# UNCANNY STORIES



A terrified bird flew out of the hedge . . .

[*Frontispiece.*

# *Uncanny Stories*

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# WHERE THEIR FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED

# UNCANNY STORIES

## WHERE THEIR FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED

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

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

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

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

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

"Well?" he said.

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

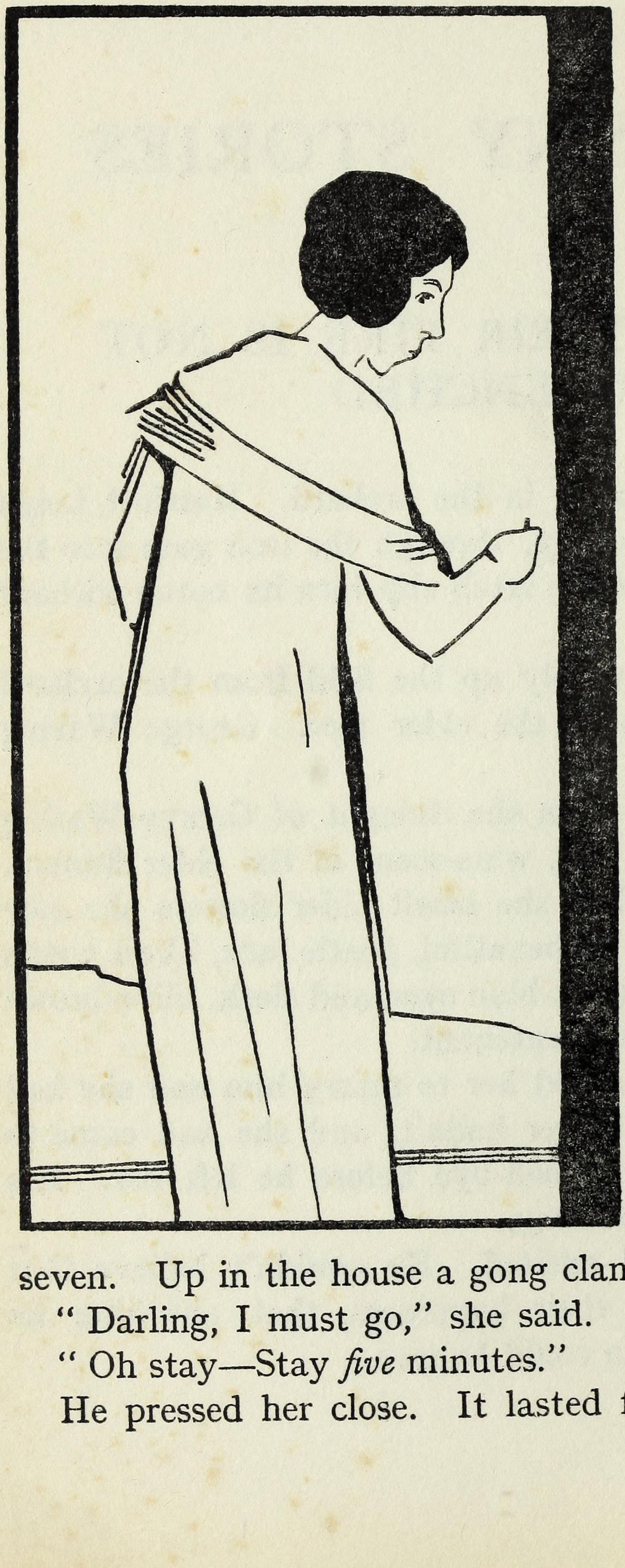
"I was twenty last August," he said, aggrieved.

"And I shall be seventeen in September."

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

"Three years."

"Three years before we can be engaged even — Why, we might be dead."



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

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

"Darling, I must go," she said.

"Oh stay—Stay *five* minutes."

He pressed her close. It lasted five minutes, and five

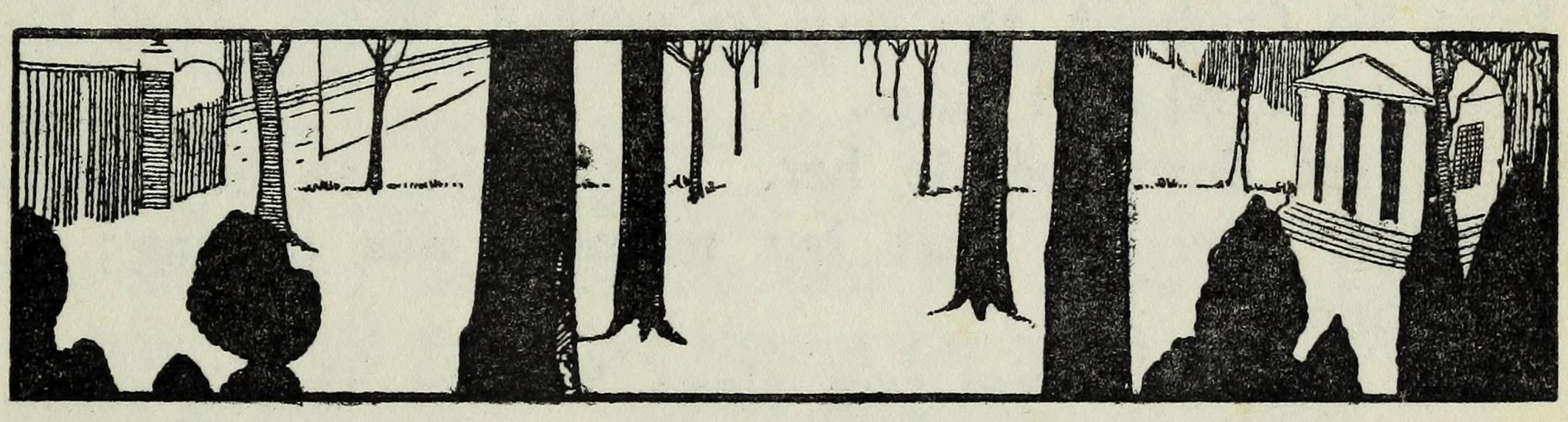
more. Then he was running fast down the road to the station, while Harriott went along the field-path, slowly, struggling with her tears.

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

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

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

Five years passed.



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

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

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

There were elder bushes in flower at the back of the

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

But her body quivered like a stretched wire when the door opened and the young man came towards her down the drive under the beech trees.

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

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

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

Her lips parted. She panted lightly.

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

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

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

"Heard what?"

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

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

Ten years passed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Do you mean it ? "

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

And he had gone then, ashamed and beaten.

She could see him, squaring his broad shoulders to meet the blow. And she was sorry for him. She told herself she had been unnecessarily hard. Why shouldn't they see each other again, now he understood where they must draw the line ? Until yesterday the line had never been very clearly drawn. To-day she meant to ask him to forget

what he had said to her. Once it was forgotten, they could go on being friends as if nothing had happened.

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



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

bristled forwards from the pushed-out upper lip. His small, flat eyes shone, reddish-brown, eager and animal.

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

He sat down, facing her.

There was an embarrassed silence, broken by Oscar Wade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She dined with him again and again, till she knew Schnebler's Restaurant by heart, the white panelled walls

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

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

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

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

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

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

From time to time they repeated the furtive, hidden adventure. Sometimes she met him in the room above Schnebler's. Sometimes, when her maid was out, she

received him at her house in Maida Vale. But that was dangerous, not to be risked too often.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then, gradually, the sense of danger began to wake

in them. They lived in perpetual fear, face to face with all the chances of discovery. They tormented themselves and each other by imagining possibilities that they would never have considered in their first fine moments. It was as though they were beginning to ask themselves if it were, after all, worth while running such awful risks, for all they got out of it. Oscar still swore that if he had been free he would have married her. He pointed out that his intentions at any rate were regular. But she asked herself : Would I marry *him?* Marriage would be the Hotel Saint Pierre all over again, without any possibility of escape. But, if she wouldn't marry him, was she in love with him ? That was the test. Perhaps it was a good thing he wasn't free. Then she told herself that these doubts were morbid, and that the question wouldn't arise.

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

" Seriously ill ? "

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

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

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

After enlightenment the rupture.

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

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

"How do you mean, settling down?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Is there any way that isn't beastly? The whole thing's beastly. I should have thought you'd have stuck to it now you've made it what you wanted. When I haven't an ideal, I haven't a single illusion, when you've destroyed everything you didn't want."

"What didn't I want?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If you ever knew what you wanted."

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

"Come," he said, "why not be honest? Face facts.

I was awfully gone on you. You were awfully gone on me —once. We got tired of each other and it's over. But at least you might own we had a good time while it lasted."

"A good time?"

"Good enough for me."

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

Twenty years passed.

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

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

Still, in the first moment of shock Harriott told herself that Oscar dead would be nearer to her than ever. She forgot how little she had wanted him to be near her, alive. And long before the twenty years had passed she had contrived to persuade herself that he had never been near to her at all. It was incredible that she had ever known such a person as Oscar Wade. As for their affair, she couldn't think of Harriott Leigh as the sort of woman to whom such a thing could happen. Schnebler's and the Hotel Saint Pierre ceased to figure among prominent images of her past. Her memories, if she had allowed herself to remember, would have clashed disagreeably with the reputation for sanctity which she had now acquired.

For Harriott at fifty-two was the friend and helper of the Reverend Clement Farmer, Vicar of St. Mary the Virgin's, Maida Vale. She worked as a deaconess in his parish, wearing the uniform of a deaconess, the semi-religious gown, the cloak, the bonnet and veil, the cross

and rosary, the holy smile. She was also secretary to the Maida Vale and Kilburn Home for Fallen Girls.

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

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

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

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

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Not yet. I think I'm afraid. Make me not afraid."

He rose and lit the two candles on the altar. He took down the crucifix from the wall and stood it against the foot-rail of the bed.

She sighed. That was not what she had wanted.

"You will not be afraid now," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

She made a careful selection.

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

After that she received the Sacrament.

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

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

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

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

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

" Oh—don't let me go."

His grasp tightened.

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

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

" I will not let you go."

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

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

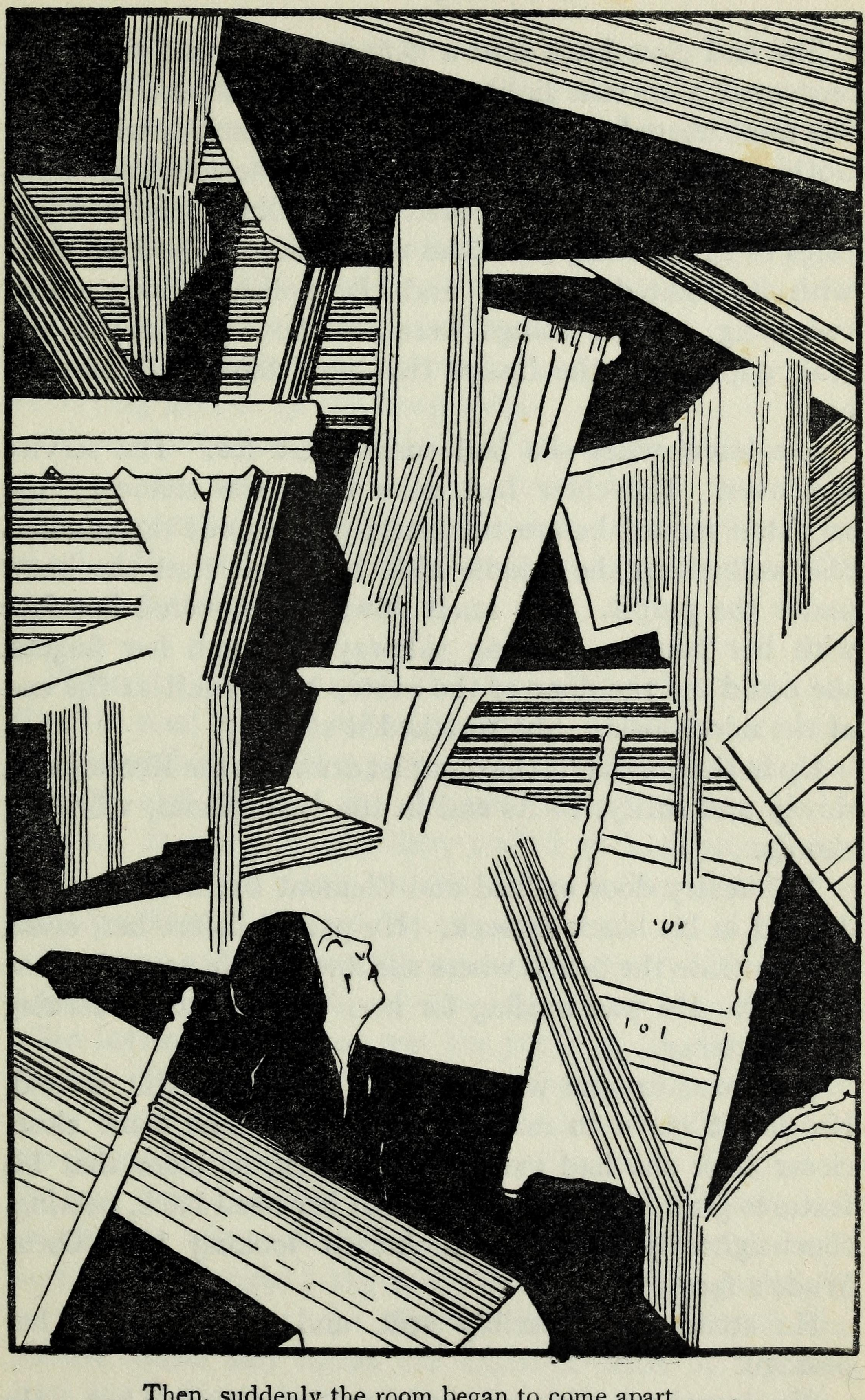
Its aspect was familiar and yet unfamiliar, and slightly repugnant to her. The altar, the crucifix, the lighted candles, suggested some tremendous and awful experience the details of which she was not able to recall. She seemed to remember that they had been connected in some way with the sheeted body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

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

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

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

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




Then, suddenly the room began to come apart . . .

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

She knew what she had come there for. The service was over. The choir had gone from the chancel; the sacristan moved before the altar, putting out the candles. She walked up the middle aisle to a seat that she knew under the pulpit. She knelt down and covered her face with her hands. Peeping sideways through her fingers, she could see the door of the vestry on her left at the end of the north aisle. She watched it steadily.

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

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

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

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

She drew back; his heaving shoulders followed her. He

leaned forward, covering her with his eyes. She opened her mouth to scream and no sound came.

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

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

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

When she looked back, Oscar Wade was not there.

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

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

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

landing that she knew, and into the long, ash-grey, foreign corridor lit by a dull window at one end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The strange quality of her state was this, that it had no

time. She remembered dimly that there had once been a thing called time ; but she had forgotten altogether what it was like. She was aware of things happening and about to happen ; she fixed them by the place they occupied, and measured their duration by the space she went through.

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

To get back farther——

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

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

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

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

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

Oscar was dead.

She remembered how he used to lie like that beside her in the room in the Hotel Saint Pierre, on his back with his hands folded on his waist, his mouth half open, his big

chest rising and falling. If he was dead, it would never happen again. She would be safe.

The dead face frightened her, and she was about to cover it up again when she was aware of a light heaving, a rhythmical rise and fall. As she drew the sheet up tighter, the hands under it began to struggle convulsively, the broad ends of the fingers appeared above the edge, clutching it to keep it down. The mouth opened; the eyes opened; the whole face stared back at her in a look of agony and horror.

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

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

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

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

She ran towards it through the village, past the long grey barns of Goodyer's farm, past the grocer's shop, past the yellow front and blue sign of the "Queen's Head," past the post office, with its one black window blinking



. . . each held there by the other's fear.

under its vine, past the church and the yew-trees in the churchyard, to where the south gate made a delicate black pattern on the green grass.

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

The glass doors swung open and she passed into the restaurant. The scene beat on her with the hard impact of reality: the white and gold panels, the white pillars and their curling gold capitals, the white circles of the tables, glittering, the flushed faces of the diners, moving mechanically.

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

"I knew you would come."

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

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

"Come," he said. "Come."

And she went before him, slowly, slipping out through

the maze of the tables, hearing behind her Oscar's measured, deliberate, thoughtful tread. The steep, red-carpeted staircase rose up before her.

She swerved from it, but he turned her back.

" You know the way," he said.

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

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

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

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

" But that *was* ended."

" Ended there, but not here."

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

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

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

" There isn't anything else."

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

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

" No. No. I shall get away—now."

She turned to the door to open it.

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

" Oscar—what did you do that for? "

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

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

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

" Immortality ? "

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

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

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

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

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

She came to the heart of the drive where it branched right and left in the form of a cross. At the end of the



. . . moving slowly, like figures in some monstrous and appalling dance . . .

[*To face p.* 34.

right arm the white Greek temple, with its pediment and pillars, gleamed against the wood.

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

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

"Stephen!"

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

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

"George, oh, George!"

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

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

"But how did you get *here*?"

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

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

"Because I did take them."

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

"Your love for me was part of it. You think the past

affects the future. Has it never struck you that the future may affect the past ? In your innocence there was the beginning of your sin. You *were* what you *were to be.*"

" I shall get away," she said.

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

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

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

" Oscar—how long will it last ? "

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

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

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

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

" This isn't the worst. We're not quite dead yet, as long as we've life in us to turn and run and get away from each other ; as long as we can escape into our memories. But when you've got back to the farthest memory of all and there's nothing beyond it—When there's no memory but this——

" In the last hell we shall not run away any longer ; we

shall find no more roads, no more passages, no more open doors. We shall have no need to look for each other.

"In the last death we shall be shut up in this room, behind that locked door, together. We shall lie here together, for ever and ever, joined so fast that even God can't put us asunder. We shall be one flesh and one spirit, one sin repeated for ever, and ever; spirit loathing flesh, flesh loathing spirit; you and I loathing each other."

"Why? Why?" she cried.

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

The darkness came down swamping, it blotted out the room. She was walking along a garden path between high borders of phlox and larkspur and lupin. They were taller than she was, their flowers swayed and nodded above her head. She tugged at the tall stems and had no strength to break them. She was a little thing.

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

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

At the bottom of the lawn there was a privet hedge cut by a broad path that went through the orchard. She knew what she would find there; her mother was in the orchard. She would lift her up in her arms to play with

the hard red balls of the apples that hung from the tree. She had got back to the farthest memory of all; there was nothing beyond it.

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

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

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

# THE TOKEN

# THE TOKEN

## I

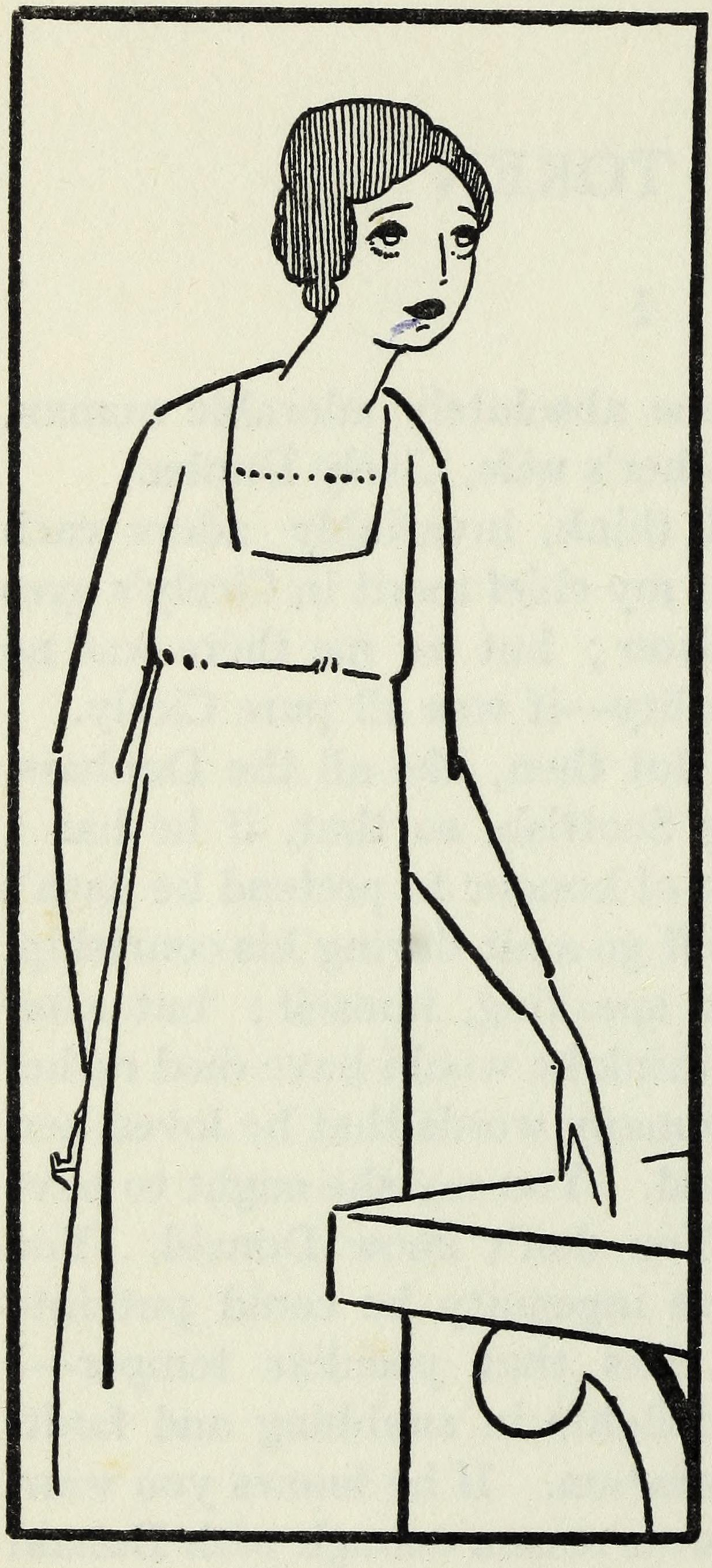
I HAVE only known one absolutely adorable woman, and that was my brother's wife, Cicely Dunbar.

Sisters-in-law do not, I think, invariably adore each other, and I am aware that my chief merit in Cicely's eyes was that I am Donald's sister; but for me there was no question of extraneous quality—it was all pure Cicely.

And how Donald—— But then, like all the Dunbars, Donald suffers from being Scottish, so that, if he has a feeling, he makes it a point of honour to pretend he hasn't it. I daresay he let himself go a bit during his courtship, when he was not, strictly speaking, himself; but after he had once married her I think he would have died rather than have told Cicely in so many words that he loved her. And Cicely wanted to be told. You say she ought to have known without telling? You don't know Donald. You can't conceive the perverse ingenuity he could put into hiding his affection. He has that peculiar temper—I think it's Scottish—that delights in snubbing and fault-finding and defeating expectation. If he knows you want him to do a thing, that alone is reason enough with Donald for not doing it. And my sister, who was as transparent as white crystal, was never able to conceal a want. So that Donald could, as we said, "have" her at every turn.

And, then, I don't think my brother really knew how ill she was. He didn't want to know. Besides, he was

so wrapt up in trying to finish his "Development of Social Economics" (which, by the way, he hasn't finished yet) that he had no eyes to see what we all saw: that, the way her poor little heart was going, Cicely couldn't have very long to live.



Of course he understood that this was why, in those last months, they had to have separate rooms. And this in the first year of their marriage when he was still violently in love with her. I keep those two facts firmly in my mind when I try to excuse Donald; for it was the main cause of that unkindness and perversity which I find it so hard to forgive. Even now, when I think how he used to discharge it on the poor little thing, as if it had been her fault, I have to remind myself that the lamb's innocence made her a little trying.

She couldn't understand why Donald didn't want to have her with him in his library any more while he read or wrote. It seemed to her sheer cruelty to shut her out now when she was ill, seeing that, before she was ill, she had always had her chair by the fireplace, where she would sit over her book or her embroidery for hours

without speaking, hardly daring to breathe lest she should interrupt him. Now was the time, she thought, when she might expect a little indulgence.

Do you suppose that Donald would give his feelings as an explanation? Not he. They were *his feelings*, and he wouldn't talk about them; and he never explained anything you didn't understand.

That—her wanting to sit with him in the library—was what they had the awful quarrel about, the day before she died: that and the paper-weight, the precious paper-weight that he wouldn't let anybody touch because George Meredith had given it him. It was a brass block, surmounted by a white alabaster Buddha painted and gilt. And it had an inscription: *To Donald Dunbar, from George Meredith. In Affectionate Regard.*

My brother was extremely attached to this paper-weight, partly, I'm afraid, because it proclaimed his intimacy with the great man. For this reason it was known in the family ironically as the Token.

It stood on Donald's writing-table at his elbow, so near the ink-pot that the white Buddha had received a splash or two. And this evening Cicely had come in to us in the library, and had annoyed Donald by staying in it when he wanted her to go. She had taken up the Token, and was cleaning it to give herself a pretext.

She died after the quarrel they had then.

It began by Donald shouting at her.

"What are you doing with that paper-weight?"

"Only getting the ink off."

I can see her now, the darling. She had wetted the corner of her handkerchief with her little pink tongue and was rubbing the Buddha. Her hands had begun to tremble when he shouted.

"Put it down, can't you? I've told you not to touch my things."

"*You* inked him," she said. She was giving one last rub as he rose, threatening.

"Put—it—down."

And, poor child, she did put it down. Indeed, she dropped it at his feet.

"Oh!" she cried out, and stooped quickly and picked it up. Her large tear-glassed eyes glanced at him, frightened.

"He isn't broken."

"No thanks to you," he growled.

"You beast! You know I'd die rather than break anything you care about."

"It'll be broken some day, if you *will* come meddling."

I couldn't bear it. I said, "You mustn't yell at her like that. You know she can't stand it. You'll make her ill again."

That sobered him for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said; but he made it sound as if he wasn't.

"If you're sorry," she persisted, "you might let me stay with you. I'll be as quiet as a mouse."

"No; I don't want you—I can't work with you in the room."

"You can work with Helen."

"You're not Helen."

"He only means he's not in love with *me*, dear."

"He means I'm no use to him. I know I'm not. I can't even sit on his manuscripts and keep them down. He cares more for that damned paper-weight than he does for me."

"Well—George Meredith gave it me."

"And nobody gave you me. I gave myself."

That worked up his devil again. He *had* to torment her.

"It can't have cost you much," he said. "And I may remind you that the paper-weight has *some* intrinsic value."



" I've told you not to touch my things."

[*To face p.* 44.

With that he left her.

"What's he gone out for?" she asked me.

"Because he's ashamed of himself, I suppose," I said.

"Oh, Cicely, why *will* you answer him? You know what he is."

"No!" she said passionately—"that's what I don't know. I never have known."

"At least you know he's in love with you."

"He has a queer way of showing it, then. He never does anything but stamp and shout and find fault with me—all about an old paper-weight!"

She was caressing it as she spoke, stroking the alabaster Buddha as if it had been a live thing.

"His poor Buddha. Do you think it'll break if I stroke it? Better not. . . . Honestly, Helen, I'd rather die than hurt anything he really cared for. Yet look how he hurts me."

"Some men *must* hurt the things they care for."

"I wouldn't mind his hurting, if only I knew he cared. Helen—I'd give anything to know."

"I think you might know."

"I don't! I don't!"

"Well, you'll know some day."

"Never! He won't tell me."

"He's Scotch, my dear. It would kill him to tell you."

"Then how'm I to know! If I died to-morrow I should die not knowing."

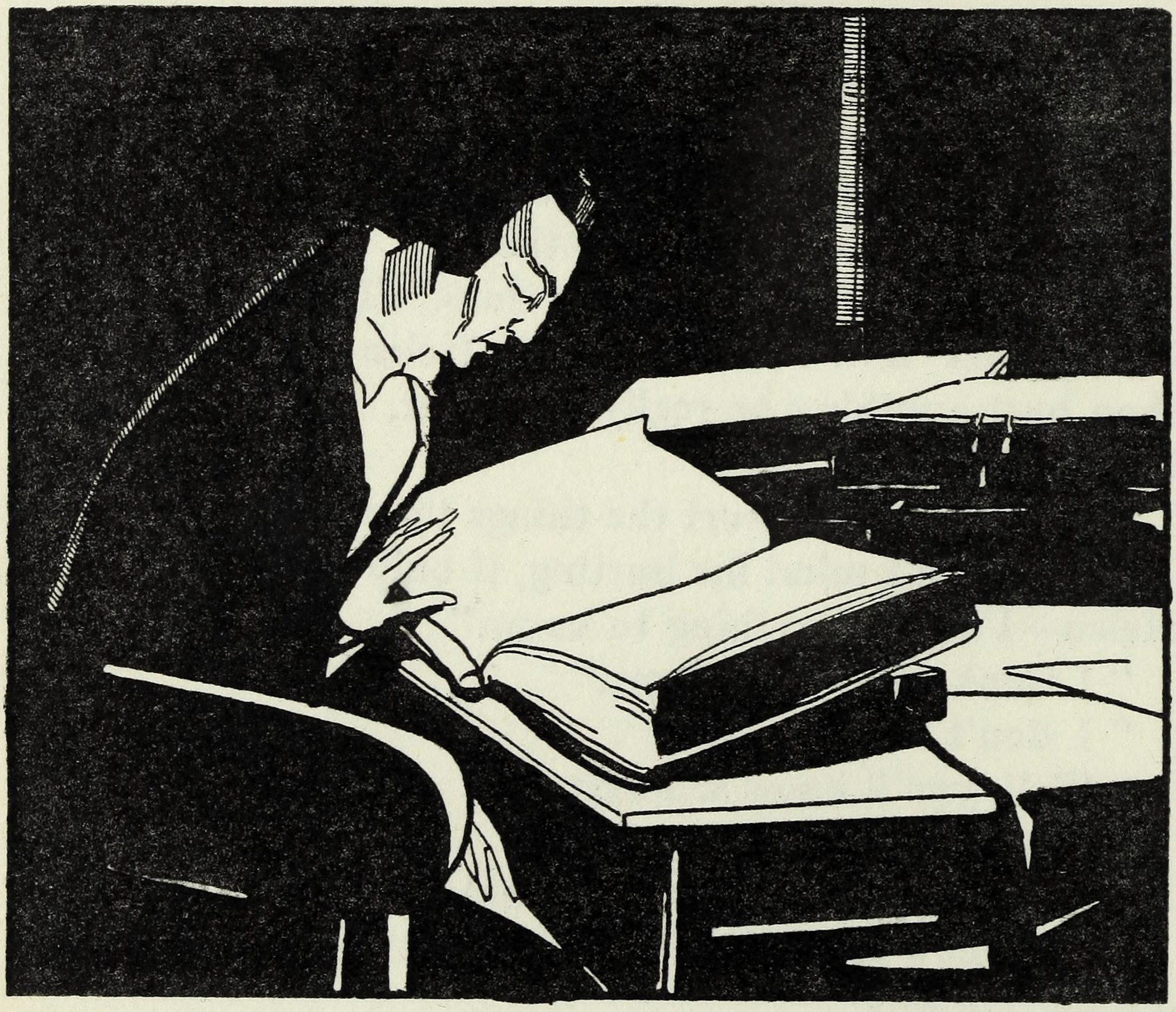
And that night, not knowing, she died.

She died because she had never really known.

## II

We never talked about her. It was not my brother's way. Words hurt him, to speak or to hear them.

He had become more morose than ever, but less irritable, the source of his irritation being gone. Though he plunged



into work as another man might have plunged into dissipation, to drown the thought of her, you could see that he had no longer any interest in it ; he no longer loved it. He attacked it with a fury that had more hate in it than love. He would spend the greater part of the day and the long evenings shut up in his library, only going out for a short walk an hour before dinner. You could see that soon all spontaneous impulses would be checked in

him and he would become the creature of habit and routine.

I tried to rouse him, to shake him up out of his deadly groove; but it was no use. The first effort—for he did make efforts—exhausted him, and he sank back into it again.

But he liked to have me with him; and all the time that I could spare from my housekeeping and gardening I spent in the library. I think he didn't like to be left alone there in the place where they had the quarrel that killed her; and I noticed that the cause of it, the Token, had disappeared from his table.

And all her things, everything that could remind him of her, had been put away. It was the dead burying its dead.

Only the chair she had loved remained in its place by the side of the hearth—*her* chair, if you could call it hers when she wasn't allowed to sit in it. It was always empty, for by tacit consent we both avoided it.

We would sit there for hours at a time without speaking, while he worked and I read or sewed. I never dared to ask him whether he sometimes had, as I had, the sense of Cicely's presence there, in that room which she had so longed to enter, from which she had been so cruelly shut out. You couldn't tell what he felt or didn't feel. My brother's face was a heavy, sombre mask; his back, bent over the writing-table, a wall behind which he hid himself.

You must know that twice in my life I have more than *felt* these presences; I have seen them. This may be because I am on both sides a Highland Celt, and my mother had the same uncanny gift. I had never spoken of these appearances to Donald because he would have put it all down to what he calls my hysterical fancy. And I am sure that if he ever felt or saw anything himself he would never own it.

I ought to explain that each time the vision was premonitory of a death (in Cicely's case I had no such warning), and each time it only lasted for a second; also that, though I am certain I was wide awake each time, it is open to anybody to say I was asleep and dreamed it. The queer thing was that I was neither frightened nor surprised.

And so I was neither surprised nor frightened now, the first evening that I saw her.

It was in the early autumn twilight, about six o'clock. I was sitting in my place in front of the fireplace; Donald was in his arm-chair on my left, smoking a pipe, as usual, before the lamplight drove him out of doors into the dark.

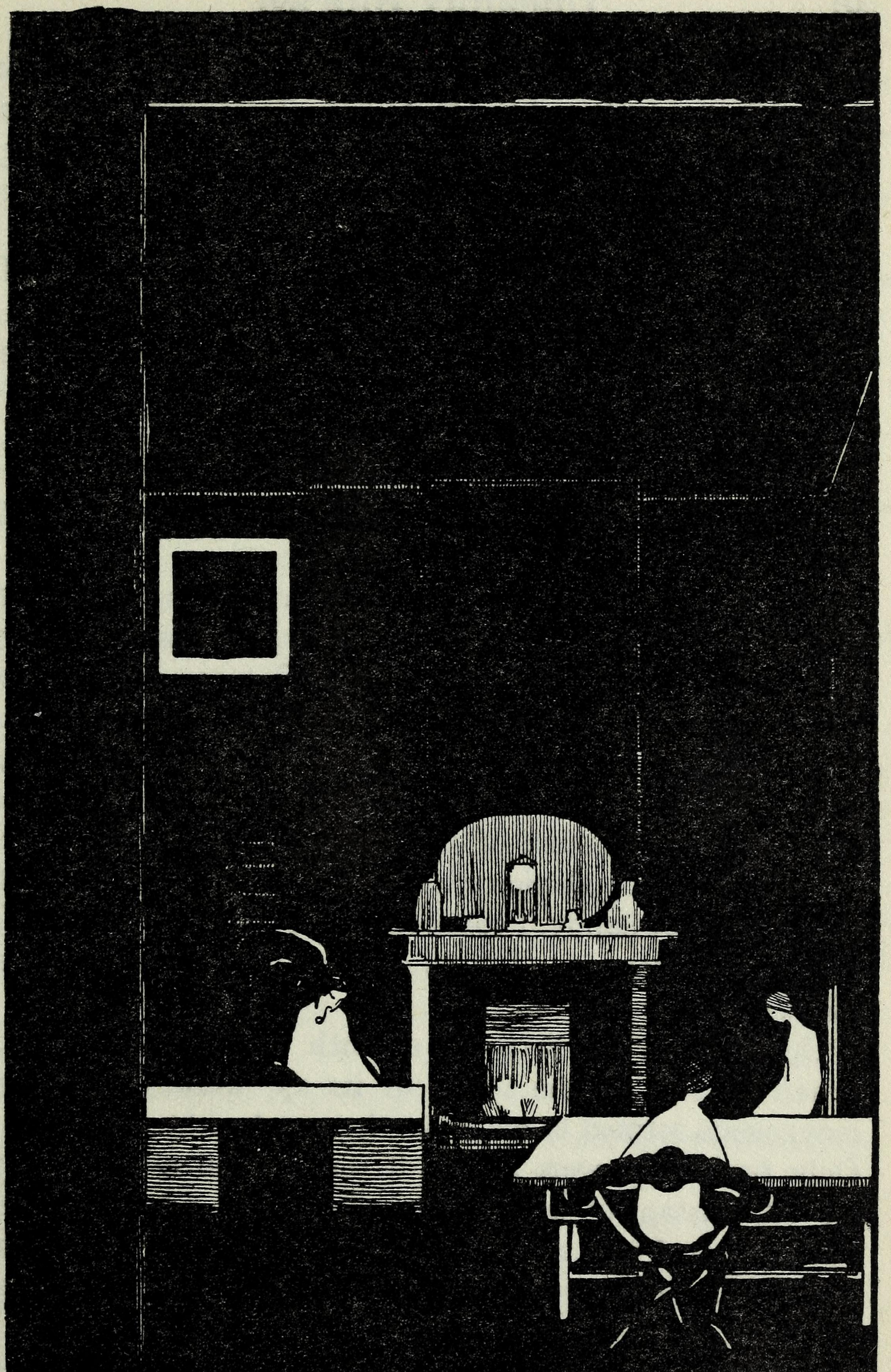
I had had so strong a sense of Cicely's being there in the room that I felt nothing but a sudden sacred pang that was half joy when I looked up and saw her sitting in her chair on my right.

The phantasm was perfect and vivid, as if it had been flesh and blood. I should have thought that it was Cicely herself if I hadn't known that she was dead. She wasn't looking at me; her face was turned to Donald with that longing, wondering look it used to have, searching his face for the secret that he kept from her.

I looked at Donald. His chin was sunk a little, the pipe drooping from the corner of his mouth. He was heavy, absorbed in his smoking. It was clear that he did not see what I saw.

And whereas those other phantasms that I told you about disappeared at once, *this* lasted some little time, and always with its eyes fixed on Donald. It even lasted while Donald stirred, while he stooped forward, knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the hob, while he sighed, stretched himself, turned, and left the room. Then, as the door shut behind him, the whole figure went out suddenly—not flickering, but like a light you switch off.

I saw it again the next evening and the next, at the



. . . her face was turned to Donald . . .

same time and in the same place, and with the same look turned towards Donald. And again I was sure that he did not see it. But I thought, from his uneasy sighing and stretching, that he had some sense of something there.

No; I was not frightened. I was glad. You see, I loved Cicely. I remember thinking, "At last, at last, you poor darling, you've got in. And you can stay as long as you like now. He can't turn you away."

The first few times I saw her just as I have said. I would look up and find the phantasm there, sitting in her chair. And it would disappear suddenly when Donald left the room. Then I knew I was alone.

But as I grew used to its presence, or perhaps as it grew used to mine and found out that I was not afraid of it, that indeed I loved to have it there, it came, I think, to trust me, so that I was made aware of all its movements. I would see it coming across the room from the doorway, making straight for its desired place, and settling in a little curled-up posture of satisfaction, appeased, as if it had expected opposition that it no longer found. Yet that it was not happy, I could still see by its look at Donald. *That* never changed. It was as uncertain of him now as she had been in her lifetime.

Up till now, the sixth or seventh time I had seen it, I had no clue to the secret of its appearance; and its movements seemed to me mysterious and without purpose. Only two things were clear: it was Donald that it came for—the instant he went it disappeared; and I never once saw it when I was alone. And always it chose this room and this hour before the lights came, when he sat doing nothing. It was clear also that he never saw it.

But that it was there with him sometimes when I was not I knew; for, more than once, things on Donald's writing-table, books or papers, would be moved out of

their places, though never beyond reach; and he would ask me whether I had touched them.

"Either you lie," he would say, "or I'm mistaken. I could have sworn I put those notes on the *left*-hand side; and they aren't there now."

And once—that was wonderful—I saw, yes, I *saw* her come and push the lost thing under his hand. And all he said was, "Well, I'm—I could have sworn——"

For whether it had gained a sense of security, or whether its purpose was now finally fixed, it began to move regularly about the room, and its movements had evidently a reason and an aim.

It was looking for something.

One evening we were all there in our places, Donald silent in his chair and I in mine, and it seated in its attitude of wonder and of waiting, when suddenly I saw Donald looking at me.

"Helen," he said, "what are you staring for like that?"

I started. I had forgotten that the direction of my eyes would be bound, sooner or later, to betray me.

I heard myself stammer, "W—w—was I staring?"

"Yes. I wish you wouldn't."

I knew what he meant. He didn't want me to keep on looking at that chair; he didn't want to know that I was thinking of her. I bent my head closer over my sewing, so that I no longer had the phantasm in sight.

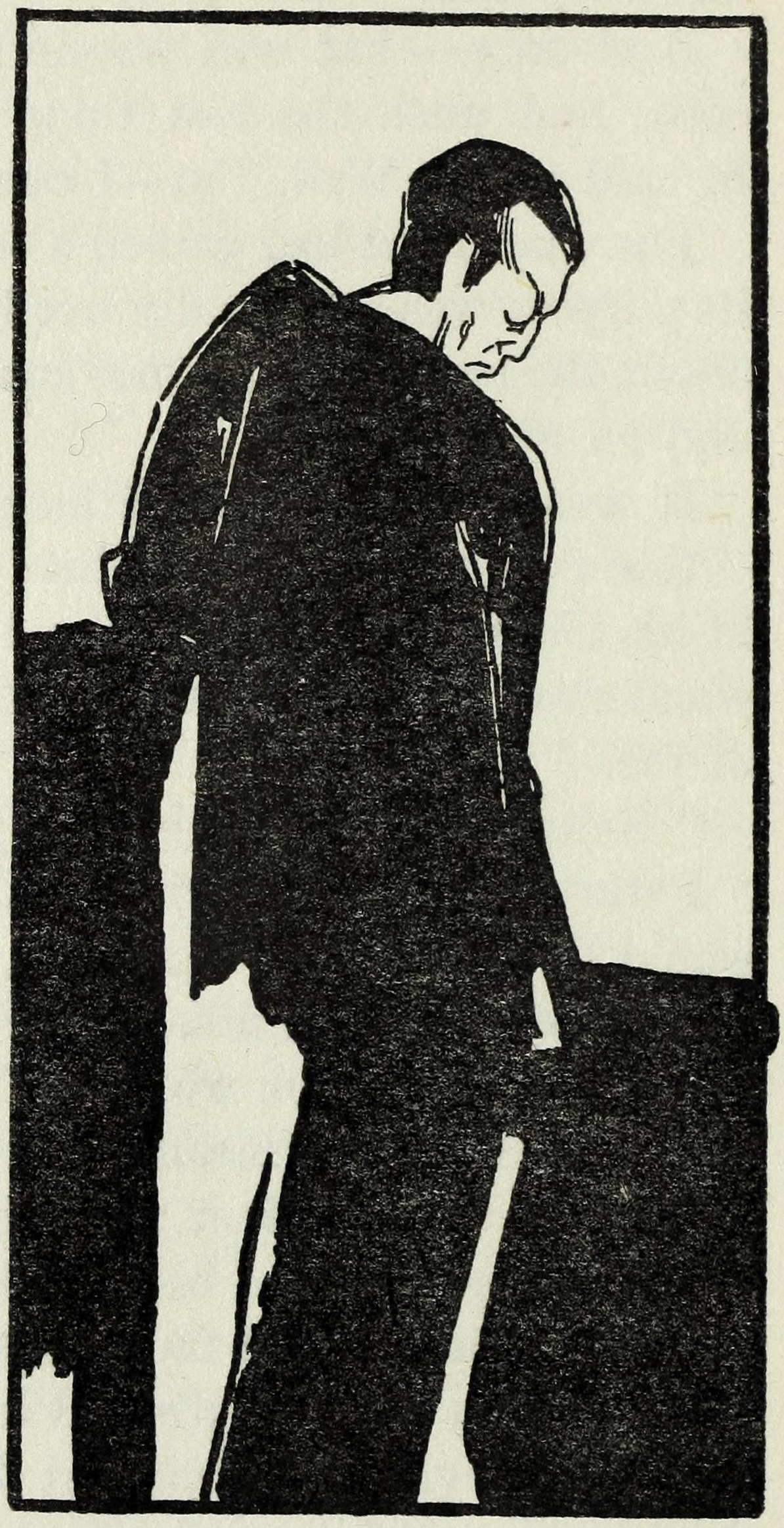
It was then I was aware that it had risen and was crossing the hearthrug. It stopped at Donald's knees, and stood there, gazing at him with a look so intent and fixed that I could not doubt that this had some significance. I saw it put out its hand and touch him; and, though Donald sighed and shifted his position, I could tell that he had neither seen nor felt anything.

It turned to me then—and this was the first time it had given any sign that it was conscious of my presence—it

turned on me a look of supplication, such supplication as I had seen on my sister's face in her lifetime, when she could do nothing with him and implored me to intercede. At the same time three words formed themselves in my brain with a sudden, quick impulsion, as if I had heard them cried.

"Speak to him—speak to him!"

I knew now what it wanted. It was trying to make itself seen by him, to make itself felt, and it was in anguish at finding that it could not. It knew then that I saw it, and the idea had come to it that it could make use of me to get through to him.



I think I must have guessed even then what it had come for.

I said, "You asked me what I was staring at, and I lied. I was looking at Cicely's chair."

I saw him wince at the name.

"Because," I went on, "I don't know how *you* feel, but *I* always feel as if she were there."

He said nothing; but he got up, as though to shake off the oppression of the memory I had evoked, and stood leaning on the chimney-piece with his back to me.

The phantasm retreated to its place, where it kept its eyes fixed on him as before.

I was determined to break down his defences, to make him say something it might hear, give some sign that it would understand.

" Donald, do you think it's a good thing, a *kind* thing, never to talk about her ? "

" Kind ? Kind to whom ? "

" To yourself, first of all."

" You can leave me out of it."

" To me, then."

" What's it got to do with you ? " His voice was as hard and cutting as he could make it.

" Everything," I said. " You forget, I loved her."

He was silent. He did at least respect my love for her.

" But that wasn't what she wanted."

That hurt him. I could feel him stiffen under it.

" You see, Donald," I persisted, " *I* like thinking about her."

It was cruel of me ; but I *had* to break him.

" You can think as much as you like," he said, " provided you stop talking."

" All the same, it's as bad for you," I said, " as it is for me, not talking."

" I don't care if it is bad for me. I *can't* talk about her, Helen. I don't want to."

" How do you know," I said, " it isn't bad for *her ?* "

" For *her ?* "

I could see I had roused him.

" Yes. If she really is there, all the time."

" How d'you mean, *there ?* "

" Here—in this room. I tell you I can't get over that feeling that she's here."

" Oh, feel, feel," he said ; " but don't talk to me about it ! "

And he left the room, flinging himself out in anger. And instantly her flame went out.

I thought, " How he must have hurt her ! " It was the old thing over again : I trying to break him down, to make him show her ; he beating us both off, punishing us both. You see, I knew now what she had come back for : she had come back to find out whether he loved her. With a longing unquenched by death, she had come back for certainty. And now, as always, my clumsy interference had only made him more hard, more obstinate. I thought, " If only he could see her ! But as long as he beats her off he never will."

Still, if I could once get him to believe that she was there——

I made up my mind that the next time I saw the phantasm I would tell him.

The next evening and the next its chair was empty, and I judged that it was keeping away, hurt by what it had heard the last time.

But the third evening we were hardly seated before I saw it.

It was sitting up, alert and observant, not staring at Donald as it used, but looking round the room, as if searching for something that it missed.

" Donald," I said, " if I told you that Cicely is in the room now, I suppose you wouldn't believe me ? "

" Is it likely ? "

" No. All the same, I see her as plainly as I see you."

The phantasm rose and moved to his side.

" She's standing close beside you."

And now it moved and went to the writing-table. I turned and followed its movements. It slid its open hands over the table, touching everything, unmistakably feeling for something it believed to be there.

I went on. " She's at the writing-table now. She's looking for something."

It stood back, baffled and distressed. Then suddenly it began opening and shutting the drawers, without a sound, searching each one in turn.

I said, " Oh, she's trying the drawers now ! "

Donald stood up. He was not looking at the place where it was. He was looking hard at me, in anxiety and a sort of fright. I supposed that was why he remained unaware of the opening and shutting of the drawers.

It continued its desperate searching.

The bottom drawer stuck fast. I saw it pull and shake it, and stand back again, baffled.

" It's locked," I said.

" What's locked ? "

" That bottom drawer."

" Nonsense ! It's nothing of the kind."

" It is, I tell you. Give me the key. Oh, Donald, give it me ! "

He shrugged his shoulders ; but all the same he felt in his pockets for the key, which he gave me with a little teasing gesture, as if he humoured a child.

I unlocked the drawer, pulled it out to its full length, and there, thrust away at the back, out of sight, I found the Token.

I had not seen it since the day of Cicely's death.

" Who put it there ? " I asked.

" I did."

" Well, that's what she was looking for," I said.

I held out the Token to him on the palm of my hand, as if it were the proof that I had seen her.

" Helen," he said gravely, " I think you must be ill."

" You think so ? I'm not so ill that I don't know what you put it away for," I said. " It was because she thought you cared for it more than you did for her."

" You can remind me of that ? There must be something very badly wrong with you, Helen," he said.

" Perhaps. Perhaps I only want to know what *she* wanted. . . . You *did* care for her, Donald ? "

I couldn't see the phantasm now, but I could feel it, close, close, vibrating, palpitating, as I drove him.

" Care ? " he cried. " I was mad with caring for her ! And she knew it."

" She didn't. She wouldn't be here now if she knew."

At that he turned from me to his station by the chimney-piece. I followed him there.

" What are you going to do about it ? " I said.

" Do about it ? "

" What are you going to do with this ? "

I thrust the Token close towards him. He drew back, staring at it with a look of concentrated hate and loathing.

" Do with it ? " he said. " The damned thing killed her ! This is what I'm going to do with it——"

He snatched it from my hand and hurled it with all his force against the bars of the grate. The Buddha fell, broken to bits, among the ashes.

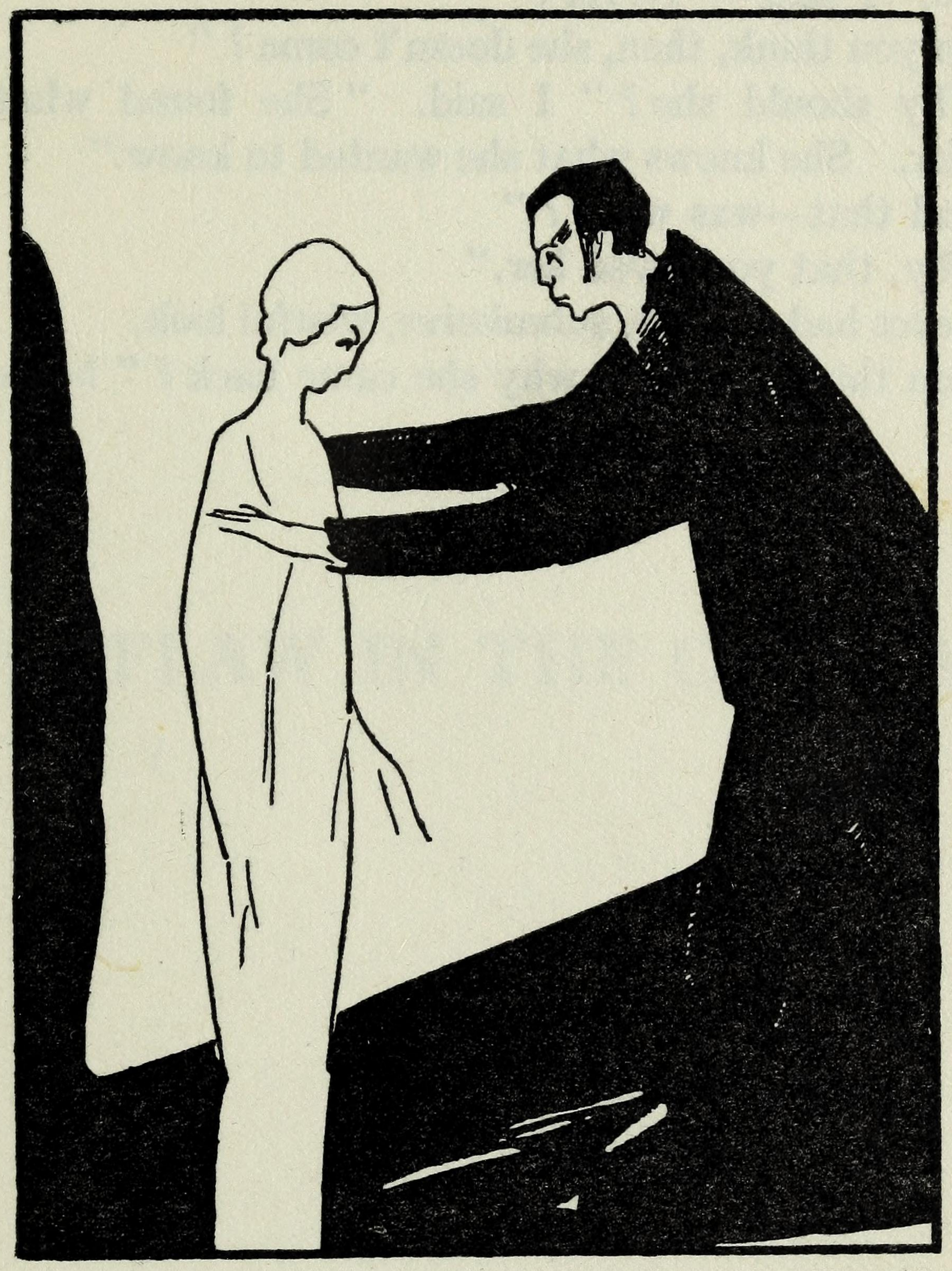
Then I heard him give a short, groaning cry. He stepped forward, opening his arms, and I saw the phantasm slide between them. For a second it stood there, folded to his breast ; then suddenly, before our eyes, it collapsed in a shining heap, a flicker of light on the floor, at his feet.

Then that went out too.

## III

I never saw it again.

Neither did my brother. But I didn't know this till some time afterwards ; for, somehow, we hadn't cared to speak about it. And in the end it was he who spoke first.



He stepped forward, opening his arms.

We were sitting together in that room, one evening in November, when he said, suddenly and irrelevantly :

" Helen—do you never see her now ? "

" No," I said—" Never ! "

" Do you think, then, she doesn't come ? "

" Why should she ? " I said. " She found what she came for. She knows what she wanted to know."

" And that—was what ? "

" Why, that you loved her."

His eyes had a queer, submissive, wistful look.

" You think that was why she came back ? " he said.

# THE FLAW IN THE CRYSTAL

# THE FLAW IN THE CRYSTAL

## I

IT was Friday, the day he always came, if (so she safeguarded it) he was to come at all. They had left it that way in the beginning, that it should be open to him to come or not to come. They had not even settled that it should be Fridays, but it always was, the week-end being the only time when he could get away; the only time, he had explained to Agatha Verrall, when getting away excited no remark. He had to, or he would have broken down. Agatha called it getting away from "things;" but she knew that there was only one thing, his wife Bella.

To be wedded to a mass of furious and malignant nerves (which was all that poor Bella was now) simply meant destruction to a man like Rodney Lanyon. Rodney's own nerves were not as strong as they had been, after ten years of Bella's. It had been understood for long enough (understood even by Bella) that if he couldn't have his week-ends he was done for; he couldn't possibly have stood the torment and the strain of her.

Of course she didn't know he spent the greater part of them with Agatha Verrall. It was not to be desired that she should know. Her obtuseness helped them. Even in her younger and saner days she had failed, persistently, to realize any profound and poignant thing that touched him; so by the mercy of heaven she had never

realized Agatha Verrall. She used to say she had never seen anything *in* Agatha, which amounted, as he once told her, to not seeing Agatha at all. Still less could she have compassed any vision of the tie—the extraordinary, intangible, immaterial tie that held them.

Sometimes, at the last moment, his escape to Agatha would prove impossible; so they had left it further that he was to send her no forewarning; he was to come when and as he could. He could always get a room in the village inn or at the farm near by, and in Agatha's house he would find his place ready for him, the place which had become his refuge, his place of peace.

There was no need to prepare her. She was never not prepared. It was as if by her preparedness, by the absence of preliminaries, of adjustments and arrangements, he was always there, lodged in the innermost chamber. She had set herself apart; she had swept herself bare and scoured herself clean for him. Clean she had to be; clean from the desire that he should come; clean, above all, from the thought, the knowledge she now had, that she could make him come.

For if she had given herself up to *that*. . . .

But she never had; never since the knowledge came to her; since she discovered, wonderfully, by a divine accident, that at any moment she could make him—that she had whatever it was, the power, the uncanny, unaccountable Gift.

She was beginning to see more and more how it worked; how inevitably, how infallibly it worked. She was even a little afraid of it, of what it might come to mean. It *did* mean that without his knowledge, separated as they were and had to be, she could always get at him.

And supposing it came to mean that she could get at him to make him do things? Why, the bare idea of it was horrible.

Nothing could well have been more horrible to Agatha. It was the secret and the essence of their remarkable relation that she had never tried to get at him; whereas Bella *had*, calamitously; and still more calamitously, because of the peculiar magic that there was (there must have been) in her, Bella had succeeded. To have tried to get at him would have been for Agatha the last treachery, the last indecency; while for Rodney it would have been the destruction of her charm. She was the way of escape for him from Bella; but she had always left her door, even the innermost door, wide open; so that where shelter and protection faced him there faced him also the way of departure, the way of escape from *her*.

And if her thought could get at him and fasten on him, and shut him in there. . . .

It could, she knew; but it need not. She was really all right. Restraint had been the essence and the secret of the charm she had, and it was also the secret and the essence of her gift. Why, she had brought it to so fine a point that she could shut out, and by shutting out destroy, any feeling, any thought that did violence to any other. She could shut them all out, if it came to that, and make the whole place empty. So that, if this knowledge of her power did violence, she had only to close her door on it.

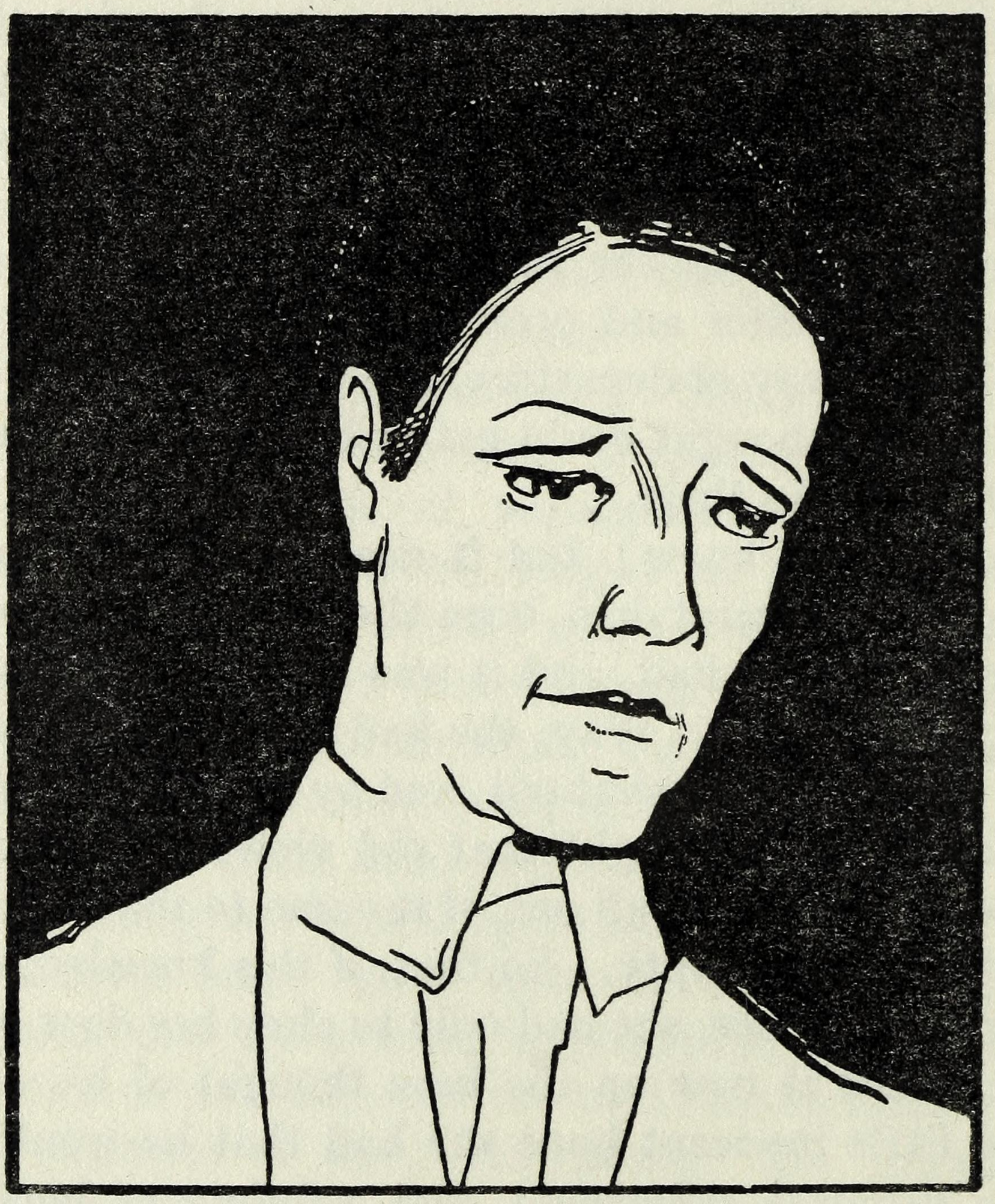
She closed it now on the bare thought of his coming; on the little innocent hope she had that he would come. By an ultimate refinement and subtlety of honour she refused to let even expectation cling to him.

But though it was dreadful to " work " her gift that way, to make him do things, there was another way in which she did work it, lawfully, sacredly, incorruptibly—the way it first came to her. She had worked it twenty times (without his knowledge, for how he would have scoffed at her) to make him well.

Before it had come to her, he had been, ever since she

knew him, more or less ill, more or less tormented by the nerves that were wedded so indissolubly to Bella's. He was always, it seemed to her terror, on the verge. And she could say to herself: "Look at him *now!*"

His abrupt, incredible recovery had been the first open



manifestation of the way it worked. Not that she had tried it on him first. Before she dared do that once she had proved it on herself twenty times, till she found it infallible.

But to ensure continuous results it had to be a continuous process; and in order to give herself up to it, to him (to his pitiful case), she had lately, as her friends said, "cut herself completely off." She had gone down into

Buckinghamshire and taken a small, solitary house at Sarratt End in the valley of the Chess, three miles from the nearest station. She had shut herself up in a world half a mile long; one straight hill to the north, one to the south, two strips of flat pasture, the river and the white farm-road between. A world closed east and west by the turn the valley takes there between the hills, and barred by a gate at each end of the farm-road. A land of pure curves, of delicate colours, delicate shadows; all winter through a land of grey woods and sallow fields, of ploughed hillsides pale with the white strain of the chalk. In April (it was April now) a land shining with silver and green. And the ways out of it led into lanes; it had neither sight nor hearing of the high roads beyond.

There were only two houses in that half-mile of valley, Agatha's house and Woodman's Farm.

Agatha's house, white as a cutting in the chalk downs, looked south-west, up the valley and across it, to where a slender beech wood went lightly up the hill and then stretched out in a straight line along the top, with the bare fawn-coloured flank of the ploughed land below. The farmhouse looked east towards Agatha's house across a field; a red-brick house—dull, dark red with the grey bloom of weather on it—flat-faced and flat-eyed, two windows on each side of the door and a row of five above, all nine staring at the small white house across the field. The narrow, flat farm-road linked the two.

Except Rodney when his inn was full, nobody ever came to Woodman's Farm; and Agatha's house, set down inside its east gate, shared its isolation, its immunity. Two villages, unseen, unheard, served her, not a mile away. It was impossible to be more sheltered, more protected and more utterly cut off. And only fifteen miles, as the crow flies, between this solitude and London, so that it was easy for Rodney Lanyon to come down.

At two o'clock, the hour when he must come if he were coming, she began to listen for the click of the latch at the garden gate. She had agreed with herself that at the last moment expectancy could do no harm ; it couldn't influence him ; for either he had taken the twelve-thirty train at Marylebone or he had not (Agatha was so far reasonable) ; so at the last moment she permitted herself that dangerous and terrible joy.

When the click came and his footsteps after it, she admitted further (now when it could do no harm) that she had had foreknowledge of him ; she had been aware all the time that he would come. And she wondered, as she always wondered at his coming, whether really she would find him well, or whether this time it had incredibly miscarried. And her almost unbearable joy became suspense, became vehement desire to see him and gather from his face whether this time also it had worked.

" How are you ? How have you been ? " was her question when he stood before her in her white room, holding her hand for an instant.

" Tremendously fit," he answered ; " ever since I last saw you."

" Oh—seeing me——" It was as if she wanted him to know that seeing her made no difference.

She looked at him and received her certainty. She saw him clear-eyed and young, younger than he was, his clean, bronzed face set, as it used to be, in a firmness that obliterated the lines, the little agonized lines, that had made her heart ache.

" It always does me good," he said, " to see you."

" And to see you—you know what it does to me."

He thought he knew as he caught back his breath and looked at her, taking in again her fine whiteness, and her tenderness, her purity of line, and the secret of her eyes, whose colour (if they had colour) he was never sure about ;




And she wondered whether really she would find him well . . .

taking in all of her, from her adorable feet to her hair, vividly dark, that sprang from the white parting like—was it like waves or wings ?

What had once touched and moved him unspeakably in Agatha's face was the capacity it had, latent in its tragic lines, for expressing terror. Terror was what he most dreaded for her, what he had most tried to keep her from, to keep out of her face. And latterly he had not found it ; or rather he had not found the unborn, lurking spirit of it there. It had gone, that little tragic droop in Agatha's face. The corners of her eyes and of her beautiful mouth were lifted, as if by—he could find no other word for the thing he meant but wings. She had a look which, if it were not of joy, was of something more vivid and positive than peace.

He put it down to their increased and undisturbed communion, made possible by her retirement to Sarratt End. Yet as he looked at her he sighed again.

In response to his sigh she asked suddenly : " How's Bella ? "

His face lighted wonderfully. " It's extraordinary," he said ; " she's better. Miles better. In fact, if it wasn't tempting Providence, I should say she was well. She's been, for the last week anyhow, a perfect angel."

His amazed, uncomprehending look gave her the clue to what had happened. It was another instance of the astounding and mysterious way it worked. She must have got at Bella somehow in getting at him. She saw now no end to the possibilities of the thing. There wasn't anything so wonderful in making him what, after all, he was ; but if she, Bella, had been, even for a week, a perfect angel, it had made her what she was not and never had been.

His next utterance came to her with no irrelevance.

" You've been found out."



"I saw the Powells at the station."

For a moment she wondered, had he guessed it then, her secret? He had never known anything about it, and it was not likely that he should know now. He was indeed very far from knowing when he could think that it was seeing her that did it.

There was, of course, the other secret, the fact that he did see her; but she had never allowed that it *was* a secret, or that it need be, although they guarded it so carefully. Anybody, except Bella, who wouldn't understand it, was welcome to know that he came to see her. He must mean that.

"Found out?" she repeated.

"If you haven't been, you will be."

"You mean," she said, "Sarratt End has been found out?"

"If you put it that way. I saw the Powells at the station." (She breathed freely.)

"They told me they'd taken rooms at some farm here."

"Which farm?"

He didn't remember.

"Was it Woodman's Farm?" she asked. And he said, "Yes, that was the name they'd told him. Whereabouts was it?"

"Don't you know," she said. "That's the name of *your* farm."

He had not known it, and was visibly annoyed at knowing it now. And Agatha herself felt some dismay. If it had been any other place but Woodman's Farm—it stared at them; it watched them; it knew all their goings out and their comings in; it knew Rodney; not that that had mattered in the least, but the Powells, when they came, would know too.

She tried to look as if that didn't matter either, while they faced each other in a silence, a curious, unfamiliar discomposure.

She recovered first. "After all," she said, "why shouldn't they?"

"Well—I thought you weren't going to tell people."

Her face mounted a sudden flame, a signal of resentment. She had always resented the imputation of secrecy in their relations. And now it was as if he were dragging forward the thought that she perpetually put away from her.

"Tell about what?" she asked, coldly.

"About Sarratt End. I thought we'd agreed to keep it for ourselves."

"I haven't told everybody. But I did tell Milly Powell."

"My dear girl, that wasn't very clever of you."

"I told her not to tell. She knows what I want to be alone for."

"Good God." As he stared in dismay at what he judged to be her unspeakable indiscretion, the thought rushed in on her straight from him, the naked, terrible thought, that there *should* be anything they had to hide, they had to be alone for. She saw at the same time how defenceless he was before it; he couldn't keep it back; he couldn't put it away from him. It was always with him, a danger watching on his threshold.

"Then" (he made her face it with him) "we're done for."

"No, no," she cried; "how could you think that? It was another thing. Something I'm trying to do."

"You told her," he insisted. "What did you tell her?"

"That I'm doing it. That I'm here for my health. She understands it that way."

He smiled as if he were satisfied, knowing her so well. And still his thought, his terrible, naked thought, was there. It was looking at her straight out of his eyes.

"Are you sure she understands?" he said.

"Yes. Absolutely."

He hesitated, and then put it differently.

"Are you sure she doesn't understand? That she hasn't an inkling?"

He wasn't sure whether Agatha understood, whether she realized the danger.

"About you and me," he said.

"Ah, my dear, I've kept *you* secret. She doesn't know we know each other. And if she did——"

She finished it with a wonderful look, a look of unblinking yet vaguely, pitifully uncandid candour.

She had always met him, and would always have to meet him, with the idea that there was nothing in it; for, if she once admitted that there was anything, then they *were* done for. She couldn't (how could she?) let him keep on coming with that thought in him, acknowledged by them both.

That was where she came in, and where her secret, her gift, would work now more beneficently than ever. The beauty of it was that it would make them safe, absolutely safe. She had only got to apply it to that thought of his, and the thought would not exist. Since she could get at him, she could do for him what he, poor dear, couldn't perhaps always do for himself; she could keep that dreadful possibility in him under; she could, in fact, make their communion all that she wanted it to be.

"I don't like it," he said miserably. "I don't like it."

A little line of worry was coming in his face again.

The door opened and a maid began to go in and out, laying the table for their meal. He watched the door close on her and said, "Won't that woman wonder what I come for?"

"She can see what you come for." She smiled. "Why are you spoiling it with thinking things?"

"It's for you I think them. *I* don't mind. It doesn't matter so much for me. But I want you to be safe."

"Oh, *I'm* safe, my dear," she answered.

"You were. And you would be still, if these Powells hadn't found you out."

He meditated.

"What do you suppose *they've* come for?" he asked.

"They've come, I imagine, for his health."

"What? To a god-forsaken place like this?"

"They know what it's done for me. So they think, poor darlings, perhaps it may do something—even yet—for him."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Something dreadful. And they say—incurable."

"It isn't——?" He paused.

"I can't tell you what it is. It isn't anything you'd think it was. It isn't anything bodily."

"I never knew it."

"You're not supposed to know. And you wouldn't, unless you *did* know. And please—you don't; you don't know anything."

He smiled. "No. You haven't told me, have you?"

"I only told you because you never tell things, and because——"

"Because?" He waited, smiling.

"Because I wanted you to see he doesn't count."

"Well—but *she's* all right, I take it?"

At first she failed to grasp his implication that if, owing to his affliction, Harding Powell didn't count, Milly, his young wife, did. Her faculties of observation and of inference would, he took it, be unimpaired.

"She'll wonder, won't she?" he expounded.

"About us? Not she. She's too much wrapped up in him to notice anyone."

"And he?"

"Oh, my dear—he's too much wrapped up in *it*."
Another anxiety then came to him.
"I say, you know, he isn't dangerous, is he?"
She laughed.
"Dangerous? Oh dear me, no! A lamb."

## II

She kept on saying to herself, Why shouldn't they come? What difference did it make?

Up till now she had not admitted that anything could make a difference, that anything could touch, could alter by a shade the safe, the intangible, the unique relation between her and Rodney. It was proof against anything that anybody could think. And the Powells were not given to thinking things. Agatha's own mind had been a crystal without a flaw, in its clearness, its sincerity.

It had to be, to ensure the blessed working of the gift; as again, it was by the blessed working of the gift that she kept it so. She could only think of that, the secret, the gift, the inexpressible thing, as itself a flawless crystal, a charmed circle; or rather, as a sphere that held all the charmed circles that you draw round things to keep them safe, to keep them holy.

She had drawn her circle round Rodney Lanyon and herself. Nobody could break it. They were supernaturally safe.

And yet the presence of the Powells had made a difference. She was forced to own that, though she remained untouched, it had made a difference in him. It was as if, in the agitation produced by them, he had brushed aside some veil and had let her see something that up till now her crystal vision had refused to see, something that was more

than a lurking possibility. She discovered in him a desire, an intention that up till now he had concealed from her. It had left its hiding place ; it rose on terrifying wings and fluttered before her, troubling her. She was reminded that, though there were no lurking possibilities in her, with him it might be different. For him the tie between them might come to mean something it had never meant and could not mean for her, something she had refused not only to see but to foresee and provide for.

She was aware of a certain relief when Monday came and he had left her without any further unveilings and revealings. She was even glad when, about the middle of the week, the Powells came with a cart-load of luggage and settled at the farm. She said to herself that they would take her mind off him. They had a way of seizing on her and holding her attention to the exclusion of all other objects.

She could hardly not have been seized and held by a case so pitiful, so desperate as theirs. How pitiful and desperate it had become she learned almost at once from the face of her friend, the little pale-eyed wife, whose small, flat, flower-like features were washed out and worn fine by watchings and listenings on the border, on the threshold.

Yes, he was worse. He had had to give up his business (Harding Powell was a gentle stock-broker). It wasn't any longer, Milly Powell intimated, a question of borders and of thresholds. They had passed all that. He had gone clean over ; he was in the dreadful interior ; and she, the resolute and vigilant little woman, had no longer any power to get him out. She was at the end of her tether.

Agatha knew what he had been for years ? Well—he was worse than that ; far worse than he had been, ever. Not so bad, though, that he hadn't intervals in which he knew how bad he was, and was willing to do everything, to try anything. They were going to try Sarratt End. It

was her idea. She knew how marvellously it had answered with dear Agatha (not that Agatha ever was, or could be, where *he* was, poor darling). And besides, Agatha herself was an attraction. It had occurred to Milly Powell that it might do Harding good to be near Agatha. There was something about her ; Milly didn't know what it was, but she felt it, *he* felt it—an influence, or something, that made for mental peace. It was, Mrs. Powell said, as if she had some secret.

She hoped Agatha wouldn't mind. It couldn't possibly hurt her. *He* couldn't. The darling couldn't hurt a fly ; he could only hurt himself. And if he got really bad, why then, of course, they would have to leave Sarratt End. He would have, she said sadly, to go away somewhere. But not yet—oh, not yet ; he wasn't bad enough for that. She would keep him with her up to the last possible moment—the last possible moment. Agatha could understand, couldn't she ?

Agatha did indeed.

Milly Powell smiled her desperate white smile, and went on ; always with her air of appeal to Agatha. That was why she wanted to be near her. It was awful not to be near somebody who understood, who would understand him. For Agatha would understand—wouldn't she ?—that to a certain extent he must be given in to ? *That*—apart from Agatha—was why they had chosen Sarratt End. It was the sort of place—wasn't it ?—where you would go if you didn't want people to get at you ; where (Milly's very voice became furtive as she explained it) you could hide. His idea—his last—seemed to be that something *was* trying to get at him.

No, not people. Something worse, something terrible. It was always after him. The most piteous thing about him—piteous but adorable—was that he came to her—to *her*, imploring her to hide him.

And so she had hidden him here.

Agatha took in her friend's high courage as she looked at the eyes where fright barely fluttered under the poised suspense. She approved of the plan. It appealed to her by its sheer audacity. She murmured that if there were anything that she could do, Milly had only to come to her.

Oh, well, Milly *had* come. What she wanted Agatha to do—if she saw him and he should say anything about it—was simply to take the line that he was safe.

Agatha said that was the line she did take. She wasn't going to let herself think, and Milly mustn't think—not for a moment—that he wasn't, that there was anything to be afraid of.

"Anything to be afraid of *here*. That's my point," said Milly.

"Mine is that here or anywhere—wherever *he* is—there mustn't be any fear. How can he get better if we keep him wrapped in it? You're *not* afraid. You're not afraid."

Persistent, invincible affirmation was part of her method, her secret.

Milly replied a little wearily (she knew nothing about the method).

"I haven't time to be afraid," she said. "And as long as you're not——"

"It's you who matter," Agatha cried. "You're so near him. Don't you realize what it means to be so near?"

Milly smiled sadly, tenderly. (As if she didn't know!)

"My dear, that's all that keeps me going. I've got to make him feel that he's protected."

"He *is* protected," said Agatha.

Already she was drawing her charmed circle round him.

"As long as I hold out. If I give in he's done for."

"You mustn't think it. You mustn't say it!"

"But—I know it. Oh, my dear! I'm all he's got."

At that she looked for a moment as if she might break down. She said the terrible part of it was that they were left so much alone. People were beginning to shrink from him, to be afraid of him.

"You know," said Agatha, "I'm not. You must bring him to see me."

The little woman had risen, as she said, "to go to him." She stood there, visibly hesitating. She couldn't bring him. He wouldn't come. Would Agatha go with her and see him?

Agatha went.

As they approached the farm, she saw to her amazement that the door was shut and the blinds, the ugly, ochreish yellow blinds, were down in all the nine windows of the front, the windows of the Powells' rooms. The house was like a house of the dead.

"Do you get the sun on this side?" she said; and as she said it she realized the stupidity of her question; for the nine windows looked to the east, and the sun, wheeling down the west, had been in their faces as they came.

Milly answered mechanically, "No, we don't get any sun." She added with an irrelevance that was only apparent, "I've had to take all four rooms to keep other people out."

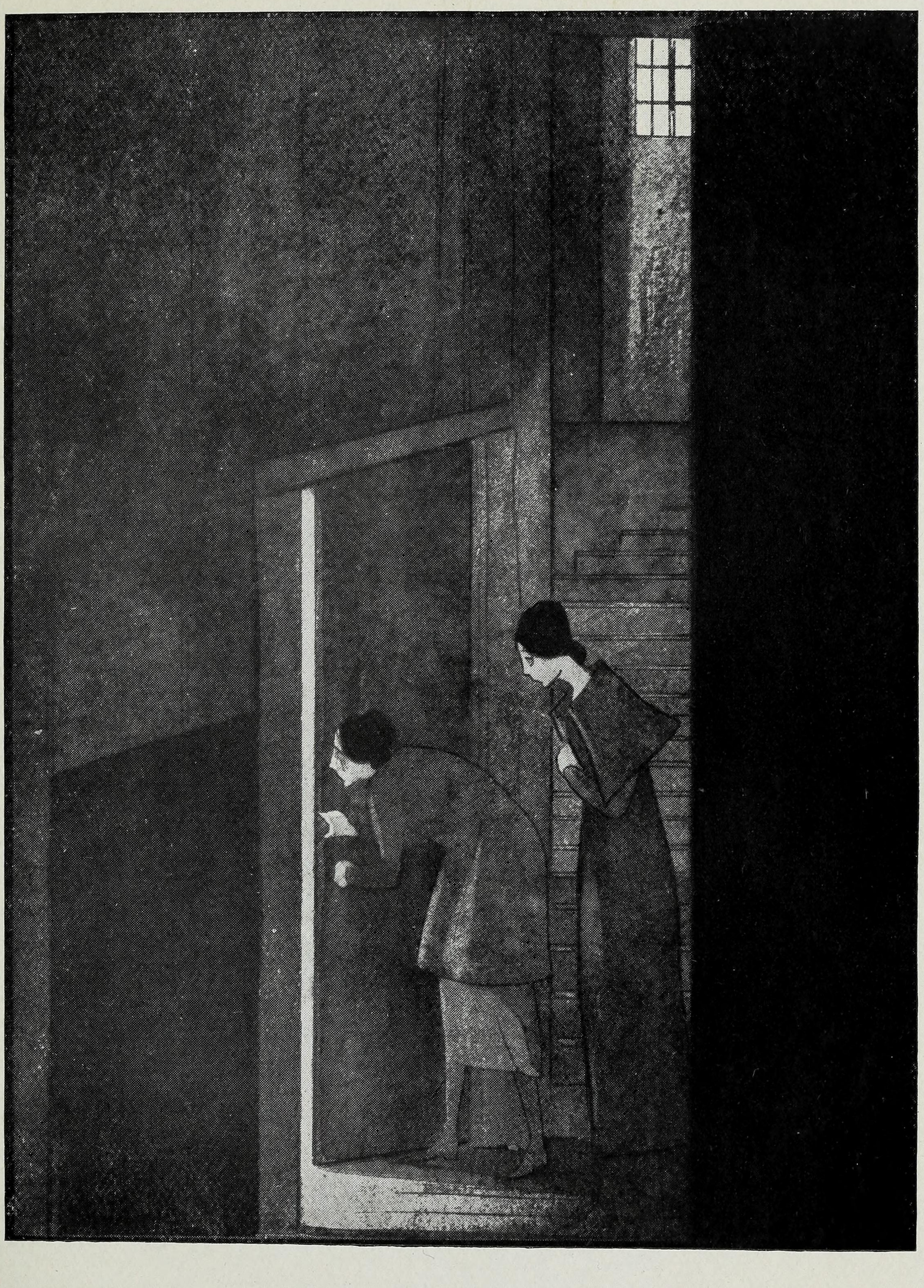
"They never come," said Agatha.

"No," said Milly, "but if they did——"

The front door was locked. Milly had the key. When they had entered Agatha saw her turn it in the lock again, slowly and without a sound.

All the doors were shut in the passage, and it was dark there. Milly opened a door on the left at the foot of the steep stairs.

"He will be in here," she said.



Milly opened a door on the left . . .

[*To face p.* 78.

The large room was lit with a thick ochreish light through the squares of its drawn blinds. It ran the whole width of the house and had a third window looking west where the yellow light prevailed. A horrible light it was. It cast thin, turbid, brown shadows on the walls.

Harding Powell was sitting between the drawn blinds, alone in the black hollow of the chimney place. He crouched in his chair, and his bowed back was towards them as they stood there on the threshold.

"Harding," said Milly, "Agatha has come to see you."

He turned in his chair and rose as they entered.

His chin was sunk on his chest, and the first thing Agatha noticed was the difficult, slow, forward-thrusting movement with which he lifted it. His eyes seemed to come up last of all from the depths to meet her. With a peculiar foreign courtesy he bowed his head again over her hand as he held it.

He apologized for the darkness in which they found him. Harding Powell's manners had always been perfect, and it struck Agatha as strange and pathetic that his malady should have left untouched the imcomparable quality he had.

Milly went to the windows and drew the blinds up. The light revealed him in his exquisite perfection, his small fragile finish. He was fifty or thereabouts, but slight as a boy, and nervous, and dark as Englishmen are dark; jaw and chin shaven; his mouth hidden by the straight droop of his moustache. From the eyes downwards the outlines of his face and features were of an extreme regularity and a fineness undestroyed by the work of the strained nerves on the sallow, delicate texture. But his eyes, dark like an animal's, were the eyes of a terrified thing, a thing hunted and on the watch, a thing that listened continually for the soft feet of the hunter. Above

these eyes his brows were twisted, were tortured with his terror.

He turned to his wife.

"Did you lock the door, dear?" he said.

"I did. But you know, Harding, we needn't—here."

He shivered slightly and began to walk up and down before the hearthplace. When he had his back to Milly, Milly followed him with her eyes of anguish; when he turned and faced her, she met him with her white smile.

Presently he spoke again. He wondered whether they would object to his drawing the blinds down. He was afraid he would have to. Otherwise, he said, *he would be seen.*

Milly laid her hand on the arm that he stretched towards the window.

"Darling," she said, "you've forgotten. You can't possibly be seen—here. It's just the one place—isn't it, Agatha?—where you can't be." Her eyes signalled to Agatha to support her. (Not but what she had perfect confidence in the plan.)

It was, Agatha assented. "And Agatha knows," said Milly.

He shivered again. He had turned to Agatha.

"Forgive me if I suggest that you cannot really know. Heaven forbid that you *should* know."

Milly, intent on her "plan," persisted.

"But, dearest, you said yourself it was. The one place."

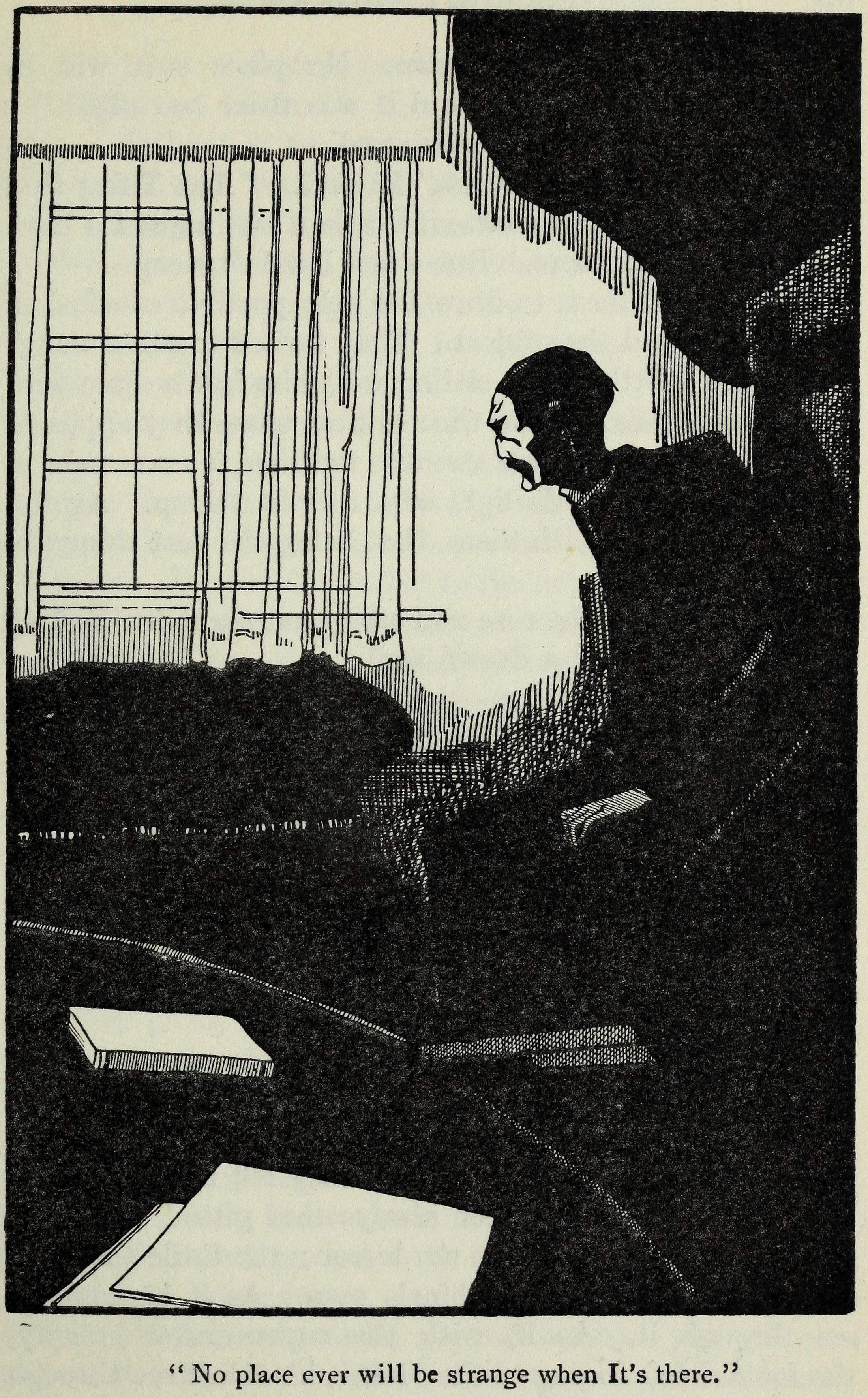
"I said that? When did I say it?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday? I daresay. But I didn't sleep last night. It wouldn't let me."

"Very few people do sleep," said Agatha, "for the first time in a strange place."

"The place isn't strange. That's what I complain of.



"No place ever will be strange when It's there."

That's what keeps me awake. No place ever will be strange when It's there. And it was there last night."

"Darling——" Milly murmured.

"You know what I mean," he said. "The Thing that keeps me awake. Of course if I'd slept last night I'd have known it wasn't there. But when I didn't sleep——"

He left it to them to draw the only possible conclusion.

They dropped the subject. They turned to other things and talked a little while, sitting with him in his room with the drawn blinds. From time to time when they appealed to him he gave an urbane assent, a murmur, a suave motion of his hand. When the light went they lit a lamp. Agatha stayed and dined with them, that being the best thing she could do.

At nine o'clock she rose and said good-night to Harding Powell. He smiled a drawn smile.

"Ah—if I could sleep——," he said.

"That's the worst of it—his not sleeping," said Milly at the gate.

"He will sleep. He will sleep," said Agatha.

Milly sighed. She knew he wouldn't.

The plan, she said, was no good after all. It wouldn't work.

## III

How could it? There was nothing behind it. All Milly's plans had been like that; they fell to dust; they *were* dust. There had been always that pitiful, desperate stirring of the dust to hide the terror; the futile throwing of the dust in the poor thing's eyes. As if he couldn't see through it. As if, with the supernatural ludicity, the invincible cunning of the insane, he didn't see through anything and provide for it. It was really only his

indestructible urbanity, persisting through the wreck of him, that bore, tolerantly, temperately, with Milly and her plans. Without it he might be dangerous. With it, as long as it lasted, little Milly, plan as she would, was safe.

But they couldn't count on its lasting. Agatha had realized that from the moment when she had seen him draw down the blind again after his wife had drawn it up. That was the maddest thing he had done yet. She had shuddered at it as at an act of violence. It outraged, cruelly, his exquisite quality. It was so unlike him.

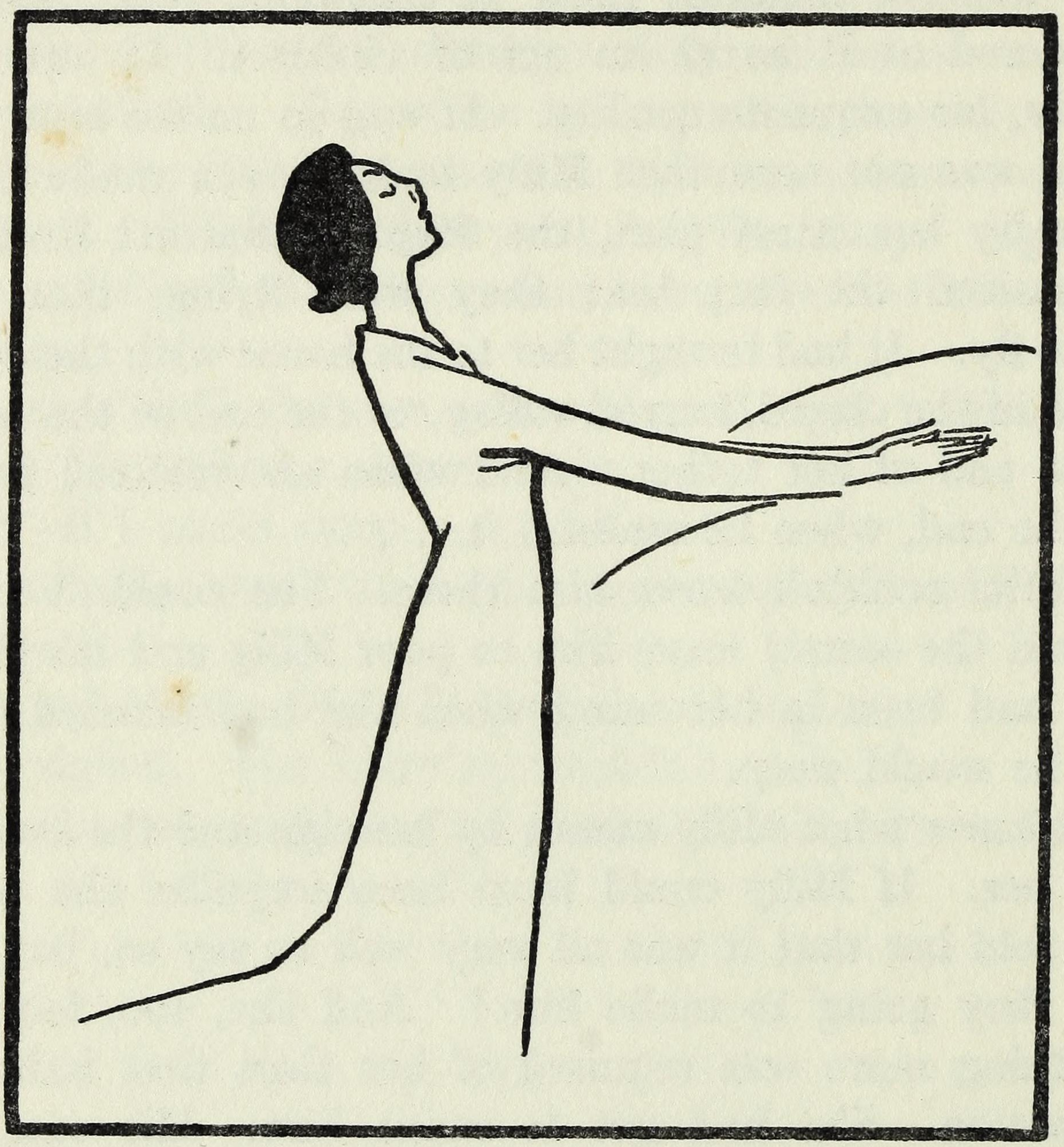
She was not sure that Milly hadn't even made things worse by her latest plan, the flight to Sarratt End. It emphasized the fact that they were flying, that they had to fly. It had brought her to the house with the drawn blinds in the closed, barred valley, to the end of the world, to the end of her tether. And when she realized that it *was* the end, when he realized it. . . .

Agatha couldn't leave him there. She couldn't (when she had the secret) leave him to poor Milly and her plans. That had been in her mind when she had insisted on it that he would sleep.

She knew what Milly meant by her sigh and the look she gave her. If Milly could have been impolite she would have told her that it was all very well to say so, but how were they going to make him? And she, too, felt that something more was required of her than that irritating affirmation. She had got to make him. His case, his piteous case, cried out for an extension of the gift.

She hadn't any doubt as to its working. There were things she didn't know about it yet, but she was sure of that. She had proved it by a hundred experimental intermissions, abstentions, and recoveries. In order to be sure you had only to let go and see how you got on without it. She had tried in that way, with scepticism and precaution, on herself.

But not in the beginning. She could not say that she had tried it in the beginning at all, even on herself. It had simply come to her, as she put it, by a divine accident. Heaven knew she had needed it. She had been, like Rodney Lanyon, on the verge, where he, poor dear, had brought her; so impossible had it been then to bear her knowledge and, what was worse, her divination of the



things he bore from Bella. It was her divination, her compassion, that had wrecked her as she stood aside, cut off from him, he on the verge and she near it, looking on, powerless to help while Bella tore at him. Talk of the verge, the wonder was they hadn't gone clean over it, both of them.

She couldn't say then from what region, what tract of unexplored, incredible mystery her help had come. It

came one day, one night when she was at her worst. She remembered how, with some resurgent, ultimate instinct of surrender, she had sunk on the floor of her room, flung out her arms across the bed in the supreme gesture of supplication, and thus gone, eyes shut and with no motion of thought or sense in her, clean into the blackness where, as if it had been waiting for her, the thing had found her.

It had found her. Agatha was precise on that point. She had not found it. She had not even stumbled on it, blundered up against it in the blackness. The way it worked, the wonder of her instantaneous well-being, had been the first, the very first hint she had that it was there.

She had never quite recaptured her primal, virgin sense of it; but to set against that, she had entered more and more into possession. She had found out the secret of its working and had controlled it, reduced it to an almost intelligible method. You could think of it as a current of transcendent power, hitherto mysteriously inhibited. You made the connection, having cut off all other currents that interfered, and then you simply turned it on. In other words, if you could put it into words at all, you shut your eyes and ears, you closed up the sense of touch, you made everything dark around you and withdrew into your innermost self; you burrowed deep into the darkness there till you got beyond it; you tapped the Power, as it were, underground at any point you pleased and turned it on in any direction.

She could turn it on to Harding Powell without any loss to Rodney Lanyon; for it was immeasurable, inexhaustible.

She looked back at the farm-house with its veiled windows. Formless and immense, the shadow of Harding Powell swayed uneasily on one of the yellow blinds. Across the field her own house showed pure and dim against the darkening slope behind it, showed a

washed and watered white in the liquid, lucid twilight. Her house was open always and on every side ; it flung out its casement arms to the night and to the day. And now all the lamps were lit, every doorway was a golden shaft, every window a golden square ; the whiteness of its walls quivered and the blurred edges flowed into the dark of the garden. It was the fragile shell of a sacred and a burning light.

She did not go in all at once. She crossed the river and went up the hill through the beech-wood. She walked there every evening in the darkness, calling her thoughts home to sleep. The Easter moon, golden-white and holy, looked down at her, shrined under the long, sharp arch of the beech-trees ; it was like going up and up towards a dim sanctuary where the holiest sat enshrined. A sense of consecration was upon her. It came, solemn and pure and still, out of the tumult of her tenderness and pity ; but it was too awful for pity and for tenderness ; it aspired like a flame and lost itself in light ; it grew like a wave till it was vaster than any tenderness or any pity. It was as if her heart rose on the swell of it and was carried away into a rhythm so tremendous that her own pulses of compassion were no longer felt, or felt only as the hushed and delicate vibration of the wave. She recognized her state. It was the blessed state desired as the condition of the working of the gift.

She turned when the last arch of the beech-trees broke and opened to the sky at the top of the hill, where the moon hung in immensity, free of her hill, free of the shrine that held her. She went down with slow soft footsteps as if she carried herself, her whole fragile being, as a vessel, a crystal vessel for the holy thing, and was careful lest a touch of the earth should jar and break her.

## IV

She went still more gently and with half-shut eyes through her illuminated house. She turned the lights out in her room and undressed herself in the darkness. She laid herself on the bed with straight lax limbs, with arms held apart a little from her body, with eyelids shut lightly on her eyes ; all fleshly contacts were diminished.

It was now as if her being drank at every pore the swimming darkness ; as if the rhythm of her heart and of her breath had ceased in the pulse of its invasion. She sank in it and was covered with wave upon wave of darkness. She sank and was upheld ; she dissolved and was gathered together again, a flawless crystal. She was herself the heart of the charmed circle, poised in the ultimate unspeakable stillness, beyond death, beyond birth, beyond the movement, the vehemence, the agitations of the world. She drew Harding Powell into it and held him there.

To draw him to any purpose she had first to loosen and destroy the fleshly, sinister image of him that, for the moment of evocation, hung like a picture on the darkness. In a moment the fleshly image receded, it sank back into the darkness. His name, Harding Powell, was now the only earthly sign of him that she suffered to appear. In the third moment his name was blotted out. And then it was as if she drew him by intangible, supersensible threads ; she touched, with no sense of peril, his innermost essence ; the walls of flesh were down between them ; she had got at him.

And having got at him she held him, a bloodless spirit, a bodiless essence, in the fount of healing. She said to herself, " He will sleep now. He will sleep. He will sleep." And as she slid into her own sleep she held and drew him with her.

He would sleep; he would be all right as long as *she* slept. Her sleep, she had discovered, did more than carry on the amazing act of communion and redemption. It clinched it. It was the seal on the bond.

Early the next morning she went over to the Farm. The blinds were up; the doors and windows were flung open. Milly met her at the garden gate. She stopped her and walked a little way with her across the field. "It's worked," she said. "It's worked after all, like magic."

For a moment Agatha wondered whether Milly had guessed anything; whether she divined the Secret and had brought him there for that, and had refused to acknowledge it before she knew.

"What has?" she asked.

"The plan. The place. He slept last night. Ten hours straight on end. I know, for I stayed awake and watched him. And this morning—oh, my dear, if you could see him! He's all right. He's all right."

"And you think," said Agatha, "it's the place?"

Milly knew nothing, guessed, divined nothing.

"Why, what else can it be?" she said.

"What does *he* think?"

"He doesn't think. He can't account for it. He says himself it's miraculous."

"Perhaps," said Agatha, "it is."

They were silent a moment over the wonder of it.

"I can't get over it," said Milly presently. "It's so odd that it should make all that difference. I could understand it if it had worked that way at first. But it didn't. Think of him yesterday. And yet—if it isn't the place, what is it? What is it?"

Agatha did not answer. She wasn't going to tell Milly what it was. If she did, Milly wouldn't believe her, and Milly's unbelief might work against it. It might prove, for all she knew, an inimical, disastrous power.

"Come and see for yourself." Milly spoke as if it had been Agatha who doubted.

They turned again towards the house. Powell had come out and was in the garden, leaning on the gate. They could see how right he was by the mere fact of his being there, presenting himself like that to the vivid light.

He opened the gate for them, raising his hat and smiling as they came. His face witnessed to the wonder worked on him. The colour showed clean, purged of his taint. His eyes were candid and pure under brows smoothed by sleep.

As they went in he stood for a moment in the open doorway and looked at the view, admiring the river and the green valley and the bare upland fields under the wood. He had always had (it was part of his rare quality) a prodigious capacity for admiration.

"My God," he said, "how beautiful the world is!"

He looked at Milly. "And all that isn't a patch on my wife."

He looked at her with tenderness and admiration, and the look was the flower, the perfection of his sanity.

Milly drew in her breath with a little sound like a sob. Her joy was so great that it was almost unbearable.

Then he looked at Agatha and admired the green gown she wore. "You don't know," he said, "how exquisitely right you are."

She smiled. She knew how exquisitely right *he* was.

## V

Night after night, she continued and without an effort. It was as easy as drawing your breath; it was indeed the breath you drew. She found that she had no longer to devote hours to Harding Powell, any more than she gave

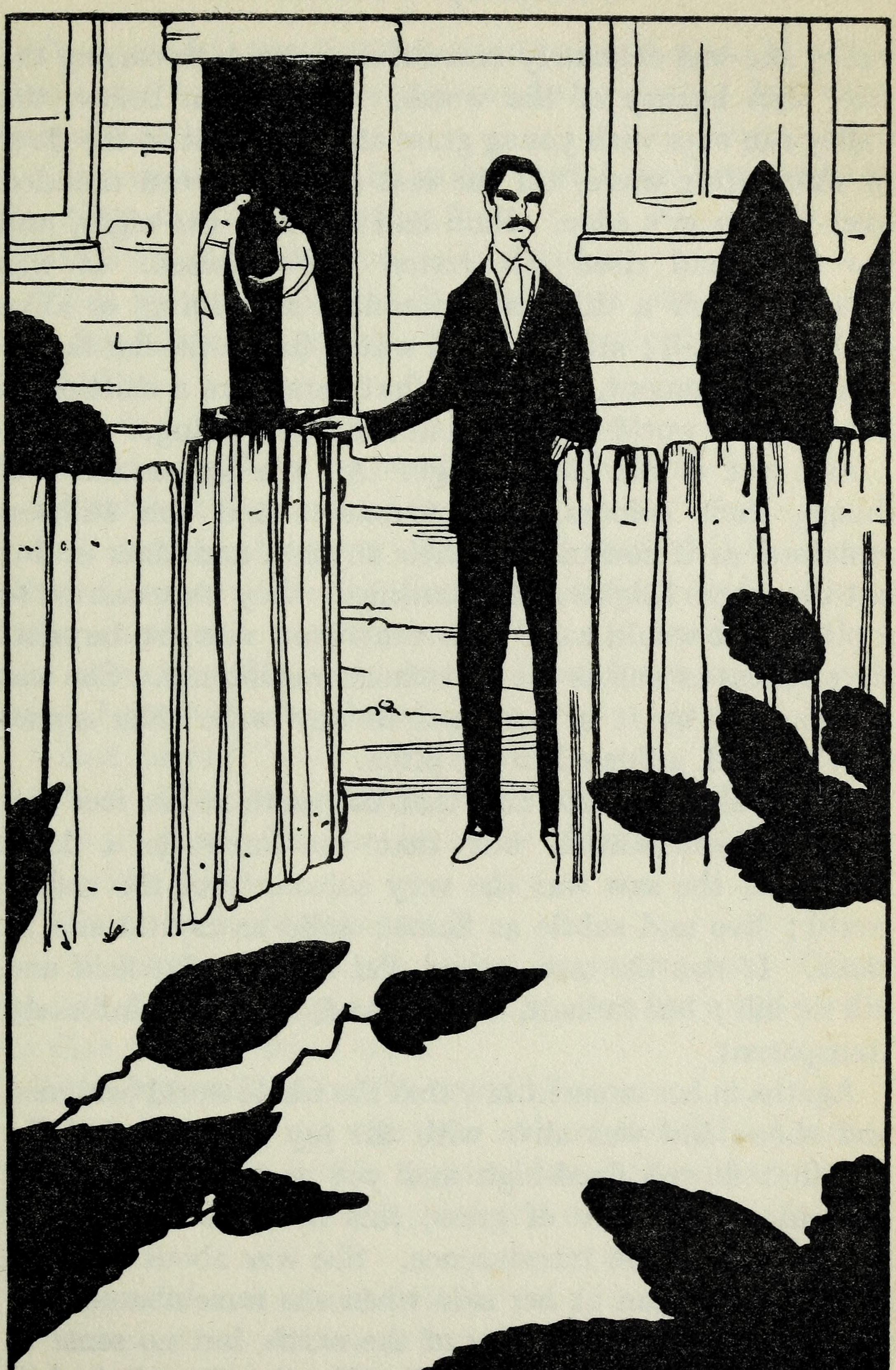
hours to Rodney ; she could do his business in moments, in points of inappreciable time. It was as if from night to night the times swung together and made one enduring timeless time. For the process belonged to a region that was not of times or time.

She wasn't afraid, then, of not giving enough time to it, but she *was* afraid of omitting it altogether. She knew that every intermission would be followed by a relapse, and Harding's state did not admit of any relapses.

Of course, if time *had* counted, if the thing was measurable, she would have been afraid of losing hold of Rodney Lanyon. She held him now by a single slender thread, and the thread was Bella. She "worked" it regularly now through Bella. He was bound to be all right as long as Bella was ; for his possibilities of suffering were thus cut off at their source. Besides, it was the only way to preserve the purity of her intention, the flawlessness of the crystal.

That was the blessedness of her attitude to Harding Powell. It was passionless, impersonal. She wanted nothing of Harding Powell except to help him, and to help Milly, dear little Milly. And never before had she been given so complete, so overwhelming a sense of having helped. It was nothing—unless it was a safeguard against vanity—that they didn't know it, that they persisted in thinking it was Milly's plan that worked. Not that that altogether accounted for it to Harding Powell. He said so at last to Agatha.

They were returning, he and she, by the edge of the wood at the top of the steep field after a long walk. He had asked her to go with him—it was her country—for a good stretch, further than Milly's little feet could carry her. They stood a moment up there and looked around them. April was coming on, but the ploughed land at their feet was still bare ; the earth waited. On that side of the



. . . he stood for a moment in the open doorway . . .

valley she was delicately unfruitful, spent with rearing the fine, thin beauty of the woods. But, down below, the valley ran over with young grass and poured it to the river in wave after wave, till the last surge of green rounded over the water's edge. Rain had fallen in the night, and the river had risen; it rested there, poised. It was wonderful how a thing so brimming, so shining, so alive could be so still; still as marsh water, flat to the flat land.

At that moment, in a flash that came like a shifting of her eyes, the world she looked at suffered a change.

And yet it did not change. All the appearances of things, their colours, the movement and the stillness remained as if constant in their rhythm and their scale; but they were heightened, intensified; they were carried to a pitch that would have been vehement, vibrant, but that the stillness as well as the movement was intense. She was not dazzled by it or confused in any way. Her senses were exalted, adjusted to the pitch.

She would have said now that the earth at her feet had become insubstantial, but that she knew, in a flash, that what she saw was the very substance of the visible world; live and subtle as flame; solid as crystal and as clean. It was the same world, flat field for flat field and hill for hill; but radiant, vibrant, and, as it were, infinitely transparent.

Agatha in her moment saw that the whole world brimmed and shone and was alive with the joy that was its life, joy that flowed flood-high and yet was still. In every leaf, in every blade of grass, this life was manifest as a strange, a divine translucence. She was about to point it out to the man at her side when she remembered that he had eyes for the beauty of the earth, but no sense of its secret and supernatural light. Harding Powell denied, he always had denied, the supernatural. And when she turned to him her vision had passed from her.

They must have another tramp some day, he said. He wanted to see more of this wonderful place. And then he spoke of his recovery.

"It's all very well," he said, "but I can't account for it. Milly says it's the place."

"It *is* a wonderful place," said Agatha.

"Not so wonderful as all that. You saw how I was the day after we came. Well—it can't be the place altogether."

"I rather hope it isn't," Agatha said.

"Do you? What do you think it is, then?"

"I think it's something in you."

"Of course, of course. But what started it? That's what I want to know. Something's happened. Something queer and spontaneous and unaccountable. It's—it's uncanny. For, you know, I oughtn't to feel like this. I got bad news this morning."

"Bad news?"

"Yes. My sister's little girl is very ill. They think it's meningitis. They're in awful trouble. And I—I'm feeling like this."

"Don't let it distress you."

"It doesn't distress me. It only puzzles me. That's the odd thing. Of course, I'm sorry, and I'm anxious and all that; but I *feel* so well."

"You *are* well. Dont be morbid."

"I haven't told my wife yet. About the child, I mean. I simply daren't. It'll frighten her. She won't know how I'll take it, and she'll think it'll make me go all queer again."

He paused and turned to her.

"I say, if she *did* know how I'm taking it, she'd think *that* awfully queer, wouldn't she?" He paused.

"The worst of it is," he said, "I've got to tell her."

"Will you leave it to me?" Agatha said. "I think I can make it all right."

"How?" he queried.

"Never mind how. I can."

"Well," he assented, "there's hardly anything you can't do."

That was how she came to tell Milly.

She made up her mind to tell her that evening as they sat alone in Agatha's house. "Harding," Milly said, "was happy over there with his books; just as he used to be, only more so." So much more so that she was a little disturbed about it. She was afraid it wouldn't last. And again she said it was the place, the wonderful place.

"If you want it to last," Agatha said, "don't go on thinking it's the place."

"Why shouldn't it be? I feel that he's safe here. He's out of it. Things can't reach him."

"Bad news reached him to-day."

"Aggy—what?" Milly whispered in her fright.

"His sister is very anxious about her little girl."

"What's wrong?"

Agatha repeated what she had heard from Harding Powell.

"Oh——" Milly was dumb for an instant while she thought of her sister-in-law. Then she cried aloud:

"If the child dies, it'll make him ill again?"

"No, Milly, it won't."

"It will, I tell you. It's always been that sort of thing that does it."

"And supposing there was something that keeps it off?"

"What is there? What is there?"

"I believe there's something. Would you mind awfully if it wasn't the place?"

"What do you mean, Agatha?" (There was a faint resentment in Milly's agonized tone.)

It was then that Agatha told her. She made it out for her as far as she had made it out at all, with the diffidence that a decent attitude required.

Milly raised doubts which subsided in a kind of awe when Agatha faced her with the evidence of dates.

"You remember, Milly, the night when he slept?"

"I do remember. He said himself it was miraculous."

She meditated.

"And so you think it's that?" she said presently.

"I do indeed. If I dared leave off (I daren't) you'd see for yourself."

"What do you think you've got hold of?"

"I don't know yet."

There was a long, deep silence which Milly broke.

"What do you *do?*" she said.

"I don't do anything. It isn't me."

"I see," said Milly. "I've prayed. You didn't think I hadn't?"

"It's not that—not anything *you* mean by it. And yet it is; only it's more, much more. I can't explain it. I only know it isn't me."

She was beginning to feel vaguely uncomfortable about having told her.

"And, Milly, you mustn't tell him. Promise me you won't tell him."

"No, I won't tell him."

"Because, you see, he'd think it was all rot."

"He would," said Milly. "It's the sort of thing he does think rot."

"And that might prevent its working."

Milly smiled faintly. "I haven't the ghost of an idea what 'it' is. But whatever it is, can you go on doing it?"

"Yes, I think so. You see, it depends rather——"

"It depends on what?"

"Oh, on a lot of things—on your sincerity; on your—your purity. It depends so much on *that* that it frightens you, lest, perhaps, you mightn't, after all be so very pure."

Milly smiled again a little differently. "Darling, if that's all, I'm not frightened. Only—supposing—supposing you gave out? You might, you know."

"*I* might. But It couldn't. You mustn't think it's me, Milly. Because if anything happened to me, if I did give out, don't you see how it would let him down? It's as bad as thinking it's the place."

"Does it matter what it is—or who it is," said Milly passionately; "as long as——" Her tears came and stopped her.

Agatha divined the source of Milly's passion.

"Then you don't mind, Milly? You'll let me go on?"

Milly rose; she turned abruptly, holding her head high, so that she might not spill her tears.

Agatha went with her over the grey field towards the farm. They paused at the gate. Milly spoke.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"Certain."

"And you won't let go?" Her eyes shone towards her friend's in the twilight. "You *will* go on?"

"*You* must go on."

"Ah—how?"

"Believing that he'll be all right."

"Oh, Aggy, he was devoted to Winny. And if the child dies——"

## VI

The child died three days later. Milly came over to Agatha with the news.

She said it had been an awful shock, of course. She'd been dreading something like that for him. But he'd taken it wonderfully. If he came out of it all right, she *would* believe in what she called Agatha's " thing."

He did come out of it all right. His behaviour was the crowning proof, if Milly wanted more proof, of his sanity. He went up to London and made all the arrangements for his sister. When he returned he forestalled Milly's specious consolations with the truth. It was better, he told her, that the dear little girl should have died, for there was distinct brain trouble anyway. He took it as a sane man takes a terrible alternative.

Weeks passed. He had grown accustomed to his own sanity and no longer marvelled at it.

And still, without intermission, Agatha went on. She had been so far affected by Milly's fright (that was the worst of Milly's knowing) that she held on to Harding Powell with a slightly exaggerated intensity. She even began to give more and more time to him, she who had made out that time in this process did not matter. She was afraid of letting go, because the consequences (Milly was perpetually reminding her of the consequences) of letting go would be awful.

For Milly kept her at it. Milly urged her on. Milly, in Milly's own words, sustained her. She praised her; she praised the Secret, praised the Power. She said you could see how it worked. It was tremendous; it was inexhaustible. Milly, familiarized with its working, had become a fanatical believer in the Power. But she

had her own theory. She knew, of course, that they were all, she and Agatha and poor Harding, dependent on the Power, that it was the Power that did it, and not Agatha.



But Agatha was *their* one link with it, and if the link gave way where were they? Agatha felt that Milly watched her and waylaid her; that she was suspicious of failures and of intermissions; that she wondered; that she peered and pried. Milly would, if she could, have stuck her

fingers into what she called the machinery of the thing. Its vagueness baffled and even annoyed her, for her mind was limited; it loved and was at home with limits; it desired above all things precise ideas, names, phrases, anything that constricted and defined.

But still, with it all, she believed; and the great thing was that Milly *should* believe. She might have worked havoc if, with her temperament, she had doubted.

What did suffer was the fine poise with which she, Agatha, had held Rodney Lanyon and Harding Powell each by his own thread. Milly had compelled her to spin a stronger thread for Harding and, as it were, to multiply her threads, so as to hold him at all points. And because of this, because of giving more and more time to him, she could not always loose him from her and let him go. And she was afraid lest the pull he had on her might weaken Rodney's thread.

Up till now, the Powells' third week at Sarratt End, she had had the assurance that his thread still held. She heard from him that Bella was all right, which meant that he too was all right, for there had never been anything wrong with him *but* Bella. And she had a further glimpse of the way the gift worked its wonders.

Three Fridays had passed, and he had not come.

Well—she had meant that; she had tried (on that last Friday of his), with a crystal sincerity, to hold him back so that he should not come. And up till now, with an ease that simply amazed her, she had kept herself at the highest pitch of her sincere and beautiful intention.

Not that it was the intention that had failed her now. It had succeeded so beautifully, so perfectly, that he had no need to come at all. She had given Bella back to him. She had given him back to Bella. Only, she faced the full perfection of her work. She had brought it to so fine a point that she would never see him again; she had gone

to the root of it ; she had taken from him the desire to see her. And now it was as if subtly, insidiously, her relation to him had become inverted. Whereas hitherto it had been she who had been necessary to him, it seemed now that he was far more, beyond all comparison, more necessary to her. After all, Rodney had had Bella ; and she had nobody but Rodney. He was the one solitary thing she cared for. And hitherto it had not mattered so immensely, for all her caring, whether he came to her or not. Seeing him had been, perhaps, a small mortal joy ; but it had not been the tremendous and essential thing. She had been contented, satisfied beyond all mortal contentments and satisfactions, with the intangible, immaterial tie. Now she longed, with an unendurable longing, for his visible, bodily presence. She had not realized her joy as long as it was with her ; she had refused to acknowledge it because of its mortal quality, and it had raised no cry that troubled her abiding spiritual calm. But now that she had put it from her, it thrust itself on her, it cried, it clung piteously to her and would not let her go. She looked back to the last year, her year of Fridays, and saw it following her, following and entreating. She looked forward and she saw Friday after Friday coming upon her, a procession of pitiless days, trampling it down, her small, piteous mortal joy, and her mortality rose in her and revolted. She had been disturbed by what she had called the "lurking possibilities" in Rodney ; they were nothing to the lurking possibilities in her.

There were moments when her desire to see Rodney sickened her with its importunity. Each time she beat it back, in an instant, to its burrow below the threshold, and it hid there, it ran underground. There were ways below the threshold by which desire could get at him. Therefore, one night—Tuesday of the fourth week—she

cut him off. She refused to hold him even by a thread. It was Bella and Bella only that she held now.

On Friday of that week she heard from him. Bella was still all right. But *he* wasn't. Anything but. He didn't know what was the matter with him. He supposed it was the same old thing again. He couldn't think how poor Bella stood him, but she did. It must be awfully bad for her. It was beastly—wasn't it ?—that he should have got like that, just when Bella was so well.

She might have known it. She had, in fact, known. Having once held him, and having healed him, she had no right—as long as the Power consented to work through her—she had no right to let him go.

She began again from the beginning, from the first process of purification and surrender. But what followed was different now. She had not only to recapture the crystal serenity, the holiness of that state by which she had held Rodney Lanyon and had healed him ; she had to recover the poise by which she had held him and Harding Powell together. She was bound equally not to let Harding go.

It was now almost a struggle to concentrate on both Rodney and Harding, a struggle in which Harding persisted and prevailed. Yes, there was no blinking it, he prevailed.

She had been prepared for it, but not as for a thing that could really happen. It was contrary to all that she knew of the beneficent working of the Power. She thought she knew all its ways, its silences, its reassurances, its inexplicable reservations and evasions. She couldn't be prepared for this—that it, the high and holy, the unspeakably pure thing should allow Harding to prevail, should connive (that was what it looked like) at his taking the gift into his own hands and turning it to his own advantage against Rodney Lanyon.

Not that she thought it really had connived. That was unthinkable, and Agatha did not think these things ; she felt them. Hitherto she had had no misgivings as to the possible behaviour of the Power. And now she was afraid, not of It, and not, certainly not, of poor Harding (how could she be afraid of him ?) ; she was afraid mysteriously, without knowing why or how.

It was her fear that made her write to Rodney Lanyon. She wrote in the beginning of the fifth week (she was counting the weeks now). She only wanted to know, she said, that he was better, that he was well. She begged him to write and tell her that he was well.

He did not write.

And every night of that week, in those " states " of hers, Powell predominated. He was becoming almost a visible presence impressed upon the blackness of the " state." All she could do then was to evoke the visible image of Rodney Lanyon and place it there over Harding's image, obliterating him. Now, properly speaking, the state, the perfection of it, did not admit of visible presences, and that Harding could so impress himself showed more than anything the extent to which he had prevailed.

He prevailed to such good purpose that he was now, Milly said, well enough to go back to business. They were to leave Sarratt End in about ten days, when they would have been there seven weeks.

She had come over on the Sunday to let Agatha know that ; and also, she said, to make a confession.

Milly's face, as she said it, was all candour. It had filled out ; it had bloomed in her happiness ; it was shadowless, featureless almost, like a flower.

She had done what she said she wouldn't do ; she had told Harding.

" Oh, Milly, what on earth did you do that for ? " Agatha's voice was strange.

"I thought it better," Milly said, revealing the fine complacence of her character.

"Why better?"

"Because secrecy is bad. And he was beginning to wonder. He wanted to go back to business; and he wouldn't, because he thought it was the place that did it."

"I see," said Agatha. "And what does he think it is now?"

"He thinks it's *you*, dear."

"But I told you—I told you—that was what you were not to think."

"My dear, it's an immense concession that he should think it's you."

"A concession to what?"

"Well, I suppose, to the supernatural."

"Milly, you shouldn't have told him. You don't know what harm you might have done. I'm not sure even now that you haven't done it."

"Oh, have I?" said Milly triumphantly. "You've only got to look at him."

"When did you tell him, then?"

"I told him—let me see—it was a week ago last Friday."

Agatha was silent. She wondered. It had been after Friday a week ago that he had prevailed so terribly.

"Agatha," said Milly solemnly, "when we go away you won't lose sight of him? You won't let go of him?"

"You needn't be afraid. I doubt now if he will let go of me."

"How do you mean—*now?*" Milly flushed slightly as a flower might flush.

"Now that you've told him, now that he thinks it's me."

"Perhaps," said Milly, "that was why I told him. I don't want him to let go."

## VII

It was the sixth week, and still Rodney did not write ; and Agatha was more and more afraid.

By this time she had definitely connected her fear with Harding Powell's dominion and persistence. She was certain now that what she could only call his importunity had proved somehow disastrous to Rodney Lanyon. And with it all, unacknowledged, beaten back, her desire to see Rodney ran to and fro in the burrows underground.

He did not write, but on the Friday of that week, the sixth week, he came.

She saw him coming up the garden path, and she shrank back into her room ; but the light searched her and found her, and he saw her there. He never knocked ; he came straight and swiftly to her through the open doors. He shut the door of the room behind him and held her by her arms with both his hands.

" Rodney," she said, " did you mean to come, or did I make you ? "

" I meant to come. You couldn't make me."

" Couldn't I ? Oh, *say* I couldn't."

" You could," he said, " but you didn't. And what does it matter so long as I'm here ? "

" Let me look at you."

She held him at arm's length and turned him to the light. It showed his face white, worn as it used to be, all the little lines of worry back again, and two new ones that drew down the corners of his mouth.

" You've been ill," she said. " You *are* ill."

" No. I'm all right. What's the matter with *you ?* "

" With me ? Nothing. Do I look as if anything was wrong ? "

" You look as if you'd been frightened.'

He paused, considering it.

"This place isn't good for you. You oughtn't to be here like this, all by yourself."

"Oh! Rodney, it's the dearest place. I love every inch of it. Besides, I'm not altogether by myself."

He did not seem to hear her; and what he said next arose evidently out of his own thoughts.

"I say, are those Powells still here?"

"They've been here all the time."

"Do you see much of them?"

"I see them every day. Sometimes nearly all day."

"That accounts for it."

Again he paused.

"It's my fault, Agatha. I shouldn't have left you to them. I knew."

"What did you know?"

"Well—the state he was in, and the effect it would have on you—that it would have on anybody."

"It's all right. He's going. Besides, he isn't in a state any more. He's cured."

"Cured? What's cured him?"

She evaded him.

"He's been well ever since he came; absolutely well after the first day."

"Still, you've been frightened; you've been worrying; you've had some shock or other, or some strain. What is it?"

"Nothing. Only—just the last week—I've been a little frightened about you—when you wouldn't write to me. Why didn't you?"

"Because I couldn't."

"Then you *were* ill?"

"I'm all right. I know what's the matter with me."

"It's Bella?"

He laughed harshly.

"No, it isn't this time. I haven't that excuse."

"Excuse for what?"

"For coming. Bella's all right. Bella's a perfect angel. God knows what's happened to her. I don't. I haven't had anything to do with it."

"You had. You had everything. You were an angel too."

"I haven't been much of an angel lately, I can tell you."

"She'll understand. She does understand."

They had sat down on the couch in the corner so that they faced each other. Agatha faced him, but fear was in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter," he said, "whether she understands or not. I don't want to talk about her."

Agatha said nothing, but there was a movement in her face, a white wave of trouble, and the fear fluttered in her eyes. He saw it there.

"You needn't bother about Bella. She's all right. You see, it's not as if she cared."

"Cared?"

"About *me* much."

"But she does, she does care!"

"I suppose she did once, or she couldn't have married me. But she doesn't now. You see—you may as well know it, Agatha—there's another man."

"Oh, Rodney, no."

"Yes. It's been perfectly all right, you know; but there he is, and there he's been for years. She told me. I'm awfully sorry for her."

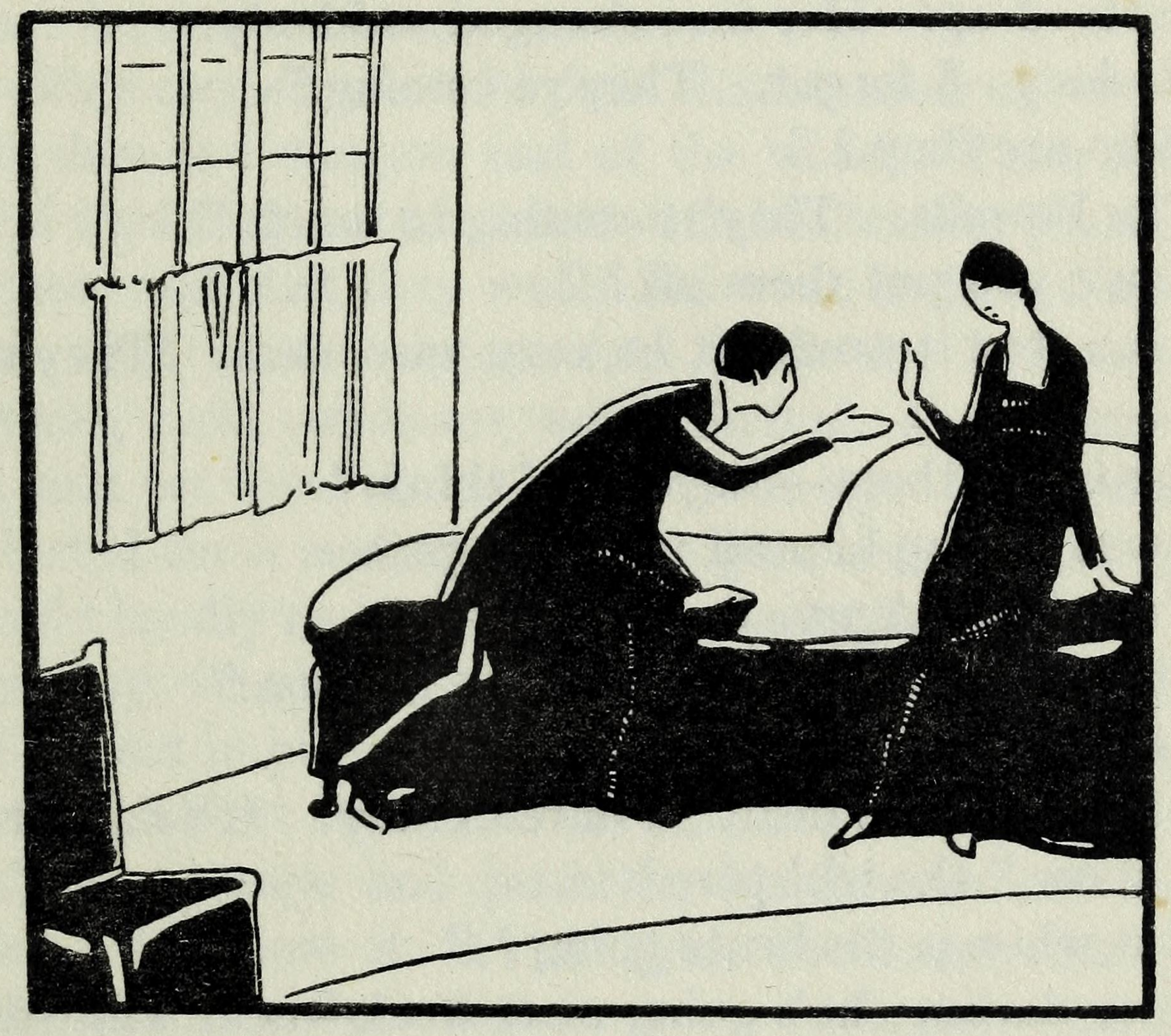
He paused.

"What beats me is her being so angelic now, when she doesn't care."

"Rodney, she does. It's all over, like an illness. It's you she cares for *now*."

"Think so?"

" I'm sure of it."
" I'm not."
" You will be. You'll see it. You'll see it soon."
He glanced at her under his bent brows.
" I don't know," he said, " that I want to see it. *That* isn't what's the matter with me. You don't understand the situation. It isn't all over. She's only being good about it. She doesn't care a rap about me. She *can't.* And what's more, I don't want her to."



" You—don't—want her to ? "
He burst out. " My God, I want nothing in this world but *you.* And I can't have you. That's what's the matter with me."
" No, no, it isn't," she cried. " You don't know."
" I do know. It's hurting me. And "—he looked at her and his voice shook—" it's hurting you. I won't have you hurt."
He started forward suddenly as if he would have taken her in his arms. She put up her hands to keep him off.

"No, no!" she cried. "I'm all right. I'm all right. It isn't that. You mustn't think it."

"I know it. That's why I came."

He came near again. He seized her struggling hands.

"Agatha, why can't we? Why shouldn't we?"

"No, no," she moaned. "We can't. We mustn't. Not *that* way. I don't want it, Rodney, that way."

"It shall be any way you like. Only don't beat me off."

"I'm not—beating—you—off."

She stood up. Her face changed suddenly.

"Rodney—I forgot. They're coming."

"Who are they?"

"The Powells. They're coming to lunch."

"Can't you put them off?"

"I can, but it wouldn't be very wise, dear. They might think——"

"Confound them—they *would* think."

He was pulling himself visibly together.

"I'm afraid, Aggy, I ought——"

"I know—you must. You must go soon."

He looked at his watch.

"I must go *now*, dear. I daren't stay. It's dangerous."

"I know," she whispered.

"But when is the brute going?"

"Poor darling, he's going next week—next Thursday."

"Well then, I'll—I'll——"

"Please, you must go."

"I'm going."

She held out her hand.

"I daren't touch you," he whispered. "I'm going now. But I'll come again next Friday, and I'll stay."

As she saw his drawn face, there was not any strength in her to say "No."

## VIII

He had gone. She gathered herself together and went across the field to meet the Powells as if nothing had happened.

Milly and her husband were standing at the gate of the Farm. They were watching; yes, they were watching Rodney Lanyon as he crossed the river by the Farm bridge. The bridge carried the field path that slanted up the hill to the farther and western end of the wood. Their attitude showed that they were interested in his brief appearance on the scene, and that they wondered what he had been doing there. And as she approached them she was aware of something cold, ominous and inimical, that came from them, and set towards her and passed by. Her sense of it only lasted for a second, and was gone so completely that she could hardly realize that she had ever felt it.

For they were charming to her. Harding, indeed, was more perfect in his beautiful quality than ever. There was something about him that she had not been prepared for, something strange and pathetic, humble almost and appealing. She saw it in his eyes, his large, dark, wild animal eyes, chiefly. But it was a look that claimed as much as it deprecated; that assumed between them some unspoken communion and understanding. With all its pathos it was a look that frightened her. Neither he nor his wife said a word about Rodney Lanyon. She was not even sure, now, that they had recognized him.

They stayed with her all that afternoon; for their time, they said, was getting short; and when, about six o'clock, Milly got up to go she took Agatha aside and said that, if Agatha didn't mind, she would leave Harding with her for a little while. She knew he wanted to talk to her.

Agatha proposed that they should walk up the hill through the wood. They went in a curious silence and constraint ; and it was not until they had got into the wood and were shut up in it together that he spoke.

" I think my wife told you I had something to say to you ? "

" Yes, Harding," she said. " What is it ? "

" Well, it's this—first of all, I want to thank you. I know what you're doing for me."

" I'm sorry. I didn't want you to know. I thought Milly wasn't going to tell you."

" She didn't tell me."

Agatha said nothing. She was bound to accept his statement. Of course, he must have known that Milly had broken her word, and he was trying to shield her.

" I mean," he went on, " that whether she told me or not, it's no matter ; I knew."

" You—knew ? "

" I knew that something was happening, and I knew it wasn't the place. Places never make any difference. I only go to 'em because Milly thinks they do. Besides, if it came to that, this place—from my peculiar point of view, mind you—was simply beastly. I couldn't have stood another night of it."

" Well."

" Well, the thing went ; and I got all right. And the queer part of it is, I felt as if you were in it somehow, as if you'd done something. I half hoped you might say something, but you never did."

" One oughtn't to speak about these things, Harding. And I told you I didn't want you to know."

" I didn't know what you did. I don't know now, though Milly tried to tell me. But I felt you. I felt you all the time."

"It was not I you felt. I implore you not to think it was."

"What can I think?"

"Think as I do; think—think——" She stopped herself. She was aware of the futility of her charge to this man who denied, who always had denied, the supernatural.

"It isn't a question of thinking," she said at last.

"Of believing, then? Are you going to tell me to believe?"

"No; it isn't believing either. It's knowing. Either you know it or you don't know, though you may come to know. But whatever you think, you mustn't think it's me."

"I rather like to. Why shouldn't I?"

She turned on him her grave white face, and he noticed a curious expression there as of incipient terror.

"Because you might do some great harm either to yourself or——"

His delicate, sceptical eyebrows questioned her.

"Or me."

"You?" he murmured gently, pitifully almost.

"Yes, me. Or even—well, one doesn't quite know where the harm might end. If I could only make you take another view. I tried to make you—to work it that way—so that you might find the secret and do it for yourself."

"I can't do anything for myself. But, Agatha, I'll take any view you like of it, so long as you'll keep on at me."

"Of course I'll keep on."

At that he stopped suddenly in his path, and faced her.

"I say, you know, it isn't hurting you, is it?"

She felt herself wince. "Hurting me? How could it hurt me?"

"Milly said it couldn't."

Agatha sighed. She said to herself, "Milly—if only Milly hadn't interfered."

"Don't you think it's cold here in the wood?" she said.

"Cold?"

"Yes. Let's go back."

As they went Milly met them at the Farm bridge. She wanted Agatha to come and stay for supper; she pressed, she pleaded, and Agatha, who had never yet withstood Milly's pleading, stayed.

It was from that evening that she really dated it, the thing that came upon her. She was aware that in staying she disobeyed an instinct that told her to go home. Otherwise she could not say that she had any sort of premonition. Supper was laid in the long room with the yellow blinds, where she had first found Harding Powell. The blinds were drawn to-night, and the lamp on the table burnt low; the oil was giving out. The light in the room was still daylight and came level from the sunset, leaking through the yellow blinds. It struck Agatha that it was the same light, the same ochreish light that they had found in the room six weeks ago. But that was nothing.

What it was she did not know. The horrible light went when the flame of the lamp burnt clearer. Harding was talking to her cheerfully and Milly was smiling at them both, when half through the meal Agatha got up and declared that she must go. She was ill; she was tired; they must forgive her, but she must go.

The Powells rose and stood by her, close to her, in their distress. Milly brought wine and put it to her lips; but she turned her head away and whispered: "Please let me go. Let me get away."

Harding wanted to walk back with her, but she refused with a vehemence that deterred him.

"How very odd of her," said Milly, as they stood at the gate and watched her go. She was walking fast, almost running, with a furtive step, as if something pursued her.

Powell did not speak. He turned from his wife and went slowly back into the house.

## IX

She knew now what had happened to her. She was afraid of Harding Powell ; and it was her fear that had cried to her to go, to get away from him.

The awful thing was that she knew she could not get away from him. She had only to close her eyes and she would find the visible image of him hanging before her on the wall of darkness. And to-night, when she tried to cover it with Rodney's it was no longer obliterated. Rodney's image had worn thin and Harding's showed through. She was more afraid of it than she had been of Harding ; and more than anything, she was afraid of being afraid. Harding was the object of a boundless and indestructible compassion, and her fear of him was hateful to her and unholy. She knew that it would be terrible to let it follow her into that darkness where she would presently go down with him alone. " It would be all right," she said to herself, " if only I didn't keep on seeing him."

But he, his visible image, and her fear of it, persisted even while the interior darkness, the divine, beneficent darkness rose round her, wave on wave, and flooded her ; even while she held him there and healed him ; even while it still seemed to her that her love pierced through her fear and gathered to her, spirit to spirit, flame to pure flame, the nameless, innermost essence of Rodney and of Bella. She had known in the beginning that it was by love that she held them ; but now, though she loved Rodney and had almost lost her pity for Harding in her fear of him, it was Harding rather than Rodney that she held.

In the morning she woke with a sense, which was almost a memory, of Harding having been in the room with her all night. She was tired, as if she had had some long and unrestrained communion with him.

She put away at once the fatigue that pressed on her (the gift still " worked " in a flash for the effacing of bodily sensation). She told herself that, after all, her fear had done no harm. Seldom in her experience of the Power had she had so tremendous a sense of having got through to it, of having " worked " it, of having held Harding under it and healed him. For, when all was said and done, whether she had been afraid of him or not, she had held him, she had never once let go. The proof was that he still went sane, visibly, indubitably cured.

All the same, she felt that she could not go through another day like yesterday. She could not see him. She wrote a letter to Milly. Since it concerned Milly so profoundly, it was well that Milly should be made to understand. She hoped that Milly would forgive her if they didn't see her for the next day or two. If she was to go on (she underlined it) she must be left absolutely alone. It seemed unkind when they were going so soon, but—Milly knew—it was impossible to exaggerate the importance of what she had to do.

Milly wrote back that, of course, she understood. It should be as Agatha wished. Only (so Milly " sustained " her) Agatha must not allow herself to doubt the Power. How could she, when she saw what it had done for Harding ? If *she* doubted, what could she expect of Harding ? But, of course, she must take care of her own dear self. If she failed—if she gave way—what on earth would the poor darling do, now that he had become dependent on her ?

She wrote as if it was Agatha's fault that he had become dependent ; as if Agatha had nothing, had nobody in the world to think of but Harding ; as if nobody, as if nothing in the world beside Harding mattered. And Agatha found herself resenting Milly's view. As if to her anything in the world mattered beside Rodney Lanyon.

For three days she did not see the Powells.

## X

The three nights passed as before, but with an increasing struggle and fear.

She knew, she knew what was happening. It was as if the walls of personality were wearing thin, and through them she felt him trying to get at her.

She put the thought from her. It was absurd. It was insane. Such things could not be. It was not in any region of such happenings that she held him, but in the place of peace, the charmed circle, the flawless crystal sphere.

Still the thought persisted; and still, in spite of it, she held him, she would not let him go. By her honour and by her love for Milly she was bound to hold him, even though she knew how terribly, how implacably he prevailed.

She was aware now that the persistence of his image on the blackness was only a sign to her of his being there in his substance; in his supreme innermost essence. It had obviously no relation to his bodily appearance, since she had not seen him for three days. It tended more and more to vanish, to give place to the shapeless, nameless, all-pervading presence. And her fear of him became pervading, nameless and shapeless too.

Somehow it was always behind her now, it followed her from room to room of her house; it drove her out of doors. It seemed to her that she went before it with quick, uncertain feet and a fluttering heart, aimless and tormented as a leaf driven by a vague light wind. Sometimes it sent her up the field towards the wood; sometimes it would compel her to go a little way towards the Farm; and then it was as if it took her by the shoulders and turned her back again towards her house.

On the fourth day (which was Tuesday of the Powells'

last week) she determined to fight this fear. She could not defy it to the extent of going on to the Farm where she might see Harding, but certainly she would not suffer it



to turn her from her hill-top. It was there that she had always gone as the night fell, calling home her thoughts to sleep; and it was there, seven weeks ago, that the moon, the golden-white and holy moon, had led her to the consecration of her gift. She had returned softly, seven

weeks ago, carrying carefully her gift, as a fragile, flawless crystal. Since then how recklessly she had held it! To what jars and risks she had exposed the exquisite and sacred thing!

She waited for her hour between sunset and twilight. It was perfect, following a perfect day. Above the wood the sky had a violet lucidity, purer than the day; below it, the pale brown earth wore a violet haze, and over that a web of green, woven of the sparse, thin blades of the young wheat. There were two ways up the hill; one over her own bridge across the river, that led her to the steep, straight path through the wood; one over the Farm bridge by the slanting path up the field. She chose the wood.

She paused on the bridge, and looked down the valley. She saw the farm-house standing in the stillness that was its own secret and the hour's. A strange, pale lamplight, lit too soon, showed in the windows of the room she knew. The Powells would be sitting there at their supper.

She went on and came to the gate of the wood. It swung open on its hinges, a sign to her that some time or other Harding Powell had passed there. She paused and looked about her. Presently she saw Harding Powell coming down the wood-path.

He stopped. He had not yet seen her. He was looking up to the arch of the beech-trees, where the green light still came through. She could see by his attitude of quiet contemplation the sane and happy creature that he was. He was sane, she knew. And yet, no; she could not really see him as sane. It was her sanity, not his own, that he walked in. Or else what she saw was the empty shell of him. *He* was in her. Hitherto it had been in the darkness that she had felt him most, and her fear of him had been chiefly fear of the invisible Harding, and of what he might do there in the darkness. Now her fear, which had become

almost hatred, was transferred to his person. In the flesh, as in the spirit, he was pursuing her.

He had seen her now. He was making straight for her. And she turned and ran round the eastern bend of the hill (a yard or so to the left of her) and hid from him. From where she crouched at the edge of the wood she saw him descend the lower slope to the river; by standing up and advancing a little she could see him follow the river path on the nearer side and cross by the Farm bridge.

She was sure of all that. She was sure that it did not take her more than twelve or fifteen minutes (for she had gone that way a hundred times) to get back to the gate, to walk up the little wood, to cut through it by a track in the undergrowth, and turn round the further and western end of it. Thence she could either take the long path that slanted across the field to the Farm bridge or keep to the upper ground along a trail in the grass skirting the wood, and so reach home by the short, straight path and her own bridge.

She decided on the short, straight path as leading her farther from the farm-house, where there could be no doubt that Harding Powell was now. At the point she had reached, the jutting corner of the wood hid from her the downward slope of the hill, and the flat land at its foot.

As she turned the corner of the wood, she was brought suddenly in sight of the valley. A hot wave swept over her brain, so strong that she staggered as it passed. It was followed by a strange sensation of physical sickness, that passed also. It was then as if what went through her had charged her nerves of sight to a pitch of insane and horrible sensibility. The green of the grass, and of the young corn, the very colour of life, was violent and frightful. Not only was it abominable in itself, it was a thing to be shuddered at, because of some still more abominable significance it had.

Agatha had known once, standing where she stood now, an exaltation of sense that was ecstasy ; when every leaf and every blade of grass shone with a divine translucence ; when every nerve in her thrilled, and her whole being rang with the joy which is immanent in the life of things.

What she experienced now (if she could have given any account of it) was exaltation at the other end of the scale. It was horror and fear unspeakable. Horror and fear immanent in the life of things. She saw the world in a loathsome transparency ; she saw it with the eye of a soul in which no sense of the divine had ever been, of a soul that denied the supernatural. It had been Harding Powell's soul, and it had become hers.

Furiously, implacably, he was getting at her.

Out of the wood and the hedges that bordered it there came sounds that were horrible, because she knew them to be inaudible to any ear less charged with insanity ; small sounds of movement, of strange shiverings, swarmings, crepitations ; sounds of incessant, infinitely subtle urging, of agony and recoil. Sounds they were of the invisible things unborn, driven towards birth ; sounds of the worm unborn, of things that creep and writhe towards dissolution. She knew what she heard and saw. She heard the stirring of the corruption that Life was ; the young blades of corn were frightful to her, for in them was the push, the passion of the evil which was Life ; the trees, as they stretched out their arms and threatened her, were frightful with the terror which was Life. Down there, in that gross green hot-bed, the earth teemed with the abomination ; and the river, livid, white, a monstrous thing, crawled, dragging with it the very slime.

All this she perceived in a flash, when she had turned the corner. It sank into stillness and grew dim ; she was aware of it only as the scene, the region in which one thing, her terror, moved and hunted her. Among sounds of the

rustling of leaves, and the soft crush of grass, and the whirring of little wings in fright, she heard it go ; it went on the other side of the hedge, a little way behind her as she skirted the wood. She stood still to let it pass her, and she felt that it passed, and that it stopped and waited. A terrified bird flew out of the hedge, no further than a fledgling's flight in front of her. And in that place it flew from she saw Harding Powell.

He was crouching under the hedge as she had crouched when she had hidden from him. His face was horrible, but not more horrible than the Terror that had gone behind her ; and she heard herself crying out to him : " Harding ! Harding ! " appealing to him against the implacable, unseen Pursuer.

He had risen (she saw him rise), but as she called his name he became insubstantial, and she saw a Thing, a nameless, unnameable, shapeless Thing, proceeding from him. A brown, blurred Thing, transparent as dusk is, that drifted on the air. It was torn and tormented, a fragment parted and flung off from some immense and as yet invisible cloud of horror. It drifted from her ; it dissolved like smoke on the hillside ; and the Thing that had born and begotten it pursued her.

She bowed under it, and turned from the edge of the wood, the horrible place it had been born in ; she ran before it, headlong down the field, trampling the young corn under her feet. As she ran she heard a voice in the valley, a voice of amazement and entreaty, calling to her in a sort of song.

" What—are—you—running for—Aggy—Aggy ? "

It was Milly's voice that called.

Then as she came, still headlong, to the river, she heard Harding's voice saying something, she did not know what. She couldn't stop to listen to him, or to consider how he came to be there in the valley, when a minute ago she

had seen him by the edge of the wood, up on the very top of the hill.

He was on the bridge—the Farm bridge—now. He held out his hand to steady her as she came on over the swinging plank.

She knew that he had led her to the other side, and that he was standing there, still saying something, and that she answered.

" Have you no pity on me ? Can't you let me go ? "

And then she broke from him and ran.

## XI

She was awake all that night. Harding Powell and the horror begotten of him had no pity ; he would not let her go. Her gift, her secret, was powerless now against the pursuer.

She had a light burning in her room till morning, for she was afraid of sleep. Those unlit roads down which, if she slept, the Thing would surely hunt her, were ten times more terrible than the white-washed, familiar room where it merely watched and waited.

In the morning she found a letter on her breakfast-table, which she said Mrs. Powell had left late last evening, after Agatha had gone to bed. Milly wrote : " Dearest Agatha,—Of course I understand. But are we *never* going to see you again ? What was the matter with you last night ? You terrified poor Harding.—Yours ever, M. P."

Without knowing why, Agatha tore the letter into bits and burned them in the flame of a candle. She watched them burn.

" Of course," she said to herself, " that isn't sane of me."

And when she had gone round her house and shut all

the doors and locked them, and drawn down the blinds in every closed window, and found herself cowering over her fireless hearth, shuddering with fear, she knew that, whether she were mad or not, there was madness in her. She knew that her face in the glass (she had the courage to look at it) was the face of an insane terror let loose.

That she did know it, that there were moments—flashes—in which she could contemplate her state and recognize it for what it was, showed that there was still a trace of sanity in her. It was not her own madness that possessed her. It was, or rather, it had been, Harding Powell's; she had taken it from him. That was what it meant—to take away madness.

There could be no doubt as to what had happened, nor as to the way of its happening. The danger of it, utterly unforeseen, was part of the very operation of the gift. In the process of getting at Harding to heal him she had had to destroy, not only the barriers of flesh and blood, but those innermost walls of personality that divide and protect, mercifully, one spirit from another. With the first thinning of the walls Harding's insanity had leaked through to her, with the first breach it had broken in. It had been transferred to her complete with all its details, with its very gestures, in all the phases that it ran through; Harding's premonitory fears and tremblings; Harding's exalted sensibility; Harding's abominable vision of the world, that vision from which the resplendent divinity had perished; Harding's flight before the pursuing Terror. She was sitting now as Harding had sat when she found him crouching over the hearth in that horrible room with the drawn blinds. It seemed to her that to have a madness of your own would not be so very horrible. It would be, after all, your own. It could not possibly be one-half so horrible as this, to have somebody else's madness put into you.

The one thing by which she knew herself was the desire that no longer ran underground, but emerged and appeared before her, lit by her lucid flashes, naked and unshamed.

She still knew her own. And there was something in her still that was greater than the thing that inhabited her, the pursuer, the pursued, who had rushed into her as his refuge, his sanctuary; and that was her fear of him and of what he might do there. If her doors stood open to him, they stood open to Bella and to Rodney Lanyon too. What else had she been trying for, if it were not to break down in all three of them the barriers of flesh and blood, and to transmit the Power? In the unthinkable sacrament to which she called them they had all three partaken. And since the holy thing could suffer her to be thus permeated, saturated with Harding Powell, was it to be supposed that she could keep him to herself, that she would not pass him on to Rodney Lanyon?

It was not, after all, incredible. If he could get at her, of course he could get, through her, at Rodney.

That was the Terror of terrors, and it was her own. That it could subsist together with that alien horror, that it remained supreme beside it, proved that there was still some tract in her where the invader had not yet penetrated. In her love for Rodney and her fear for him she entrenched herself against the destroyer. There at least she knew herself impregnable.

It was in such a luminous flash that she saw the thing still in her own hands, and resolved that it should cease.

She would have to break her word to Milly. She would have to let Harding go, to loosen deliberately his hold on her and cut him off. It could be done. She had held him through her gift, and it would be still possible, through the gift, to let him go. Of course she knew it would be hard.

It *was* hard. It was terrible; for he clung. She had

not counted on his clinging. It was as if, in their undivided substance, he had had knowledge of her purpose and had prepared himself to fight it. He hung on desperately; he refused to yield an inch of the ground he had taken from her. He was no longer a passive thing in that world where she had brought him. And he had certain advantages. He had possessed her for three nights and for three days. She had made herself porous to him; and her sleep had always been his opportunity.

It took her three nights and three days to cast him out. In the first night she struggled with him. She lay with all her senses hushed, and brought the divine darkness round her, but in the darkness she was aware that she struggled. She could build up the walls between them, but she knew that as fast as she built them he tore at them and pulled them down.

She bore herself humbly towards the Power that permitted him. She conceived of it as holiness—estranged and offended; she pleaded with it. She could no longer trust her knowledge of its working, but she tried to come to terms with it. She offered herself as a propitiation, as a substitute for Rodney Lanyon, if there was no other way by which he might be saved.

Apparently, that was not the way it worked. Harding seemed to gain. But, as he kept her awake all night, he had no chance to establish himself,as he would otherwise have done, in her sleep. The odds between her and her adversary were even.

The second night *she* gained. She felt that she had built up her walls again; that she had cut Harding off. With spiritual pain, with the tearing of the bonds of compassion, with a supreme agony of rupture, he parted from her.

Possibly the Power was neutral; for in the dawn after the second night she slept. That sleep left her uncertain

of the event. There was no telling into what unguarded depths it might have carried her. She knew that she had been free of her adversary before she slept, but the chances were that he had got at her in her sleep. Since the Power held the balance even between her and the invader, it would no doubt permit him to enter by any loophole that he could seize.

On the third night, as it were in the last watch, she surrendered, but not to Harding Powell.

She could not say how it came to her ; she was lying in her bed with her eyes shut and her arms held apart from her body, diminishing all contacts, stripping for her long slide into the cleansing darkness, when she found herself recalling some forgotten, yet inalienable knowledge that she had. Something said to her : " Do you not remember ? There is no striving and no crying in the world which you would enter. There is no more appeasing where peace *is*. You cannot make your own terms with the high and holy Power. It is not enough to give yourself for Rodney Lanyon, for he is more to you than you are yourself. Besides, any substitution of self for self would be useless, for there is no more self there. That is why the Power cannot work that way. But if it should require you, here on this side the threshold, to give him up, to give up your desire of him, what then ? Would you loose your hold on him and let him go ? "

" Would you ? " the voice insisted.

She heard herself answer from the pure threshold of the darkness : " I would."

Sleep came on her there ; a divine sleep from beyond the threshold ; sacred, inviolate sleep.

It was the seal upon the bond.

## XII

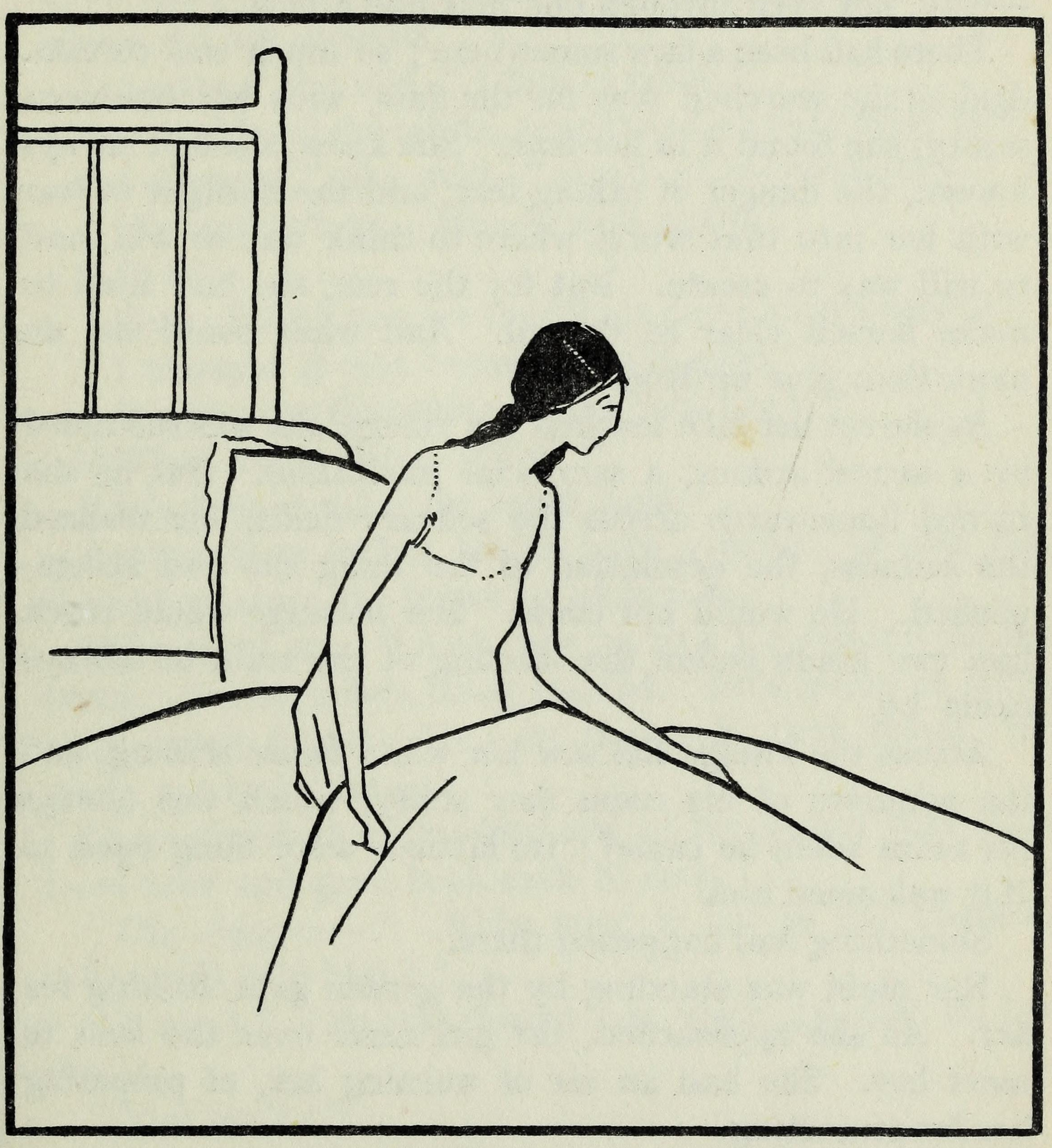
She woke on Friday morning to a vivid and indestructible certainty of escape.

But there had been a condition attached to her deliverance; and it was borne in on her that instead of waiting for the Power to force its terms on her, she would do well to be beforehand with it. Friday was Rodney's day, and this time she knew that he would come. His coming, of course, was nothing, but he had told her plainly that he would not go. She must, therefore, wire to him not to come.

In order to do this she had to get up early and walk about a mile to the nearest village. She took the shortest way, which was by the Farm bridge, and up the slanting path to the far end of the wood. She knew vaguely that once, as she turned the corner of the wood, there had been horrors, and that the divine beauty of green pastures and still waters had appeared to her as a valley of the shadow of evil, but she had no more memory of what she had seen than of a foul dream, three nights dead. She went at first uplifted in the joy of her deliverance, drawing into her the light and fragrance of the young morning. Then she remembered Harding Powell. She had noticed as she passed the Farm-house that the blinds were drawn again in all the windows. That was because Harding and Milly were gone. She thought of Harding, of Milly, with an immense tenderness and compassion, but also with lucidity, with sanity. They had gone—yesterday—and she had not seen them. That could not be helped. She had done all that was possible. She could not have seen them as long as the least taint of Harding's malady

remained with her. And how could she have faced Milly after having broken her word to her ?

Not that she regretted even that, the breaking of her word, so sane was she. She could conceive that, if it had



not been for Rodney Lanyon, she might have had the courage to have gone on. She might have considered that she was bound to save Harding, even at the price of her own sanity, since there *was* her word to Milly. But it might be questioned whether by holding on to him she would have kept it, whether she really could have saved

him that way. She was no more than a vehicle, a crystal vessel for the inscrutable and secret Power, and in destroying her utterly, Harding would have destroyed himself. You could not transmit the Power through a broken crystal —why, not even through one that had a flaw.

There had been a flaw somewhere ; so much was certain. And as she searched now for the flaw, with her luminous sanity, she found it in her fear. She knew, she had always known, the danger of taking fear, and the thought of fear with her into that world where to think was to will, and to will was to create. But for the rest, she had tried to make herself clear as crystal. And what could she do more than give up Rodney ?

As she set her face towards the village, she was sustained by a sacred ardour, a sacrificial exaltation. But as she turned homewards across the solitary fields, she realized the sadness, the desolation of the thing she had accomplished. He would not come. Her message would reach him two hours before the starting of the train he always came by.

Across the village she saw her white house shining, and the windows of his room (her study, which was always his room when he came) ; its lattices were flung open as if it welcomed him.

Something had happened there.

Her maid was standing by the garden gate, looking for her. As she approached, the girl came over the field to meet her. She had an air of warning her, of preparing her for something.

It was Mrs. Powell, the maid said. She had come again. She was in there, waiting for Miss Agatha. She wouldn't go away ; she had gone straight in. She was in an awful state. The maid thought it was something to do with Mr. Powell.

They had not gone, then.

"If I were you, miss," the maid was saying, "I wouldn't see her."

"Of course I shall see her."

She went at once into the room where Rodney might have been, where Milly was. Milly rose from the corner where she sat averted.

"Agatha," she said, "I had to come."

Agatha kissed the white, suppliant face that Milly lifted.

"I thought," she said, "you'd gone—yesterday."

"We couldn't go. He—he's ill again."

"Ill?"

"Yes. Didn't you see the blinds down as you passed?"

"I thought it was because you'd gone."

"It's because that *thing's* come back again."

"When did it come, Milly?"

"It's been coming for three days."

Agatha drew in her breath with a pang. It was just three days since she began to let him go.

Milly went on. "And now he won't come out of the house. He says he's being hunted. He's afraid of being seen, being found. He's in there—in that room. He made me lock him in."

They stared at each other and at the horror that their faces took and gave back each to each.

"Oh, Aggy——" Milly cried it out in her anguish. "You *will* help him?"

"I can't." Agatha heard her voice go dry in her throat.

"You *can't?*"

Agatha shook her head.

"You mean you haven't, then?"

"I haven't. I couldn't."

"But you told me—you told me you were giving yourself up to it. You said that was why you couldn't see us."

"It *was* why. Do sit down, Milly."

They sat down, still staring at each other. Agatha faced the window, so that the light ravaged her.

Milly went on. "That was why I left you alone. I thought you were going on. You said you wouldn't let him go; you promised me you'd keep on——"

"I did keep on, till——"

But Milly had only paused to hold down a sob. Her voice broke out again, clear, harsh, accusing.

"What were you doing all that time?"

"Of course," said Agatha, "you're bound to think I let you down."

"What am I to think?"

"Milly—I asked you not to think it was me."

"Of course I knew it was the Power, not you. But you had hold of it. You did something. Something that other people can't do. You did it for one night, and that night he was well. You kept on for six weeks, and he was well all that time. You leave off for three days—I know when you left off—and he's ill again. And then you tell me it isn't you. It *is* you; and if it's you, you can't give him up. You can't stand by, Aggy, and refuse to help him. You know what it was. How can you bear to let him suffer? How can you?"

"I can, because I must."

"And why must you?"

Milly raised her head more in defiance than in supplication.

"Because—I told you—I might give out. Well—I *have* given out."

"You told me the Power can't give out—that you've only got to hold on to it—that it's no effort. I'm only asking you, Aggy, to hold on."

"You don't know what you're asking."

"I'm asking you only to do what you have done, to give

five minutes in the day to him. You said it was enough. Only five minutes. It isn't much to ask."

Agatha sighed.

"What difference could it make to you—five minutes?"

"You don't understand," said Agatha.

"I do. I don't ask you to see him, or to bother with him; only to go on as you were doing."

"You don't understand. It isn't possible to explain it. I can't go on."

"I see. You're tired, Aggy. Well—not now, not to-day. But later, when you're rested, won't you?"

"Oh, Milly, dear Milly, if I could——"

"You can. You will. I know you will——"

"No. You must understand it. Never again. Never again."

"Never?"

"Never."

There was a long silence. At last Milly's voice crept through, strained and thin, feebly argumentative, the voice of a thing defeated and yet unconvinced.

"I don't understand you, Agatha. You say it isn't you; you say you're only a connecting link; that you do nothing; that the Power that does it is inexhaustible; that there's nothing it can't do, nothing it won't do for us, and yet you go and cut yourself off from it—deliberately, from the thing you believe to be divine."

"I haven't cut myself off from it."

"You've cut Harding off," said Milly. "If you refuse to hold him."

"That wouldn't cut him off—from It. But, Milly, holding him was bad; it wasn't safe."

"It saved him."

"All the same, Milly, it wasn't safe. The thing itself isn't."

"The Power? The divine thing?"

"Yes. It's divine and it's—it's terrible. It does terrible things to us."

"How could it? If it's divine, wouldn't it be compassionate? Do you suppose it's less compassionate than—*you* are? Why, Agatha, when it's goodness and purity itself——?"

"Goodness and purity are terrible. We don't understand it. It's got its own laws. What you call prayer's all right—it would be safe, I mean—I suppose it might get answered anyway, however we fell short. But *this*—this is different. It's the highest, Milly; and if you rush in and make for the highest, can't you see, oh, can't you *see* how it might break you? Can't you see what it requires of *you*? Absolute purity. I told you, Milly. You have to be crystal to it—crystal without a flaw."

"And—if there were a flaw?"

"The whole thing, don't you see, would break down; it would be no good. In fact, it would be awfully dangerous."

"To whom?"

"To you—to them, the people you're helping. You make a connection; you smash down all the walls so that you—you get through to each other; and supposing there was something wrong with *you*, and it doesn't work any longer (the Power, I mean), don't you see you might do harm where you were trying to help?"

"But—Agatha—there was nothing wrong with you."

"How do I know? Can anybody be sure there's nothing wrong with them?"

"You think," said Milly, "there was a flaw somewhere?"

"There must have been—somewhere——"

"What was it? Can't you find out? Can't you think? Think."

"Sometimes—I've thought it may have been my fear."

"Fear?"

"Yes, it's the worst thing. Don't you remember, I told you not to be afraid?"

"But, Agatha, you were *not* afraid."

"I was—afterwards. I got frightened."

"*You?* And you told *me* not to be afraid," said Milly.

"I had to tell you."

"And I wasn't afraid—afterwards. I believed in you. He believed in you."

"You shouldn't have. You shouldn't. That was just it."

"That was it? I suppose you'll say next it was I who frightened you?"

As they faced each other there, Agatha, with the terrible, the almost supernatural lucidity she had, saw what was making Milly say that. Milly had been frightened; she felt that she had probably communicated her fright; she knew that was dangerous, and she knew that if it had done harm to Harding, she, and not Agatha, would be responsible. And because she couldn't face her responsibility, she was trying to fasten upon Agatha some other fault than fear.

"No, Milly, I don't say you frightened me; it was my own fear."

"What was there for *you* to be afraid of?"

Agatha was silent. That was what she must never tell her, not even to make her understand. She did not know what Milly was trying to think of her; Milly might think what she liked; but she should never know what her terror had been and her danger.

Agatha's silence helped Milly.

"Nothing," she said, "will make me believe it was your fear that did it. That would never have made you give Harding up. Besides, you were not afraid at first, though you may have been afterwards."

"Afterwards?"

It was her own word, but it had as yet no significance for her.

"After—whatever it was you gave him up for. You gave him up for something."

"I did not. I never gave him up until I was afraid."

"You gave It up. You wouldn't have done that if there had not been something. Something that stood between."

"If," said Agatha, "you could only tell me what it was."

"I can't tell you. I don't know what came to you. I only know that if I'd had a gift like that, I would not have given it up for anything. I wouldn't have let anything come between. I'd have kept myself——"

"I did keep myself—for it. I couldn't keep myself entirely for Harding; there were other things, other people. I couldn't give them up for Harding or for anybody."

"Are you quite sure you kept yourself what you were, Aggy?"

"What *was* I?"

"My dear—you were absolutely pure. You said *that* was the condition."

"Yes. And, don't you see, who *is* absolutely? If you thought I was, you didn't know me."

As she spoke she heard the sharp click of the latch as the garden gate fell to; she had her back to the window so that she saw nothing, but she heard footsteps that she knew, resolute and energetic footsteps that hurried to their end. She felt the red blood surge into her face, and saw that Milly's face was white with another passion, and that Milly's eyes were fixed on the figure of the man who came up the garden path. And without looking at her Milly answered:

"I don't know now; but I think I see, my dear——"

In Milly's pause the door-bell rang violently. Milly rose and let her have it. "What the flaw in the crystal was."

## XIII

Rodney entered the room, and it was then that Milly looked at her. Milly's face was no longer the face of passion, but of sadness and reproach, almost of recovered incredulity. It questioned rather than accused her. It said unmistakably, " You gave him up for *that ?* "

Agatha's voice recalled her. " Milly, I think you know Mr. Lanyon."

Rodney, in acknowledging Milly's presence, did not look at her. He saw nothing there but Agatha's face, which showed him at last the expression that to his eyes had always been latent in it, the look of the tragic, hidden soul of terror that he had divined in her. He saw her at last as he had known he should some day see her. Terror was no longer there, but it had possessed her ; it had passed through her and destroyed that other look she had from her lifted mouth and hair, the look of a thing borne on wings. Now, with her wings beaten, with her white face and haggard eyes, he saw her as a flying thing tracked down and trampled under the feet of the pursuer. He saw it in one flash as he stood there holding Milly's hand.

Milly's face had no significance for him. He didn't see it. When at last he looked at her his eyes questioned her ; they demanded an account from her of what he saw.

For Agatha, Milly's face, prepared as it was for leave-taking, remained charged with meaning ; it refused to divest itself of reproach and of the incredulity that challenged her. Agatha rose to it.

" You're not going, Milly, just because he's come ? You needn't."

Milly *was* going.

He rose to it also.

If Mrs. Powell *would* go like that—in that distressing way—she must at least let him walk back with her. Agatha wouldn't mind. He hadn't seen Mrs. Powell for ages.

He had risen to such a height that Milly was bewildered by him. She let him walk back with her to the Farm and a little way beyond it. Agatha said good-bye to Milly at the garden gate and watched them go. Then she went up into her own room.

He was gone so long that she thought he was never coming back again. She didn't want him to come back just yet, but she knew she was not afraid to see him. It didn't occur to her to wonder why, in spite of her message, he had come, nor why he had come by an earlier train than usual; she supposed he must have started before her message could have reached him. All that, his coming or his not coming, mattered so little now.

For now the whole marvellous thing was clear to her. She knew the secret of the gift. She saw luminously, almost transparently, the way it worked. Milly had shown her. Milly knew; Milly had seen; she had put her finger on the flaw.

It was not fear; Milly had been right there too. Until the moment when Harding Powell had begun to get at her Agatha had never known what fear felt like. It was the strain of mortality in her love for Rodney; the hidden thing, unforeseen and unacknowledged, working its work in the darkness. It had been there all the time, undermining her secret, sacred places. It had made the first breach through which the fear that was not *her* fear had entered. She could tell the very moment when it happened.

She had blamed poor little Milly; but it was the flaw, the flaw that had given their deadly point to Milly's interference and Harding's importunity. But for the

flaw they could not have penetrated her profound serenity. Her gift might have been trusted to dispose of them.

For before that moment the gift had worked indubitably; it had never missed once. She looked back on its wonders; on the healing of herself; the first healing of Rodney and Harding Powell; the healing of Bella. It had worked with a peculiar rhythm of its own, and always in a strict, a measurable proportion to the purity of her intention. To Harding's case she had brought nothing but innocent love and clean compassion; to Bella's nothing but a selfless and beneficent desire to help. And because in Bella's case at least she had been flawless, of the three, Bella's was the only cure that had lasted. It had most marvellously endured. And because of the flaw in her she had left Harding worse than she had found him. No wonder that poor Milly had reproached her.

It mattered nothing that Milly's reproaches went too far, that in Milly's eyes she stood suspected of material sin (anything short of the tangible had never been enough for Milly); it mattered nothing that (though Milly mightn't believe it) she had sinned only in her thought; for Agatha, who knew, that was enough; more than enough; it counted more.

For thought went wider and deeper than any deed; it was of the very order of the Powers intangible wherewith she had worked. Why, thoughts unborn and shapeless, that run under the threshold and hide there, counted more in that world where It, the Unuttered, the Hidden and the Secret, reigned.

She knew now that her surrender of last night had been the ultimate deliverance. She was not afraid any more to meet Rodney; for she had been made pure from desire; she was safeguarded for ever.

He had been gone about an hour when she heard him at the gate again and in the room below.

She went down to him. He came forward to meet her as she entered; he closed the door behind them; but her eyes held them apart.

"Did you not get my wire?" she said.

"Yes. I got it."

"Then why——?"

"Why did I come? Because I knew what was happening. I wasn't going to leave you here for Powell to terrify you out of your life."

"Surely—you thought they'd gone?"

"I knew they hadn't or you wouldn't have wired."

"But I would. I'd have wired in any case."

"To put me off?"

"To—put—you—off."

"Why?"

He questioned without divination or forewarning. The veil of flesh was as yet over his eyes, so that he could not see.

"Because I didn't mean that you should come, that you should ever come again, Rodney."

He smiled.

"So you went back on me, did you?"

"If you call it going back."

She longed for him to see.

"That was only because you were frightened," he said.

He turned from her and paced the room uneasily, as if he saw. Presently he drew up by the hearth and stood there for a moment, puzzling it out; and she thought he had seen.

He hadn't. He faced her with a smile again.

"But it was no good, dear, was it? As if I wouldn't know what it meant. You wouldn't have done it if you hadn't been ill. You lost your nerve. No wonder, with those Powells preying on you, body and soul, for weeks."

"No, Rodney, no. I didn't *want* you to come back.

And I think—now—it would be better if you didn't stay."

It seemed to her now that perhaps he had seen and was fighting what he saw.

"I'm not going to stay," he said, "I am going—in another hour—to take Powell away somewhere."

He took it up where she had made him leave it. "Then, Agatha, I shall come back again. I shall come back—let me see—on Sunday."

She swept that aside.

"Where are you going to take him?"

"To a man I know who'll look after him."

"Oh, Rodney, it'll break Milly's heart."

She had come, in her agitation, to where he stood. She sat on the couch by the corner of the hearth, and he looked down at her there.

"No," he said, "it won't. It'll give him a chance to get all right. I've convinced her it's the only thing to do. He can't be left here for you to look after."

"Did she tell you?"

"She wouldn't have told me a thing if I hadn't made her. I dragged it out of her, bit by bit."

"Rodney, that was cruel of you."

"Was it? I don't care. I'd have done it if she'd bled."

"What did she tell you?"

"Pretty nearly everything, I imagine. Quite enough for me to see what, between them, they've been doing to you."

"Did she tell you *how he got well?*"

He did not answer all at once. It was as if he drew back before the question, alien and disturbed, shirking the discerned, yet unintelligible issue.

"Did she tell you, Rodney?" Agatha repeated.

"Well, yes. She *told* me."

He seemed to be making, reluctantly, some admission. He sat down beside her, and his movement had the air of ending the discussion. But he did not look at her.

"What do you make of it?" she said.

This time he winced visibly.

"I don't make anything. If it happened—if it happened like *that*, Agatha——"

"It did happen."

"Well, I admit it was uncommonly queer."

He left it there and reverted to his theme.

"But it's no wonder—if you sat down to that for six weeks—it's no wonder you got scared. It's inconceivable to me how that woman could have let you in for him. She knew what he was."

"She didn't know what I was doing till it was done."

"She'd no business to let you go on with it when she did know."

"Ah, but she knew—then—it was all right."

"All right?"

"Absolutely right. Rodney——" She called to him as if she would compel him to see it as it was. "I did no more for him than I did for you and Bella."

He started. "Bella?" he repeated.

He stared at her. He had seen something.

"You wondered how she got all right, didn't you?"

He said nothing.

"That was how."

And still he did not speak. He sat there, leaning forward, staring now at his own clasped hands. He looked as if he bowed himself before the irrefutable.

"And there was you, too, before that."

"I know," he said then; "I can understand *that*. But —why Bella?"

"Because Bella was the only way."

She had not followed his thoughts, nor he hers.

"The only way?" he said.

"To work it. To keep the thing pure. I had to be certain of my motive, and I knew that if I could give Bella back to you that would prove—to me, I mean—that it was pure."

"But Bella," he said softly—"Bella. Powell I can understand—and me."

It was clear that he could get over all the rest. But he could not get over Bella. Bella's case convinced him. Bella's case could not be explained away or set aside. Before Bella's case he was baffled, utterly defeated. He faced it with a certain awe.

"You were right, after all, about Bella," he said at last. "And so was I. She didn't care for me, as I told you. But she does care now."

She knew it.

"That was what I was trying for," she said. "That was what I meant."

"You meant it?"

"It was the only way. That's why I didn't want you to come back."

He sat silent, taking that in.

"Don't you see now how it works? You have to be pure crystal. That's why I didn't want you to come back."

Obscurely, through the veil of flesh, he saw.

"And I am never to come back?" he said.

"You will not need to come."

"You mean you won't want me?"

"No. I shall not want you. Because, when I did want you, it broke down."

He smiled.

"I see. When you want me, it breaks down."

He rallied for a moment. He made his one last pitiful

stand against the supernatural thing that was conquering him.

He had risen to go.

"And when *I* want to come, when I long for you, what then?"

"*Your* longing will make no difference."

She smiled also, as if she foresaw how it would work, and that soon, very soon, he would cease to long for her.

His hand was on the door. He smiled back at her.

"I don't want to shake your faith in it," he said.

"You can't shake my faith in It."

"Still—it breaks down. It breaks down," he cried.

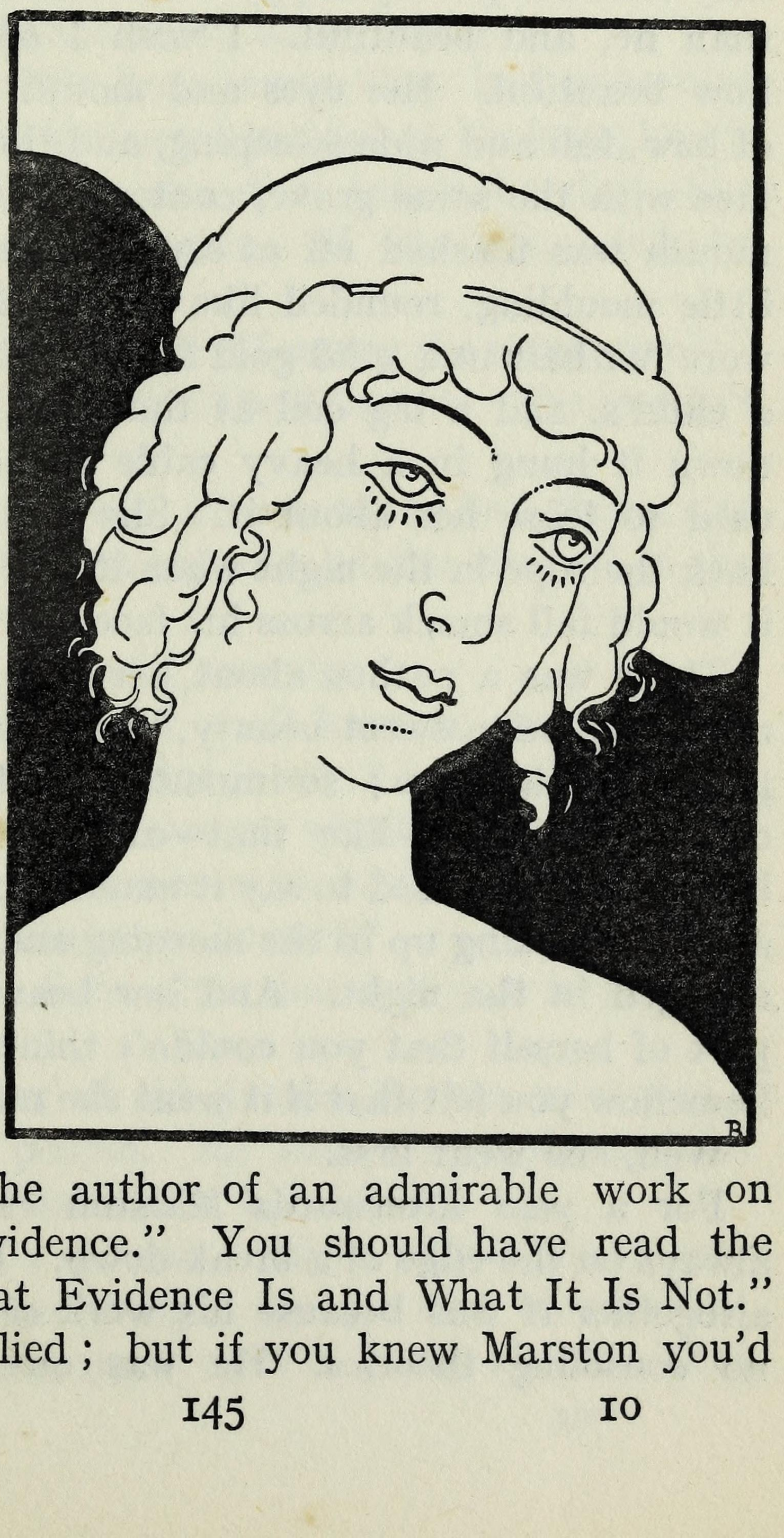
"Never. You don't understand," she said. "It was the flaw in the crystal."

Soon, very soon he would know it. Already he had shown submission.

She had no doubt of the working of the Power. Bella remained as a sign that it had once been, and that, given the flawless crystal, it should be again.

# THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE

# THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE



THIS is the story Marston told me. He didn't want to tell it. I had to tear it from him bit by bit. I've pieced the bits together in their time order, and explained things here and there, but the facts are the facts he gave me. There's nothing that I didn't get out of him somehow.

Out of *him*—you'll admit my source is unimpeachable. Edward Marston, the great K.C., and the author of an admirable work on "The Logic of Evidence." You should have read the chapters on "What Evidence Is and What It Is Not." You may say he lied; but if you knew Marston you'd

know he wouldn't lie, for the simple reason that he's incapable of inventing anything. So that, if you ask me whether I believe this tale, all I can say is, I believe the things happened, because he said they happened and because they happened to him. As for what they *were*—well, I don't pretend to explain it, neither would he.

You know he was married twice. He adored his first wife, Rosamund, and Rosamund adored him. I suppose they were completely happy. She was fifteen years younger than he, and beautiful. I wish I could make you see how beautiful. Her eyes and mouth had the same sort of bow, full and wide-sweeping, and they stared out of her face with the same grave, contemplative innocence. Her mouth was finished off at each corner with the loveliest little moulding, rounded like the pistil of a flower. She wore her hair in a solid gold fringe over her forehead, like a child's, and a big coil at the back. When it was let down it hung in a heavy cable to her waist. Marston used to tease her about it. She had a trick of tossing back the rope in the night when it was hot under her, and it would fall smack across his face and hurt him.

There was a pathos about her that I can't describe—a curious, pure, sweet beauty, like a child's; perfect, and perfectly immature; so immature that you couldn't conceive its lasting—like that—any more than childhood lasts. Marston used to say it made him nervous. He was afraid of waking up in the morning and finding that it had changed in the night. And her beauty was so much a part of herself that you couldn't think of her without it. Somehow you felt that if it went she must go too.

Well, she went first.

For a year afterwards Marston existed dangerously, always on the edge of a break-down. If he didn't go over altogether it was because his work saved him. He had no consoling theories. He was one of those bigoted

materialists of the nineteenth century type who believe that consciousness is a purely physiological function, and that when your body's dead, *you're* dead. He saw no reason to suppose the contrary. "When you consider," he used to say, "the nature of the evidence!"

It's as well to bear this in mind, so as to realize that he hadn't any bias or anticipation. Rosamund survived for him only in his memory. And in his memory he was still in love with her. At the same time he used to discuss quite cynically the chances of his marrying again.

It seems that in their honeymoon they had gone into that. Rosamund said she hated to think of his being lonely and miserable, supposing she died before he did. She would like him to marry again. If, she stipulated, he married the right woman.

He had put it to her: "And if I marry the wrong one?"

And she had said, That would be different. She couldn't bear that.

He remembered all this afterwards; but there was nothing in it to make him suppose, at the time, that she would take action.

We talked it over, he and I, one night.

"I suppose," he said, "I shall have to marry again. It's a physical necessity. But it won't be anything more. I shan't marry the sort of woman who'll expect anything more. I won't put another woman in Rosamund's place. There'll be no unfaithfulness about it."

And there wasn't. Soon after that first year he married Pauline Silver.

She was a daughter of old Justice Parker, who was a friend of Marston's people. He hadn't seen the girl till she came home from India after her divorce.

Yes, there'd been a divorce. Silver had behaved very decently. He'd let her bring it against *him*, to save her. But there were some queer stories going about. They

didn't get round to Marston, because he was so mixed up with her people ; and if they had he wouldn't have believed them. He'd made up his mind he'd marry Pauline the first minute he'd seen her. She was handsome ; the hard, black, white and vermilion kind, with a little aristocratic nose and a lascivious mouth.

It was, as he had meant it to be, nothing but physical infatuation on both sides. No question of Pauline's taking Rosamund's place.

Marston had a big case on at the time.

They were in such a hurry that they couldn't wait till it was over ; and as it kept him in London they agreed to put off their honeymoon till the autumn, and he took her straight to his own house in Curzon Street.

This, he admitted afterwards, was the part he hated. The Curzon Street house was associated with Rosamund ; especially their bedroom—Rosamund's bedroom—and his library. The library was the room Rosamund liked best, because it was his room. She had her place in the corner by the hearth, and they were always alone there together in the evenings when his work was done, and when it wasn't done she would still sit with him, keeping quiet in her corner with a book.

Luckily for Marston, at the first sight of the library Pauline took a dislike to it.

I can hear her. " Br-rr-rh ! There's something beastly about this room, Edward. I can't think how you can sit in it."

And Edward, a little caustic :

" *You* needn't, if you don't like it."

" I certainly shan't."

She stood there—I can see her—on the hearthrug by Rosamund's chair, looking uncommonly handsome and lascivious. He was going to take her in his arms and kiss her vermilion mouth, when, he said, something stopped

him. Stopped him clean, as if it had risen up and stepped between them. He supposed it was the memory of Rosamund, vivid in the place that had been hers.

You see it was just that place, of silent, intimate communion, that Pauline would never take. And the rich, coarse, contented creature didn't even want to take it. He saw that he would be left alone there, all right, with his memory.

But the bedroom was another matter. That, Pauline had made it understood from the beginning, she would have to have. Indeed, there was no other he could well have offered her. The drawing-room covered the whole of the first floor. The bedrooms above were cramped, and this one had been formed by throwing the two front rooms into one. It looked south, and the bathroom opened out of it at the back. Marston's small northern room had a door on the narrow landing at right angles to his wife's door. He could hardly expect her to sleep there, still less in any of the tight boxes on the top floor. He said he wished he had sold the Curzon Street house.

But Pauline was enchanted with the wide, three-windowed piece that was to be hers. It had been exquisitely furnished for poor little Rosamund; all seventeenth century walnut wood, Bokhara rugs, thick silk curtains, deep blue with purple linings, and a big, rich bed covered with a purple counterpane embroidered in blue.

One thing Marston insisted on: that *he* should sleep on Rosamund's side of the bed, and Pauline in his own old place. He didn't want to see Pauline's body where Rosamund's had been. Of course he had to lie about it and pretend he had always slept on the side next the window.

I can see Pauline going about in that room, looking at everything; looking at herself, her black, white and vermilion, in the glass that had held Rosamund's pure rose

and gold; opening the wardrobe where Rosamund's dresses used to hang, sniffing up the delicate, flower scent of Rosamund, not caring, covering it with her own thick trail.



And Marston (who cared abominably)—I can see him getting more miserable and at the same time more excited as the wedding evening went on. He took her to the play to fill up the time, or perhaps to get her out of Rosamund's rooms; God knows. I can see them sitting in the stalls, bored and restless, starting up and going out before the thing was half over, and coming back to that house in Curzon Street before eleven o'clock.

It wasn't much past eleven when he went to her room.

I told you her door was at right angles to his, and the landing was narrow, so that anybody standing by Pauline's door must have been seen the minute he opened his. He hadn't even to cross the landing to get to her.

Well, Marston swears that there was nothing there when he opened his own door; but when he came to Pauline's he saw Rosamund standing up before it; and, he said, "*She wouldn't let me in.*"

Her arms were stretched out, barring the passage. Oh yes, he saw her face, Rosamund's face; I gathered that it was utterly sweet, and utterly inexorable. He couldn't pass her.

So he turned into his own room, backing, he says, so that he could keep looking at her. And when he stood on the threshold of his own door she wasn't there.

No, he wasn't frightened. He couldn't tell me what he felt; but he left his door open all night because he couldn't bear to shut it on her. And he made no other attempt to go in to Pauline; he was so convinced that the phantasm of Rosamund would come again and stop him.

I don't know what sort of excuse he made to Pauline the next morning. He said she was very stiff and sulky all day; and no wonder. He was still infatuated with her, and I don't think that the phantasm of Rosamund had put him off Pauline in the least. In fact, he persuaded himself that the thing was nothing but a hallucination, due, no doubt, to his excitement.

Anyhow, he didn't expect to see it at the door again the next night.

Yes. It was there. Only, this time, he said, it drew aside to let him pass. It smiled at him, as if it were saying, "Go in, if you must; you'll see what'll happen."

He had no sense that it had followed him into the room; he felt certain that, this time, it would let him be.

It was when he approached Pauline's bed, which had been Rosamund's bed, that she appeared again, standing between it and him, and stretching out her arms to keep him back.

All that Pauline could see was her bridegroom backing and backing, then standing there, fixed, and the look on his face. That in itself was enough to frighten her.

She said, " What's the matter with you, Edward ? "

He didn't move.

" What are you standing there for ? Why don't you come to bed ? "

Then Marston seems to have lost his head and blurted it out :

" I can't. I can't."

" Can't what ? " said Pauline from the bed.

" Can't sleep with you. She won't let me."

" She ? "

" Rosamund. My wife. She's there."

" What on earth are you talking about ? "

" She's there, I tell you. She won't let me. She's pushing me back."

He says Pauline must have thought he was drunk or something. Remember, she *saw* nothing but Edward, his face, and his mysterious attitude. He must have looked very drunk.

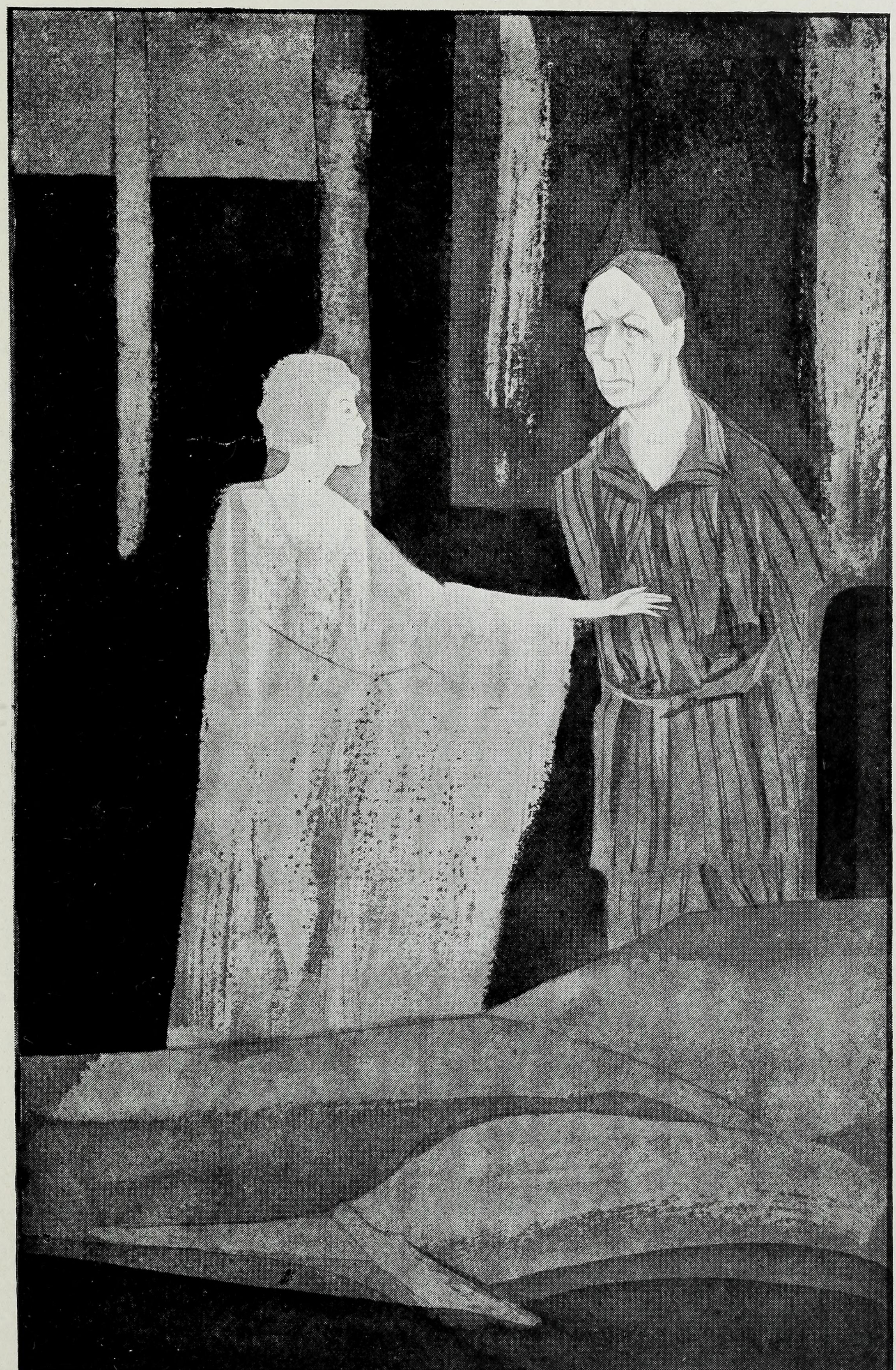
She sat up in bed, with her hard, black eyes blazing away at him, and told him to leave the room that minute. Which he did.

The next day she had it out with him. I gathered that she kept on talking about the " state " he was in.

" You came to my room, Edward, in a *disgraceful* state."

I suppose Marston said he was sorry ; but he couldn't help it ; he wasn't drunk. He stuck to it that Rosamund was there. He had seen her. And Pauline said, if he wasn't drunk then he must be mad, and he said meekly, " Perhaps I *am* mad."

That set her off, and she broke out in a fury. He was no more mad than she was ; but he didn't care for her ; he



. . . stretching out her arms to keep him back.

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was making ridiculous excuses ; shamming, to put her off. There was some other woman.

Marston asked her what on earth she supposed he'd married her for. Then she burst out crying and said she didn't know.

Then he seems to have made it up with Pauline. He managed to make her believe he wasn't lying, that he really had seen something, and between them they arrived at a rational explanation of the appearance. He had been overworking. Rosamund's phantasm was nothing but a hallucination of his exhausted brain.

This theory carried him on till bed-time. Then, he says, he began to wonder what would happen, what Rosamund's phantasm would do next. Each morning his passion for Pauline had come back again, increased by frustration, and it worked itself up crescendo, towards night. Supposing he *had* seen Rosamund. He might see her again. He had become suddenly subject to hallucinations. But as long as you *knew* you were hallucinated you were all right.

So what they agreed to do that night was by way of precaution, in case the thing came again. It might even be sufficient in itself to prevent his seeing anything.

Instead of going in to Pauline he was to get into the room before she did, and she was to come to him there. That, they said, would break the spell. To make him feel even safer he meant to be in bed before Pauline came.

Well, he got into the room all right.

It was when he tried to get into bed that—he saw her (I mean Rosamund).

She was lying there, in his place next the window, her own place, lying in her immature child-like beauty and sleeping, the firm full bow of her mouth softened by sleep. She was perfect in every detail, the lashes of her shut eyelids golden on her white cheeks, the solid gold of her square

fringe shining, and the great braided golden rope of her hair flung back on the pillow.

He knelt down by the bed and pressed his forehead into the bedclothes, close to her side. He declared he could feel her breathe.

He stayed there for the twenty minutes Pauline took to undress and come to him. He says the minutes stretched out like hours. Pauline found him still kneeling with his face pressed into the bedclothes. When he got up he staggered.

She asked him what he was doing and why he wasn't in bed. And he said, " It's no use. I can't. I can't."

But somehow he couldn't tell her that Rosamund was there. Rosamund was too sacred ; he couldn't talk about her. He only said :

" You'd better sleep in my room to-night."

He was staring down at the place in the bed where he still saw Rosamund. Pauline couldn't have seen anything but the bedclothes, the sheet smoothed above an invisible breast, and the hollow in the pillow. She said she'd do nothing of the sort. She wasn't going to be frightened out of her own room. He could do as he liked.

He couldn't leave them there ; he couldn't leave Pauline with Rosamund, and he couldn't leave Rosamund with Pauline. So he sat up in a chair with his back turned to the bed. No. He didn't make any attempt to go back. He says he knew she was still lying there, guarding his place, which was her place. The odd thing is that he wasn't in the least disturbed or frightened or surprised. He took the whole thing as a matter of course. And presently he dozed off into a sleep.

A scream woke him and the sound of a violent body leaping out of the bed and thudding on to its feet. He switched on the light and saw the bedclothes flung back and Pauline standing on the floor with her mouth open.

He went to her and held her. She was cold to the touch and shaking with terror, and her jaws dropped as if she was palsied.

She said, " Edward, there's something in the bed."

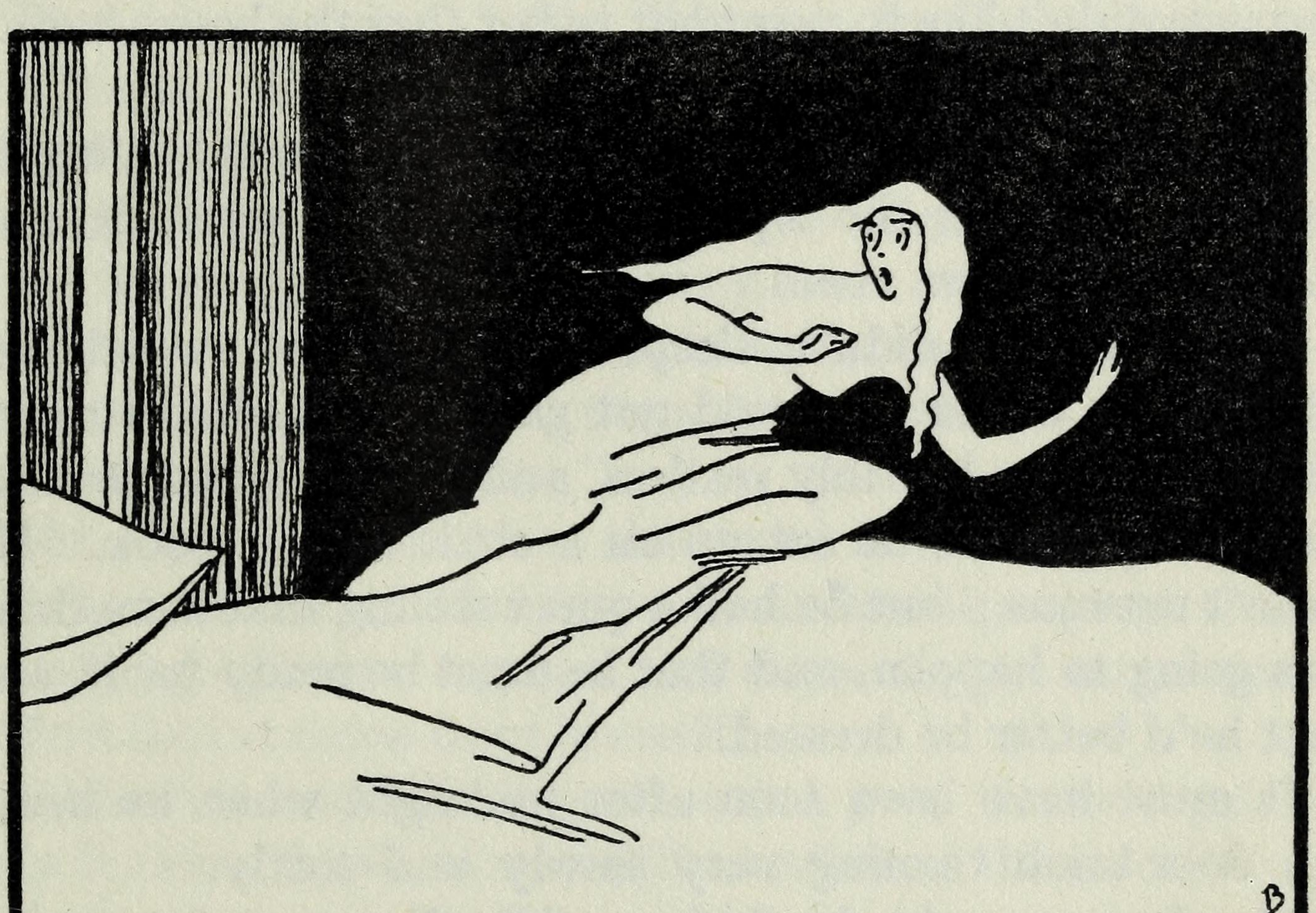
He glanced again at the bed. It was empty.

" There isn't," he said. " Look."

He stripped the bed to the foot-rail, so that she could see.

" There *was* something."

" Do you see it."



" No. I felt it."

She told him. First something had come swinging, smack across her face. A thick, heavy rope of woman's hair. It had waked her. Then she had put out her hands and felt the body. A woman's body, soft and horrible; her fingers had sunk in the shallow breasts. Then she had screamed and jumped.

And she couldn't stay in the room. The room, she said, was " beastly."

She slept in Marston's room, in his small single bed, and he sat up with her all night, on a chair.

She believed now that he had really seen something, and she remembered that the library was beastly, too. Haunted by something. She supposed that was what she had felt. Very well. Two rooms in the house were haunted; their bedroom and the library. They would just have to avoid those two rooms. She had made up her mind, you see, that it was nothing but a case of an ordinary haunted house; the sort of thing you're always hearing about and never believe in till it happens to yourself. Marston didn't like to point out to her that the house hadn't been haunted till she came into it.

The following night, the fourth night, she was to sleep in the spare room on the top floor, next to the servants, and Marston in his own room.

But Marston didn't sleep. He kept on wondering whether he would or would not go up to Pauline's room. That made him horribly restless, and instead of undressing and going to bed, he sat up on a chair with a book. He wasn't nervous; but he had a queer feeling that something was going to happen, and that he must be ready for it, and that he'd better be dressed.

It must have been soon after midnight when he heard the door knob turning very slowly and softly.

The door opened behind him and Pauline came in, moving without a sound, and stood before him. It gave him a shock; for he had been thinking of Rosamund, and when he heard the door knob turn it was the phantasm of Rosamund that he expected to see coming in. He says, for the first minute, it was this appearance of Pauline that struck him as the uncanny and unnatural thing.

She had nothing, absolutely nothing on but a transparent white chiffony sort of dressing-gown. She was trying to undo it. He could see her hands shaking as her fingers fumbled with the fastenings.

He got up suddenly, and they just stood there before

each other, saying nothing, staring at each other. He was fascinated by her, by the sheer glamour of her body, gleaming white through the thin stuff, and by the movement of her fingers. I think I've said she was a beautiful woman, and her beauty at that moment was overpowering.

And still he stared at her without saying anything. It sounds as if their silence lasted quite a long time, but in reality it couldn't have been more than some fraction of a second.

Then she began. "Oh, Edward, for God's sake *say* something. Oughtn't I to have come?"

And she went on without waiting for an answer. "Are you thinking of *her?* Because, if—if you are, I'm not going to let her drive you away from me. . . . I'm not going to. . . . She'll keep on coming as long as we don't—— Can't you see that this is the way to stop it. . . ? When you take me in your arms."

She slipped off the loose sleeves of the chiffon thing and it fell to her feet. Marston says he heard a queer sound, something between a groan and a grunt, and was amazed to find that it came from himself.

He hadn't touched her yet—mind you, it went quicker than it takes to tell, it was still an affair of the fraction of a second—they were holding out their arms to each other, when the door opened again without a sound, and, without visible passage, the phantasm was there. It came incredibly fast, and thin at first, like a shaft of light sliding between them. It didn't do anything; there was no beating of hands, only, as it took on its full form, its perfect likeness of flesh and blood, it made its presence felt like a push, a force, driving them asunder.

Pauline hadn't seen it yet. She thought it was Marston who was beating her back. She cried out: "Oh, don't, don't push me away!" She stooped below the phantasm's guard and clung to his knees, writhing and crying. For a

moment it was a struggle between her moving flesh and that still, supernatural being.

And in that moment Marston realized that he hated Pauline. She was fighting Rosamund with her gross flesh and blood, taking a mean advantage of her embodied state to beat down the heavenly, discarnate thing.

He called to her to let go.

"It's not I," he shouted. "Can't you *see* her?"

Then, suddenly, she saw, and let go, and dropped, crouching on the floor and trying to cover herself. This time she had given no cry.

The phantasm gave way; it moved slowly towards the door, and as it went it looked back over its shoulder at Marston, it trailed a hand, signalling to him to come.

He went out after it, hardly aware of Pauline's naked body that still writhed there, clutching at his feet as they passed, and drew itself after him, like a worm, like a beast, along the floor.

She must have got up at once and followed them out on to the landing; for, as he went down the stairs behind the phantasm, he could see Pauline's face, distorted with lust and terror, peering at them above the stairhead. She saw them descend the last flight, and cross the hall at the bottom and go into the library. The door shut behind them.

Something happened in there. Marston never told me precisely what it was, and I didn't ask him. Anyhow, that finished it.

The next day Pauline ran away to her own people. She couldn't stay in Marston's house because it was haunted by Rosamund, and he wouldn't leave it for the same reason.

And she never came back; for she was not only afraid of Rosamund, she was afraid of Marston. And if she *had* come it wouldn't have been any good. Marston was convinced that, as often as he attempted to get to Pauline,




. . . drew itself after him along the floor.

[*To face p.* 158.

something would stop him. Pauline certainly felt that, if Rosamund were pushed to it, she might show herself in some still more sinister and terrifying form. She knew when she was beaten.

And there was more in it than that. I believe he tried to explain it to her; said he had married her on the assumption that Rosamund was dead, but that now he knew she was alive; she was, as he put it, "there." He tried to make her see that if he had Rosamund he couldn't have *her*. Rosamund's presence in the world annulled their contract.

You see I'm convinced that something *did* happen that night in the library. I say, he never told me precisely what it was, but he once let something out. We were discussing one of Pauline's love-affairs (after the separation she gave him endless grounds for divorce).

"Poor Pauline," he said, "she thinks she's so passionate."

"Well," I said, "wasn't she?"

Then he burst out. "No. She doesn't know what passion is. None of you know. You haven't the faintest conception. You'd have to get rid of your bodies first. *I* didn't know until——"

He stopped himself. I think he was going to say, "until Rosamund came back and showed me." For he leaned forward and whispered: "It isn't a localized affair at all. . . . If you only knew——"

So I don't think it was just faithfulness to a revived memory. I take it there had been, behind that shut door, some experience, some terrible and exquisite contact. More penetrating than sight or touch. More—more extensive: passion at all points of being.

Perhaps the supreme moment of it, the ecstasy, only came when her phantasm had disappeared.

He couldn't go back to Pauline after *that*.

# IF THE DEAD KNEW

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## I

THE voluntary swelled, it rose, it rushed to its climax. The organist tossed back his head with a noble gesture, exalted; he rocked on his bench; his feet shuffled faster and faster, pedalling passionately.

The young girl who stood beside him drew in a deep, rushing breath; her heart swelled; her whole body listened, with hurried senses desiring the climax, the climax, the crash of sound. Her nerves shook as the organist rocked towards her; when he tossed back his head her chin lifted; she loved his playing hands, his rocking body, his superb, excited gesture.

Three times a week Wilfrid Hollyer went down to Lower Wyck, to give Effie Carroll a music lesson; three times a week Effie Carroll came up to Wyck on the Hill to listen to Hollyer's organ practice.

The climax had come. The voluntary fell from its height and died in a long cadence, thinned out, a trickling, trembling diminuendo. It was all over.

The young girl released her breath in a long, trembling sigh.

The organist rose and put out the organ lights. He took Effie by the arm and led her down the short aisles of the little country church and out on to the flagged path of the churchyard between the tombstones.

"Wilfrid," she said, "you're too good for Wyck. You ought to be playing in Gloucester Cathedral."

"I'm not good enough. Perhaps—if I'd been trained——"

"Why weren't you?"

"My mother couldn't afford it. Besides, I couldn't leave her. She hasn't anybody but me."

"I know. You're awfully fond of her, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said shortly.

They had passed down the turn of the street into the Market Square. There was a plot of grass laid down in the north-east corner. Two tall elms stood up on the grass, and behind the elms a small, ivy-covered house with mullioned windows, looking south.

"That's our house," Hollyer said. "Won't you come in and see her?"

They found her sitting by herself in the little cramped, green drawing-room. She was the most beautiful old lady; small, upright and perfect; slender, like a girl, in her grey silk blouse. She had a miniature oval face, pretty and white: a sharp chin, and a wide forehead under a pile of pure white hair. And sorrowful blue eyes, white-lidded, in two rings of mauve and bistre.

She couldn't be so very old, Effie thought. Not more than sixty.

Mrs. Hollyer rose, holding out a fragile hand.

Presently she said: "I wanted to see you; after all you've done for him."

"I? I haven't done anything."

"You've listened to his playing. He can't get anybody to do that for him in Wyck."

"They hear enough of me on Sundays."

"Then they haven't heard him. He plays much better on week-days, when he plays to me," said Effie.

"So I can imagine," Mrs. Hollyer said.



. . . her whole body listened . . .

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"She thinks I'm better than I am," said Hollyer.

"Go on thinking it. That's the way to make him better." She was smiling at Effie as if she liked her.

All through tea-time and after they talked about Wilfrid's playing and Wilfrid and Wyck, and the people of Wyck, and how they knew nothing and cared nothing about Wilfrid's playing.

Twilight came, twilight of October. He was going to walk back with Effie down the hill to Lower Wyck.

As the house door closed behind them he said: "Now you know why I'm nothing but an organist at Wyck."

"Wilfrid, she's the most beautiful thing I've seen yet—your mother. No wonder you can't leave her."

"It isn't that altogether. I mean we're tied here because we can't afford to leave; and because I've got this organ job. I should never have had it anywhere else." He paused. "And you know, I couldn't live on it—without mother. She's got the house."

Effie said nothing.

"So here I am. Thirty-five and still dependent on my mother."

"Oh, Wilfrid, what will you do when—when——"

"When my mother dies? That's the awful thing. I shall have enough then. There'll be the house and her income. I hate to think of it. I don't think of it——"

"You see," he went on, "when I was a kid I was so seedy they didn't think I'd live. So I was brought up to do nothing. Nothing but my playing. They gave me this job just to keep me quiet. And now I'm strong enough, but there's nothing else I can do."

He hung his head, frowning gloomily.

"You know why I'm telling you all this?"

"No. But I'm glad you've told me."

"It's because—because—if I had a decent income,

Effie, I'd ask you to marry me. As it is, I can only hope that you won't ever care for me as I care for you."

"But I *do* care for you. You know I do."

"Would you have married me, Effie? Do you care as much as that?"



"You know I would. I will the minute you ask me."

"I shall never ask you."

"Why not? I can wait."

"My dear, for what?" He paused again. "I can't marry in my mother's life-time."

"Oh, Wilfrid—I didn't mean that. Your dear, beautiful mother. You know I didn't."

"Of course, darling, I know. But there it is."

He left her at the gate of the cottage where she lived with her father.

As he went back up the hill he meditated on his position. He was right to make it clear to her, now that she had begun to care for him. He would have told her long ago if he had known that she cared. Yesterday he didn't know it. But to-day there had been something, in her manner, in her voice, in the way she looked at him in the church after his playing, that had told him.

Poor little Effie. She would have nothing either, unless her father—and Effie's father was a robust man, not quite fifty.

Well—he mustn't think of it. And he mustn't let his mother think. He wondered whether he was too late, whether she had seen anything. He tried to slink past the drawing-room and up the stairs. But his mother had heard him come in. She called to him. He went to her, shame-faced, as if he had committed a sin.

Her large, gentle eyes looked at him, wondering. He could see them wondering.

"Wilfrid," she said suddenly, "do you care for that little girl?"

"What's the good of my caring? I can't marry her. I've just told her so."

"It's too late. She's in love with you. You should have told her before."

"How could I if she didn't care? You can't be fatuous."

"No—poor boy. Poor Effie."

"Mother—why couldn't I have been brought up to a profession?"

"You know why—you weren't strong enough. It was as much as I could do to keep you alive."

"I'm strong enough now."

"Only because I took such care of you. Only because

you hadn't to go out and earn your own living. You'd have been dead before you were twenty if I hadn't kept you with me."

"It would have been better if you'd let me die."

"Don't say that, Wilfrid. What should I have done without you? What should I do without you now?"

"You mean if I married?"

"No, my dear. I'd be glad if you could marry. I don't want to keep you tied to me for ever. If you can get better work and better pay by going anywhere else, I shan't mind your leaving me."

"I shouldn't get anything. I'm not good enough. I shall never be worth more than fifty pounds a year anywhere. We can't live on that."

"If you could live on half my income, I'd give it you, but you couldn't."

"No. We'll just have to wait."

"I hope for your sake, my dear, it won't be too long."

"What do you mean, mother?"

"What did *you* mean?"

"Why, I meant we'd have to wait till I heard of something."

"You *might* have meant something else." She smiled.

"Oh, mother—*don't*."

"Why not?" she said cheerfully.

"You know—you know I couldn't bear it."

"You'll have to bear it some day—I'm an old woman."

"Well, I shall be an old man—by then."

He tossed it back to her, laughing, as he left her to wash his hands and brush his hair. He laughed, to shake off her pathos and to hide his own.

When he talked about waiting, he hadn't meant what she thought he meant. He was simply trying to dismiss a too serious situation with a reassuring levity. Waiting to hear of something? Was it likely he would ever hear

of anything? Could he have made a more frivolous suggestion?

It was she who had faced it. She had made him see how hopeless their case was, his and Effie's. He saw it now, as he saw his own face in the glass, between two hair-brushes, a little drawn, even now, a little sallow and haggard. Not a young face.

He would be an old man—an old man before he could dream of marrying. His mother, after all, was only sixty, and she came of a long-lived family. Her apparent fragility was an illusion; she had never had a day's illness as long as he could remember. Nerves like whipcord, young arteries, and every organ sound. She would live ten—fifteen—twenty years longer, live to be eighty. He was thirty-five now, and Effie was twenty-five. Before they could marry, they would be fifty-five and forty-five; old, old; too old to feel, to care passionately. He had no right to ask Effie to wait twenty years for him.

He must give up thinking about her.

His mother was still in her chair by the drawing-room fire, waiting for him. She turned as he came to her, and held up her face to be kissed, like a child, he thought, or like a young wife waiting for her husband. She put her hands on his hair and stroked it. And he remembered the time when he used to say to her: "I shall never marry. You're all the wife I want, Mother."

And now it was as if he had been calculating on her death.

But he hadn't. He hadn't. You couldn't calculate on anything so far-off, so unlikely. He had done the only possible, the only decent thing. He had given Effie up.

## II

The doctor had gone. Hollyer went back into his mother's room. She lay there, dozing, in the big white bed, propped high on the pillows. Through her mouth,



piteously open, he could hear her short quick breath, struggling and gasping.

The illness had lasted nine days. Even now Hollyer hadn't got used to it. He still looked at the figure in the bed with the same stare of shocked incredulity. It was still incredible that his mother's influenza should have

turned to pleurisy, that she should lie like that, utterly abandoned, the neat pile of her hair undone, and her face, with its open mouth, loose and infirm between the two white loops that hung askew, rumpled by the pillow. He knew in a vague way how it had happened. First his own attack of influenza, then his mother's. His had been pretty bad, but hers had been slight, so slight that it had not been recognized, and through it she had still nursed him. Then she had gone out too soon, in the raw January weather. And now the doctor came morning and evening ; she had a trained nurse for the night, and Hollyer looked after her all day.

He had got used to the nurse. Her expensive presence proved to him that he had nothing to reproach himself with ; he had done, as they said, everything that could be done.

He knew that the nurse and the doctor disagreed about the case. Nurse Eden declared that his mother would get over it. Dr. Ransome was convinced she wouldn't ; she hadn't strength in her for another rally. Hollyer himself agreed with Nurse Eden. He couldn't believe that his mother would die. The thought of her death was unbearable, therefore he denied it, he put it from him. When he left her for the night he would come creeping back at midnight and dawn, to make sure that she was still there.

The little room was half filled by the big white bed. It seemed to him there was nothing in it but the white bed and his mother and Nurse Eden in her white uniform. She had looked in on her way downstairs to tea. Everything was cold and white. On the window panes the frost made a white pattern of moss and feathers. From his seat between the bed and the fire he could see Nurse Eden and her small, pure face brooding above the pillows as she shifted them with tender, competent hands.

"She'll be better in the morning," she said. "She always gets better in the night."

She did. Always she gained ground in the night under Nurse Eden and always she lost it in the daytime, getting worse and worse towards evening.

The afternoon wore on. At four o'clock old Martha, the servant, tapped at the door. Miss Carroll, she said, was downstairs and wanted to see him. Martha took his place at the bedside.

Every day Effie came to inquire, and every day she went away sad, as if it had been her own mother who was dying. This time she stayed, for the old doctor had stopped her in the Square and told her to get Hollyer out of his mother's room, if possible. "Talk to him. Take him off it Make him buck up."

She sat in his mother's chair behind the round tea-table and poured out his tea for him, and talked to him about his music and a book she had been reading. When he looked at her, at her sweet face, soft and clear with youth, at her hands moving with pretty gestures, his heart trembled. That was how it would be if Effie was his wife. They would sit there every day and she would pour out his tea for him. He would hear her feet running up and down the stairs.

When she got up to go she said, "Whatever you do, Wilfrid, don't keep on thinking about it."

"I can't help thinking."

She put her hand on his sleeve and stroked it. At her touch he broke down.

"Oh, Effie—I cannot bear it. If she dies, I shall never forgive myself."

"Nonsense. Don't talk about her dying. Don't think about it."

She turned to him on the doorstep. "Just think how strong she is. I can't see her ill, somehow. I see her

there, all the time, sitting upright in her chair, looking beautiful."

That was how *he* had once seen her, sitting there between the fire and the round tea-table, for years and years, as long as his own life lasted.

But now he saw Effie. Upstairs, in his mother's room, as he watched, he saw Effie. Effie—the sweet face, and the sweet hands moving. He heard Effie's voice in the rooms, Effie's feet on the stairs. That was how it would be if Effie was his wife.

That was how it would be if his mother died.

He would have an income of his own, and a house of his own ; he would be his own master in his house.

If his mother died, Effie and he would sleep together. Perhaps in that bed, on those pillows.

He shut his eyes and covered his face with his hands, pressing in on his eyelids as if that way he could keep out the sight of Effie.

## III

That evening the doctor came again. He left a little before nine o'clock, the hour when Nurse Eden would begin her night watch. He refused to hold out any hope. She was sinking fast.

As Hollyer turned from the front-door he met Nurse Eden coming downstairs. She signed to him to follow her into the drawing-room, moving before him without a sound. She shut the door.

He was afraid of Nurse Eden ; there was something—he didn't know what it was, but—there was something unbearable in her small, pure face ; in the thrust of her chin tilted by the stiff cap-strings ; in her brave, slender mouth, straightening itself against the droop of its com-

passion; and in the stillness of her dense, grey eyes. Her eyes made him feel uneasy, somehow, and unsafe. He was going to sit up with her to-night; but he would rather have shared his night-watch with old Martha.



"Well?" she said.

"He says this is the end."

"It may be," said Nurse Eden. "But it needn't."

"You've seen her."

"Yes."

"*Well*——?"

"She hasn't gone yet, Mr. Hollyer—— She's on the edge. She's in that state when a breath would tip her one way or the other."

"A breath?"

"Yes, Mr. Hollyer. Or a thought."

"A thought?"

"A thought. If I had Mrs. Hollyer to myself, I believe I could bring her round even now."

"Oh, Nurse——"

"I *have* brought her round. Night after night I've brought her."

"What do you do?"

"I don't know what I do. But it works. Haven't you

noticed she gets better in the night when I've had her ; and that she slips back in the day ? "

" Yes, I have."

" You see, Mr. Hollyer, Dr. Ransome's made up his mind. And when the doctor makes up his mind that the patient's going to die, ten to one the patient does die. It lowers their resistance. It isn't every one that would feel it ; but your mother would."

" If," she went on, " I had her day *and* night, I might save her."

" You really think that ? "

" I think there's a chance."

He didn't know whether he believed her or not. Dr. Ransome shrugged his shoulders and said Nurse Eden could try it if she liked. She had a wonderful way with her ; but he wouldn't advise Hollyer to count on it. Nothing but a miracle, he said, could save his mother.

Hollyer didn't count on Nurse Eden's way. But he thought—something stronger than himself compelled him to think—that his mother would not die.

And each hour showed her slowly coming back. Under his eyes the miracle was being accomplished. At midnight her breathing and temperature and pulse were normal ; and by noon of the next day even Ransome was convinced. He wouldn't swear to the miracle, but whatever Nurse Eden had or had not done, he believed Mrs. Hollyer would recover.

Hollyer not only believed it, but he was certain, as Nurse Eden was certain. She came to him, radiant with certainty, and told him that his mind could be at rest now.

But his mind was not at rest. It had only rested while he doubted, as if doubt absolved him from knowledge of some secret that he could not face. With the first moment of certainty he was aware of it. It was given to him in physical sensations, a weight and pain about his heart

that did not lie. In a flash he saw himself back in his old life of dependence and frustration. There would be no Effie sitting with him in the house, no Effie running up and down the stairs. He would not sleep with Effie in the big, white bed. They would grow old, wanting each other.

He tried to jerk his mouth into a smile, but it had stiffened. It opened, gasping, as his muffled heart-beats choked him.

He went upstairs to his mother's room. She was sitting up in bed, clear-eyed, almost alert, and she turned her face to him as he entered.

"I don't know how it is," she said, "I thought I was going, but there's something that won't let me go. It keeps on pulling me back and back." (Nurse Eden looked at him.) "Is it you, Wilfrid?"

He knelt down and buried his face in the bed-clothes by her side. His sobs shook the mattress. The nurse took him by the arm; he got up and stared at her as if dazed and drunk with grief. She led him from the room.

"You're upsetting her," she said. "Don't come back till you've pulled yourself together."

When he went back his mother was sleeping calmly. Hollyer and the nurse withdrew from the bedside to the window and talked there in low voices.

"Did you hear what she said, Nurse?"

"Yes. We can get her through, between us, if we make up our minds she's to live. Think of what she was yesterday."

"But do you think we ought to? I don't want her brought back to suffer."

"She isn't going to suffer. There's no reason why she shouldn't be as well as ever. If you want her to live."

"Want her? Of course I want her to live."

"I know you do. But you must get rid of your fear."

"My fear?"

"Your fear of her dying."

"Do you think my fear could—could make her?"

"I know it could. Make up your mind with me that she's going to get well."

"Supposing she wants to go? Supposing she's fighting against us all the time?"

"She isn't fighting. She hasn't any fight in her—— Now, while she's sleeping, is the time. You've only got to say to yourself 'She shall live. She's going to live.' There—you sit in that chair, make yourself quite comfortable, shut your eyes, and keep on saying it. Don't think of anything else."

He sat down. He said it over and over again: "She shall live. She's going to live. She shall live——" He tried to think of nothing else; but all the time he was aware of the dragging of his heart. He shut his eyes, but he couldn't get rid of the vision of Effie. Effie sitting in his mother's place. Effie sleeping beside him in the big bed.

"She *shall* live. She's going to live." The words meant nothing. Only the dragging weight at his heart had meaning. And it didn't lie.

He thought: If that's how I feel about it, I'd better keep my mind off her.

Then he was aware that he was tired, dead beat, too tired to think. And presently, sitting upright in the chair, he fell asleep.

He was waked by Nurse Eden's voice calling to him from the bed: "Mr. Hollyer! She's going!"

His mother lay in the nurse's arms, her head had fallen forward on her chest, her mouth was open; and through it there came a groaning, grating cry. Once, twice, three times; and she was gone.

After the funeral Hollyer went up into his mother's room. Nurse Eden was there, removing the signs of death. She had covered the bed with a white counterpane. She

had opened the door and window wide, and a flood of clean cold air streamed through the room.

" Nurse," he said, " come here a minute."

She followed him into his bed-sitting room on the other side of the landing. Hollyer shut the door.

" You remember that night when my mother got better ? "

" Indeed I do."

" Do you still think you brought her back ? "

" I do think it."

" Do you really believe that a thought—*a thought* could do that ? "

" Yes."

" But it doesn't always work. It breaks down."

" Sometimes. That night she died I felt it wasn't working. I was up against a wall. I couldn't get through. But remember, before that, she was going when I brought her back."

" Could a thought—another thought—kill ? "

" It depends. Perhaps, if it was a very strong thought. A wish."

Her queer eyes looked through him and beyond him, not seeing him, seeing some reality that was not he. He had gone to her for her truth and she had given it him. A wish, even a hidden wish, could kill. In the dark, secret places of the mind your thoughts ran loose beyond your knowing ; they burrowed under the walls that shut off one self from another ; they got through. It was as if his secret self had broken loose, and got through to his mother, and had killed her secretly, in the dark. His wish was a part of himself, but stronger than himself. The force behind it was indestructible, for it was a form of his desire for Effie ; so that while he lived he could not kill it.

It had been there all the time, cunningly disguised. It was there in his fear of Nurse Eden ; it was there in that

obstinate belief of his that his mother would live. His beliefs were always the expression of his fears. He had been afraid that his mother would not die. That was his fear. He saw it all clearly in the moment while Nurse Eden's voice went on.

"But it wasn't *that*, Mr. Hollyer," she was saying. "We were all wishing her to live—— No. I think she was too far gone. She had got beyond us."

It was too late for Nurse Eden to go back on it. He knew. He was certain.

## IV

He knew, and if he were to keep on thinking about it—but he was afraid to think. You could go mad, thinking. The moment of his certainty remained in his memory; he knew where to find it if he chose to look that way. But he refused to look. Such things were better forgotten.

He told himself there was nothing in it. Nothing but Nurse Eden's hysteria and vanity. She wanted you to believe she was wonderful, that she could do things. She didn't really believe it herself. In her own last moment of honesty she had confessed as much. He was a fool to have been taken in by her.

Meanwhile, three months after his mother's death, he had married Effie Carroll. Her father, who had held out against the engagement, surrendered suddenly on the day of the wedding, and made his daughter an allowance of fifty pounds a year. He said he didn't want to profit by her folly, and the fifty pounds were no more than the cost of her keep.

It was horrible to think they should owe their happiness to his mother's death; but as things had turned out they didn't owe it; they could have married even if she had

lived. And as he had now no motive for wishing her dead, he almost forgot that he had ever wished it.

Not that Hollyer reproached himself ; his tendency, when he thought it all over, was to reproach his mother. He had found out something about himself. Before he married he had gone to Dr. Ransome to be overhauled, and Ransome had told him there was nothing much the matter with him ; never was. And if the old pessimist said there wasn't much the matter, you might depend upon it there wasn't anything at all. Except, Ransome said, molly-coddling ; and that wasn't Hollyer's fault.

"Whose was it, then?" Hollyer had asked. "My mother's?"

"No. Your dear mother, Hollyer, had no faults. But she made mistakes, as we all do."

"You mean, if I'd been allowed to live like other people I'd have been all right?"

"Well—you weren't a very robust infant ; and later on there *was* a slight risk. Personally, I'd have taken it. You must take some risks. But your mother was afraid. You were all she had. And I daresay she wasn't sorry to keep you with her."

"I see."

He saw it clearly. He had been sacrificed to his mother's selfishness. Nothing but that had doomed him to his humiliating dependence, his poverty, his intolerable celibacy. He found himself brooding over it, going back and back to it, with a certain gratification, as if it justified him. His mind was appeased by this righteous resentment. When the remembrance of his mother's beauty and sweetness rushed at him and accused him he turned from it to his brooding.

He had begun to talk, to say things about his mother. Put into spoken words his grievance seemed more real ; it acquired validity.

He had felt so safe. His mother couldn't hear him. She would never know what he thought about her; he would have died rather than let her know. And he had only talked to Effie. Talking to his wife was no worse than thinking to himself. After all he had gone through, he felt he was entitled to that relief.

It was June, a hot, close evening before lamp-light; they were sitting together in the drawing-room, Effie in his mother's chair and he at his piano in the recess on the other side of the fireplace. And there was something that Effie said when he had stopped playing and had turned to her, smiling.

"Wilfrid—are you happy?"

"Of course I'm happy."

"No, but—really?"

"Really. Absolutely. You make me happy."

"Do I? I'm so glad. You see, when I married you I was afraid I couldn't. It was so hard to come after your mother."

He winced.

"How do you mean? You don't come 'after' her."

"I mean, after all she was to you. After all she did. Your life with her was so perfect."

"If it's any consolation to you, Effie, it wasn't."

"Wasn't?"

"No. Anything but."

"Oh, Wilfrid!"

He seemed to her to be uttering blasphemy.

"It's better you should know it. My dear mother didn't understand me in the least. My whole up-bringing was a ghastly blunder. If I'd been let live a decent life, like any other boy, like any other man, I might have been good for something. But she wouldn't let me. She pretended there was something the matter with me when there wasn't, so that she could keep me dependent on her."

"Wilfrid *dear*, it may have been a blunder and it may have been ghastly——"

"It was."

"But it was only her love for you."

"A very selfish sort of love, Effie."

"Oh *don't*," she cried. "Don't. She's *dead*, Wilfrid."

"I'm not likely to forget it."

"You talk as if you'd forgotten—— If the dead knew——"

If the dead knew——

"If they knew," she said, "how we spoke about them, how we thought——"

If the dead knew——

If his mother had heard him; if she knew what he had been thinking; if she knew that he had wished her dead and that his wish had killed her——

If the dead knew——

"Happily for us and them, they don't know," he said.

And he began playing again. He was aware that Effie had risen and was now seated at the writing-table. As he played he had his back to the writing-table and the door.

The book on the piano ledge before him was Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, open as Effie had left it at Number Nine. He remembered that was the one his mother had loved so much. His fingers fell of their own accord into the prelude, into the melody, pressing out its thick, sweet, deliberate sadness. It wounded him, each note a separate stab, yet he went on, half-voluptuously enjoying the self-inflicted pain, trying to work it up and up into a supreme poignancy of sorrow, of regret.

As he stopped on the closing chord he heard somewhere behind him a thick, sobbing sigh.

"Effie——"

He looked round. But Effie was not there. He could hear her footsteps in the room overhead. She had gone,

then, before he had stopped playing, shutting the door without a sound. It must have been his imagination.

He played a few bars, then paused, listening. The sighing had begun again ; it was close behind him.

He swung round sharply. There was nobody there. But the door, which had been shut a minute ago, stood wide open. A cold wind blew in, cutting through the hot, stagnant air. He got up and shut the door. The cold wind wrapped him in a belt, a swirl ; he stood still in it for a moment, stiff with fear. When he crossed the room to the piano it was as if he moved breast high in deep, cold water.

Somewhere in the secret place of his mind a word struggled to form itself, to be born.

"Mother."

It came to him with a sense of appalling, supernatural horror. Horror that was there with him in the room like a presence.

"Mother."

The word had lost its meaning. It stood for nothing but that horror.

He tried to play again, but his fingers, slippery with sweat, dropped from the keyboard.

Something compelled him to turn round and look towards his mother's chair.

Then he saw her.

She stood between him and the chair, straight and thin, dressed in the clothes she had died in, the yellowish flannel nightgown and bed jacket.

The apparition maintained itself with difficulty. Already its hair had grown indistinct, a cap of white mist. Its face was an insubstantial framework for its mouth and eyes, and for the tears that fell in two shining tracks between. It was less a form than a visible emotion, an anguish.

Hollyer stood up and stared at it. Through the glasses of its tears it gazed back at him with an intense, a terrible reproach and sorrow.

Then, slowly and stiffly, it began to recede from him, drawn back and back, without any movement of its feet, in an unearthly stillness, keeping up, to the last minute, its look of indestructible reproach.

And now it was a formless mass that drifted to the window and hung there a second, and passed, shrinking like a breath on the pane.

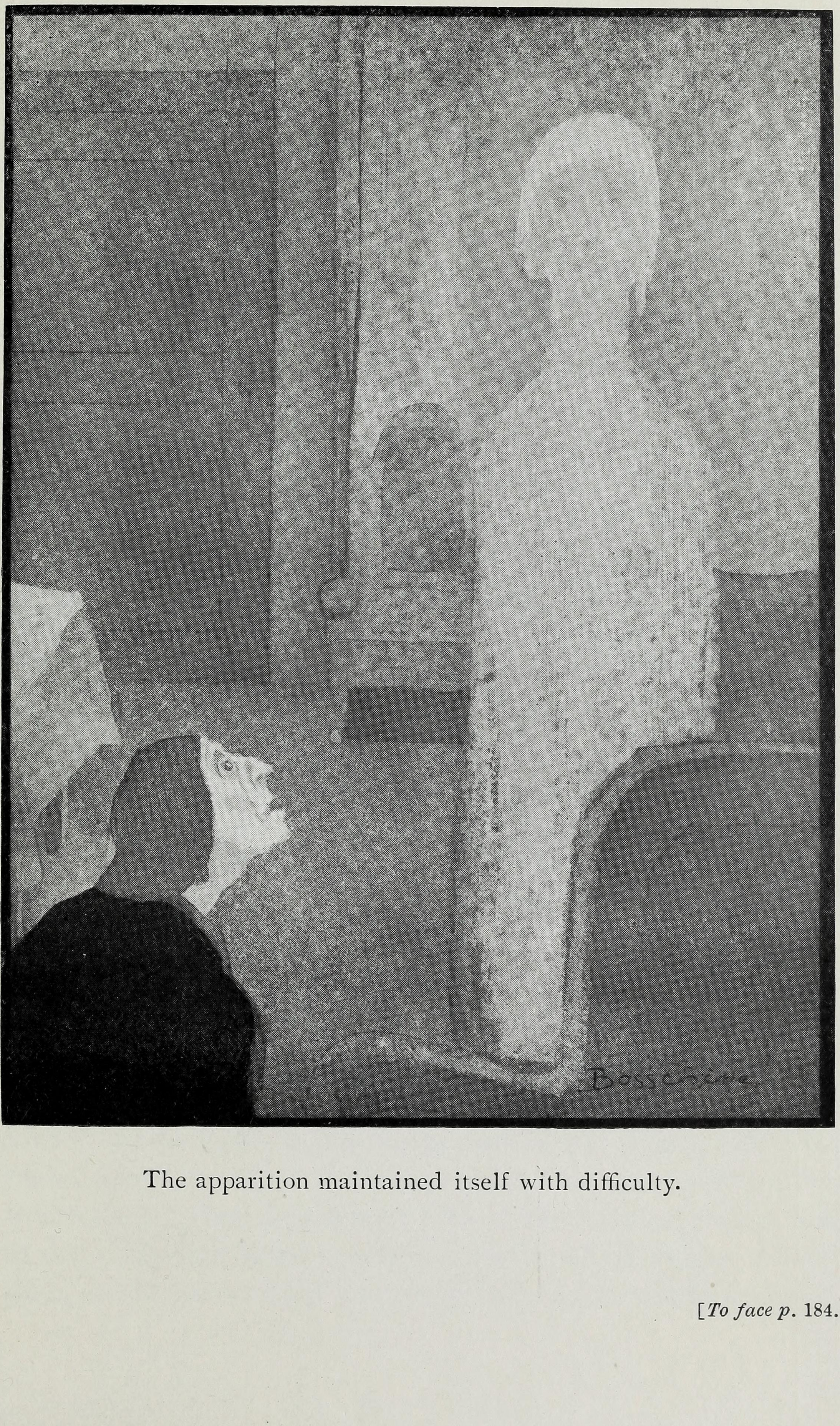
Hollyer, rigid, pouring out sweat, still stared at the place where it had stood. His heart-beats came together in a running tremor : it was as if all the blood in his body was gathered into his distended heart, dragging it down to meet his heaving belly.

Then he turned and went headlong towards the door, stumbling and lurching. He threw out his hands to clutch at a support and found himself in Effie's arms.

" Wilfrid—darling—what is it ? "

" Nothing. I'm giddy. I—I think I'm going to be sick."

He broke from her and dragged himself upstairs and shut himself into his study. That night his old single bed was brought back and made up there. He was afraid to sleep in the room that had been his mother's.




The apparition maintained itself with difficulty.

[*To face p.* 184.

## V

He had run through all the physical sensations of his terror. What he felt now was the sharp, abominable torture of the mind.

If the dead knew——

The dead *did* know. She had come back to tell him that she knew. She knew that he thought of her with unkindness. She had been there when he talked about her to Effie. She knew the thought he had hidden even from himself. She knew that she had died because, secretly, he had wished her dead.

That was the meaning of her look and of her tears.

No fleshly eyes could have expressed such an intensity of suffering, of unfathomable grief. He thought: the pain of a discarnate spirit might be infinitely sharper than any earthly pain. It might be inexhaustible. Who was to say that it was not?

Yet could it—could even an immortal suffering—be sharper than the anguish he felt now? If only he had known what he was doing to her— If he had known. If he had known——

But, he thought, we know nothing, and we care less. We say we believe in immortality, but we do not believe in it. We treat the dead as if they *were* dead, as if they were not there. If he had really believed that she was there, he would have died rather than say the things he had said to Effie. Nobody, he told himself, could have accused him of unkindness to his mother while she lived. He had really loved her up to the moment, the moment of supreme temptation, when he wanted Effie. He had not willed her to die. He had been barely conscious of his wish. How, then, could he be held accountable? How could he have

destroyed the thing whose essence was the hidden, unknown darkness? Yet, if men are accountable at all, he was accountable. There had been a moment when he was conscious of it. He could have destroyed it then. He should have faced it; he should have dragged it out into the light and fought it.

Instead, he had let it sink back into its darkness, to work there unseen.

And if he had really loved his mother, he would have wished, not willed her to live. He would have wanted her as he wanted her now.

For, now that it was too late, he did want her. His whole mind had changed. He no longer thought of her with resentment. He thought, with a passionate adoration and regret, of her beauty, her goodness, and her love for him. What if she *had* kept him with her? It had been, as Effie had said, because she loved him. How did he know that if she had let him go he would have been good for anything? What on earth could he have been but the third-rate organist he was?

He remembered the happiness he had had with her before he had loved Effie; her looks, her words, the thousand things she used to do to please him. The Mendelssohn she had given him. A certain sweet cake she made for him on his birthdays. And the touch of her hands, her kisses.

He thought of these things with an agony of longing. If only he could have her back; if only she would come to him again, that he might show her——

He asked himself: How much did Effie know? She must wonder why he had taken that sudden dislike to the drawing-room; why he insisted on sleeping in his study. She had never said anything.

A week had passed—they were sitting in the dining-room after supper, when she spoke.

"Wilfrid, why do you always want to sit here?"

"Because I hate the other room."

"You didn't use to. It's only since that day you were ill, the last time you were playing. Why do you hate it?"

"Well, if you want to know—you remember the beastly things I said about mother?"

"You didn't mean them."

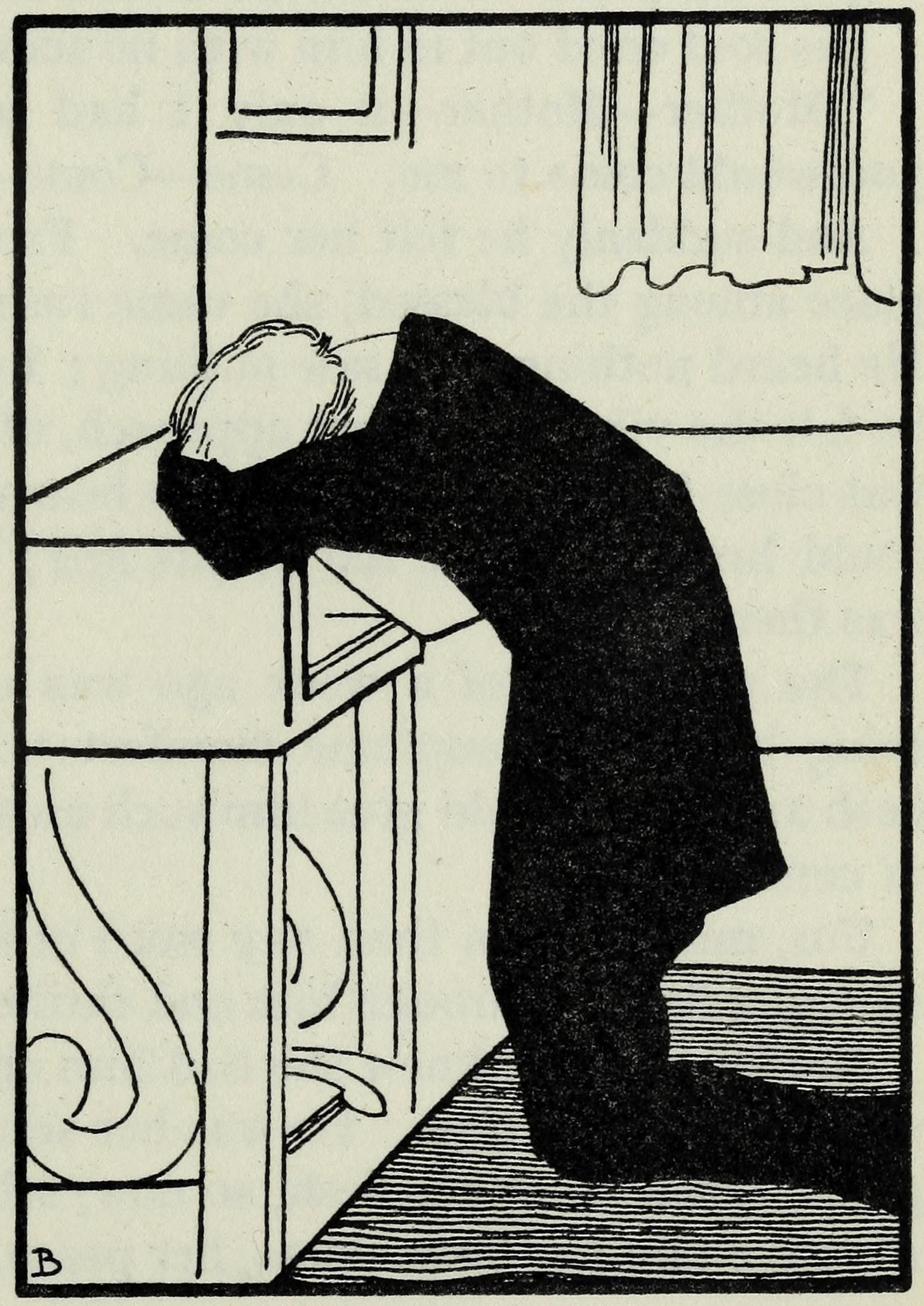
"I did mean them——But it wasn't that. It was something you said."

"I?"

"Yes. You said 'If the dead knew——'"

"Well——?"

"Well—they do know—I'm certain my mother knew. Certain, as I'm certain I'm sitting here, that she heard."




"Oh, Wilfrid, what makes you think that?"

"I can't tell you what makes me think it——But—she was there."

"You only think it because you're feeling sorry. You must get over it. Go back into the room and play."

He shook his head and still sat there thinking. Effie did not speak again; she saw that she must let him think.

Presently he got up and went into the drawing-room, shutting the doors behind him.

The Mendelssohn was still on the piano ledge, open at Number Nine. He began to play it. But at the first bars of the melody he stopped, overwhelmed by an agony of regret. He slid down on his knees, with his arms on the edge of the piano and his head bowed on his arms.

His soul cried out in him with no sound.

"Mother—Mother—if only I had you back. If only you would come to me. Come—Come——"

And suddenly he felt her come. From far-off, from her place among the blessed, she came rushing, as if on wings. He heard nothing; he saw nothing; but with every nerve he felt the vibration of her approach, of her presence. She was close to him now, closer than hearing or sight or touch could bring her; her self to his self; her inmost essence was there.

The phantasm of a week ago was a faint, insignificant thing beside this supreme manifestation. No likeness of flesh and blood could give him such an assurance of reality, of contact.

For, more certain than any word of flesh and blood, her meaning flashed through him and thrilled.

She knew. She knew she had him again; she knew she would never lose him. He was her son. As she had once given him flesh of her flesh, so now, self to innermost self, she gave him her blessedness, her peace.

# THE VICTIM

# THE VICTIM

## I

STEVEN ACROYD, Mr. Greathead's chauffeur, was sulking in the garage.

Everybody was afraid of him. Everybody hated him except Mr. Greathead, his master, and Dorsy, his sweetheart.

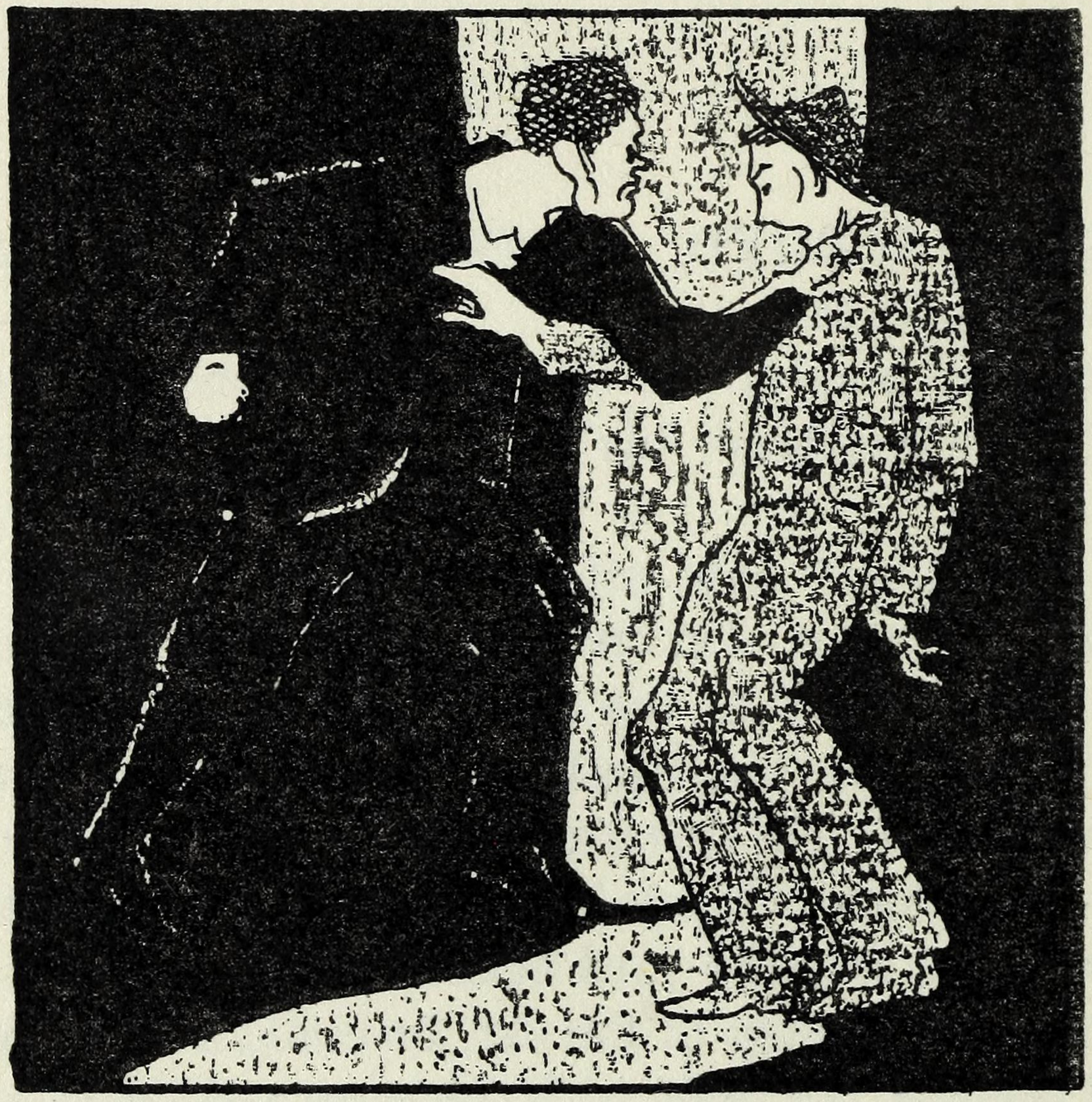
And even Dorsy now, after yesterday!

Night had come. On one side the yard gates stood open to the black tunnel of the drive. On the other the high moor rose above the wall, immense, darker than the darkness. Steven's lantern in the open doorway of the garage and Dorsy's lamp in the kitchen window threw a blond twilight into the yard between. From where he sat, slantways on the step of the car, he could see, through the lighted window, the table with the lamp and Dorsy's sewing huddled up in a white heap as she left it just now, when she had jumped up and gone away. Because she was afraid of him.

She had gone straight to Mr. Greathead in his study, and Steven, sulking, had flung himself out into the yard.

He stared into the window, thinking, thinking. Everybody hated him. He could tell by the damned spiteful way they looked at him in the bar of the "King's Arms;" kind of sideways and slink-eyed, turning their dirty tails and shuffling out of his way.

He had said to Dorsy he'd like to know what he'd done. He'd just dropped in for his glass as usual; he'd looked round and said "Good-evening," civil, and the dirty tykes took no more notice of him than if he'd been a toad. Mrs. Oldishaw, Dorsy's aunt, *she* hated him, boiled-ham-face, swelling with spite, shoving his glass at the end of her arm, without speaking, as if he'd been a bloody cockroach.



All because of the thrashing he'd given young Ned Oldishaw. If she didn't want the cub's neck broken she'd better keep him out of mischief. Young Ned knew what he'd get if he came meddling with *his* sweetheart.

It had happened yesterday afternoon, Sunday, when he had gone down with Dorsy to the "King's Arms" to see her aunt. They were sitting out on the wooden bench against the inn wall when young Ned began it. He could see him now with his arm round Dorsy's neck and his mouth gaping.

And Dorsy laughing like a silly fool and the old woman snorting and shaking.

He could hear him. "She's my cousin if she *is* your sweetheart. You can't stop me kissing her." *Couldn't* he!

Why, what did they think? When he'd given up his good job at the Darlington Motor Works to come to Eastthwaite and black Mr. Greathead's boots, chop wood, carry coal and water for him, and drive his shabby secondhand car. Not that he cared what he did so long as he could live in the same house with Dorsy Oldishaw. It wasn't likely he'd sit like a bloody Moses, looking on, while Ned——

To be sure, he had half killed him. He could feel Ned's neck swelling and rising up under the pressure of his hands, his fingers. He had struck him first, flinging him back against the inn wall, then he had pinned him—till the men ran up and dragged him off.

And now they were all against him. Dorsy was against him. She had said she was afraid of him.

"Steven," she had said, "tha med 'a killed him."

"Well—p'r'aps next time he'll knaw better than to coom meddlin' with *my* lass."

"I'm not thy lass, ef tha canna keep thy hands off folks. I should be feared for my life of thee. Ned wurn't doing naw 'arm."

"Ef he doos it again, ef he cooms between thee and me, Dorsy, I shall do 'im in."

"Naw, tha maunna talk that road."

"It's Gawd's truth. Anybody that cooms between thee and me, loove, I shall do 'im in. Ef 'twas thy aunt, I should wring 'er neck, same as I wroong Ned's."

"And ef it was me, Steven?"

"Ef it wur thee, ef tha left me——Aw, doan't tha assk me, Dorsy."

"There—that's 'ow tha scares me."

"But tha' 'astna left me—'tes thy wedding claithes tha'rt making."

"Aye, 'tes my wedding claithes."

She had started fingering the white stuff, looking at it with her head on one side, smiling prettily. Then all of a sudden she had flung it down in a heap and burst out crying. When he tried to comfort her she pushed him off and ran out of the room, to Mr. Greathead.

It must have been half an hour ago and she had not come back yet.

He got up and went through the yard gates into the dark drive. Turning there, he came to the house front and the lighted window of the study. Hidden behind a clump of yew he looked in.

Mr. Greathead had risen from his chair. He was a little old man, shrunk and pinched, with a bowed narrow back and slender neck under his grey hanks of hair.

Dorsy stood before him, facing Steven. The lamplight fell full on her. Her sweet flower-face was flushed. She had been crying.

Mr. Greathead spoke.

"Well, that's my advice," he said. "Think it over, Dorsy, before you do anything."

That night Dorsy packed her boxes, and the next day at noon, when Steven came in for his dinner, she had left the Lodge. She had gone back to her father's house in Garthdale.

She wrote to Steven saying that she had thought it over and found she daren't marry him. She was afraid of him. She would be too unhappy.



Then all of a sudden she had burst out crying . . .

## II

That was the old man, the old man. He had made her give him up. But for that, Dorsy would never have left him. She would never have thought of it herself. And she would never have got away if he had been there to stop her. It wasn't Ned. Ned was going to marry Nancy Peacock down at Morfe. Ned hadn't done any harm.

It was Mr. Greathead who had come between them. He hated Mr. Greathead.

His hate became a nausea of physical loathing that never ceased. Indoors he served Mr. Greathead as footman and valet, waiting on him at meals, bringing the hot water for his bath, helping him to dress and undress. So that he could never get away from him. When he came to call him in the morning, Steven's stomach heaved at the sight of the shrunken body under the bedclothes, the flushed, pinched face with its peaked, finicking nose upturned, the thin silver tuft of hair pricked up above the pillow's edge. Steven shivered with hate at the sound of the rattling, old-man's cough, and the " shoob-shoob " of the feet shuffling along the flagged passages.

He had once had a feeling of tenderness for Mr. Great head as the tie that bound him to Dorsy. He even brushed his coat and hat tenderly, as if he loved them. Once Mr. Greathead's small, close smile—the greyish bud of the lower lip pushed out, the upper lip lifted at the corners—and his kind, thin " Thank you, my lad," had made Steven smile back, glad to serve Dorsy's master. And Mr. Greathead would smile again and say, " It does me good to see your bright face, Steven." Now Steven's face writhed in a tight contortion to meet Mr. Greathead's kindliness, while his throat ran dry and his heart shook with hate.

At meal-times from his place by the sideboard he would look on at Mr. Greathead eating, in a long contemplative disgust. He could have snatched the plate away from under the slow, fumbling hands that hovered and hesitated. He would catch words coming into his mind : " He ought to be dead. He ought to be dead." To think that this thing that ought to be dead, this old, shrivelled skin-bag



of creaking bones should come between him and Dorsy, should have power to drive Dorsy from him.

One day when he was brushing Mr. Greathead's soft felt hat a paroxysm of hatred gripped him. He hated Mr. Greathead's hat. He took a stick and struck at it again and again ; he threw it on the flags and stamped on it, clenching his teeth and drawing in his breath with a sharp hiss. He picked up the hat, looking round furtively, for fear lest Mr. Greathead or Dorsy's successor, Mrs. Blenkiron, should have seen him. He pinched and pulled it

back into shape and brushed it carefully and hung it on the stand. He was ashamed, not of his violence, but of its futility.

Nobody but a damned fool, he said to himself, would have done that. He must have been mad.

It wasn't as if he didn't know what he was going to do. He had known ever since the day when Dorsy left him.

"I shan't be myself again till I've done him in," he thought.

He was only waiting till he had planned it out; till he was sure of every detail; till he was fit and cool. There must be no hesitation, no uncertainty at the last minute, above all, no blind, headlong violence. Nobody but a fool would kill in mad rage, and forget things, and be caught and swing for it. Yet that was what they all did. There was always something they hadn't thought of that gave them away.

Steven had thought of everything, even the date, even the weather.

Mr. Greathead was in the habit of going up to London to attend the debates of a learned Society he belonged to that held its meetings in May and November. He always travelled up by the five o'clock train, so that he might go to bed and rest as soon as he arrived. He always stayed for a week and gave his housekeeper a week's holiday. Steven chose a dark, threatening day in November, when Mr. Greathead was going up to his meeting and Mrs. Blenkiron had left Eastthwaite for Morfe by the early morning bus. So that there was nobody in the house but Mr. Greathead and Steven.

Eastthwaite Lodge stands alone, grey, hidden between the shoulder of the moor and the ash-trees of its drive. It is approached by a bridle-path across the moor, a turning off the road that runs from Eastthwaite in Rathdale to Shawe in Westleydale, about a mile from the village and a mile

from Hardraw Pass. No tradesmen visited it. Mr. Greathead's letters and his newspaper were shot into a post-box that hung on the ash-tree at the turn.

The hot water laid on in the house was not hot enough for Mr. Greathead's bath, so that every morning, while Mr. Greathead shaved, Steven came to him with a can of boiling water.

Mr. Greathead, dressed in a mauve and grey striped sleeping-suit, stood shaving himself before the looking-glass that hung on the wall beside the great white bath. Steven waited with his hand on the cold tap, watching the bright curved rod of water falling with a thud and a splash.

In the white, stagnant light from the muffed window-pane the knife-blade flame of a small oil-stove flickered queerly. The oil sputtered and stank.

Suddenly the wind hissed in the water-pipes and cut off the glittering rod. To Steven it seemed the suspension of all movement. He would have to wait there till the water flowed again before he could begin. He tried not to look at Mr. Greathead and the lean wattles of his lifted throat. He fixed his eyes on the long crack in the soiled green distemper of the wall. His nerves were on edge with waiting for the water to flow again. The fumes of the oil-stove worked on them like a rank intoxicant. The soiled green wall gave him a sensation of physical sickness.

He picked up a towel and hung it over the back of a chair. Thus he caught sight of his own face in the glass above Mr. Greathead's; it was livid against the soiled green wall. Steven stepped aside to avoid it.

"Don't you feel well, Steven?"

"No, sir." Steven picked up a small sponge and looked at it.

Mr. Greathead had laid down his razor and was wiping the lather from his chin. At that instant, with a gurgling, spluttering haste, the water leaped from the tap.

It was then that Steven made his sudden, quiet rush. He first gagged Mr. Greathead with the sponge, then pushed him back and back against the wall and pinned him there with both hands round his neck, as he had pinned Ned Oldishaw. He pressed in on Mr. Greathead's throat, strangling him.

Mr. Greathead's hands flapped in the air, trying feebly to beat Steven off ; then his arms, pushed back by the heave and thrust of Steven's shoulders, dropped. Then Mr. Greathead's body sank, sliding along the wall, and fell to the floor, Steven still keeping his hold, mounting it, gripping it with his knees. His fingers tightened, pressing back the blood. Mr. Greathead's face swelled up ; it changed horribly. There was a groaning and rattling sound in his throat. Steven pressed in till it had ceased.

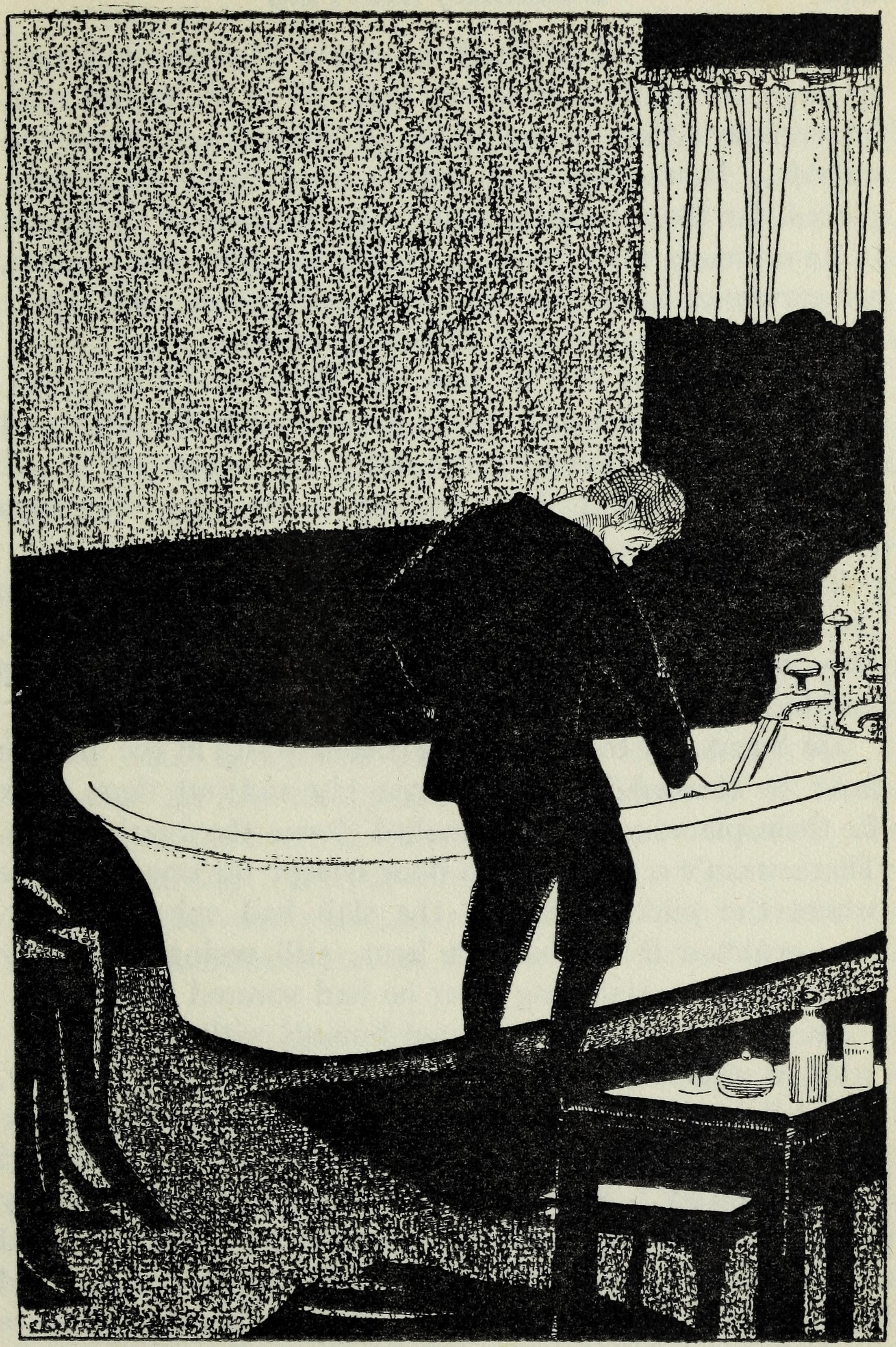
Then he stripped himself to the waist. He stripped Mr. Greathead of his sleeping-suit and hung his naked body face downwards in the bath. He took the razor and cut the great arteries and veins in the neck. He pulled up the plug of the waste-pipe, and left the body to drain in the running water.

He left it all day and all night.

He had noticed that murderers swung just for want of attention to little things like that ; messing up themselves and the whole place with blood ; always forgetting something essential. He had no time to think of horrors. From the moment he had murdered Mr. Greathead his own neck was in danger ; he was simply using all his brain and nerve to save his neck. He worked with the stern, cool hardness of a man going through with an unpleasant, necessary job. He had thought of everything.

He had even thought of the dairy.

It was built on to the back of the house under the shelter of the high moor. You entered it through the scullery, which cut it off from the yard. The window-panes had



Steven waited with his hand on the tap . . .

been removed and replaced by sheets of perforated zinc. A large corrugated glass sky-light lit it from the roof. Impossible either to see in or to approach it from the outside. It was fitted up with a long, black slate shelf, placed, for the convenience of butter-makers, at the height of an ordinary work-bench. Steven had his tools, a razor, a carving-knife, a chopper and a meat-saw, laid there ready, beside a great pile of cotton waste.

Early the next day he took Mr. Greathead's body out of the bath, wrapped a thick towel round the neck and head, carried it down to the dairy and stretched it out on the slab. And there he cut it up into seventeen pieces.

These he wrapped in several layers of newspaper, covering the face and the hands first, because, at the last moment, they frightened him. He sewed them up in two sacks and hid them in the cellar.

He burnt the towel and the cotton waste in the kitchen fire ; he cleaned his tools thoroughly and put them back in their places ; and he washed down the marble slab. There wasn't a spot on the floor except for one flagstone where the pink rinsing of the slab had splashed over. He scrubbed it for half an hour, still seeing the rusty edges of the splash long after he had scoured it out.

He then washed and dressed himself with care.

As it was war-time Steven could only work by day, for a light in the dairy roof would have attracted the attention of the police. He had murdered Mr. Greathead on a Tuesday ; it was now three o'clock on Thursday afternoon. Exactly at ten minutes past four he had brought out the car, shut in close with its black hood and side curtains. He had packed Mr. Greathead's suit-case and placed it in the car with his umbrella, railway rug, and travelling cap. Also, in a bundle, the clothes that his victim would have gone to London in.

He stowed the body in the two sacks beside him on the front.

By Hardraw Pass, half-way between Eastthwaite and Shawe, there are three round pits, known as the Churns, hollowed out of the grey rock and said to be bottomless. Steven had thrown stones, big as a man's chest, down the largest pit, to see whether they would be caught on any ledge or boulder. They had dropped clean, without a sound.

It poured with rain, the rain that Steven had reckoned on. The Pass was dark under the clouds and deserted. Steven turned his car so that the headlights glared on the pit's mouth. Then he ripped open the sacks and threw down, one by one, the seventeen pieces of Mr. Greathead's body, and the sacks after them, and the clothes.

It was not enough to dispose of Mr. Greathead's dead body; he had to behave as though Mr. Greathead were alive. Mr. Greathead had disappeared and he had to account for his disappearance. He drove on to Shawe station to the five o'clock train, taking care to arrive close on its starting. A troop-train was due to depart a minute earlier. Steven, who had reckoned on the darkness and the rain, reckoned also on the hurry and confusion on the platform.

As he had foreseen, there were no porters in the station entry; nobody to notice whether Mr. Greathead was or was not in the car. He carried his things through on to the platform and gave the suit-case to an old man to label. He dashed into the booking-office and took Mr. Greathead's ticket, and then rushed along the platform as if he were following his master. He heard himself shouting to the guard, "Have you seen Mr. Greathead?" And the guard's answer, "Naw!" And his own inspired statement, "He must have taken his seat in the front, then." He ran to the front of the train, shouldering his

way among the troops. The drawn blinds of the carriages favoured him.

Steven thrust the umbrella, the rug, and the travelling cap into an empty compartment, and slammed the door to. He tried to shout something through the open window; but his tongue was harsh and dry against the roof of his mouth, and no sound came. He stood, blocking the window, till the guard whistled. When the train moved he ran alongside with his hand on the window ledge, as though he were taking the last instructions of his master. A porter pulled him back.

"Quick work, that," said Steven.

Before he left the station he wired to Mr. Greathead's London hotel, announcing the time of his arrival.

He felt nothing, nothing but the intense relief of a man who has saved himself by his own wits from a most horrible death. There were even moments, in the week that followed, when, so powerful was the illusion of his innocence, he could have believed that he had really seen Mr. Greathead off by the five o'clock train. Moments when he literally stood still in amazement before his own incredible impunity. Other moments when a sort of vanity uplifted him. He had committed a murder that for sheer audacity and cool brain work surpassed all murders celebrated in the history of crime. Unfortunately the very perfection of his achievement doomed it to oblivion. He had left not a trace.

Not a trace.

Only when he woke in the night a doubt sickened him. There was the rusted ring of that splash on the dairy floor. He wondered, had he really washed it out clean. And he would get up and light a candle and go down to the dairy to make sure. He knew the exact place; bending over it with the candle, he could imagine that he still saw a faint outline.

Daylight reassured him. *He* knew the exact place, but nobody else knew. There was nothing to distinguish it from the natural stains in the flagstone. Nobody would guess. But he was glad when Mrs. Blenkiron came back again.

On the day that Mr. Greathead was to have come home by the four o'clock train Steven drove into Shawe and bought a chicken for the master's dinner. He met the four o'clock train and expressed surprise that Mr. Greathead had not come by it. He said he would be sure to come by the seven. He ordered dinner for eight; Mrs. Blenkiron roasted the chicken, and Steven met the seven o'clock train. This time he showed uneasiness.

The next day he met all the trains and wired to Mr. Greathead's hotel for information. When the manager wired back that Mr. Greathead had not arrived, he wrote to his relatives and gave notice to the police.

Three weeks passed. The police and Mr. Greathead's relatives accepted Steven's statements, backed as they were by the evidence of the booking office clerk, the telegraph clerk, the guard, the porter who had labelled Mr. Greathead's luggage and the hotel manager who had received his telegram. Mr. Greathead's portrait was published in the illustrated papers with requests for any information which might lead to his discovery. Nothing happened, and presently he and his disappearance were forgotten. The nephew who came down to Eastthwaite to look into his affairs was satisfied. His balance at his bank was low owing to the non-payment of various dividends, but the accounts and the contents of Mr. Greathead's cash-box and bureau were in order and Steven had put down every penny he had spent. The nephew paid Mrs. Blenkiron's wages and dismissed her and arranged with the chauffeur to stay on and take care of the house. And as Steven saw that this was the best way to escape suspicion, he stayed on.

Only in Westleydale and Rathdale excitement lingered. People wondered and speculated. Mr. Greathead had been robbed and murdered in the train (Steven said he had had money on him). He had lost his memory and wandered goodness knew where. He had thrown himself out of the railway carriage. Steven said Mr. Greathead wouldn't do *that*, but he shouldn't be surprised if he had lost his memory. He knew a man who forgot who he was and where he lived. Didn't know his own wife and children. Shell-shock. And lately Mr. Greathead's memory hadn't been what it was. Soon as he got it back he'd turn up again. Steven wouldn't be surprised to see him walking in any day.

But on the whole people noticed that he didn't care to talk much about Mr. Greathead. They thought this showed very proper feeling. They were sorry for Steven. He had lost his master and he had lost Dorsy Oldishaw. And if he *did* half kill Ned Oldishaw, well, young Ned had no business to go meddling with his sweetheart. Even Mrs. Oldishaw was sorry for him. And when Steven came into the bar of the King's Arms everybody said "Good-evening, Steve," and made room for him by the fire.

## III

Steven came and went now as if nothing had happened. He made a point of keeping the house as it would be kept if Mr. Greathead were alive. Mrs. Blenkiron, coming in once a fortnight to wash and clean, found the fire lit in Mr. Greathead's study and his slippers standing on end in the fender. Upstairs his bed was made, the clothes folded back, ready. This ritual guarded Steven not only from the suspicions of outsiders, but from his own knowledge. By behaving as though he believed that Mr. Great-

head was still living he almost made himself believe it. By refusing to let his mind dwell on the murder he came to forget it. His imagination saved him, playing the play that kept him sane, till the murder became vague to him and fantastic like a thing done in a dream. He had waked up and this was the reality; this round of caretaking, this look the house had of waiting for Mr. Greathead to



come back to it. He had left off getting up in the night to examine the place on the dairy floor. He was no longer amazed at his impunity.

Then suddenly, when he really had forgotten, it ended. It was on a Saturday in January, about five o'clock. Steven had heard that Dorsy Oldishaw was back again, living at the "King's Arms" with her aunt. He had a mad, uncontrollable longing to see her again.

But it was not Dorsy that he saw.

His way from the Lodge kitchen into the drive was through the yard gates and along the flagged path under the study window. When he turned on to the flags he saw it shuffling along before him. The lamplight from the window lit it up. He could see distinctly the little old man in the long, shabby black overcoat, with the grey woollen muffler round his neck hunched up above his collar, lifting the thin grey hair that stuck out under the slouch of the black hat.

In the first moment that he saw it Steven had no fear. He simply felt that the murder had not happened, that he really *had* dreamed it, and that this was Mr. Greathead come back, alive among the living. The phantasm was now standing at the door of the house, its hand on the door-knob as if about to enter.

But when Steven came up to the door it was not there.

He stood, fixed, staring at the space which had emptied itself so horribly. His heart heaved and staggered, snatching at his breath. And suddenly the memory of the murder rushed at him. He saw himself in the bath-room, shut in with his victim by the soiled green walls. He smelt the reek of the oil-stove; he heard the water running from the tap. He felt his feet springing forward, and his fingers pressing, tighter and tighter, on Mr. Great-head's throat. He saw Mr. Greathead's hands flapping helplessly, his terrified eyes, his face swelling and dis-coloured, changing horribly, and his body sinking to the floor.

He saw himself in the dairy, afterwards; he could hear the thudding, grinding, scraping noises of his tools. He saw himself on Hardraw Pass and the headlights glaring on the pit's mouth. And the fear and the horror he had not felt then came on him now.

He turned back; he bolted the yard gates and all the

doors of the house, and shut himself up in the lighted kitchen. He took up his magazine, *The Autocar*, and forced himself to read it. Presently his terror left him. He said to himself it was nothing. Nothing but his fancy. He didn't suppose he'd ever see anything again.

Three days passed. On the third evening, Steven had lit the study lamp and was bolting the window when he saw it again.

It stood on the path outside, close against the window, looking in. He saw its face distinctly, the greyish, stuck-out bud of the under-lip, and the droop of the pinched nose. The small eyes peered at him, glittering. The whole figure had a glassy look between the darkness behind it and the pane. One moment it stood outside, looking in; and the next it was mixed up with the shimmering picture of the lighted room that hung there on the blackness of the trees. Mr. Greathead then showed as if reflected, standing with Steven in the room.

And now he was outside again, looking at him, looking at him through the pane.

Steven's stomach sank and dragged, making him feel sick. He pulled down the blind between him and Mr. Greathead, clamped the shutters to and drew the curtains over them. He locked and double-bolted the front door, all the doors, to keep Mr. Greathead out. But, once that night, as he lay in bed, he heard the "shoob-shoob" of feet shuffling along the flagged passages, up the stairs, and across the landing outside his door. The door handle rattled; but nothing came. He lay awake till morning, the sweat running off his skin, his heart plunging and quivering with terror.

When he got up he saw a white, scared face in the looking-glass. A face with a half-open mouth, ready to blab, to blurt out his secret; the face of an idiot. He was afraid to take that face into Eastthwaite or into Shawe. So he shut

himself up in the house, half starved on his small stock of bread, bacon and groceries.

Two weeks passed; and then it came again in broad daylight.

It was Mrs. Blenkiron's morning. He had lit the fire in the study at noon and set up Mr. Greathead's slippers in the fender. When he rose from his stooping and turned round he saw Mr. Greathead's phantasm standing on the hearthrug close in front of him. It was looking at him and smiling in a sort of mockery, as if amused at what Steven had been doing. It was solid and completely lifelike at first. Then, as Steven in his terror backed and backed away from it (he was afraid to turn and feel it there behind him), its feet became insubstantial. As if undermined, the whole structure sank and fell together on the floor, where it made a pool of some whitish glistening substance that mixed with the pattern of the carpet and sank through.

That was the most horrible thing it had done yet, and Steven's nerve broke under it. He went to Mrs. Blenkiron, whom he found scrubbing out the dairy.

She sighed as she wrung out the floor-cloth.

"Eh, these owd yeller stawnes, scroob as you will they'll navver look clean."

"Naw," he said. "Scroob and scroob, you'll navver get them clean."

She looked up at him.

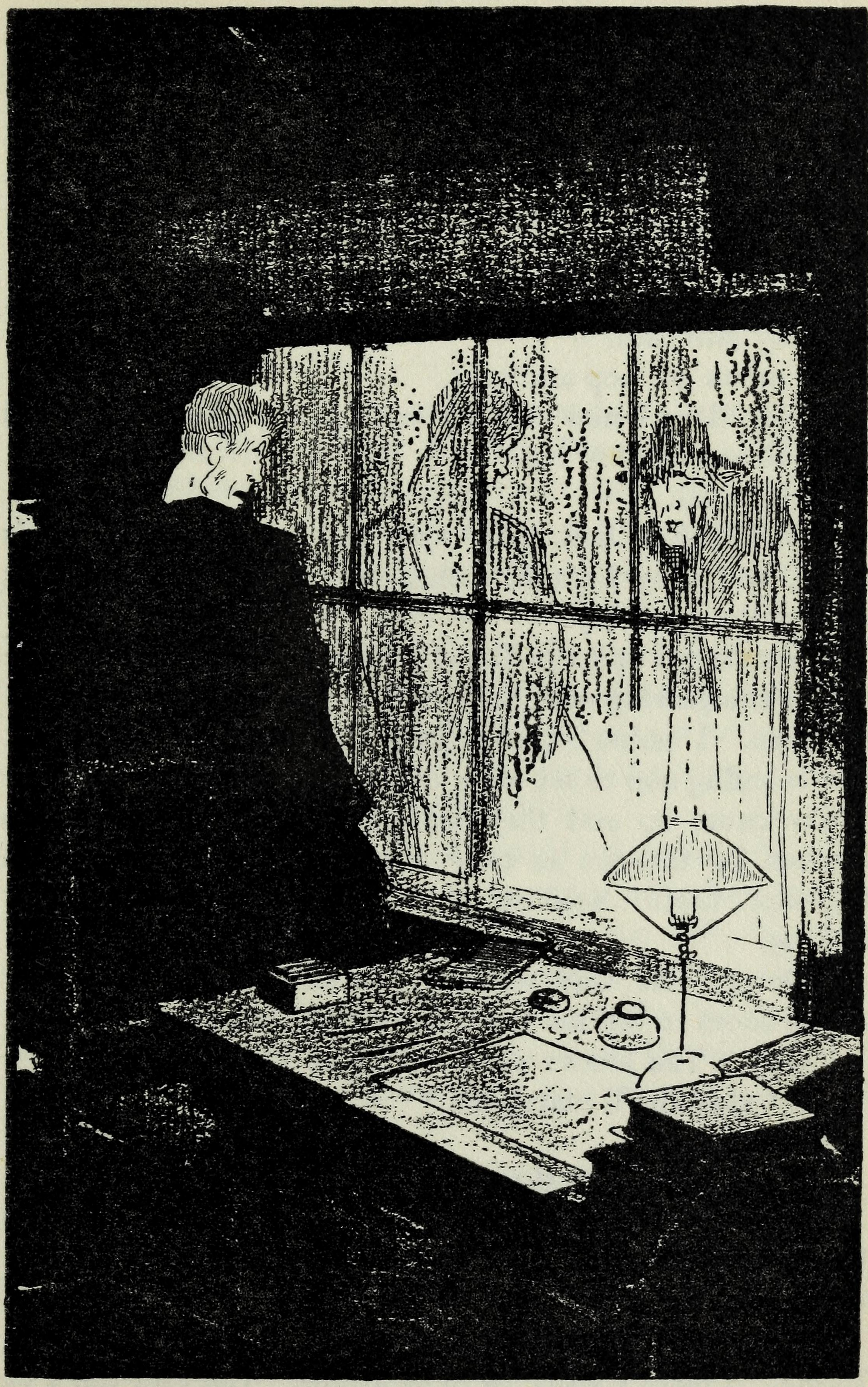
"Eh, lad, what ails 'ee? Ye've got a faace like a wroong dishclout hanging ower t' sink."

"I've got the colic."

"Aye, an' naw woonder wi' the damp, and they misties, an' your awn bad cooking. Let me roon down t' 'King's Arms' and get you a drop of whisky."

"Naw, I'll gaw down mysen."

He knew now he was afraid to be left alone in the house. Down at the "King's Arms" Dorsy and Mrs. Oldishaw were



It stood close against the window, looking in.

sorry for him. By this time he was really ill with fright. Dorsy and Mrs. Oldishaw said it was a chill. They made him lie down on the settle by the kitchen fire and put a rug over him, and gave him stiff hot grog to drink. He slept. And when he woke he found Dorsy sitting beside him with her sewing.

He sat up and her hand was on his shoulder.

"Lay still, lad."

"I maun get oop and gaw."

"Nay, there's naw call for 'ee to gaw. Lay still and I'll make thee a coop o' tea."

He lay still.

Mrs. Oldishaw had made up a bed for him in her son's room, and they kept him there that night and till four o'clock the next day.

When he got up to go Dorsy put on her coat and hat.

"Is tha gawing out, Dorsy?"

"Aye. I canna let thee gaw and set there by thysen. I'm cooming oop to set with 'ee till night time."

She came up and they sat side by side in the Lodge kitchen by the fire as they used to sit when they were together there, holding each other's hands and not talking.

"Dorsy," he said at last, "what astha coom for? Astha coom to tall me tha'll navver speak to me again?"

"Nay. Tha knaws what I've coom for."

"To saay tha'll marry me?"

"Aye."

"I maunna marry thee, Dorsy. 'Twouldn' be right."

"Right? What dostha mean? 'Twouldn't be right for me to coom and set wi' thee this road ef I doan't marry thee."

"Nay. I darena'. Tha said tha was afraid of me, Dorsy. I doan't want 'ee to be afraid. Tha said tha'd be unhappy. I doan't want 'ee to be unhappy."

"That was lasst year. I'm not afraid of 'ee, now, Steve."

"Tha doan't knaw me, lass."

"Aye, I knaw thee. I knaw tha's sick and starved for want of me. Tha canna live wi'out thy awn lass to take care of 'ee."

She rose.

"I maun gaw now. But I'll be oop to-morrow and the next day."

And to-morrow and the next day and the next, at dusk, the hour that Steven most dreaded, Dorsy came. She sat with him till long after the night had fallen.

Steven would have felt safe so long as she was with him, but for his fear that Mr. Greathead would appear to him while she was there and that she would see him. If Dorsy knew he was being haunted she might guess why. Or Mr. Greathead might take some horrible blood-dripping and dismembered shape that would show her how he had been murdered. It would be like him, dead, to come between them as he had come when he was living.

They were sitting at the round table by the fireside. The lamp was lit and Dorsy was bending over her sewing. Suddenly she looked up, her head on one side, listening. Far away inside the house, on the flagged passage from the front door, he could hear the "shoob-shoob" of the footsteps. He could almost believe that Dorsy shivered. And somehow, for some reason, this time he was not afraid.

"Steven," she said, "didsta 'ear anything?"

"Naw. Nobbut t' wind oonder t' roogs."

She looked at him; a long wondering look. Apparently it satisfied her, for she answered: "Aye. Mebbe 'tes nobbut wind," and went on with her sewing.

He drew his chair nearer to her to protect her if it came. He could almost touch her where she sat.

The latch lifted. The door opened, and, his entrance and his passage unseen, Mr. Greathead stood before them.

The table hid the lower half of his form; but above it he was steady and solid in his terrible semblance of flesh and blood.

Steven looked at Dorsy. She was staring at the phantasm with an innocent, wondering stare that had no fear in it at all. Then she looked at Steven. An uneasy, frightened, searching look, as though to make sure whether he had seen it.

That was her fear—that *he* should see it, that *he* should be frightened, that *he* should be haunted.

He moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder. He thought, perhaps, she might shrink from him because she knew that it *was* he who was haunted. But no, she put up her hand and held his, gazing up into his face and smiling.

Then, to his amazement, the phantasm smiled back at them; not with mockery, but with a strange and terrible sweetness. Its face lit up for one instant with a sudden, beautiful, shining light; then it was gone.

"Did tha see 'im, Steve?"

"Aye."

"Astha seen annything afore?"

"Aye, three times I've seen 'im."

"Is it that 'as scared thee?"

"'Oo tawled 'ee I was scared?"

"I knawed. Because nowt can 'appen to thee but I maun knaw it."

"What dostha think, Dorsy?"

"I think tha needna be scared, Steve. 'E's a kind ghawst. Whatever 'e is 'e doan't mean thee no 'arm. T' owd gentleman navver did when he was alive."

"Didn''e? Didn' 'e? 'E served me the woorst turn 'e could when 'e coomed between thee and me."

"Whatever makes 'ee think that, lad?"

"I doan' think it. I *knaw*."

"Nay, loove, tha dostna."

"'E did. 'E did, I tell thee."

"Doan' tha say that," she cried. "Doan' tha say it, Stevey."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Tha'll set folk talking that road."

"What do they knaw to talk about?"

"Ef they was to remember what tha said."

"And what did I say?"

"Why, that ef annybody was to coom between thee and me, tha'd do them in."

"I wasna thinking of *'im*. Gawd knaws I wasna."

"*They* doan't," she said.

"*Tha* knaws? Tha knaws I didna mean 'im?"

"Aye, *I* knaw, Steve."

"An', Dorsy, tha 'rn't afraid of me? Tha 'rn't afraid of me anny more?"

"Nay, lad. I loove thee too mooch. I shall navver be afraid of 'ee again. Would I coom to thee this road ef I was afraid?"

"Tha'll be afraid now."

"And what should I be afraid of?"

"Why—*'im*."

"*'Im?* I should be a deal more afraid to think of 'ee setting with 'im oop 'ere, by thysen. Wuntha coom down and sleep at aunt's?"

"That I wunna. But I shall set 'ee on t' road passt t' moor."

He went with her down the bridle-path and across the moor and along the main road that led through Eastthwaite. They parted at the turn where the lights of the village came in sight.

The moon had risen as Steven went back across the moor. The ash-tree at the bridle-path stood out clear, its hooked,

bending branches black against the grey moor-grass. The shadows in the ruts laid stripes along the bridle-path, black on grey. The house was black-grey in the darkness of the drive. Only the lighted study window made a golden square in its long wall.

Before he could go up to bed he would have to put out the study lamp. He was nervous; but he no longer felt the sickening and sweating terror of the first hauntings. Either he was getting used to it, or—something had happened to him.

He had closed the shutters and put out the lamp. His candle made a ring of light round the table in the middle of the room. He was about to take it up and go when he heard a thin voice calling his name: "Steven." He raised his head to listen. The thin thread of sound seemed to come from outside, a long way off, at the end of the bridle-path.

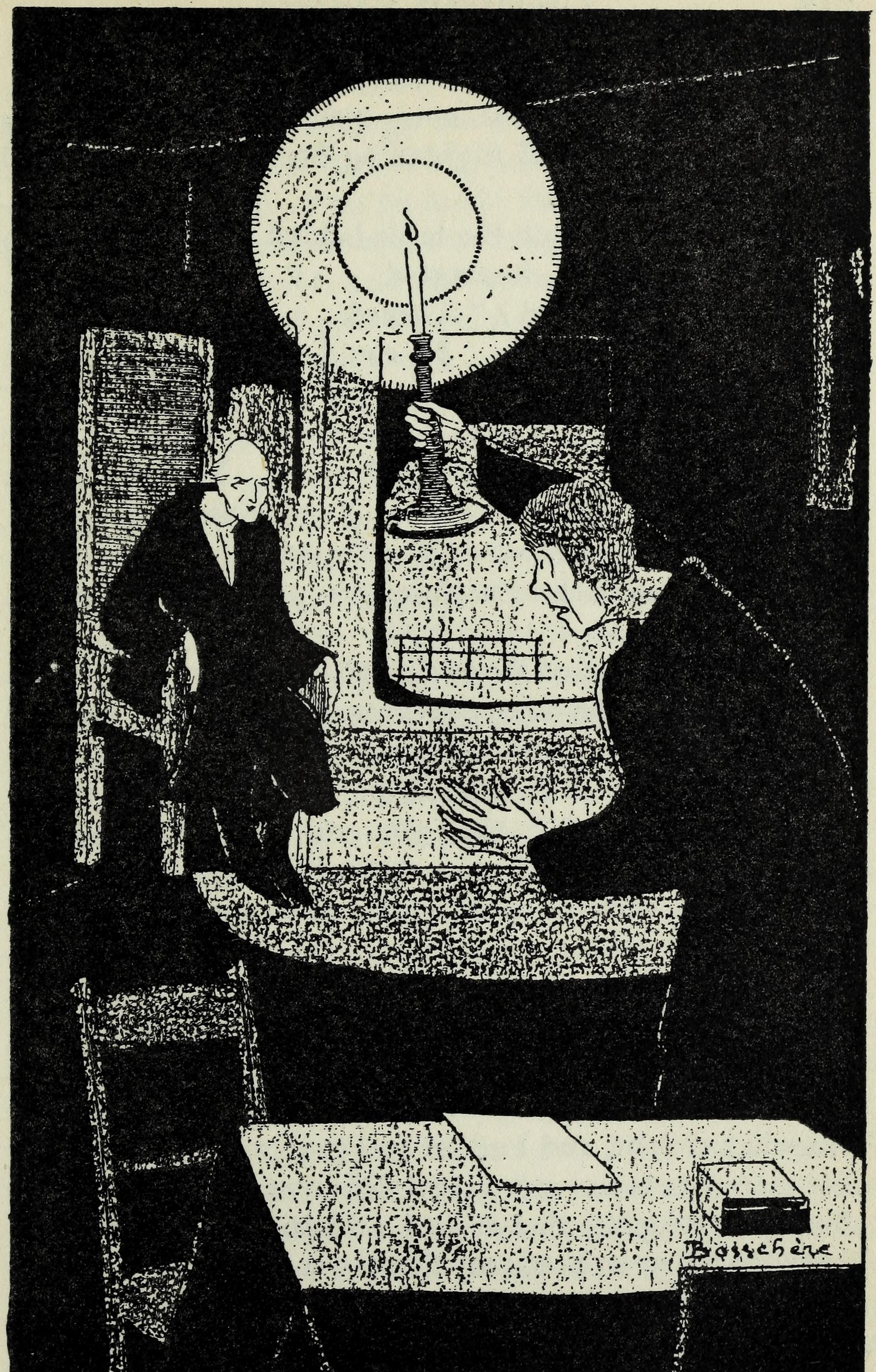
"Steven, Steven——"

This time he could have sworn the sound came from inside his head, like the hiss of air in his ears.

"Steven——"

He knew the voice now. It was behind him in the room. He turned, and saw the phantasm of Mr. Greathead sitting, as he used to sit, in the arm-chair by the fire. The form was dim in the dusk of the room outside the ring of candlelight. Steven's first movement was to snatch up the candlestick and hold it between him and the phantasm, hoping that the light would cause it to disappear. Instead of disappearing the figure became clear and solid, indistinguishable from a figure of flesh and blood dressed in black broadcloth and white linen. Its eyes had the shining transparency of blue crystal; they were fixed on Steven with a look of quiet, benevolent attention. Its small, narrow mouth was lifted at the corners, smiling.

It spoke.




. . . the figure became clear and solid . . .

" You needn't be afraid," it said.

The voice was natural now, quiet, measured, slightly quavering. Instead of frightening Steven it soothed and steadied him.

He put the candle on the table behind him and stood up before the phantasm, fascinated.

" *Why* are you afraid ? " it asked.

Steven couldn't answer. He could only stare, held there by the shining, hypnotizing eyes.

" You are afraid," it said, " because you think I'm what you call a ghost, a supernatural thing. You think I'm dead and that you killed me. You think you took a horrible revenge for a wrong you thought I did you. You think I've come back to frighten you, to revenge myself in my turn.

" And every one of those thoughts of yours, Steven, is wrong. I'm real, and my appearance is as natural and real as anything in this room—*more* natural and more real if you did but know. You didn't kill me, as you see ; for here I am, as alive, more alive than you are. Your revenge consisted in removing me from a state which had become unbearable to a state more delightful than you can imagine. I don't mind telling you, Steven, that I was in serious financial difficulties (which, by the way, is a good thing for you, as it provides a plausible motive for my disappearance). So that, as far as revenge goes, the thing was a complete frost. You were my benefactor. Your methods were somewhat violent, and I admit you gave me some disagreeable moments before my actual deliverance ; but as I was already developing rheumatoid arthritis there can be no doubt that in your hands my death was more merciful than if it had been left to Nature. As for the subsequent arrangements, I congratulate you, Steven, on your coolness and resource. I always said you were equal to any emergency, and that your brains would pull you safe through

any scrape. You committed an appalling and dangerous crime, a crime of all things the most difficult to conceal, and you contrived so that it was not discovered and never will be discovered. And no doubt the details of this crime seemed to you horrible and revolting to the last degree; and the more horrible and the more revolting they were, the more you piqued yourself on your nerve in carrying the thing through without a hitch.

"I don't want to put you entirely out of conceit with your performance. It was very creditable for a beginner, very creditable indeed. But let me tell you, this idea of things being horrible and revolting is all illusion. The terms are purely relative to your limited perceptions.

"I'm speaking now to your intelligence—I don't mean that practical ingenuity which enabled you to dispose of me so neatly. When I say intelligence I mean intelligence. All you did, then, was to redistribute matter. To our incorruptible sense matter never takes any of those offensive forms in which it so often appears to you. Nature has evolved all this horror and repulsion just to prevent people from making too many little experiments like yours. You mustn't imagine that these things have any eternal importance. Don't flatter yourself you've electrified the universe. For minds no longer attached to flesh and blood, that horrible butchery you were so proud of, Steven, is simply silly. No more terrifying than the spilling of red ink or the rearrangement of a jig-saw puzzle. I saw the whole business, and I can assure you I felt nothing but intense amusement. Your face, Steven, was so absurdly serious. You've no idea what you looked like with that chopper. I'd have appeared to you then and told you so, only I knew I should frighten you into fits.

"And there's another grand mistake, my lad—your thinking that I'm haunting you out of revenge, that I'm trying to frighten you. . . . My dear Steven, if I'd wanted

to frighten you I'd have appeared in a very different shape. I needn't remind you what shape I *might* have appeared in. . . . What do you suppose I've come for ? "

" I don't know," said Steven in a husky whisper. " Tell me."

" I've come to forgive you. And to save you from the horror you *would* have felt sooner or later. And to stop your going on with your crime."

" You needn't," Steven said. " I'm not going on with it. I shall do no more murders."

" There you are again. Can't you understand that I'm not talking about your silly butcher's work ? I'm talking about your *real* crime. Your real crime was hating me.

" And your very hate was a blunder, Steven. You hated me for something I hadn't done."

" Aye, what did you do ? Tell me that."

" You thought I came between you and your sweetheart. That night when Dorsy spoke to me, you thought I told her to throw you over, didn't you ? "

" Aye. And what did you tell her ? "

" I told her to stick to you. It was you, Steven, who drove her away. You frightened the child. She said she was afraid for her life of you. Not because you half killed that poor boy, but because of the look on your face before you did it. The look of hate, Steven.

" I told her not to be afraid of you. I told her that if she threw you over you might go altogether to the devil ;