

The Flaw in the Crystal

by

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Freeeditorial 

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CHAPTER ONE

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 weekends 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 realise any profound and poignant thing that touched him; so by the mercy of heaven she had never realised Agatha Verrall. She used to say that 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. She had proved it up to the hilt.

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 fallow fields, of ploughed hillsides pale with the white strain of the chalk. In April (it was April now) a land shining with silver and with 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 southwest, 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; 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 was not 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."

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 that 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 realised 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, could not perhaps always do for himself; she could keep that dreadful possibility in him under; she could in fact, make their communion all that she most 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."

CHAPTER TWO

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 had 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 that it had never meant and could not mean for her, something that 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 stockbroker). 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 realise 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 Powell's 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 realised 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.

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 apologised 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 incomparable 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 hearth-place. 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. 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.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW could it? There was nothing behind it. All Milly's plans had been like that; they fell to dust; they were dust. They 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 lucidity, 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 realised 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 emphasised 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 realised that it was the end – when he realised 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 enthroned. 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 recognised 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.

CHAPTER FOUR

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 movements, the vehemences, 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.

CHAPTER FIVE

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 that 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 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 her 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. Don't 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, 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 will 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 agonised 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 leave 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 — —"

CHAPTER SIX

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, familiarised 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 realised 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. And the effort to recover it became a striving, 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.

It was her fear at last that made her write to Rodney. 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 prevailed. 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 complacency 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 have not done harm."

"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."

CHAPTER SEVEN

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 any one."

"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."

CHAPTER EIGHT

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 which led up the hill by the field path that slanted 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 realise 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 moreover 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 recognised 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 that 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 that 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 that 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 ought not 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 down to-night, and the lamp on the table burnt low; the oil had given 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.

CHAPTER NINE

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.

CHAPTER TEN

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 farmhouse 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 farmhouse, 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?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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 the maid 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 recognise 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 unashamed.

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.

CHAPTER TWELVE

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 had 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 realised 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 that 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 that I might give out. Well – I have given out."

"You told me that 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 that 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 that 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 have 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 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 will make me believe," she said, "that 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 doorbell rang violently. Milly rose and let her have it—"what was the flaw in the crystal."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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 did not want him to come back just yet, but she knew that she was not afraid to see him. It did not 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 that 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, out 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 ran under the threshold and hid 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 forever.

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 that 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 — that 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.