die slowly, not from rigours and mortifications but from tedium, the tedium that makes all day and all night seem one perpetual and melancholy afternoon."

Her eyes glittered with so strange an expression of hatred and even rage, that she, whom

I had hitherto considered as the most reasonable of the family, now appeared almost wild. I wondered why her parents had not given her the right of priority which belonged to her, instead of leaving the choice to me. My father's remarks on the subject came back to me, and I now considered that I had certainly better choose Mademoiselle de Riennes and satisfy the strictest claims of honour and delicacy. This decision was the easier to reach since Mademoiselle Marie had again shown so plainly she was a fool. I rose and took my leave of them that I might go and find the Comte to tell him my decision, for I feared that to wait too long before arriving at it might look like discourtesy.

I walked down an alley between clipped box hedges that rose above my head, and as I turned a corner I saw Mademoiselle Claude walking in my direction. She was correctly attired in a grey lute-string nightgown with ruffles of fine embroidery; her hands were folded in front of her and her head, slightly bent, was neatly dressed. When I had greeted her I asked if she had been walking long in the garden.

"No, Monsieur," she replied, "I have been

to the convent. The chaplain informed me of your pious interest in his church."

I disliked the thought that the priest I had met was chaplain to the Convent of Riennes—still more, that he had been talking with Mademoiselle Claude. I asked her which of her sister's opinions she shared concerning the religious life—did she not agree with Mademoiselle de Riennes that it was inexpressibly tedious? She smiled very slightly.

"I should not find life in the convent tedious, Monsieur," she said.

"Then you, like Mademoiselle Marie, have the vocation?"

"I have a vocation."

As she spoke, she at last raised her eyes and looked up at me, nor did they flicker nor turn away as I looked down into them. It came upon me with a shock, that was not all displeasure, that the eyes of this young girl revealed a deeper knowledge of evil, which is what we generally mean by knowledge of life, than was sounded in all my experience as a travelled man of fashion. And as this struck me, I laughed, in a way that should have frightened her, but only brought her nearer to my

side with a low, purring murmur, too soft for a laugh, her eyes still fixed on mine.

An extraordinary sensation swam over me. I was trying to remember something that I had seen in or thought about her eyes the evening before. The effort to remember was so strong that it was like a physical struggle, and though I felt I might succeed if I drew my eyes away from hers for a moment, I could not do this. Then I noticed that she was humming the tune of the song that she had sung the night before, and as she did so her body rocked a little, backwards and forwards, as though swaying to the measure of a dance, while her eyes never left mine. I advanced a step towards her, she receded, we seemed to be dancing together, though with what steps and movements I could not say. Presently she was speaking to me, chanting the words to the tune,—"Monsieur enjoys dancing? Monsieur will dance with me?"

I seized her by the shoulders. She winced and cried out, her lips contorted with pain that my movement, rough as it was, could not have caused by itself. As she tried to pull herself away, her dress slipped over her shoulder and

revealed a freshly made scar on the white skin, caused by a knife or some other weapon. I cried out on seeing it and let go of her, but she pulled her dress over it again in an instant, looking back over her shoulder at me and smiling.

"So Monsieur will dance with me," she said, and moved away from me down the alley so quickly that she seemed to have gone before I had perceived her go.

I was now utterly unwilling to continue my way to the château, to tell the Comte I desired to marry his eldest daughter. I roamed up and down the box alleys for a considerable length of time, ill at ease and dissatisfied. The rest of the day passed in an intolerable mingling of tedium and excitement. I seemed to be waiting for it to pass in eager expectancy of I knew not what. I found myself watching the sun as though I were longing for it to set; again and again I glanced at the clock and told myself, "The moon will be at the full to-night," though I did not know what possible interest that could have for me. I supposed it was some echo of Madame la Comtesse's maundering fancies when she had rambled to me

about her youngest daughter, and I tried to pull myself up sharply and point out that I was myself becoming like an old woman, my mind incapable of decision or reasoning, of anything but a feeble repetition of words and phrases that came from I knew not where.

Yet I could not shake off this mood nor discover what I meant to do regarding my marriage; nor indeed what I was thinking of. I found conversation, even with Mademoiselle de Riennes, unbearably wearisome, it was no pleasure to observe Mademoiselle Marie's beauty which now appeared as insipid and lifeless as a puppet's. I saw Mademoiselle Claude again only in the presence of her parents, but she never spoke nor did she look at me.

In the evening I chanced to be alone with the Comte. I felt that he was expecting me to speak of my marriage, and suddenly I knew that it was only his youngest daughter I had any desire to marry—a desire so burning and importunate that I marvelled I had not realised my wishes sooner. I spoke of them, saying that though I was anxious to perform the part of a man of scrupulous honour, I could not but take advantage of his liberality and make my

choice according to the dictates of my heart. He showed no surprise, and gave his consent in terms appropriate and correct, with nothing that I could interpret as expressive of displeasure. Yet he spoke mechanically and with a strained, uneasy attention, almost, or so it sometimes appeared, as if he were listening and repeating someone else's words, instead of directly answering me. It struck me when he had finished speaking, that he was a smaller and a duller man than I had formerly observed him to be.

I found a pretext for going early to my room, where I paced up and down in a fever of restlessness. In spite of the exaltation of my new desires and the immediate prospect of their fruition, I felt that I had never been so much bored in the course of my whole existence as at that moment; that never before had I discovered how ineffably tedious and wearisome that whole existence had been.

I remembered the various pleasures I had experienced and marvelled that I had ever found zest in them; my deepest passions, my most exciting adventures, now appeared as flat, trivial and insipid as the emotions and escapades

of a schoolboy. I wondered with a kind of despair if there were nothing left in life that could amuse me. The fact that my marriage was to be one of inclination should no doubt have answered this question, but I seemed already satiated with that as with all else. I would have bartered all that was most dear to me, my possessions, my name, my life, my honour, my soul itself, for any new experience that could satisfy this new curiosity and raise me from my intolerable tedium. Desires arose in me so monstrous and unnatural that my thoughts could scarcely find shape or name for them, yet I regarded them calmly, without horror, without even surprise.

At last I went to bed, because however much I longed to be occupied there was no other occupation for me. In spite of the disordered turmoil in my brain, I fell asleep quickly. No noises disturbed me this time, I did not dream, but I woke as suddenly as I had fallen asleep. I drew back my bed-curtains and saw that the room was full of moonlight, for the window shutters which Jacques had closed before he left me for the night were now wide open, and I could hear a great noise of wind in the pine

trees outside. In the middle of the floor stood the white cat, perfectly still, its back arched and tail erect, its pale green eyes glaring at me. It now leaped on to the foot of the bed and began ramping its paws up and down on the quilt in a state of violent excitement, uttering short wild mewing cries. I kicked it off, but it sprang on to another part of the bed and clawed at the bed-clothes as though trying to pull them off. A cloud must have passed over the moon for the room was momentarily darkened, and a blast of wind came roaring through the pines and rushed in through my open shutters, blowing the bed-curtains all over me. In that instant I could have sworn that I felt the light cold touch of a hand on my heart.

I scrambled out of bed and hurried on my clothes as though my life depended on getting dressed instantly. Clapping on my sword-belt I strode to the door and found the cat there awaiting me. It was purring loudly, and looking back to see I was following, it trotted into the passage. I could just see a vague shape of something white as it passed before me through the darkness and I followed downstairs and along passages until I came plump against a

closed door. I fumbled for bolts and locks and unfastened them, hearing always the purring of the cat close by me. It never occurred to me to wonder why I was following this beast I detested, out of doors in the middle of the night. As soon as the door was open I hurried out as fast as I could, through the gardens and out on to the countryside. I was not following the cat now, nor did I see it anywhere. I did not know where I was going, but presently I perceived that I was on the same broad slope of moorland where I had ridden that morning. There were sharp risings and fallings in the ground that I had avoided in my ride, and prevented my seeing far in front of me; also, though the moon when unclouded shone clear in the sky, a low-lying miasmic fog obscured the ground.

As I rose to the summit of one of these mounds, I stopped and listened. I thought that I had heard music, but as the wind rushed onwards through the pine woods behind me, I could no longer distinguish it. At this moment the whole light of the full moon shone out from behind a hurrying cloud, and I saw vaguely before me in the mist a vast circle of appar-

ently human figures, revolving in furious movement round some huge and dark object of fantastic shape. Clouds of smoke, reddened now and then by fire, rose round this object and were swept onwards in the wind.

I ran towards the circle; as I did so, the music came nearer, now loud, now faint, on the uncertain blast, and I recognised the tune as the same that Mademoiselle Claude had sung to me. I approached cautiously as I drew near. Sometimes the ring of dancers swung so near me that I was within a few feet of them, sometimes it receded far away. All the figures were holding hands and faced outwards, their backs toward the centre of the circle that they formed. I saw the figures of men, women and even children flying past me; not one had a human face. The faces of goats, toads and cats, of grinning devils and monkeys showed opposite me for one instant, clear in the moonlight or obscured by the drifting smoke. Those that seemed most horrible of all were white faces that had no features.

Suddenly the ring broke for one instant as it swung within a yard of where I crouched, and at that moment a blinding cloud of smoke

blew into my face. A hand was flung out and touched mine, a light cold touch that I knew. I seized it and sprang to my feet, immediately my other hand was clasped and I was swung madly onwards into the movement of the dance.

I could now no longer see the dancers, not even those on either side of me whose hands I grasped. I saw nothing but the night, the smoke, the flying landscape, now vague and vast as of an illimitable sea of fog, now black and hideous shapes of mountains that rose sharply in the moonlight. I felt an exhilaration such as I had never known, a brusque and furious enjoyment, as though my senses and powers were quickened beyond their natural limit. Yet again and again I found I was trying to remember something, with the urgency and even the agony that besets one in a nightmare; but my mind appeared to have forsaken its office.

Then without any warning the hands in my clasp were torn from me, and the ring broke in all directions. I staggered back unable to keep my balance in the shock of the suddenly loosened contact; the next instant I

realised that she who had first taken my hand had gone, and I was hunting madly for her through that monstrous assembly. Though the ring had broken, the music continued, and I jostled many who were still dancing, back to back, with their hands joined. In the misty confusion it was impossible to distinguish anything clearly; I thought I saw gigantic toads dressed in green velvet who were carrying dishes, but I did not stay to remark them. Huge clouds of dun-coloured smoke arose before me, lit up momentarily by flames, and in their midst I saw for an instant a shape that seemed greater and more hideous than the human. A mighty voice arose from it, speaking it seemed some word of command, and straightway all the company fell on their knees.

Then I saw her whom I had been seeking. She stood erect on what appeared to be a black throne, the fiery smoke behind her. The moon, darkened of late, shone out on her white limbs that were scarcely concealed by the fluttering rags she wore. Her loosened hair blew straight before her face, and appeared snow-white in the moonlight. Something

gleamed in her uplifted hand, she bent, and at this moment an awful cry arose, a sobbing shriek so deformed by its extreme anguish and terror that though it was certainly human I could not distinguish if it were from man, woman or child. The figure rose erect, her arms flung wide as in triumph, her face revealed. It was the face of Mademoiselle Claude.

I rushed towards the throne; it was the huge stone I had observed on my ride. She turned towards me, her face bent down to greet me, her lips parted in laughter, her eyes gleaming as I had never seen them, her whole body transfused with some mysterious force that seemed to fill her with life, pleasure and attraction more than human. My senses reeled as in delirium, I seized her in my arms and dragged her from the stone. In doing so, my hand closed on the knife in hers, and something warm and wet drenched my fingers. The meaning of that hideous death-cry I had just heard suddenly penetrated my numbed and stupefied brain—and I stood stiff with horror, cold sweat breaking out on my hands and forehead.

She twisted herself in my arms till her face looked up into mine; her eyes shone like pale flames and appeared to draw near and then recede very far away, and with them my horror likewise receded until I felt I was forgetting the very cause of it. Yet it seemed to me, as though someone not myself were telling me, that if I did so, the consequences would be worse than death. I struggled desperately to recall what I had felt, and with it something else that all that past day and this night I had been trying to remember. I longed to pray but was ashamed to enlist the aid of a Power that until that moment I had doubted and mocked.

Her arms slid upwards round my neck; my flesh shuddered beneath their embrace as from contact with some loathsome thing, yet she seemed but the more desirable. My consciousness began to fail me as I bent over her. Again the eyes came close, enormous, and I stared at the pupils, black and perpendicular in their green depths. A voice that I did not at first recognise for my own shrieked aloud—"They are not human. Remember, the eyes are not human."

As I cried out, I found that I could remove

my eyes from hers, I looked down at what I held, and on her naked shoulder saw the scar I had observed that morning. I knew now that it had been made by my own sword the night before when I had struck in the darkness at her familiar, and the discovery turned me sick and faint. I frantically repulsed the accursed white body that clung to mine, and made to draw my sword. The witch screamed not in fear but in laughter, and flung herself upon me with her knife before I could get my sword free from its scabbard. I fended off the blow on my heart, and with my left arm dripping blood I seized her wrist while my right, now holding my sword, was raised to strike.

In that instant I was seized from behind by what seemed to be a hundred slippery hands clawing at my neck, arms and ankles. The whole mob, laughing, sobbing, screaming, chuckling, was round me and upon me. It appeared certain that I should be overcome, but I struck out madly with my sword and succeeded in effecting some clearance round me. A kind of berserker fury consumed me; I rushed upon that obscene herd, striking right and left to hew a passage through them. They

fled shrieking in front of me but closed on me from behind; I was bitten, clawed, scratched, hacked at, cut at, with no proper weapons it seemed, but the blows would have been sufficient to overcome me had not all my forces been so desperately engaged.

After a period that seemed to endure for hours, I found that I was hacking blindly at the empty air; I wiped the blood from my eyes and looking round me saw that I was alone, surrounded only by the mounds and hillocks through which I had approached to that frightful merry-making. My legs could no longer support me, my senses fled from me, and I fell upon the ground.

I woke to consciousness to see the light of dawn behind the mountains. All was silent; at some distance, a thin column of smoke, as from a dying fire, ascended straight upwards in the still air. I struggled to my feet and with all the strength that was left in my bruised body I dragged myself towards the château.

One of my grooms was in the courtyard as I entered, and cried out on seeing my condition. I cut him short and ordered him to assemble the rest of my band and have my

horses saddled with the utmost expedition. I commanded Jacques to leave all my baggage and we were ready for departure before any of the Comte's household, excepting the servants, were aroused. My men implored me not to attempt to ride in such a state, but it seemed to me that any feat was possible that could withdraw me immediately from that loathsome place. In raw and foggy daylight we rode out of the courtyard and down the road that led from Riennes.

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I will finish this event in my memories here, though I must traverse six years to do so. The other day, while on a protracted visit to London, I was sitting in White's coffee-house when Jacques brought me the papers that I have sent me regularly from France. In one of them was a notice which so much engaged my attention that I lost all account of the conversation around me. My Lord Selborne asked me what news I found so engrossing. I read aloud: "In the French Juras a nun, youngest daughter of the ancient and noble family of R——, has

been tried and found guilty of sorcery. She was burnt at the stake and with her the priest, chaplain to the convent, who had confessed to having performed the Black Mass regularly in the same church where he had conducted sacred worship by day. The nun's two sisters are also in the religious life, and the eldest, who is in the same convent, fell under suspicion for some time but has been cleared. In fact so many arrests were made both within the convent and through the whole countryside that it was found impossible to prosecute them all, lest the whole district of R——, the scene of these horrors, should require to be burnt."

Here my lord interrupted me with expressions of horror that France, even in her remotest provinces, should still be so barbarously superstitious as to burn a woman of quality for a witch.

"In England," he remarked, "we got over such whimsies in the time of the Stuarts, and since then the women, God bless 'em, have been allowed to enchant with impunity."

That very able man, Monsieur Voltaire the playwright, who was then on his visit to England, burst forth in great indignation against

the priest-ridden laws of our country that could make such executions possible. What could it matter, he declared, if an ignorant peasantry, rebelling against the tedium of its miserable existence, cared at certain seasons to make a bonfire, dress up one of their number as the devil, put masks on the rest, and indulge in the mummery of the Witches' Sabbath? In his grandfather's day, sorcery had been a fashion extending even to the *noblesse* and gentry; the trial of La Voisin, the famous sorceress and prisoner, had implicated hundreds, even, it was whispered, the King's reigning mistress, Madame de Montespan herself. Whole villages, indeed whole districts in the Basques and Juras had been devastated by the laws against witchcraft, and it had proved impossible to deal with all the witches that had been arrested, many of them from the convents, where monotony and ennui drove the inmates to a despairing search of anything that could relieve their unutterable boredom. The world had grown saner since then; if there were to be a revival of this sort of superstitious persecution, it would revive superstition, and set back the whole of civilisation and humanity.

"But witchcraft amounted to more than mummery," declared one Mr Calthrop. "On my own estate in my father's time a stone was thrown at an old woman's dog and the mark was found on *her* body."

Monsieur Voltaire waved this aside. He had heard many such instances and did not deny that there was foundation for them. Such people as believed themselves to be witches were certainly abnormal, and they, and the animals they used as their ministers, might well have abnormal powers. But he was certain that the world did not yet fully realise the powers of thought and belief. He considered it possible that future ages would place such instances of unnatural sympathy between a witch and her familiars together with miracles such as the stigmata on the hands and feet of saints, and attribute all these unnatural phenomena to an unnatural state of mind and body. He addressed his remarks chiefly to me, but I did not answer them.

In spite of the fact that as I am now approaching my thirty-first year, middle age is hard upon me, I have still to find a wife to carry on my family.

Time Will Tell

Time Will Tell

"ALL gone."

That was what the children said when they had finished their pudding.

"Out into the night."

That was what the lady novelists said.

"The bread is eaten and the company broke up."

That was what somebody said in *Don Quixote*.

The taxis had finished whirring outside the door and had wheezed and skidded and chuckled away down the wet street, and still the rain came down in great swoops and rushes against the windows, and still Majendie did not go to bed but stood and looked at the empty brandy glasses and the full ash-trays and smelt the hot, stale air of alcohol and cigar smoke in the room that had been crowded with talk and laughter and movement a few minutes since, and was now so quiet.

He had given his last bachelor dinner. His

wedding-eve dinner, but it had been quite like one of the old ones. James and Crowdie were there who had been up with him at Oxford, they three were the only ones that the war had left out of that particular gang at the House. James had made him rout out the common-place book that he had determined to start one morning when the three of them were walking down the High. They had gone into Black-well's and bought a thick exercise book with ruled lines. When they opened it this evening, there was the inscription, Godfrey Majendie, 1913. Nothing else had been inscribed on its virgin sheets. But snapshots had been thrust between them, a poem cut out of the *Isis* that had been written by Pierce, who had since been killed, a postcard with a bawdy limerick in Greek by Travers, who had since been married.

There was that snap of the little girl that Majendie had been keen on for the whole of his last summer, staying up all through the Long, pretending that it was to work, though everyone knew that it was to paddle his canoe every day down the river. For she was a lock-keeper's daughter, her name was Maggie or

Aggie or something equally dreadful, and God! what hair women wore then!

From the chimney-piece Majendie's bride had looked down on the group of men round the table as they compared reminiscences and rhymes with shouts of noisy laughter. It was a beautiful photograph. The eyelashes had been painted in afterwards and the modelling of the face painted out. The eyelids had been arranged to look like a nun, and the fingers to show her engagement ring.

Majendie, a little drunk, confronted her now.

"Yes," he said, "you do all that very well."

She had always done things well; it was a matter of production, and, as was perhaps natural, her mother had produced her.

She had done what her mother, her guardians, her teachers and friends had all intended her to do—"but why," he cried to himself in the futile indignation of the conquered, "should she have done it on me?"

Still, he was getting on. He was getting on well at the Bar too. Time to get married. Money to get married. The clock behind him, large and square, beat out the echo of his thoughts in slow, heavy thumps.

Twenty-two years since he had written his name in that commonplace book, and, as if that in itself were enough to express his passionate egoism, had written nothing since. Twenty-two years since he had been in love with Aggie; had he ever been in love since? Twenty-two years since that first eager joy and pride which all his life he had waited to recapture.

But now he had not waited and now there was no escape.

There came a sweeping, spattering burst of rain at his window with a noise like shrill laughter, and his gate creaked and rattled and the wind went hooting round his chimney and then rushed away, and suddenly there was silence again, except for the steady feet of time marching on past midnight, on through the morning hours to daylight and his wedding.

Could nothing happen to prevent it? Would no one come and tell him that Clemence had run away with someone else, had been married before, had discovered unimaginable crimes in him which would prevent her ever seeing him again? If he listened hard enough, there would surely come a knock at the door and a

telegraph boy—but it was too late for telegrams.

"Too late," said the clock. "All gone. Out into the night."

He must be rather tight. But that was quite right. All men did it the night before their wedding. All men went through some such crisis as he was experiencing. Poor old Travers, whose best man he had been, how green he had looked as he stood at the top of the church, nearly sick with nervousness, staring down into the church that was spattered all over with harpy faces, all scrutinising him, criticising him, while his belated bride kept him enduring hour after hour, no, only ten minutes, of torture.

Clemence should not keep him waiting, if he had to be late himself to prevent it.

He took some more brandy. He told himself that the men who had just left him certainly envied him. That they certainly would not have envied him if he had married Aggie. No, they would have pitied him, perhaps even laughed at him. "Caught, poor fellow." "Married his mistress, poor devil. Fatal, when a fellow does that."

But he had not done it. Like Clemence, he had done what his mother, his guardians, his teachers and friends had all intended he should do.

On the blank first page of his commonplace book he wrote, "How little do those nearest to us know what we really think or wish."

As he wrote, he heard something tapping at the window that was not the rain. It might be a loose branch of the clematis that grew against the house, but then it stopped, and he did not think it was the clematis. He looked up and listened, but it did not come again. He went to the window and looked out and saw a woman's face in the darkness just below the window, for one second before he turned away and ran to the front door.

But there he stood still, holding the handle, knowing that if he opened it he would see nothing but darkness and the bushes by his gate swaying in the wind, and the rain driving down on to the gleaming lamp-lit road beyond. He went back into his room, telling himself, "It could not have been her, unless she were dead," and finished his glass, shivering, and then grew bold and thought, "What would it

matter if she were dead or alive if she had come for me?" Now it seemed to him that that pale ghost he had seen in the dark and the rain had come to warn him, and he looked round his room on the pieces of old silver he had collected, on his books, and the photograph of Clemence, and knew that he held success in his hands and could see nothing in it but how precious failure might have been.

And as he heard the clock take up the last three words and tick them out over and over and over again, he counted the money in his pockets, turned out the light, went into the hall and put on his hat and coat, went back into the room and turned on the light again for one second and saw it all, still and bright and alien from him now for ever, shut it all into darkness again, and went out of the house.

Now he knew where the weighted feet of time had been marching all through this evening. They had been marching him out. Out of his house, out of all his former life. He did not know where he was going, what he would do. He was starting life all over again, or rather as he had never started it before, for life had been started for him, mapped out by

others ever since he had been put down for the house of his father's old friend at Eton at the age of one.

He came down the steps, and someone who must have been crouching against the bushes by the gate, came forward to meet him.

He heard a woman's voice say, "I didn't know it was you. I was waiting to see." Not for some seconds did he realise that the voice was that of Clemence.

She said, "Why didn't you open the door before? I tapped at the window and I thought you saw me. I didn't ring because of the servants."

She was trying to sound cool and natural. But she was not doing it well.

He said, "Come in out of the rain," and led her back into the hall and through into that room again where all the objects had been waiting for them in the darkness and were now shot into the light. Most prominent among them to Majendie was an exercise book lying open on the table with a thin scrawl of writing straggling down the middle of the page. He closed it guiltily, suddenly aware that this was his last testimony to the world he had been

about to leave, and that it was in no sense a tribute to Clemence.

The electric light glistened on her wet hair as she stood staring at her photograph.

"That awful thing," she said, "it's not me."

"Everybody thinks it very good of you. Have a brandy and soda."

He did not say. "Why have you come?"

He went on not saying it while the air tingled with his suppression.

She said, "You must think me—coming like this. So absurd. One's a fool to——"

Each of these jerky half-sentences rapped against his mind and caused a small shock; it was disturbing that anyone who had always from her shoes to her shingle been so consistently right should thus put herself in the wrong.

She looked so different too. Dishevelled, yes, untidy. And she would go on talking quite unlike herself, saying abrupt, disconnected, hysterical things like,

"You do it all so well.

"But I'm no good really.

"You'd be disappointed.

"You'd hate a failure."

Suddenly he realised that she was wanting to break it off.

Now. At the eleventh hour. How melodramatic. How like a woman. After he had given his farewell bachelor dinner. Making him look a fool. Never letting him know till now.

Until he remembered that he also had wanted to break it off and that he had not thought of letting her know at all.

Here she was, doing it all for him, he would not have to break his life in two and throw up his career and disappear.

But why was she doing it? What on earth had been wrong? For the life of him he could not understand women.

She was saying absurd things. Something about a friend of her brother's that she used to play with, who had gone to Australia and married someone else, so what was the use of that? He saw that like most of her countrywomen she held romance dearer than content and would rather think she had been happy in the past than that she might be happy in the future.

And suddenly she shot at him, "Has there

never been any impossible romance like that in your life?"

"Never," he said, and sat on the commonplace book.

"I thought men never forgot their first love."

"Who told you you weren't the first?"

"I am not a half-wit."

That touch of her old familiar crispness came oddly from the unknown creature that had drifted into his house; he stared at her, not knowing which of the two women now confronted him.

"Why don't you want to marry me?" he asked.

"It would all be so ordinary, so just what mother wants, and I don't know that anybody else wants it very much. Why did you want to marry me?"

"You answered 'No' at the right moment and 'Yes' at the right moment."

Almost they were on their old ground, flicking bright answers to each other, cool and composed in a world where the regular order of living mattered most. He saw her as he had so often done before, the perfect hostess at

little dinners given to his less fortunately married friends.

But there was her voice speaking in a low, slightly mechanical rhythm that he had always known in her, saying, "All those presents are there on show, waiting for us. I have been round and round the tables, learning them all by heart so as to thank the right people for them. Mother screamed her head off about the wedding dress. It wasn't right on the shoulders. Then she made them put higher hassocks at the back of the church, so that people could stand on them to see. We have had two rehearsals with the pages. Jennifer Golightly is to be my chief bridesmaid because she's failed to pull it off and is going to travel to make room for her younger sisters. Mother thought of that to score off Lady Golightly. I am to walk up the aisle with Jennifer behind me and mother beaming at Lady Golightly. Do you know why they have all this fuss about the trousseau? So as to tire the bride out, stun her with fuss and fatigue that she shall have no time to think. I can't think. I only know I can't go through with it to-morrow. And I can't tell mother. I am going away to-night."

"That would be damnably inconsiderate," he burst out, then broke off, flung himself out of his chair and began striding up and down the room. "It would be easier if you were going off with someone else, but without that motive, what sort of construction will be put on your running away from me at the last moment like this?"

"I am sorry. I really do not know anyone whom I can run away with at this moment."

She too had risen; now she sat down in his chair; now, numb with apprehension, he watched her jump half up again in order to pull the sharp-edged exercise book from beneath her, watched her open it and read the single sentence in its fresh, scarcely dried ink, watched her eyes rise from it to his face.

"You!" she said, and then, "what were you doing, coming out of your house? Were you running away too?"

"I was mad. It was only for a moment; I should have turned back by the time I'd got to the end of the street. It's common enough. You have trousseaux. Well, we have bachelor parties on the eve of a wedding so as to ginger a fellow up and keep him from bolting."

"That would be damnably inconsiderate."

"Damnably."

"You weren't even going to let me know first."

"I tell you, I don't believe for a moment I was going to do it. I was drunk, I think. But I'm not now."

"The sight of me sobered you. That is not the traditional effect of a bride. Well, it's settled now; what a relief it must be for you, poor Godfrey. Why, I haven't even any name for you beside your own dreadful one in full. I can't call you God. Godfrey and Clemence —they're enough in themselves to forbid the banns!" She was laughing wildly, but suddenly grew quiet again. "How little do those nearest to us know what we really think or wish," she repeated, "how little do we know ourselves, for you are just going to try and persuade me not to break it off."

Well, but of course he was. It was unthinkable that she should do this outrageous thing, upsetting all their plans, his career, both their lives. It was nerves, of course, hysteria; it was common enough, women were apt to take fright just before their wedding. Everything

he thought echoed mockingly in his head before he could begin to say it; his own fight had defeated him before he knew of hers; persuasion, argument turned cold in his mouth as he looked at her; looked at her and saw her leaving him. One tick more of the clock and she would be through the door and he would have to think what to do, how to explain, clear up the mess. But as she opened the door, not looking back at him, he ceased to know that; he knew only that he had never known the woman who was leaving him, that if he were to marry her on the morrow, he would be marrying as remote a stranger as the veiled bride of oriental tradition.

Familiarity had been what he craved, the familiarity of rough hair under his lips, deep in the long orchard grass, of husky tender tones in an accent deliciously inferior. "I can't call you God," Clemence had said—well, there had been one girl who could easily have called him that. Ever since that enchanted summer that had held the world in peace that he might love before the war, he had thirsted to know again that exquisite surrender of a woman's whole being to his will. Aggie had been his

creature quite literally, he had made her live for him and by him, it was he who made her moods, had lit her quite ordinary eyes into splendour, had created her whole body as an instrument of delight. What could he have done with Clemence, that cold, sophisticated girl?

But no one cold and sophisticated had run to him through the raining night to tell him she could not bear to marry him next day.

"Tock," said the clock, and the door closed.

The room was empty of her. Godfrey rushed to the door and pulled it open. The passage outside was empty. The hall door stood open. Outside in the blackness there was no sound but that of the falling rain. He rushed out, collided violently against her, began dragging her in again, fighting her resistance, flung his arms round her, found himself kissing her roughly, furiously, while on their frantic faces the rain poured down.

"Come back into the house," he said, "and I will show you how I love you; I never knew it till now."

"Come away from the house," she said, "and get your car out of the garage and drive

all night up to Scotland. Let us run away together from our wedding."

They clung together for a moment. In the next, the dark, drenched garden was filled only with the falling rain, while within the house, inside the bright and empty room, the clock ticked on, marking the passage of the moments that should change their lives for better or for worse.

The Curate and the Rake

The Curate and the Rake

In the dining-room of Little Sudley Rectory in Kent, the Rector, Mr Dale, had just rounded off his disquisition on the views of the ancients concerning spirits and devils by a quotation from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*: "Many will not believe they can be seen—and if any man shall say that he hath seen them, they account him a humorous fool, a melancholy dizzard, a weak fellow, a dreamer, a sick or a mad man." As he spoke, he hurried, eagerly stooping with outstretched forefinger, to one of the bookcases. "Surely Mr Chalmers, I have shown you my Burton. No great value, like all my books alas, but a pretty piece."

He placed the book in the hands of his temporary curate, running a reverent finger down the old red morocco binding. "Straight-grained," he murmured tenderly.

Mr Chalmers flushed like a schoolboy, and in his haste spoke with stiff ungraciousness.

"These things seem remote to me. I have not had time for them since I was at Oxford."

Then he perceived that while feeling like an ignoramus he had spoken like a prig.

He had been ordered by his doctor after prolonged overwork in his London slum parish to take it quietly in the country for six months or so, and for this purpose was now temporary curate to Mr Dale. There, in the sudden hush that had fallen like an enchanted sleep on his hard-worked life, he had envied the Rector for those very qualities that in his shyness he had seemed to disparage.

"Leisure, learning, taste, a sense of beauty," he had thought, "even good manners—I've had no time for them in the slums—I'm out of touch with them." But with how unfortunate a turn had he expressed his thoughts! He could feel the air grow cold around him. Dr Finney, the Rector's crony of thirty years' standing, sought to thaw it.

"Ah—your work for humanity," he grunted.

Mr Dale observed dryly that so humane a man should maintain an interest in the Humanities, and was at once appeased by his slender joke.

Mrs Dale did not allow pipes in the drawing-room. In that rarer air she sat with her daugh-

ter after the Sunday luncheon, saying nothing. She held her large capable hands to the fire, her black stuff skirt turned back over her black silk petticoat, and yawned several times.

Her daughter stood at the window. Alice Dale was thirty-three and belonged to a generation earlier than her age. She had never been to school, nor cut off her hair; she was unselfish, taught in the Sunday school, and looked older than was necessary. She was conscious with the least tinge of bitterness of all these things as she looked out at the heavy October rain falling in the garden.

Mrs Taffleton, the jolly, elderly Squire's wife, had pulled her aside after church and remarked that there was something rather eighteenth-century-looking about Mr Chalmers —positively distinguished—she was sure "he had a leg." It had not occurred to Alice that Mr Chalmers was "distinguished" or "eighteenth-century-looking," nor to remark the possibilities of his leg. She had thought him ascetic-looking, a dreamer, possibly a saint.

But why had Mrs Taffleton talked to her about him at all? And then her final words:

"But he wants waking up, my dear. No one has ever done it yet, that's plain. I believe he could be quite—well, quite unclerical! Wake him up." And she had looked . . . She was a dreadful busybody. Alice sighed. The rain dripped so steadily, as if the weather would never change. Why should it? Nothing ever changed here.

She went out on to the drawing-room balcony where she could hear the men's voices below her in the dining-room—Finney's sharp and argumentative, her father's rolling along in quiet enjoyment, Mr Chalmers' not at all. He, then, was not interested in the conversation. She wondered if he were wishing to come upstairs to the drawing-room.

"The rain, my dear!" said her mother's voice, coming muffled through the drawing-room furniture. She went back into the room shaking the drops from her hair, but still they gleamed on it in little points of light against the window. Mr Chalmers saw them as he stood in the doorway for an instant while coming in with the other men.

"What have you been talking about?" she asked.

"Of visions," said her father.

Then Mr Chalmers had not been interested in visions. She wondered what other subject she could introduce, but Dr Finney was already expounding the probable nervous and digestive system of saints and hermits.

"Our old contest," observed the Rector. "Vision versus indigestion. Doctor, you treat the most revered saints in the Calendar with considerably less delicacy than you do your patients."

"Except, of course," continued the Doctor, impervious to interruption, "when they saw what they wished to see. *Tempted* by the devil indeed! What lonely hermit would not have welcomed his visits, especially when he came disguised as a beauty chorus!"

"Yes, indeed, indeed," murmured Mrs Dale nervously, for she knew that all clergymen were not as broad-minded as dear Father. "And that reminds me, dear,"—she was addressing her husband—"I have heard again about that coach-and-four that is supposed to drive down the Lower Road. Old Mrs Tebbit down the village solemnly assured me that it happens on the last night in November every

year. 'You can hear the harness rattling and the coachman a-cracking his whip, but you don't see nothing,' she said."

Alice Dale began to tell Mr Chalmers in her soft voice of some interesting old letters Mrs Taffleton had found up at the Manor House, which might throw a new light on Mrs Tebbit's story. "For they say that coach-and-four they hear is the one that Sir Hercules Marvell's wife eloped in nearly two hundred years ago, when the Marvell family were at the Manor." She paused, but Mr Chalmers seemed no more interested in old letters than in village ghost stories. "It made a great stir at the time," she added lamely, and drifted on that she did wish her father would go up and see the new letters that had been found, but he did put things off so.

"I will do it this week," said the Rector, "perhaps even to-day, my love."

Mr Chalmers said nothing. What was the way to "wake him up"? He had sleepy-looking eyes—such heavy lids to them, like an old portrait. But they had looked at her as he had come into the room, and in quite a new way, she had fancied.

But now he did not look at her, for the raindrops had dried on her hair, and he was thinking of something else.

Last evening as he had come through the church, he had paused at the altar steps, his eye attracted by the small curtain of old brocade that hung beside the altar against the chancel wall. A late sunbeam had fallen on it through one of the plain glass windows, and in its glow the red roses seemed to stand out on their background of dim gold as though they were living roses seen against the sunset. He even thought that a warm fragrance emanated from them, dispelling the chilly tombstone smell of the church. It showed, he thought, how one sense communicated with another, that he should fancy he smelt the roses because they looked so real.

He had stood and gazed, forgetting what he was looking at, remembering the roar and bustle of his life in London, the ugly and crowded meanness of his surroundings there, the difficulty of snatching any moments for reflection. The trouble was that now he had them, he did not seem able to reflect. After eleven years of such breathless work that he

never had time to think, he was shot into such complete quiet that he had nothing to think about. It was so quiet here, perhaps too quiet. It was dead; no, it was asleep.

And as he thought this it suddenly occurred to him that it was he only that was asleep, and that something or someone in that place was living and awake, and, more, was watching him.

He looked quickly round, but the church was empty. As he turned his head he heard the faintest of sounds behind him, too low to be called a rustle, and saw in the tail of his eye that the rose-and-gold brocade had moved. In that instant he thought that a white hand held back the brocade, and in that instant slipped back again behind it. A long white hand, and on one of its pointed fingers, a ring with a red stone. But all he saw, as he actually faced the brocade, was that it was swaying very slightly.

He sprang up the altar steps and pulled the brocade aside. It was a foolish thing to do, for nothing could possibly be concealed behind it. The stuff hung close against the wall, and behind it as he saw was the impenetrable grey stone.

But he did not speak of this in the dining-room when the Rector and Dr Finney discussed visions.

And it was of this that he was thinking in the drawing-room while Alice Dale spoke to him of lovers long since dead. What lover had she herself ever known? It struck him with a shock how barren of pleasure such lives as hers and his own had been. He knew in that moment, without coxcombry, that it would bring her the highest delight she had known did he lean towards her in that buzz of conversation and tell her that he loved her. He watched the tender and serious curves of her smile, and said to himself, "Yes, she is good and gentle, and I have begun to want love. I will ask her for it," he resolved, and the Rector's words to his daughter echoed in his thoughts, "I will do it this week, perhaps even to-day, my love."

He could not meet her eyes. He looked down at her hands. They were broad and red like her mother's. Rings would not look well on them, especially rings with red stones.

Then amazement struck him at the unaccustomed turns of his mind. He decided

to go across to his rooms and read the latest reports of the autumn lectures and classes given to the Men's Club in his London parish. He had been told to get as far away from all such things as possible, but he had begun to feel he was getting just a little too far away. As he rose to leave, the Rector looked up to say that he would be walking to the further end of his parish and to ask if Mr Chalmers would care to accompany him.

The rain had stopped. They passed up through the churchyard on the hillside, and the late evening sun shone out with sudden brilliance. Some red roses climbing over an ornate old tomb were sprinkled with raindrops that glittered like jewels. Mr Dale told him that in this sheltered corner the roses often bloomed as late as December. Looking tenderly at them, he repeated a line in a ballad: "Out o' the lady's grave grew a bonny red rose."

Mr Chalmers remarked that there was nothing to show it was a "lady's grave." The climbing rose tree had quite covered the inscription, which was worn away and crumbling. He pushed aside the wet branches, and thought

he could make out the numbers XXII, which no doubt told the age of the person there interred. Mr Dale pronounced the tomb to be in the style of the early eighteenth century, probably of the reign of Queen Anne, and thought it was of the family of the Marvells, who had been Squires of Little Sudley for many generations before the Taffletons had come to the place. "Yet if so, it is strange the body should not be in the Marvells' family vault," he concluded.

There was a wild beauty in the autumn evening in that place of decay. Torn fragments of grey cloud floated rapidly across the sky; the dark trees in the churchyard looked black in this brilliant and unreal light. A storm cloud had swept up behind the church and was already covering half the sky. Chalmers let go the rose branches; they swung again to their tombstones, and from them a shower of cold raindrops fell on his hands so that they looked as though they were wet with tears.

He wished that he had ever known any love great enough for tears. He could remember his father crying as he stood by his wife's grave, that formidable man, so impressive in

gaiters, so early fixed in his decision that his only son should follow his distinguished career in the Church. But he himself, the little boy who stood awed and nervous beside him, was too much afraid of him to cry. He could remember his mother laughing; she had teased his father and pulled his hair, an incredible thing; he wondered if his own life would have had more colour and gaiety in it if she had lived, if even he himself might have been different.

His life so far had been conducted only in accordance with the wishes of others. But why should he now want it otherwise? Why indeed was he now indulging in any of the disturbing thoughts that were visiting him for the first time? And why, oh why did there steal out on the soft air the sound of his own voice saying, without his ever having thought it, "When I am dead, let me be buried by that tomb, and a graft from that rose tree planted on my grave."

The startled silence closed in round them. Through it at last broke Mr Dale's shocked tones, reminding his curate that he would certainly outlive his rector.

The two clergymen in their black coats hurried on up the hillside to escape the coming rain, while the curate, looking back, saw the rose tree swaying gently against the stormy sunset.

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That night Chalmers dreamed he was dancing. He did not dance, and considered dance music mawkish and sickly, but the music he heard in his dream was not like that. It was a tinkling, tripping tune, as unemotional as an exercise, making no appeal to the sentiment. This music was free from hope and from regret; its heartless gaiety told him to live in the moment only.

He was not dancing in the usual modern fashion; he was leading a partner through an intricate and formal pattern composed of dancers whom he saw vaguely as rich colours rather than as actual people. He felt the light touch of his partner's finger-tips in his, he heard the subdued rustle of heavy silks beside him, but, as so often in a dream, he could only see her as a blurred though glowing shadow.

They separated, he was bowing very low,

with a hat in his hand. The music had stopped, he was bending over a long, white, pointed hand which he saw clearly against a background of rose-and-gold brocade. As he raised it to his lips, he saw on it a ring with one large ruby, and laughed low to himself with exultation.

When he woke, he told himself that his extraordinary sense of triumph must have been because he had recognised the hand and the ring as those that he had fancied he had seen upon the chancel curtain two days before. What could be more natural than that he should have dreamt of them? But he knew that the triumph that had risen in him at the sight of the ring had been deeper and more personal than this. It had been fierce, cruel even, the exultation of one who knows suddenly that he holds a creature in his power. And as he remembered how he had laughed in his dream, a passionate tremor ran through his body, and his hands clenched.

*

Like nearly everyone else Chalmers had

always believed he had a sense of humour. But now he found that mocking fancies and cynical epigrams would fly into his head at the most inappropriate moments. And his thoughts during the services now wandered perpetually; he was beset by sensual desires. He had always held it unhealthy to account such thoughts and images too heavily, but he now knew that never before had he had much cause to do so. He had read of the ravings of hermits persecuted by temptations of the devil; they became charged for him with a new significance.

For as though it were the perverse teasing of some other mind exterior to his own, such desires, cynicisms and mocking fancies were never so strong as when he was in church, in his seat in the chancel, or standing at the altar. And there, more than once, he again fancied that silken rustle of a lady's dress among the folds of the brocade curtain, and breathed in the air a perfume of roses.

Once as he knelt in his seat during the Rector's reading of Evensong, his hands pressed over his eyes, he saw against the darkness of their closed lids a fan moving backwards and

forwards, held by a long white hand. A group of figures was depicted in the centre of the fan, surrounded by a pattern of roses, and beneath it were three lines of writing in blue-and-gold characters, infinitesimally small. The fan remained thus an instant, moving gently to and fro, as vivid as if it had been painted inside his eyelids; then vanished.

He opened his eyes on to the lights in the chancel, the bowed heads of the choir boys, the raised head of the Rector as he read the prayers in his droning voice. He looked down into the body of the church, which was ill-lighted, and saw a lady in wide and glowing skirts moving up the main aisle. The light was too dim to distinguish her features; she held her head a little to one side; he thought that she was smiling.

In the same instant he saw the black-cloaked figure of Mrs Taffleton, the Squire's wife, who always arrived late, turn into her pew; and marvelled that his fancy should even for an instant have transformed her largely cumbrous person into that gracious and familiar form. For he was certain that it was the form of his rose-and-gold lady, as he now called her to

himself; though often he woke with other phrases for her such as "the cruel fair", "relentless charmer," "the coral and ivory of her lips and brow"—a comparison that struck his waking mind as absurdly artificial.

He no longer spoke with enthusiasm nor even interest of his work in London. The Rector, least observant of men, observed that he had changed very much; his wife added that sometimes he seemed like quite another man. And their daughter, Alice—

Alice stood down in the Lower Road, talking to a woman who was carrying a couple of ducks to market. Alice stood with her hands in her pockets, and her legs rather far apart, and the autumn sunshine cast a flickering yellow warmth round her tall thin figure in its country tweeds. She heard the churchyard gate click, and turned to see the curate coming down the path towards her with a full-blown rose in his hand. The woman, detecting a sign of courtship in his flower, hurried on her way so as to leave the young people alone. Alice flushed as she looked after her.

"That is a good creature," she said to Mr Chalmers, for she must say something, he must

not guess the question that was hammering inside her: "Is he going to give me that rose?"

Chalmers had just plucked it from the old tombstone; its perfume had risen to his head like wine, so that he felt unsure of what he would do or say next. He had looked down the path at Alice Dale straddling in the sunshine like a schoolgirl—a full-grown woman whom no man had ever taught to be more than a child.

"No doubt," he said in answer to her, "but there were so many good women in that generation. So large a supply of virtue has lessened the demand. It is the result of indiscriminate chastity."

He raised his hat and walked on. Perhaps he was mad—but mad or sane he did not want to give her his flower. He had looked at her so keenly, but only as if he were talking about her with someone else—had it indeed been of her that he had spoken in those crisp, unclerical phrases—spoken unguardedly out of his own unconscious mind, summarising and destroying her? Now away he walked with his rose—and yes, it was as though he were with someone else. And across that fancy

came the certainty that Mr Chalmers was in love, had been so for some time, and never with herself.

She had never known, and he did not remember, that once he had admired her soft and innocent eyes.

*

That night he dreamed he was walking in a formal garden built in terraces; it had a square stone pond in the centre and steps that rose from it to a small gate of iron, fantastically wrought. Statues of cupids stood on either side of the steps, and a pleached alley enclosed the whole garden. He was walking up and down the path with a full-blown red rose in his hand. He raised it to his lips and as he did so he laughed low to himself with exultation.

Then he knew that someone was watching him from behind the little gate. He looked up and saw a gracious and familiar figure in rose-and-gold brocade. She stood there, poised as though she had but alighted for an instant from the upper air, borne hither by the balloon-like folds of her voluminous skirts. A

black mask concealed her features; she held her head a little to one side; he thought that she was smiling.

She moved, she disappeared, and he dashed across the garden and leaped the gate. She was a little way down the pleached alley, her head still turned, smiling. He caught her, his arms were round her, and he seized her mask to tear it off as his face came down to meet hers.

He was lying in bed and his hand was empty. He could not believe that it was not still holding a black velvet mask. So great a rage of disappointment and baffled desire arose in him that he turned as he lay and bit and gnawed the empty hand.

"This is absurd," he told himself presently. "The garden was very like the enclosed formal garden at the Taffletons'—it is not surprising I should dream of it. There's a pleached alley round it too, I remember—and the little gate with the steps going down from it to the fountain. As for the figure, it is nothing but that piece of rose-and-gold brocade. I can't be in love with a piece of brocade!"

He suddenly laughed aloud. For was it

merely a piece of brocade that had stood so, and watched him, inscrutable but exquisite behind her mask? No, he was in love, and with someone whom he had never known, whose face even in dreams he had never seen. The Early Fathers, whose writings the Rector enjoyed so much, would have said he was being tempted by the devil; but Dr Finney, materialist and atheist, would find a simpler scientific explanation of Chalmers' present state of mind. Such explanations now offended Chalmers' sense of romance more than his sense of religion.

"This family-doctor air towards the desires of the flesh will destroy their prestige, and even their charm," he considered. "It is the Church who has paid woman her highest compliment in regarding her as a danger and a sin."

He chuckled at this and thought how he had expanded; he could see now how narrow his ideas had been, how crude and ill-formed his enthusiasms. There had been times when he had not wanted to go into the Church, yet he had allowed himself to become swamped in it. He had wasted his youth and manhood, starving

himself in order to give others what they did not want.

He knew now what he wanted. "Love, joy, peace"—no, no, not the text—love, joy, beauty, pleasure, an intoxication, a delirium of delight. All his past life, his ideals and labours, had been a dream until this moment. Now he lived.

*

He had been kneeling in his seat in the chancel for nearly an hour. It was after the choir practice on Friday, the last evening of November, and he had stayed behind, saying he would put out the lights. He had not done so, but had remained in his seat.

Here, alone in the house of God, he had hoped to recall something of the faith and trust in the Divine that had once been his. But the silence of the half-lighted church wrapped him round as with a thick pall, making him drowsy and forgetful. He tried to pray, but his mind did not follow his words.

"They come too easily," he told himself. "It is the result of practice."

He had prayed all his life without ever realising the need for prayer. What had he ever had, what had he done, what had he been?

"A dream, a dream," he repeated drowsily to himself, and sat back in his seat. "When I wake I shall know who I am."

He struggled against this inertia but unavailingly. He tried to remember different events in his past life, people he had met. There was a friend at college called—called—if only he could remember the name he would remember more about him. The devil! He would forget his own name next! But one could forget anything if one waited long enough. It was an intolerable occupation. He must have been waiting over an hour, and still she had not come.

Would she come? She must come.

He yawned, crossed one knee over the other and nursed his foot. He felt an instant's surprise at the contact of a shoe buckle under his hand. Had he not worn shoe buckles all his life! But one could forget anything if one waited long enough. It was like her to keep him waiting, the little devil. Well, he would

soon have his revenge. He drew in his breath sharply, and his hand clenched.

He folded his arms and drummed with his fingers against the soft velvet of his sleeve. She was late, very late. "Ah God!" he thought, "if she should not come!"

He found that he was praying, praying madly that she should come. He laughed aloud. "So Love makes fools of all of us," he told himself as in excuse for a God that could not, in any polite and reasonable age, exist.

His eyes were fixed on the door in the chancel, he leaned forward in expectation of the gracious and familiar figure that should enter. It was so, though not through the chancel door, that she had first sailed upon his vision. He had come to church and sat in the top pew to see if any local goddess were worthy of his homage, and had stared and hemmed and rapped his snuff-box and ogled the farmers' daughters. Until that rare excellence in rose-and-gold brocade swam like a sunset cloud up the main aisle, startling him from his insolent gallantry into admiration that was already half devotion. He had not seen her face as she sat within the high walls of the Squire's pew, but

he had watched as though enchanted the slow movement to and fro of a fan, held by a long white hand.

How well he had come to know that fan, its pretty device of a pastoral group, encircled by roses, its motto in blue and gold that they had spelt out as they sat together on the rustic seat. Her head, perfumed with roses, had been close to his as they bent over the minute characters:

> L'amour est ung je ne sçais quoi
> Qui vient, je ne sçais d'où
> Est qui s'en ay, je ne sçais comment.

So said the fan. And a still clearer language had it spoken to him in fluttering and languishing signs from the recesses of the Squire's pew, while the Squire, his wig awry, slumbered, an insensible swine beside his pearl of a wife.

Now this church, the scene of his first enraptured vision, and since then of so many tormenting doubts and equally tormenting desires and dreamed delights, was the place appointed to meet for their elopement. Now, in this chill and forbidding place, certainty would fulfil his dream, and the Omnipotent

Power he mocked and defied was powerless to uphold His Laws even in His own house.

Suddenly he saw that the chancel door stood open. She was in the doorway, a voluminous dark cloak wrapped close around her, a hood pulled so low over her face as to obscure the delicate features that he knew so well. Her exquisite ears, her dimple, her coral lips, her ivory brow; it seemed that his burning eyes could even now discern them through the envious hood.

He was beside her. He had found her hand among the folds of her cloak and was covering it with kisses. His lips pressed a ring with a single stone that flashed red in the light of the church candles.

"My ring!" he whispered, laughing low in exultation.

She seemed to pause, to hesitate, to flutter, in a movement as light and fugitive as that of her own fan. Then she swayed towards him, and the voice he knew so well came faintly, as though she were no more than sighing.

"Do you still wear my rose against your heart?"

He seized her, lifted her, bore her out of

the church, down the churchyard path, stumbling in the darkness and in his feverish haste. He could see dimly before him in the Lower Road the shape of a coach and four horses. The lanterns were obscured. The dark figure of a man leaped down from his seat on the box and opened the door. It was shut behind them, he heard the crack of a whip, a clatter of harness; with a heavy and jolting movement the coach drove forward. His arms tightened round the figure beside him, he had seized and torn back the envious hood, in the darkness his face came down to meet hers.

All his past life, all his scheming ambitions, his gallantries and dissemblings had been a dream until this moment. Now, he lived.

*

The Rector sat in Mrs Taffleton's boudoir, examining the letters that she had rustled, scolding, before him, reminding him that they had been waiting for him since October and here it was the first morning in December.

The letters told of some gifts that had been made to the church of Little Sudley when the Taffletons had bought the Manor from the

Marvell family more than a hundred years ago. One of the gifts had been a piece of rose-and-gold brocade for a chancel curtain, that had once been part of a lady's dress.

"And very shabby of our ancestors," cried Mrs Taffleton, "to pass off old clothes as ecclesiastical work! Not sanctified stuff at all, then?"

"Far from it," said the Rector. "It is clear from this letter that the dress must have belonged to that fair and frail lady, the wife of Sir Hercules Marvell, she who caused such a stir in the reign of Queen Anne. Do you know the story?"

"Why, I told it you myself—how she eloped with a young London gallant who had fallen in love with her in church. Churches must have been dangerous scenes of flirtation in those days."

Mr Dale cooed pleasantly in answer.

"You remember Addison on the dangers—how the pious verger had to screen the pews with evergreens to shelter their occupants from Cupid's darts. And in Farquhar's comedy—that rogue Aimwell tells us very prettily how the gallant of his day 'does execution in a country church'—how does it go?"

"Never mind how it goes. You ought to write this story of Lady Marvell and her lover —such a tragedy—their coach pursued by her irate husband, the lady shot dead, the lover killed in the duel that followed."

"I will tell my daughter to write it. Young people like tragedies."

"Lady Marvell herself was only twenty-two when she was killed."

The Rector gave an exclamation. "It has just struck me—I wonder if that tomb with the rose tree outside the church is hers. We must have it examined more closely. Now I come to think of it, Chalmers noticed the numbers XXII on it." He added with a rather distressed look, "And he once said he would like to be buried beside it. Now why should he have said that?"

"He is young," said Mrs Taffleton.

As she spoke, Dr Finney was shown into the room. He had been looking everywhere for the Rector. Mr Chalmers had been found in the church that morning, dead. It was thought at first that he was asleep; he was sitting upright, and in his hand, which was raised to his breast, was clasped a faded rose.

Those who had first found him said that on his face was the look of a man who had seen a vision. But the opinion of Dr Finney and his colleagues was death from failure of the heart, weakened by prolonged overwork and nervous strain; for if any man has seen a vision, "they account him a humorous fool, a melancholy dizzard, a weak fellow, a dreamer, a sick or a mad man."

"Where Beauty Lies"

"Where Beauty Lies"

HYACINTHE ANNE FRANÇOIS SAINT CUPIDON, Marquis des Beaux Airs, awoke on the morning of June 2nd, 1725, in that state of unhappy indecision common to most men about to marry.

This state was only aggravated by his unusual freedom of choice, for he was to marry one of three young ladies whom he had met for the first time on the previous evening, and could as yet discover no reason why he should choose one rather than another. All three were much of the same age and height, all tolerably pretty, witty and docile. Almost he was inclined to blame his host, their father, the noble Comte des Brioches, for the unwonted generosity that had left the choice in so delicate a matter to himself rather than to their respective parents.

"Whichever I choose," he petulantly declared to his valet, "is sure to turn out the wrong one."

"It is inevitable, Monsieur," agreed the valet.

"Alas, it is not inevitable, that is the worst of it. By fastening the responsibility on me, our parents have deprived me of the satisfaction of railing either at them or at Fate. I shall only have myself to blame."

"It is always possible to find someone else," said the valet. "There will be Madame, for instance."

Even this consolation failed to reassure his master, who in his restless mood rose very early, dressed rapidly and took a turn in the park before anyone was about. The park was filled with early sunshine and the song of birds who had had no such difficulty as his in mating. The dew sparkled under his feet, roses nodded over his head, a strutting peacock spread his tail and reminded him that he too was a very pretty fellow and that whatever his difficulties regarding matrimony he was unlikely to encounter among them any coldness or indifference.

At this he smoothed back his powdered hair which the morning breeze had slightly disarranged, pulled his lace ruffles over his hands, brushed a fleck of dust from his red heels, threw out his chest and whistled an air which

he quickly abandoned on finding it to be a hymn tune, walked very fast, indeed almost ran over the wide lawns, turned the corner of a box alley, and fell in love.

At the end of the dark and narrow box alley was a fountain splashing and sparkling in the sunlight. Its drops fell in a shower of jewels on water-lilies, golden and rose-pink like the clouds of sunrise that still adorned the sky. Two swans floating on its basin appeared as spirits from another world in their dazzling whiteness, their marvellous indifference to the marvel that stood before them. For on the edge of the fountain stood a nymph newly risen from its waters, and glittering so that every melting curve and perfect outline of her body seemed modelled in pearl and silver.

Her head was flung back, her face upturned, but Beaux Airs could not see it, for she held her arms outstretched before it as if rapt in ecstatic adoration of the beneficent sun that had called forth this garden, its flowers, its creatures and herself, into the warmth and light and life of the summer morning. She stood so lightly poised that she appeared to have but just alighted from the upper air, as

though she were indeed the goddess of this sacred grove.

The heart of Beaux Airs stopped within him as if in mortal fear, his knees shook together, he turned at first hot and then icy cold. He stole away from that place on tiptoe towards the terrace in front of the château. There, his agitation suddenly left him, he found himself strong, calm and assured of his fate. There was only one woman in the world for him to marry. He had only to wait and see which of the three Mesdemoiselles des Brioches would return from her bathe in the park and he would forthwith declare his passion.

He waited half an hour. An hour. The servants were now about and stared at him. He was no longer strong and calm. He refused the chocolate that his valet brought him, he even poured it over his valet. He returned to the gardens, to the box alley. But his nymph had disappeared. Only the insensate swans glided slowly to and fro, only the fountain played ceaselessly above the place where she had stood.

He was still sitting there disconsolate, when three vast shapes floated down the alley

towards him, sank billowing in a curtsy, and perched themselves on the side of the fountain. Their skirts swelled up in huge semicircular curves and from them rose their whale-boned bodices like square boxes, not fitting to the figure but stiffly encasing it as in flat boards.

They greeted him with a little twittering chorus of surprise and approbation that he should so soon have discovered their favourite fountain. Did he not admire the water lilies? Did he not adore the swans? Did he know that one could sometimes see a rainbow in the fountain?

But after his bow and greetings he only stared in baffled dismay at the three boxes rising from the three balloons, so that they wondered if anything could be amiss with the fine dresses that had been ordered from Paris especially for this event. Emboldened by their lucky encounter without the restricting presence of any parent, governess or even servant, they began to twit him with his embarrassment, and Mademoiselle Guilberte, the youngest and pertest, asked if it arose from the difficulty of his choice.

He answered that that was very possible among so many beauties.

"So many!" cried the eldest, Mademoiselle Elizabeth. "Why, there are but three of us."

"So there were before Paris, Mademoiselle," he replied, "yet he found it difficult to choose between three goddesses even though they were undisguised."

At that they clamoured to know what he meant by disguise for not one of them wore so much as a mask.

"Alas, Mesdemoiselles," he sighed, "but you wear so much else."

And in despair he could almost have besought them to tell him which of those constructions of hoops and boxes concealed as in a muffled cage the exquisite and living body that he had observed so delicately poised, so all but flying, on the very spot where they now sat stiffly imprisoned.

But at his last words they had surged up with a crackle and swish of satin like a flight of pigeons from the ground, they had rustled and bustled together, joined hands and swept off down the box alley in scandalised flight from this offence against the modesty of their maiden ears.

"Decidedly," said Mademoiselle Elizabeth, "we were mistaken to have conversed with him in such dangerous and illicit solitude."

"Must you tell Mamma?" asked Mademoiselle Guilberte, who had looked back at the miscreant, but only three times.

"That would be a pity," declared Mademoiselle Madeleine, the second, most silent and most sensible.

"They might," she added, "break off the match."

Careless of his guilt, Beaux Airs watched only to see which of the three hastily retreating barrel hoops might reveal any chance resemblance to his nymph of the sunrise. She would surely fly as lightly as a fawn down that long alley, flashing white between its walls of dark box hedge. But could he discover those pearl white, those slender and tapering legs beneath the three swirling masses of petticoats that dipped and swayed and undulated away from him? He was forced to try what other indications could help his choice.

Mademoiselle Elizabeth had decidedly the handsomest features. She had an excellent forehead and her ears were admirably shaped.

But Mademoiselle Madeleine wore a strange and secretive smile.

But then Mademoiselle Guilberte had looked back at him three times.

No, none of these things could help him, since none could tell him which was the nymph of the fountain.

Suddenly he remembered that one had called it her favourite fountain. That should tell him. Which of them had said it? With a groan of despair he remembered that all had done so.

That afternoon he asked an audience of the Dowager Madame des Brioches, grandmother to the young ladies. He had frequented her salon in Paris where, immense, imperturbable, and apparently immovable, she had sat enthroned like some grotesque idol among the hundreds that thronged to enjoy a philosophy as broad as her person.

She had once been a famous beauty but had recollected in better time than most that she might soon lose the pleasures of love but could always retain those of the table and the tongue. She had therefore cultivated with enjoyment her palate and her observation at an age when

her contemporaries were half killing themselves in the despairing efforts to preserve their figures, complexions and lovers.

Beaux Airs had been entertained by her wit, which the squeamish modern fools mistook for grossness, and had relied much on her wisdom and experience. In fact he had eagerly consented to this project of marriage for the sake of so eligible a *parti* as the grandmother.

To her he now confided the story of that brief glimpse of perfection which had decided his fate for him, and of his baffled attempt to discover which of the three sisters' dresses concealed that fate. In the torture of his perplexity he even permitted himself to rail impiously against the good God for having, presumably, inspired the correct and fashionable costume of the day, and to pray that the devil might one day circumvent Him by inventing a dress that did not conceal and distort the female form.

The old lady's little black eyes gave an instructive twinkle amidst the vast folds of her face, and she replied, "Then the devil will lose his pains and woman her charms. A man is doubly insensible to the beauties he sees every

day, and none will turn to remark the female legs that troop in thousands through Paris and London."

After this prophetic utterance she seemed to be staring two hundred years into the future, but returned to the present in order to tell him that he had fallen in love, not with a woman, but with the beauties of nature. "You are enamoured of love itself," she said, "of life, of beauty, of youth, of the sparkling water, the morning sunlight, the song of birds. That is correct, and just as it should be. Take all these things and give them the name of any woman and you will be happy with her."

"What do you mean?" he stammered. "How am I to choose?"

"How? Why, by tossing a penny or cutting the cards. My granddaughters are all much alike in person and none of them especially well made. Now I, as a girl—but what would you . . ." She surveyed her corpulency without a sigh, and continued, "Remember that 'Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.' Only believe that the one you marry is your nymph of the fountain, and you can then believe that you have found your ideal."

"But does it make no difference if I have or not?"

"None. Provided she is not actively ill-humoured, distasteful, or imbecile, any woman can make any man happy, if he chooses to believe that she will do so."

He protested that she did not understand, he even reminded her that she was old, and in any case he doubted if she had ever truly loved.

She paid no attention to his execrable rudeness for it delighted her when, as she expressed it, she had caused people to tear off their wigs.

She answered him with her blandest twinkle and the story of Actæon who saw Diana bathing and was turned into a stag.

"I advise you, Monsieur, to be warned by this simple fable, for the man who before his marriage sees his wife naked, is likely to wear horns."

Beaux Airs was naturally enraged at the grossness which old-fashioned fools mistook for wit, and at the folly and inexperience which made her confound the commonplaces of passion with the rarity, purity and divinity of his singular emotion.

He left her presence to see if intrigue and

espionage might help where an old woman's advice could only irritate. He summoned the head footman, a stupid dolt with a narrow head and flat dull eyes who appeared to Beaux Airs a miracle of intelligence when, in answer to his enquiries as to the young ladies' movements, he informed him that he had with his own eyes seen Mademoiselle Elizabeth leave the château that morning at a quarter to five.

He thrust a gold coin into the astonished footman's hand, and ran headlong from him to the gallery where the young ladies were assembled in the presence of their mother, telling himself as he ran that he had not needed to enquire, for instinct, that surer and diviner guide, had told him at the first.

"I knew it was she all the time," he thought. "Did I not worship her incomparable forehead, and the entrancing shape of her ears? Only such features could accompany such a form."

Arrived at the gallery, it was all that he could do to restrain himself from declaring the burning ardour of his passion before them all. As it was, he appeared in such strange excitement that they were fluttered and uneasy, fearing he would make some further indiscretion before

their austere mamma. He retained enough presence of mind however to converse politely with her for some time and then with an unnatural air of carelessness he joined Mademoiselle Elizabeth and asked her to explain to him the subject of her embroidery. She did so very prettily, but he did not appear to attend to a word she said and the instant she had finished he asked abruptly if she often walked out at an early hour.

And at this he fixed his eyes on her face with a meaning smile so that she wondered if there were something at which she ought to have blushed. As it seemed too late to manage this, she replied simply, "Only when I go early to church. To-day you know is the day of the blessed Saint Hymenée."

"You went—to church this morning?"

"Yes, at five o'clock. But what is the matter, Monsieur? I fear you are unwell."

It was as he had thought. She was *dévote*, a religious prude, a horror. As soon as he could, he returned to kick the blockhead of a footman, and command that the maid of the young ladies should be brought to him. This the footman did, but with a stupidly suspicious air

and persisted in hovering near by while Beaux Airs questioned her as to the movements of her mistresses that morning.

He learned that Mademoiselle Madeleine had risen and walked out at an unusually early hour. Mademoiselle Madeleine! Of course! How could he have doubted? He had never doubted. That aloof mysterious smile, as of a goddess in disguise, had told him from the first.

He returned to the gallery. He approached Mademoiselle Madeleine at the clavichord. He asked if he might join her in a duet. Under the notes of the music he asked if she often walked abroad at an early hour.

"Yes, when I go a-milking," she replied. "It delights me to dress as a shepherdess and visit our farm."

"Do you never walk early in the park?" he faltered.

"Ah no, I detest prim alleys and fountains when I am alone and am all for nature and the simple life."

It was as he had thought. She was a coarse creature, a hulking farm wench. Heavens, what he had escaped! She might even wish to suckle her infants.

He rose from the music-stool with the pain of a shattered illusion in his eyes.

But consolation suddenly flooded him with its healing glow. Since his nymph was neither Mesdemoiselles Elizabeth nor Madeleine, she must be Mademoiselle Guilberte. Of course! How could he have doubted? He had never doubted. In spite of all the weight of evidence against it, he had known it from the first. He had known by the deep and spiritual bond between them which had caused her, when harshly forced by her sisters to flee from him, to look back at him three times. The joy of certainty settled on his formerly perplexed spirit. In the exquisite grace of Mademoiselle Guilberte's position as she sat on the footstool and teased the cat, he recognised the voluptuous yet tender curves of the nymph of the fountain.

He advanced towards her with a flushed cheek and flashing eye; but recollected in time that he now needed no further enquiry but must make his addresses to the proper quarter. He therefore checked himself and asked for the favour of speech with Monsieur le Comte. Madame their mother offered to accompany

him and together they left the gallery to a shrill outburst of enquiry which exploded as soon as the young ladies were alone.

All were agreed that the extraordinary behaviour of the Marquis de Beaux Airs was due to his being in love, but no two could agree as to the object of his affections.

In due time the Marquis returned between their parents who called Mademoiselle Guilberte to their side, gave her hand to that of Beaux Airs and pronounced their approval of the match. This astonishing procedure of her betrothal, before her two elder sisters, when she herself was scarcely out of the schoolroom, caused Mademoiselle Guilberte to lose her head completely. She burst into a wild fit of giggling, and with some confused memory of being presented to the Lord Cardinal on her confirmation, she knelt and kissed the Marquis' hand.

Her sisters were disgusted and her mother pained at this display of ill-breeding, her indulgent father did his best to excuse her awkwardness as the result of being kept much in the background. But Beaux Airs was enchanted with this naïve act of grateful homage.

She alone was sufficiently young and virginal to accord with the wild freshness of his nymph of the morning sunlight. Certainly he could never have doubted.

He was all adoration, and she all gratified pleasure.

They were permitted to converse apart in a window-seat, sometimes he was able, undetected, to hold her hand. They gazed at each other, and discovered unimagined perfections. They were ecstatically happy. He had no need now to question her about her bathe, and even no wish, for as his passion grew each minute, he discovered in himself a strange new delicacy, a tender reverence for the immaculate purity of this child goddess. With the delight of a jaded and world-weary man, he listened to the artless prattle that wished to inform him of all her pleasures, all her trials, and even—touching innocence—all her faults.

"Yes indeed," she insisted, "I have a multitude of faults, I fear you will not love me when you know them all. My sisters say I answer back, though indeed if they speak, why should I not answer back? And my father calls me a chatterbox, but indeed he loves to hear me

chatter, and my mother complains that I am sadly idle, and indeed I love to lie abed. Do you not love to lie abed? Only this morning I was so shocking idle, my maid could not get me to rise before seven o'clock."

"Before—seven—o'clock?"

"Yes indeed. Was it not shocking of me? You are quite shocked, you see. I told you you would be when you knew me. Oh but what is the matter? I would never have told you if I had thought you would be angry. You cannot be really angry about such a little thing as lying abed?"

Her voice faltered, died away. She saw him rise and leave her, heard him make some mumbled apology to her father about being indisposed.

He left the gallery. It was as he had thought. She was a hoyden, a pert baggage, an idle silly chattering slut. It was as he had thought. He had chosen the wrong one. He was condemned to marry a woman he could never love.

"But one of them must be the right one," he cried to himself, and once more sought the maid, whom he found this time alone. Seizing

her by the wrists, he forced her to swear on the crucifix to speak the truth, and then demanded which of her young mistresses had bathed in a fountain in the park early that morning.

"To my certain knowledge, Monsieur," she replied, "none of my mistresses has ever committed such an imprudence."

"Infamous and blasphemous daughter of Judas, you lie!" he shouted. "With my own eyes I saw a lady bathing in the fountain at the end of the box alley."

"That, Monsieur," said she, with a very pretty blush, "was no lady, for it was myself."

She would have escaped, but he caught her hand and stared at her while his whole world fell about his ears. Birth, tradition, circumstance and power, tumbled crashing round him, and he never noticed except to account the world well lost.

"In that case," he said, "I will marry you."

"Alas, Monsieur, I am married already. To the head footman."

"What!" he cried in anguish, "does that clown, that doltish flunkey, enjoy the exquisite

rapture of beholding this nymph clad only in her beauty and the dewy morn?"

"Certainly not," she protested, scandalised. "My husband and myself are honest folk. Neither he nor I would dream of his beholding me in such a disgraceful condition."

MADAME FEARS THE DARK



Margaret Irwin

Chatto & Windus