

# THE GATELESS BARRIER

BY  
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*Freeditorial* 

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### I

Laurence leaned his arms upon the broad wooden hand-rail of the bulwarks. The water hissed away from the side. Immediately below it was laced by shifting patterns of white foam, and stained pale green, violet, and amber, by the light shining out through the rounds of the port-poles. Further away it showed blue black, but for a glistening on the hither side of the vast ridge and furrow. The smoke from the funnels streamed afar, and was upturned by a following wind. The great ship swung in the trough, and then lifted—as a horse lifts at a fence—while the seas slid away from under her keel. As she lifted, her masts raked the blue-black night sky, and the stars danced in the rigging.

This was the first time since his marriage, nearly two years before, that Laurence found himself alone and altogether his own master. His marriage was a notable success—every one said so, and he himself had never doubted the fact so far. Yet this solitary voyage, this temporary return to bachelorhood, possessed compensations. He reproached himself, as in duty bound, for being sensible of those compensations. He excused himself to himself. He gave reasons. Doubtless his present sense of freedom and content took its rise not in his enforced absence from Virginia, from her bright continuous talk, her innumerable and perfectly constructed dresses, her perpetual and skilful activities; but in his escape from the highly artificial and materialised society in which she lived and moved and had her being. Laurence had certainly no ostensible cause of complaint against that society. Its members had recited his verses, given a charming performance of his little comedy—in the interests of a deserving charity—quoted his opinions on literature and politics, and waxed enthusiastic over his strokes at golf and his style at rackets and polo. He had, in fact, been the spoilt child of two New York winters and two Newport summers. No Englishman, he was repeatedly assured, had ever been so popular among the "smart set" of the great republic. It had petted and *fêted* him, and finally given him one of its fairest daughters to wife. And for all this Laurence Rivers was sincerely grateful. His vanity was most agreeably flattered. His natural love both of pleasing and of pleasure was well satisfied. Yet—such is the perversity of human nature—the very completeness of his success tended to lessen the worth of it. He even questioned, at moments, whether that success did not offer the measure of surrounding immaturity of taste and judgment, rather than of the greatness of his personal talent and merit. He was haunted by the conviction that he had never yet given his best, the highest and strongest of his nature, either in thought, or art, or adventure, or even—perhaps—he feared it—in love. The demand had been for a thoroughly presentable and immediately marketable article; and the Best is usually far from marketable, often but doubtfully presentable either. It

followed that Laurence had, almost of necessity, kept the best of himself to himself—kept it to himself so effectually that he had come uncommonly near forgetting its existence altogether, and letting it perish for lack of air and exercise.

Now leaning his arms upon the hand-rail of the bulwarks, while the stars danced in the rigging, and the great ship ploughed her way eastward across the mighty ridge and furrow of the Atlantic, gratified vanity ceased to obtain in him. His thoughts travelled back to periods of his career at once more obscure and more ambitious—to the few vital raptures, the few fine failures, the few illuminating aspirations which he had known. The bottom dropped out of the social side of things, so to speak. He looked below superficial appearances into the heart of it all. Life put off its cheap frippery of fancy dress, Death its cunningly devised concealments and evasions. Backed by the immensities of sea and sky, both stood before him naked and unashamed, in all their primitive and eternal vigour, their uncompromising actuality, their inviolable mystery; while, with a sudden and searching apprehension of the profound import of the question, Rivers asked himself—

"What shall it profit a man—what in good truth—if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

He had been summoned to England by the illness of an uncle whose estates and considerable wealth he would inherit. That illness had been pronounced incurable; but the approaching death of this near relation made small demand upon his intimate feelings. A decent seriousness of thought and speech, concerning the impending event, were all that could reasonably be required of him; for the elder Mr. Rivers was both morose and eccentric, and had given his nephew a handsome allowance on the express understanding that he saw as little of him as possible. A declared misogynist, he had received the announcement of Laurence's proposed marriage with an exasperating mixture of contempt and approval.

"I am sincerely sorry for you," he had written on this occasion. "The more so that you appear to labour under the impression that the step you have in contemplation is calculated to secure your happiness. This, you must pardon my remarking, is obviously absurd. I grant that you are under a moral obligation to perpetuate our family and secure the succession to our estates in the direct line. I cannot, therefore, but be glad that you should adopt the recognised means to attain the above ends. I should, however, respect both your motives and your intelligence more highly had you done this in a rational and scientific spirit, without indulgence in sentimental illusions which every sane student of human history has long since perceived to be as pernicious to the moral, as they are enervating to the mental health. I could say much worthy of your attention upon this point; but, in your present condition of emotional inebriation, it would be a waste of energy on my part,—I might add, a throwing of pearls before swine. Still, justice, my dear Laurence, compels me to own that, even so,

I must ever consider myself in a measure your debtor, since the fact of your existence, your remarkably sound physical condition, your normal and slightly unintelligent outlook on life, have combined to relieve me of the odious necessity of sacrificing my time and my personal liberty to the interests of our family, by entering into those domestic relations, which you appear to regard with as much thoughtless complacency as I with reasoned repulsion and distrust."

This being the attitude of the elder Mr. Rivers's mind, it followed that when, by his request, Mr. Wormald, the family solicitor, summoned his nephew and heir to attend his deathbed, the young man's wife was not included in that gloomy invitation. And this Laurence could not by any means honestly regret. Virginia at a disadvantage was an idea almost inconceivable. Yet so immediate and concrete a being would not, he felt, shade quite gracefully into the mortuary landscape. She would not suit it, neither would it suit her. For she was almost amazingly in harmony with her modern, mundane environment; and, save in the way of costly mourning costumes, it seemed incredible that death should have any dominion over her. It struck him, moreover, that if he gauged the position aright, Virginia, notwithstanding her many charms and much cleverness, would have to take a back seat in his eccentric uncle's establishment. And Virginia in a back seat was again an idea almost inconceivable. So he said—

"It's an awful nuisance to have to leave you like this, but this is going to be a pretty dismal bit of business anyhow. I'd much better just worry through it alone. You'll join me later when it's all over, and we are free to take possession and knock the place in shape. Stoke Rivers is really rather delightful, though it is not very large. There used to be some good pictures and books and things in it I remember. I believe my uncle is a virtuoso in his way, though he is such a cross-grained old chap. You'll enjoy the place, at all events for a few months every year, I think, Virginia. And you can have all your own people over in turn, you know; and show them how the savage English do it in their savage little island. You'll make the neighbourhood sit up, I fancy. It'll be amusing."

But as Laurence leaned his arms upon the broad hand-rail of the bulwarks, in the chill of the March night, while the water hissed away from the side, and the engines drummed and pounded, and the bows of the great ship lifted against the far, blue-black horizon, he began to wonder whether he had not been somewhat over hasty in proposing chronic invasion of Stoke Rivers by all Virginia's smart friends in turn. They were well-bred, hospitable, amusing, very much up-to-date. He owed them thanks for a most uncommonly good time. But they seemed a trifle thin, a trifle superficial and ephemeral just now, in face of the immensities of ocean and sky, and of the ancient mysteries of Life and Death.

## II

Not until after dinner, on the evening of his arrival, was Laurence admitted to his uncle's presence. The aspect of the room was rich though sombre. Long in proportion to its width, with a low, heavily-moulded ceiling, the walls of it were panelled in black oak three parts of their height. The space between the top of the panelling and the cornice was hung with dark blue silk-damask, narrow diagonal lines of yellow crossing the background of the raised pattern. The short, full curtains drawn over the wide window were of the same handsome material. So were the counterpane and hangings of the half-tester, ebony bed. This last was elaborately carved. Two couchant sphinxes, the polished surface of whose cup-like breasts glowed in the firelight, supported the footboard, as did a couple of caryatides—naked to the loins—the canopy. Near the fireplace stood an oaken table, on which lay a few well-bound books. The further end of it was covered by a cloth of gold and crimson embroidery—evidently fashioned from some priestly vestment—upon which rested a *memento mori*, about four inches in height, cut out of a solid block of rock crystal, the olive crown which encircled the brow being of pale, green jade.

In a deep-seated, high-backed armchair—placed between the table and the outstanding pillars of the chimney piece—propped up by dark silken pillows, his spare frame wrapped in a long, fur-lined, violet, cloth dressing-gown, a violet, velvet skull-cap on his head, sat Mr. Rivers.

Laurence, who had not seen his uncle for the last five or six years, was conscious of receiving an almost painfully vivid impression at once of physical feebleness and intellectual energy. The elder man's face and hands appeared transparent as the crystal *memento mori* on the table beside him. His long, straight nose showed thin as a knife. His wide, lip-less mouth seemed to shut with a spring, like a trap. The bone of the face and hands was salient, as of one suffering starvation. Yet the blue-grey eyes, though sunk in their cavernous sockets, were brilliant, alert, full of an almost malevolent greed of observation. Laurence noted that a spotless cleanliness and order pervaded the room and the person of its occupant. The angular and attenuated face was shaven with scrupulous nicety. The finger-nails were carefully polished and pointed. An open collar and wristbands of fine lawn showed exquisitely white against the purple cloth and fur of the dressing-gown. It was evident that Mr. Rivers, whatever the peculiarities of his temper or of his opinions, treated illness and approaching dissolution with an admirable effect of stoicism and personal dignity.

As Laurence—himself conspicuously well-groomed, in evening dress, no mark of his long journey upon him, save in a complexion tanned by sun and sea-wind, and by the directness of glance and vigour of movement that remains, for a while, by every true

sea-lover after he comes ashore—crossed the space between the door and fireplace, the old man raised himself a little in his chair.

"Believe me, I am very sensible of the consideration you show in so immediately gratifying my desire to see you, my dear Laurence."

"I was very happy to come, sir," the younger man answered. But he was not unconscious of a point of irony in the cold, level tones of the voice, or in the persistent scrutiny of the brilliant eyes. These appeared to regard him as they might some row of figures—mentally casting up, subtracting, dividing, intent on arriving, with all possible despatch, at a conclusive and final result. The effect was not precisely encouraging, nor were the words which followed.

"That is well," Mr. Rivers said. "But it is desirable you should understand from the outset that which you have undertaken. You may be detained here. The disease from which I suffer is, as you have been informed, incurable; though it is, I am happy to say, neither offensive or infectious. But though the final result is assured, the moment of its advent is uncertain. Neither I, nor the physicians who amiably expend their limited and somewhat empirical skill upon me, can determine the date at which this disease will prove fatal. I shall regret to cause you inconvenience, but the event is beyond my control. I may keep you waiting."

"The longer the better, sir," Laurence said, smiling, and his smile was sincere and genial, of the sort which inspires confidence.—"That is," he added, "if you do not suffer unduly."

"When the mind has realised the greatness of its own powers, and trained itself to their exercise, the will can almost invariably reduce suffering to endurable proportions," Mr. Rivers replied contemptuously, as dealing with a matter obvious, and so beneath discussion. He raised one transparent hand, pointed towards a chair, and then let his wrist drop again upon a supporting silken cushion. As he did so the two heavy rings he wore—one an amethyst set in brilliants and engraved with Arabic characters, the other a black scarab on a hoop of rough gold—slipped up the long phalange of his second finger to the knotted knuckle, and back again, with a dry rattle and chink.

"Oblige me by sitting down, Laurence," he said. "I wish you to labour under no misapprehension as to my intentions in sending for you. A certain amount of business may need attention; but all that you can discuss with my agent, Armstrong,—a very worthy, though prejudiced person. My affairs are in order. I am not called upon to waste any of the time remaining to me upon them. Let me explain myself. The disease—for, to do so, I must refer to it once again—which is in process of destroying certain organs, and consequently paralysing certain functions of my body, has in no degree affected my mind. This retains the completeness of its lucidity. Indeed, I am

disposed to believe that my enforced physical inactivity, and the small number of objects presented to my sight—I never leave this room—tend to exalt and stimulate my intellectual powers. You recall the legend of the ancient philosopher who plucked out his eyes, that, undisturbed by the vision of irrelevant objects, he might attain to greater concentration of thought. Disease, in limiting my activities, has gone far to confer upon me the boon which the philosopher in question strove, rather violently, to bestow upon himself. I have ever been a student. I propose to continue so to the last. My interest is unabated. My passion for knowledge—the sole passion of my life—remains in full force."

Laurence sat listening, nursing his knee. The speaker's attitude was impressive, in a way admirable. His detachment, his calm, his acumen, commanded his hearer's respect.

"Yes, yes. I see—that's fine," Laurence said under his breath.

A slightly ironical expression passed across the elder man's attenuated face.

"I am, of course, glad that my sentiments meet with your approval. But I fear that approval may prove premature. I have not yet fully explained myself."

Laurence smiled at him good-temperedly. "All right, sir; I'm listening," he said.

"I must frankly admit I did not require your presence with a view to having you endorse my opinions. These are, I trust, too much the outcome of close and lengthened thought to stand in need of support from the agreement of another mind. I have never desired disciples, having the evidence of the history of all great religious, political, and scientific movements to prove conclusively that it is the invariable habit of the disciple to falsify his master's teaching, to attach himself to the weak rather than the strong places of such teaching, to betray intellectually with some emotional, some hysterical kiss. The disciple resembles those parasitic plants of the tropic forests, that strangle the tree upon which they climb upward toward the air and light."

He paused a moment, turned his head against the pillows, with a movement of almost distressing weakness. Then, gathering himself together by a perceptible exercise of will, he looked searchingly at Laurence again, and resumed his speech.

"Nor have I required your presence here during these last days or weeks—as the case may be—with a view to offering to you, or receiving from you, that which is usually termed affection. I am not aware of any demand, or supply, in myself of that very much overrated commodity. I deny the actuality, indeed, of its existence. Subjected to analysis, it can always be resolved into workings of self-interest, or into the gratification, more or less gross, of the animal passions. It is the generator of all the practical folly and intellectual sloth which go to retard the progress of science, and the rule of high philosophy among men. As between ourselves, my dear Laurence, any

pretence of affection would be transparently ridiculous. We are barely acquainted. My departure will very clearly be to your advantage. Moreover, our tastes and characters are so divergent, that any real community of interests, any real bond of sympathy, is clearly out of the question."

During the course of this address the young man's pleasant smile had broadened almost to the point of laughter.

"I understand, I really do understand," he said. "And now that we've cleared the decks for action in this very comprehensive manner, I grow—if I may mention it—most uncommonly curious to learn what you did send for me here for."

"I sent for you because there is one matter regarding which my information is conspicuously defective, and because your conversation, your habits, your very appearance, and gestures may serve to enlighten me. I have lived among books, and objects of art of no mean value. I have enjoyed communion, both by letter and in speech, with many of the most distinguished minds of the present century. But I never associated, I have never cared to associate, with the average man of the world, of the clubs and the racecourse, the man of intrigues, of, in short, society. He appeared to me to weigh too lightly in the scale to be a worthy object of study. I ignored him, and in so doing dropped an important link out of the chain of being. For these persons breed, they perpetuate tendencies, they influence and modify the history of the race. Not to reckon with such persons, is not to reckon with a persistent and active factor in intellectual and moral evolution."

Laurence had risen to his feet. He stood with his hands behind him and his back to the fire. He was amused, but he was also slightly nettled.

"Ah!" he said, "exactly. And so you sent for me. You took for granted I was that sort. You wanted to see how we do it."

"Yes," Mr. Rivers answered, "it did appear to me that you were calculated to fulfil the conditions. In any case you were the only example of the type available. Our connection by blood, and the relation in which you stand to my property, gave me certain claims upon your time and your consideration. I wish very much to observe you. I wish to study you from the psychological and other points of view. You need not attempt to assist me. Be yourself, please. Be passive. I need no co-operation on the part of my subject. This will really give you very little trouble, while it will afford me interesting occupation during the period—whether short or protracted, I know not—which must elapse before disease has run its course and procured dissolution."

Laurence listened in silence; and while he did so, he ceased to be nettled, he ceased even to be inclined to treat these singular proposals humorously. For there appeared to him a certain pathos in the earnest desire of this recluse and student now, at the



eleventh hour, to acquaint himself with just that which he had so arrogantly despised, namely the Commonplace. It was slightly wounding to personal vanity to be thus selected, from among the millions of mankind, as a fine, thorough-paced example and exponent of the Commonplace. But Laurence was kind-hearted. He also possessed a fund of practical philosophy. No—decidedly the position was not a flattering one! Yet it was rather original, and, moreover, how could one in common charity refuse any little pleasure to a dying man?

"Very well, sir," he said. "I think I quite grasp the necessities of the inquiry. I'm quite willing to be operated on, and I promise to play fair and not let the evidence be faked. But I'm afraid you'll get bored first. I am likely to be more illuminated than illuminating."

"I am obliged to you," Mr. Rivers said. "To-night I will not further detain you. Pray give any orders you please to Renshaw. He is a well-trained and responsible servant. There are horses in the stable. Good-night. I repeat that I am obliged to you."

### III

Finding it unlikely that his uncle would ask for him before evening, and that consequently he had plenty of time at his disposal, Laurence embarked after breakfast upon a survey of the house. When a boy at school he had occasionally passed a couple of nights at Stoke Rivers. His recollections of these visits were not gay. He had been glad enough to go away again. It followed that his impressions of the house itself were vague and confused. He now found that it was constructed in the shape of a capital L reversed. The base of the letter, facing east and west, contained kitchens, offices, and servants' quarters. The main building—at right angles to it—was two stories in height, and consisted of suites of handsome rooms opening on to a wide corridor. The windows of the latter looked south, those of the rooms north. The colouring and furnishings resembled, in the main, those of Mr. Rivers' bedroom. Dark panelled walls, rich, sombre hangings of dark blue, crimson, or violet obtained throughout. In the drawing-rooms were some noble landscapes by Cuyp, Ruysdael, and other Dutch masters of note. There was also an admirable collection of Italian ivories, small figures of exquisite workmanship; and several glass cases containing fine antique and renaissance gems. The walls of the libraries were lined with books—a curious and varied collection, ranging from ancient black-letter volumes down to the latest German treatise, on natural science or metaphysics, of the current year. Laurence promised himself to make nearer acquaintance with these rather weighty joys at a more convenient season. Meanwhile, in contrast to the otherwise distinctly old-fashioned character of the house, he remarked a very complete installation of electric light, and an ingenious system of hot-air ventilation, by means of which a temperature of over seventy degrees was maintained throughout the whole interior. This produced a heavy and enervating atmosphere of which Laurence—fresh from the strong clean air of the Atlantic—became increasingly and disagreeably sensible. It made him at once restless and inert; and as he wandered, rather aimlessly from room to room, he was annoyed by finding a slight nervousness gained on him—he, whose nerves were usually of the steadiest, happily conspicuous by their absence, indeed, rather than by their presence!

"Upon my word, this beats the American abomination of steam heat," he said to himself.

His visit to the library, where the smell of old leather bindings added to the deadness of the air, nearly finished him. He went out on to the corridor, and paced the length of it, past the flying staircase of black oak leading to the upper corridor, and back again. A broad strip of deep-pile, crimson carpet was spread along the centre of the polished floor. On one hand, between the doors of the living-rooms, hung a collection of valuable copper-plate engravings, representing classic ruins in Italy and Greece. While on the other, in the spaces between the windows, were ranged a series of

busts—Augustus, Tiberias, Nero, the two Antonines, Caligula, and Commodus—set on tall columnar pedestals of dark green or yellow marble. The blind, sculptured faces deepened the general sense of oppression by their rigidity, their unalterable and somewhat scornful repose.

Out of doors the March morning was tumultuous with wind and wet, offering marked contrast to the dry heat, the almost burdensome order and stillness reigning within. The air of the corridor was perhaps a degree fresher than that of the library he had just quitted. Laurence leaned his arms on a stone window-sill, and glanced in a desultory way at the day's *Times*, which he had picked up off the hall table in passing. But Chinese railway concessions, plague reports from Bombay, even the last racing fixtures, or rumours of fighting on the North-West Indian Frontier, failed to arouse his interest. In his present humour, these items of news from the outside world seemed curiously unimportant and remote. He stared at the wide, well-wooded, rain-blurred landscape. The scene at which he had assisted last night, the intimate drama moving forward relentlessly even now to its close in that well-appointed room upstairs—and the extraordinary character of the chief actor in that drama—his over-stimulated brain and atrophied affections, his greed of experiment and of acquiring information, even yet, in the very article of death—depressed Laurence's imagination as the close atmosphere depressed his body. It was all so painfully narrow, barren, hungry, joyless, somehow. And meanwhile, he, Laurence, was required to play the fool—not for the provocation of laughter, which would after all have had a semblance of cheerful good-fellowship in it. But in cold blood, as an object lesson in the manner and customs of the average man; a lesson the result of which would be tabulated and pigeon-holed by that unwearying intelligence, as might be the habits of some species of obscure, unpleasant insect. The young man had developed slight intolerance of the exclusively worldly side of things lately. It seemed by no means improbable he might develop equal intolerance of the exclusively intellectual side before long, at this rate.

"I seem qualifying as a past-master in the highly unprofitable act of quarrelling with my bread and butter," he said to himself. "If I chuck society, and proceed to chuck brains as well, for a man like myself, without genius and without a profession, what the devil is there left?"

Meditating thus, he had left his station at the window, and walked to the extreme end of the corridor farthest away from the servants' wing of the house. It was closed by a splendid tapestry curtain, whereon a crowd of round-limbed cupids drove a naked and reluctant woman, with gestures of naughty haste, towards a satyr, seated beneath a shadowy grove of trees upon a little monticule, who beckoned with one hand while with the other he stopped the notes of his reed pipe. The tapestry was of great beauty and indubitable worth; but the subject of it was slightly displeasing to Laurence, a trifle gross in suggestion, as had been the sphinxes and caryatides of the carved ebony bed.

"Oh! of course there's that sort of thing left," he said to himself, recurring to his recent train of thought. "But, no thank you, I flatter myself I can hardly find satisfaction in those low latitudes at present."

Having, however, an appreciation of all fine artistic work, he laid hold of the border of the curtain, wishing to feel its texture. To his surprise, it was of very great weight, padded and lined with leather, as are curtains covering the doors of certain Roman churches.

Laurence pulled the corner of it towards him and passed behind it. The curtain fell back into position with a muffled thud, leaving him standing in a narrow, dark, cupboard-like space, closed by a door, of which it took him some stifling seconds to find the handle. He fumbled blindly in the dark, an almost childish sense of agitation upon him. He felt as in dreams, when the place to be traversed grows more and more contracted, walls closing down and in on every hand, while the means of exit become more maddeningly impossible of discovery. To his surprise, he turned faint and broke into a sweat. It was not in the least an amusing experience.

At last the handle gave, with a click, and the door opened, disclosing a large and lofty room quite unlike any one which he had yet visited. It was delicately fresh both in atmosphere and colouring. It wore a gracious and friendly look, seeming to welcome the intruder with a demure gladness. A certain gaiety pervaded it even on this unpropitious morning. The great bay-window, facing east, gave upon a stately Italian garden, beyond the tall cypresses, white statues, and fountains of which spread flat, high-lying lawns of brilliantly green turf. These were crossed by a broad walk of golden gravel leading to an avenue of enormous lime-trees, the domed heads of which were just touched with the rose-pink buds of the opening spring.

The furniture of the room was of satin-wood, highly polished and painted with garlands of roses, true-lovers' knots of blue ribbon, dainty landscapes, ladies and lovers, after the manner of Boucher. The chairs and sofas were upholstered in brocade, the predominating colours of which were white, pale yellow, and pale pink. An old-fashioned, square, semi-grand piano—the case of it in satin-wood and painted like the rest—stood out into the room. On a spindle-legged table beside it lay a quantity of music, the printing very black, the pages brown with age. Close against these was a violin case covered with faded, red velvet, on which were stamped initials and a crest.

Laurence's eyes dwelt on these things. And then—surely there should be a harp in the further left-hand corner, the strings of it covered by a gilded, stamped leather hood? Yes, it was there right enough.—And a tall escritoire, with a miniature brass balustrade running along the top of it, should stand at right angles to the chimney-piece, upon which last, doubled by the looking-glass behind, should be tall azure and

gold *Sèvres* jars, an Empire clock—the golden face of it set in a ring of precious garnets—figures in Chelsea china and branched, gold candlesticks.

Laurence looked for and found these objects, a prey at once to surprise and to a sense of happy familiarity. He was perfectly acquainted with this room—but why or how he knew not. He was filled, too, by a singular sense of expectation. It was to him as though some exquisite presence had but lately quitted this apartment and might, at any instant, return to it. He apprehended something tenderly, delectably feminine. The china ornaments, and many little fanciful silver toys, spoke of a woman's taste. So did a tambour frame, and an ivory work-box, the lid of it open, disclosing dainty property of gold thimble, scissors, cottons, and what not—and a half-finished frill of cobweb-like India muslin, a little, gold-eyed needle sticking in the mimic hem. On the small table beside the work-box lay a white vellum-bound copy of the *Vita Nuova* of Dante, and the *Introduction to the Devout Life* of St. Francis de Sales.

Perplexed by his own sensations, possessed too by a sudden, gentle reverence and longing which he could not explain, Laurence touched the pretty trifles in the work-box; fitted the thimble on the tip of his little finger; turned the pages of the Dante, and read how the poet came near swooning at first sight of the maiden of eight years old whom, though she was never destined to be his mistress or wife, he loved ever after, and made immortal in immortal verse. He unlocked the worn red-velvet violin case and drew the bow—not for the first time—he could have sworn not—across the wailing strings. What did it all mean? Yes, what, indeed,—in the name of common-sense, of New York and Newport, of his golf and polo, and cotillions, of crowded opera-house and shouting racecourse? In the name, too, of those hard, brilliant, dying eyes, and that cold, hungry intellect upstairs, what did it mean? He had no recollection of having been into this room on his former visits to Stoke Rivers in his boyhood. And yet, of course, he must have been here—otherwise? But then this overmastering sense of expectation, this apprehension of an exquisite feminine presence, this—

"Upon my word, I'm playing the fool to some purpose," he said, half aloud.

He crossed the room, threw wide the French window and went onto the head of the semicircular flight of stone steps without. The wind buffeted him roughly. The rain spattered in his face. On the left, the lawns were divided from the downward slope of rough park and woodland by a sunk fence. Beyond was outspread an extensive tract of rolling, wooded country—red and white hamlets half buried among trees, here and there the spire of a village church, flat, green pastures lying along the valleys, brown patches of hop-garden and ploughland, and uplifted against the grey, storm-drifted horizon a windmill crowning some conspicuous height. Suddenly the cry of hounds, running, saluted Laurence's ear. Then the whole pack, breaking covert, crossed the open park. The field followed, horses pulling, riders leaning forward, squaring their

shoulders to the wind—a flash of scarlet, chestnut, black and bay, behind the dappled joy of the racing pack.

For a moment the strange influences of this strange day made even the merry hunt appear to Laurence as the pageant of an uneasy dream. But soon the honest outdoor life claimed him again, forcing him back upon unquestioned realities. He closed the French window behind him, stood on the wet steps spending some anxious moments in the lighting of a cigar, and then strolled, hatless, round to the stables to make inquiry as to what his uncle might own in the matter of horseflesh.

## IV

In the afternoon Laurence drove over to Bishop's Pudbury, some eight miles distant from Stoke Rivers. An English soldier—by name Bellingham—whom he had known in New York, and who had married a Miss Van Renan, a cousin of Virginia—had taken a house there for the hunting season. His wife had impressed upon Laurence the duty of making an early call on these connections—he being the bearer of certain gifts to a small daughter of the family, Virginia's godchild. A revulsion in favour of the ordinary ways of ordinary modern life, in favour, indeed, of that very Commonplace of which last evening he had supposed himself so unwilling an exponent, was upon him. He wanted to get in with his accustomed habits, his accustomed outlook, again. The last twenty-four hours had been somewhat of a strain, and Laurence was as lazy as are most healthy Englishmen. He hated energising, specially of the super-induced, involuntary sort. And Mrs. Bellingham's society would be helpful. She was an agreeable woman, of this world worldly. He could have a good, square gossip with her. She was possessed, moreover, of a cult for Virginia—for her beauty, her clothes, her social ability. And in the back of his mind, somehow, Laurence was conscious that it would be an excellent thing for him to hear Virginia's praises sounded loudly. Mrs. Bellingham would count his blessings to him. That recital would be at once humbling and bracing—altogether salutary. But, unfortunately, neither the lady nor her husband were at home; so he could but deposit Virginia's immaculate parcels, tied with flaring bows of amber ribbon, and drive homeward through the rolling Sussex country—now engulfed in its deep, narrow lanes, now climbing its breezy, wooded hills, catching glimpses of the smooth, open downs ranging away to Beachy Head, and of the grey turmoil of the dirty Channel sea.

All this was not very exciting, it must be owned, but it afforded him relief from the singular sensations he had experienced during the morning. He came into the house in excellent spirits, bringing the clean chill of the March evening along with him—came in to meet the same dry, dead atmosphere, the same dark, glossy walls, and rich, sombre colours, the same at once unemotional yet almost voluptuous suggestion from objects of art. A lonely dinner followed, admirably served by two silent, middle-aged men-servants. Their faces were sallow and without expression, their manner was correct to the point of absolute nullity of character, they moved as automata. The dinner itself was a little *chef-d'œuvre*, and was served on remarkably handsome silver plate. As centre-piece, three dancing female figures in silver-gilt—copied apparently from those on some Etruscan vase—supported a cut-glass bowl, in which floated fantastic orchids, some mottled, dull, brown-green, toad-like, some in long sprays of mauve, or tiger-colour, striped with glossy black. These last gave off a thick musky scent.

Towards the end of the meal Renshaw, the butler, delivered a note to him, which Laurence read not without kindly amusement. It was from the curate-in-charge—the Rector of Stoke Rivers preferring to dwell amid the social excitements of Cheltenham, and but rarely, on the plea of bad health, visiting the parish. Laurence judged the curate-in-charge to be a very young man. His letter ran thus:—

"DEAR SIR,—I trust I am not presuming upon my official connection with this parish by hastening to express to you the great relief which I feel in learning that you have arrived at the Courthouse. As representative of the incumbent of this parish, I hold myself responsible for the spiritual welfare of all persons resident in it, whether of exalted or humble station. I have, therefore, suffered much anxiety regarding your uncle's, Mr. Rivers, spiritual condition, in his present very serious state of health. I know that his views are regrettably latitudinarian, and that his attitude is far from conciliatory towards the Church. These sad facts, however, far from relieving me of responsibility, only increase it. I would so gladly read and pray with him, and reason with him of those things necessary to salvation. The time permitted him may, I understand, be short. It is my duty first to warn, and then to console. I cannot reproach myself with negligence in calling at the Courthouse. I do so regularly three times a week. Unhappily, Mr. Rivers is persistent in his refusal to receive me. This is not only very shocking, as precluding the possibility of my offering either the warnings or consolations of religion to the invalid; but it injuriously affects my position with my parishioners, who, seeing me thus slighted by the principal landowner in the parish, show a painful disposition to treat my ministrations with levity, and my person with disrespect. I trust to your sense of justice to obtain my admittance to the sickroom, both in the interests of your uncle's eternal welfare and in those of the Church, of which I am a humble, but, I trust, efficient minister.—I have the honour to remain, dear Sir, yours obediently,

"WALTER SAMUEL BEAL."

Laurence finished his glass of claret and his cigarette with a smile. He sat a minute or two, gazing at the dancing, golden figures and at the rather malign loveliness of the orchids.

"Poor little Padre Sahib!" he said to himself. "I'll go and see him to-morrow and do my best to quiet his worthy conscience. Funny mixture of soul and of self in that letter! But he's very much too mild a Daniel to fling into the lion's den upstairs. He little imagines what he's asking. Well, he won't get it anyhow, so that doesn't much matter. Pah!—how hot this room is!"

Laurence rose from the table, folded up the letter, and put it in his pocket.



"Now for processes of vivisection. It's the most original fashion of paying succession duty I ever heard of. My word, if I ever do come into possession, won't I just open the windows in this house!"

## V

The conversation that evening did not move very smoothly. Laurence brought all the good temper and practical philosophy at his command into play. But the elder man was captious. His blank scepticism, his keen, unsparing statements jarred on his companion. An inclination towards revolt arose in Laurence.

"I am half afraid, sir," he permitted himself to say at last, while his eyes rested on the gleaming breasts of the ebony sphinxes,— "that we have made a radical mistake and put the cart before the horse. To understand the average man, and his relation to things in general, must not you begin with the study of the average woman? Is not *cherchez la femme*, after all, the keynote of our inquiry?"

Mr. Rivers raised his thin hand almost as in warning, and the heavy finger-rings chinked as he let it fall again on the arm of his chair.

"The subject of sex in connection with human beings is distasteful to me," he said.

Laurence glanced at the speaker and then back at the carven sphinx again. His eyes were a little merry—he could not help it.

"Oh! no doubt," he said; "there are times when it is distasteful to many of us, and most infernally inconvenient into the bargain. Only you see, unluckily, it is the pivot on which the whole history of the race turns."

"A most objectionable pivot! An insult to the intellect, a degradation."

"That may be so," Laurence answered. "Still the thing is there—always has been, always will be, modern science notwithstanding, unless humanity agrees to voluntary and universal suicide, a consummation which does not seem immediately probable in any case.—'Male and female created He them.' An error perhaps of judgment, but one the Creator has never shown much sign of wishing to correct as yet. The most venerable religious systems recognise this. I need not remind you that it lies at the heart of their mysteries. Christianity too—Catholic Christianity—the only form, that is, of Christianity worth considering seriously—acknowledges the profound significance of it in the worship of the divine motherhood and the perpetually renewed miracle of the Incarnation."

"You interest me," Mr. Rivers said slowly.

"I am glad of that," Laurence answered. He had warmed up unexpectedly to his subject. "I am glad of that, for I can't help seeing—"

Mr. Rivers interrupted him.

"Pardon me," he said. "I would not have you labour even temporarily under a misapprehension. It is less your exposition that interests me than yourself. I note indications of thought and feeling for which I was not wholly prepared. Taking you as a fair example of the type, I perceive that the mind of the average member of society is of an even lower order than I had supposed. I had, in my ignorance, imagined that, even in the class to which you belong, modern, scientific ideas had taken sufficient root to oust such effete superstitions as those to which you have alluded. A more or less stupid Agnosticism, an utter indifference, would not have surprised me. From such a condition development is still possible. But here I recognise traces of a return to fetich worship, to savage standards—this indeed is hopeless, a degeneration from which revival is impossible. I admit, of course, the necessity of the existence of woman, since the perpetuation of the race appears at present desirable. It would be childish to argue the matter. She must be kept and cared for by qualified persons, as are the other higher, domestic animals, but—"

"But, but," Laurence said, laughing, "I must protest. Perhaps his type of mind is too low for yours to be able to stoop to it; but, upon my word, sir, even with so thoroughly-paced a specimen as myself before you, you have not grasped the characteristics of the average man one bit. I don't say we are conspicuously noble, or virtuous, or godly creatures, and I don't say that the side of our lives which has to do with our ambitions, with public affairs, our profession, or our art—the side, in fact, in which woman counts least—may not give scope to that which is best in us. I have no end of belief in the life a man lives among men. I grant a good deal on your side of the question, you see. Only I know it will be a precious bad day when we keep our women merely for breeding purposes. We shall have degeneration in uncommonly full swing then. There is an immense lot in the relation between man and woman beside the physical one; and—and—I'm not ashamed to thank whatever gods there be for that."

"Your wife—" began Mr. Rivers. Laurence looked hard at him, while the good temper, the geniality, died out of his face.

"My wife does not enter into our contract, sir," he said shortly.

The coldly brilliant eyes fastened on him with a certain voracity of observation. Then the elder man bowed slightly, courteously, contemptuously.

"You interest me extremely," he said. "I am obliged to you. But I must not presume upon your complaisance. You have supplied me with sufficient subjects of meditation for to-night. I will not detain you further. I thank you, my dear Laurence. Good-night."

"I was a fool to let myself go, and a still bigger one to lose my temper," the young man said to himself as he closed the door and passed out on to the corridor.

Save for a ticking of clocks, silence prevailed throughout the house. The electric light, clear and steady, revealed every object in its completeness. The temperature was some degrees higher than during the day, and airless in proportion to its increased warmth. Half-way down the shining oak staircase, Laurence was saluted by the musky odour of the orchids. Clinging, enfolding, it seemed to meet him more as a presence than a scent. The dining-room door stood wide open. The under-butler came forth and went noiselessly towards the offices. There followed a muffled sound of baize doors swinging to. Then simultaneously, sharply, from all quarters, clocks struck the half hour.

"Only half-past ten!" Laurence exclaimed. "How villainously early! I wish to goodness I had not lost my temper though. It was slightly imbecile. If the poor, old gentleman enjoys being offensive, why shouldn't he be so? He has none too many opportunities of amusement."

He paused, looking down the bright, vacant, silent corridor, past the open doors of all the bright, vacant, silent rooms.

"If it comes to that, nor have I," he added, "when I come to think of it. There's a notable paucity of excitement in this existence, and this beastly hot air makes one too muzzy to read." He yawned.—"What a mercy Virginia didn't come! She would have been most extensively and articulately bored."

He sauntered aimlessly along the passage, past the fine, copper-plate engravings, and the impassive, Roman emperors, and drew up before the great, tapestry curtain. Again he looked curiously at the figures worked so skilfully upon it. The light took the silken surface, bringing the warm flesh-tints into high relief, against the dim, grey-green background of shadowy hill and grove.

"No wonder my uncle blasphemes if that represents his only idea of the relation of the sexes."

He sighed involuntarily.

"Yes, but, thank God, there is more in it all than merely that," he said. Then he repeated:—"It is a mercy Virginia did not come. It would not have suited her from any point of view. She'd have been hideously bored, and she would have been offended and a good deal shocked. It is queer the way the Puritanic element survives over there, notwithstanding their modernity."

Laurence smiled to himself, becoming aware of the slight inconsistency of his own attitude—his late heated championship of the claims of the Eternal Feminine, his self-congratulation at the fact that his own particular investment in the matter of womanhood was, at present, safely away on the other side of the Atlantic.

Then, taken by a sudden impulse—born in part of a desire of escape from the suffocating atmosphere around him—he pulled the edge of the heavy curtain outwards, passed round it, letting it drop into place behind him. He stood a moment in a contracted, blind space. The place seemed possessed of singular influences. Again he grew faint as he groped for the door handle; while a conviction grew upon him that he had stood just here, and so groped an innumerable number of times already, and that he should so stand and grope—either in fact or in imagination, just as long, indeed, as consciousness remained to him—an innumerable number of times again.

At last the handle was found and yielded. Breathing rather quickly, Laurence entered the lofty, fair-coloured room. It too was bright with electric light, but the air of it was sensibly purer than that of the corridor; while, standing before the painted satin-wood *escritoire*, at the further side of the fireplace, was a slender woman. Her back was towards him. She wore a high-waisted, clinging, rose-pink, silken gown. Her dark hair was gathered up in soft, yet elaborate, bows and curls high on her small head, after the fashion prevalent in the early years of the century. A cape of transparent muslin and lace veiled her bare shoulders.

## VI

The young man's astonishment was immense. Recovering from the first shock of it, he was taken with reprehensible irreverence towards the sick man upstairs.

"The old sinner, how he has lied!" he said to himself. "A pretty ass he has made of me with this card up his iniquitous, old sleeve all the while!"

He debated momentarily whether good manners demanded his retirement before his presence was perceived; or whether he was free to go forward and make acquaintance with this unacknowledged member of his uncle's household. Strong curiosity, coupled with a spirit of mischief, provoked him to adopt the latter course. He owed it to himself, surely, not to neglect so handsome an opportunity of turning the tables upon old Mr. Rivers. While, astonishment and levity, notwithstanding, Laurence was aware of a strong attraction drawing him towards the slender, rose-clad figure. He began to question, indeed, whether it, like the room and its furnishings, was not in a degree familiar to him? Whether it was not the embodiment of just all that of which he had been so singularly expectant when visiting the room this same morning?

Meanwhile the young lady's hands moved over the rounded cover of the *escritoire* as though endeavouring to open it. The lace frills, edging her muslin cape, flew upwards, showing her bare arms. These were thin, but beautifully shaped; while the movement of her hands was singularly graceful and rapid. She touched, yet seemed unable firmly to grasp the gilded handles of the *escritoire* again and again; clasped her hands, as it appeared to Laurence—for her back was still towards him—with a baffled, despairing gesture, and then moved away across the room. She appeared to flit rather than walk, so light and silent were her steps, bird-like in their swift and dainty grace. Watching her, Laurence was reminded of a certain Spanish *danseuse*, who, during the previous winter, had excited the wild enthusiasm and considerably lightened the pockets of the *jeunesse dorée* of New York. But the charm of the dancer had, for him at least, been spoilt by the somewhat unbridled pride of success perceptible in her bearing. Whereas the flitting figure now before him, notwithstanding the beguiling loveliness of its motions, struck him as penetrated with the sorrow of failure, rather than the arrogance of success.

She wandered to and fro, regardless or unconscious of his presence, searching—searching—as it seemed; passing her hands over the work-table, sweeping them along the surface of the chimney-piece between the ornaments and china, fingering the music upon the piano. He caught sight of a delicate profile, a round and youthful cheek. But her movements were so anxious and rapid that he could get no definite view of her face. Indeed, her action was so quick that it was not without effort Laurence followed it.

At first the young man's attitude had been one of slightly irritated amusement at the concealment practised on him by his host. But as the rose-clad lady's search continued, the sense of amusement was merged in one of sympathy. She was so graceful a creature. She appeared so sadly baffled and perplexed. A subtle anxiety laid hold of him—an apprehension that something momentous and of far-reaching consequence to himself was in act of accomplishment—that he was himself deeply involved, and pledged by a long train of antecedent circumstances to assist those delicately framed and apparently so helpless hands in their unceasing search.

"Pardon me, but what have you lost?" he asked her at last, speaking gently as to a timid and unhappy child. "Tell me, and let me try to help you find it."

At the sound of his voice the flitting figure paused, stood a moment listening, as though striving to collect the purport of his address. Then it turned to him. For the first time Laurence saw his companion's face clearly, and he shrank back, penetrated at once by a great admiration and a vague dread of her. For it was a very lovely face, but shy and wild as no other human face he had ever beheld. The sweet mouth drooped at the corners, as with some haunting, but half-comprehended distress. The eyes were serious; blue-purple—as are deep, high-lying, mountain tarns, set in a soft gloom of pine-trees and of heather. A gentle distraction pervaded the young lady's aspect. And this was the more arresting, that each bow and curl of her pretty hair was in place; every detail of her dress fresh and finished, from the string of pearls about her white throat, to the toes of her rose-pink, satin slippers, sparkling with an embroidery of brilliants, which showed beneath the small flounce edging her rose-pink skirt.

Laurence had lived at least as virtuously as most men of his class; yet it would be idle to declare Virginia his first and only flame. He had married her, which constituted the difference between her and all those other flames—and at times it occurred to him what a prodigiously great difference that was! Since his marriage he had been guiltless of looking to the right hand or to the left even in thought. But, before that event, it must be owned, he had had his due share of affairs of the heart. He was thoroughly conversant with the premonitory symptoms of that fascinating disorder, commonly known as "falling in love." And, to his dismay, as he looked on the sad and lovely person before him, he was conscious that some of those premonitory symptoms were not entirely absent. An immense pity and tenderness took him; a deepening conviction, too, of recollection, as one who after a long lapse of years hears again some almost forgotten melody, or sees again a once well-known and well-beloved landscape. The sad face was new to him, not in itself, but in its sadness only. The corners of the sweet mouth should not droop, but tip upward in soft, discreet laughter. The serious eyes should dance, as the surface of these same mountain tarns in sunlight under a rippling breeze. The face, remembered thus, had indeed never been wholly forgotten—he knew that. It formed part of inherent prenatal impressions, of which, all his life, he had been potentially if not actively aware.

All this flashed through him in the space of a few seconds; while he repeated, somewhat staggered by the fulness of emotion which the tones of his own voice implied—

"Only tell me what you have lost—tell me; and let me help you find it."—Then he added more lightly, smiling at her with his sincere and kindly smile:—"Really, my services are worth enlisting. I've always been a rather famous hand at finding things, you know."

She gazed at the young man for a minute or more, a tremulous wonder in her expression, while she fingered the string of pearls about her rounded throat. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Her attitude changed. She stood with her head raised, apparently listening. Then reluctantly, as in obedience to some unwelcome summons, she moved swiftly across the room to the outstanding, painted satin-wood escritoire, passed at the back of it, and the young man found himself alone.



## VII

Though usually an excellent sleeper, Laurence passed a restless night. Like most sane persons, he was disposed to resent that which he could not account for; and, with the best will in the world to evolve ingenious hypotheses explanatory of her disappearance, the manner of his sweet companion's going remained a mystery. He had examined the escritoire, and found it locked. He had also examined the wall-space in its vicinity. This was hung, from cornice to wainscot, with pale yellow-and-white brocade, as was all the room. But neither behind the brocade, nor in the wainscot, was any door or sliding panel discoverable. Indeed, when he came to think of it, remembering the structure of the house as he had seen it on his way along the south front to the stables, that side of the room consisted of a blank wall, doorless and windowless. This fact, when he realised it, caused Laurence something of a shock. It was unpleasant to him. And so he took refuge in scepticism. He laughed at himself, declaring that the unwholesome atmosphere of the house, and the lonely, uneventful life he was compelled to lead, were breeding morbid fancies in him. All that talk about woman and the relation of the sexes had stamped itself upon his mind in an exaggerated way, thanks to his surroundings. The musky scent of the orchids had a word to say in the matter too, no doubt. So had his revulsion from the gross suggestions of the scene represented on the tapestry curtain. Heavy sleep, amounting almost to torpor, induced by the heavy atmosphere, had fallen upon him directly after he had entered that strangely engaging and familiar room. And, in that sleep, imagination had created a woman who should embody all that which the room and its furnishings suggested—an ideal woman, far away alike from the brilliant young leader of smart society whom he had married—but on this clause Laurence refused to allow his thoughts to dwell—and from the mere human brood-mare, whom his uncle pronounced to be the only admissible exponent of the Eternal Feminine. He had dreamed a poem—one of those poems he kept at the bottom of his despatch-box, and had never felt any inclination to read aloud to Virginia—had dreamed instead of writing it, that was all.

Laurence got out of bed and threw open the window. Where the eastern angle of the house stood out dark against the sky, he could see the pallor of the dawn warming into rose, while overhead the stars died out one by one as the light broadened.

"Yes, the vision of a dream," he said to himself. "Only another of those thousand exquisite things which belong to the language of symbol, and possess, alas! no tally in reality—reality, that is, as most of us hide-bound victims of conventionality are destined to know it."—He laughed a little grimly.—"Reality, as we know it, being precisely the biggest illusion of all!"

He watched the fading stars, the deepening rose and gold of day, above the woods and lawns, the black cypresses and white statues upon the northern boundary of the Italian garden. Starlings chattered joyously from the gutters under the eaves; and then swept down, with a rush of passing wings, on to the grass. A keeper, gun on shoulder, with a busy, little, black cocking-spaniel, and a long-limbed, red, Irish setter behind him, crossed the rough downward slope of the park; and the wide, blue-grey landscape began to grow definite, to assert itself right away up to the horizon. The earth seemed to awake with a quiet smile from the kindly sleep of night.

Laurence drank in his fill of the moist, sharp air.

"Poor dear Virginia!" he said suddenly. And it was probably the very first time in her whole life that this popular, admirably finished, and much admired young lady had ever excited pity.

After breakfast Laurence set forth to visit his clerical correspondent, and strive to ease the latter's conscience while refusing his request. The rectory, distant about three-quarters of a mile, stood on the rising ground across the valley, backed by a fringe of high-lying woods. The church, a small but very perfect example of Norman architecture, closely adjoined the house. There were good details of carving about the narrow, round-headed windows of the chancel, and the low, heavy arch of the porch—the floor of which was sunk several steps below the level of the churchyard. The tower, square and solid, but little higher than the roof of the nave, was surmounted by a squat, shingled spire. It struck Laurence as a calm, self-contained, little building, on which the centuries had set but slight mark of decay. The churchyard, too—shadowed by a few ancient yew-trees—was singularly peaceful, full for the most part of unnamed, grass-grown graves. Death, seen thus, had nothing awful, nothing repulsive, about it—quiet "rest after toil," it amounted to no more than that.

But then the charm of spring was in the air, and the young man was pleasantly beguiled by it. He sat down on the broad coping of the churchyard wall, lighted a cigarette, and idly watched the rooks streaming out from the rectory elms, and dropping on the fragrant, fresh-turned earth of a plough-field in the valley. He listened idly to the nimble wind that blew up from the ten-mile-distant sea, sang in the woodland above, and whispered through the dark, plume-like branches of the yews here in this sheltered piece of ground. The sky was a thin, bright blue, and across it wandered little clouds, like flocks of white sheep, herded by that same nimble wind up from the Channel.

It seemed to Laurence that here, indeed, would be a pleasant enough place to lie when life was over. But then that time had by no means arrived for him yet. He felt again—as he had felt that night on board ship—that he had never done complete justice to his own capacity. Whether the fault lay in himself or in circumstance, he could not say;

but he knew that neither body, nor mind, nor heart, had worked up to their full strength yet. Ambition of some notable and absorbing undertaking stirred in him. He looked out over the goodly land. Would this by no means contemptible inheritance, on the threshold of the possession of which he now stood, afford him his great opportunity? And then his thought harked back to the lovely and pathetic vision which had blessed his sleep—for, of course, he was asleep—last night. A man could find fulness of satisfaction in a great passion for such a woman—if so be she actually existed, instead of being only the ideal vision of an ideal dream. Yes, a man could go very far down that road if—if—And there Laurence, being a decent fellow, laid strong hands on his imagination. To indulge it was just simply not right, since whatever woman's existence might belong to the land of fancy, his wife, Virginia's, belonged, to the land of very positive fact. He got up, shook himself, and walked away to the rectory house, through the sunshine and shadow of the peaceful, country graveyard.

## VIII

Mr. Beal received his guest with an agitation in which natural timidity warred with professional pride. He laboured under the conviction that he was called upon at all times and in all places to maintain the dignity of the Anglican Church. He believed she was very much in the midst of foes, Rome and Non-conformity alike perpetually plotting her downfall; while Atheism cruised about in the offing ever ready to seize any who escaped the machinations of these more declared enemies. And, unfortunately, the young man, neither in appearance nor constitution, was a born fighter, or even a born diplomatist. In appearance he was mild, with sandy, down-like hair, a high narrow forehead and freckled skin, pale, anxious eyes behind spectacles, and a moist white hand. He opened the front door to Laurence himself; and it occurred to the latter that his clothes were very black, and that he wore a great many of them.

"Mr. Laurence Rivers, I presume?" he said, looking up nervously into his guest's face.

"Yes; I thought it would be simplest to answer your letter in person," the other replied. He felt a certain kindly pity for the young clergyman, whose existence he divined to be of a somewhat limited and unproductive sort.—"I should have given myself the pleasure of calling on you in any case in a day or two. But your letter seemed to require attention at once. I am sorry you are having any bother about—"

"Will you not come in?" Mr. Beal asked hurriedly. "Our conversation might be overheard and commented upon. This way, please. You will excuse the dining-room? I always occupy this room during the winter months. It is both necessary and right that I should practise economy, and to occupy this room exclusively saves a fire."

In his nervousness Mr. Beal talked continuously.

"Pray take a seat," he said, pushing forward an armchair, the leather cover and springs of which were decidedly tired. "I at once begged you to come in here, because in speaking of personal and parochial matters one cannot, I feel, be too careful. Mr. Wingate—the rector of Stoke Rivers, you know—wished, I am sure, to treat me with generosity when I undertook the duty here. He not only placed the whole of this house at my disposal, but he left two female servants—not on board wages—an elderly woman and a younger person as her assistant. The intention was generous, I feel sure; but I grieve to say they are not such staunch church-women as I could desire, and this has led to difficulties between us. I thought it my duty to admonish them, separately, of course, suiting my remonstrances to their respective ages and dispositions. But they did not receive my admonitions in a submissive spirit. Since then I have found it necessary to exercise great caution. There has been much gossip. Remarks of mine have been repeated, and that not in a manner calculated to improve my position with

the parishioners. My actions are spied upon. There is a small, but bigoted, dissenting element in the village, and——"

"Ah! yes, they're a nuisance, I dare say," Laurence put in, smiling. "Still, it's a charming place, all the same. I have just been poking round the church. There are some wonderfully quaint bits about it. And I like the churchyard."

"I could wish to have the graves levelled, and the head and foot stones placed neatly in line on the confines of the enclosure."

"Oh! no, no; that would destroy the character of the place. We can't carry anything away with us—granted—when we go. And so there's a certain subjective comfort in knowing we leave a little mound of earth and turf behind to mark our resting-place. That's hardly ostentatious, considering our pretensions during life—do you think so?"

Mr. Beal shifted the position of his spectacles. He braced himself.

"The churchyard has been levelled at Bishop's Pudbury," he said. "I had the privilege of being assistant priest there for five years. The archdeacon is considered a man of great taste."

"I should have thought the parishioners would have objected now," Laurence remarked.

"So they did," Mr. Beal replied. "I grieve to say some persons displayed a most illiberal spirit. They called meetings, and behaved in a really seditious manner. Many even became guilty of the sin of schism. They ceased to attend the church services, and frequented dissenting places of worship. The archdeacon was pained; but he felt a principle was at stake. He has long contended that the churchyard is legally the rector's freehold. He therefore felt it a duty to the Church to be firm."

Laurence contemplated the young clergyman with a touch of good-natured amusement, wondering if, with that anæmic physique, he was capable of emulating the militant virtues of the archdeacon-rector of Bishop's Pudbury.

"But about this letter of yours, Mr. Beal," he said. "That's what I came to talk to you about."

"I am afraid my conversation has been a little irrelevant. But—but—" the young man sat opposite to Laurence, shifting his spectacles, and washing his hands in an access of nervousness. "I confess I am not quite myself this morning, Mr. Rivers. I was made an object of public ridicule last night."

"I am very sorry to hear it. How was that?"

"I think I am at liberty to tell you, because the incident took its rise in your uncle, the elder Mr. Rivers', refusal to receive me. You see it is known how often I have been repulsed. Last night we had the weekly choir practice at the school. While it was in progress, I was called and informed by the pupil-teacher—whom I excuse of participation in the unseemly jest—that Mr. Rivers had sent for me, and that his carriage was waiting at the gate. This surprised me; but I supposed you might have received, and immediately responded to, the request contained in my note. I excused myself to the organist and choir, and hastily put on my hat and coat. I hurried out, but some ill-disposed youths had placed strings across the school door. I fell. The ground was exceedingly muddy. My reappearance was greeted with hardly concealed derision. I discovered the whole matter was a vulgar hoax."

"Ah! that's very much too bad," Laurence said kindly, though the picture suggested by the young clergyman's story provoked him to internal mirth. "We must straighten this out somehow. And yet I tell you frankly your letter placed me in a difficulty. Even when in good health my uncle was not an easy person to approach, and now, as you know, he is fatally ill——"

"I would deal with him very gently," Mr. Beal remarked, bracing himself.

"I am sure of that. But I am afraid he might deal anything but gently with you."

"I think—I believe—I am prepared to suffer for my faith."

"I am sure of that," Laurence repeated consolingly. "But it appears to me this would be both a superfluous and inglorious martyrdom. My uncle is perfectly secure of his own position and opinions. The latter are peculiar, and he has a very trenchant way of stating them."

"You would convey to me that I should be worsted in argument?" Mr. Beal inquired.

"Yes, I really am more than half afraid you would. And so, you see, no end would be gained. You would be pained, and possibly humiliated; while my uncle's victory would render him more stubborn in the maintenance of his own views. He would be irritated too, and that might accelerate the action of the disease from which he suffers. Remember, he's both old and ill. I own I think he must just go his own way. I hesitate to coerce him."

During this address Walter Beal had washed his moist hands in a very agony of agitation. This handsome stranger impressed him greatly. He was sympathetic, moreover, a patient and kindly listener. The young clergyman could have found it in his heart to adore him with a humble and dog-like devotion. But then his own professional dignity must be asserted. So he whipped down his natural and wholesome inclination to hero-worship, and whipped up his rather spavined,

ecclesiastical valour; and said, with all the sternness his tremulous voice could command—

"I fear you are not a true Christian, Mr. Rivers, or you would find no room for hesitation where the salvation of a soul is involved."

Laurence turned his chair sideways to the dinner-table, crossed his legs, and rested his elbow on the bare, white cloth. Some crumbs remained on it, left over from Walter Beal's breakfast; but happily they were at the far corner. The young man deserved a snub, but he was an innocent creature, a great sincerity in his foolishness. Laurence looked out of window, across to the sunny peaceful churchyard. After all, why be harsh? Why snub anybody? So he smiled again genially enough upon the distracted Beal.

"Oh! we must discuss the heights and depths of my Christianity some other time," he said. "The point is to stop this impertinence of which you are the victim. Look here, honestly I don't see my way to making a meeting between you and my uncle at present. But as you can't get the uncle, let me beg you to put up with the nephew. Let it be known that you and I are on excellent terms. Come and see me. Let's see—tomorrow evening I shall be free till half-past nine or ten. Come and dine with me."

But Mr. Beal shrunk back and raised his moist, white hands in protest.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed. "That is, I am sure your intentions are most kind, most kind—indeed, indeed, really, I am sure of that. But except professionally, except at the urgent call of duty—and then grace would be given me—I felt that yesterday when I received the summons during the choir practice—I prayed—I was praying when those strings intercepted my passage and caused me to fall—I knew I should be supported—but, except professionally, I could not make up my mind to enter that house—Stoke Rivers. And after dark too! I could not. It would be too dreadful."

Laurence stared at him blankly. "Why, my good man," he said, laughing a little, "what on earth is the matter with the house?"

"I understand that it contains pictures and statues of an immoral character. It is very frightful to think of a soul, the soul of a scoffer, of one who speaks lightly of holy things, going forth to meet its doom from among such heathenish surroundings.—But it is not that so much which deters me. I ought to cope with that, strong in faith. But from a child, I own it, I have suffered from the fear of the supernatural."

Laurence's eyebrows drew together. "The supernatural," he said.

"Yes—yes—the supernatural."

Laurence paused a moment, gazing down at the worn drugget between his feet.

"Look here," he said, "either you are talking great nonsense, or there is something uncommonly serious at the bottom of all this, of which I ought to be informed. Tell me plainly, what are you afraid of?"

"There, there are lights all night."

"Certainly there are. The electric light is left on. It is a fancy of my uncle's—and not an unreasonable one in time of illness. If your fears take their rise in nothing worse than that, why—" Laurence shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh! but—but—" Mr. Beal's voice sunk to a whisper, and his pale eyes looked piteously upon his guest from behind his spectacles. "It is commonly reported there is a female in the house——"

Laurence shook his head.—"Oh, no, pardon me," he said. "That is a mistake. There are only men-servants in the house. That I know. No lady has stayed at Stoke Rivers—so my uncle informed me—since my mother stayed there with me when I was quite a small boy."

"But—but," poor Walter Beal almost wailed, "I don't mean any lady visitor. The—the Scarlet Woman—you know. I understand the keepers have frequently seen her at night at the windows downstairs. And I believe I saw her once this winter myself——"

"Saw her yourself?"

"Yes; I had been to call and inquire for Mr. Rivers. It was dusk, and I was much alarmed at going; but I would not permit myself to neglect a duty. I was going back up the avenue, when I saw a person in a red dress coming out from the bow-window. I—I—I—did not wait—"

Laurence had risen. He stood for a moment speechless. Then a sudden gladness took him. The sun was bright outside there, but the yew-trees waved their dusky arms quaintly, making little shadows dance and flit upon the churchyard grass.

"No—I see. You ran away," he said. "Well, Mr. Beal, perhaps that was the very best thing under the circumstances that you could have done.—You can't make up your mind to dine with me? All right, I'll come and see you then. We'll let the parish know you and I are on excellent terms anyhow. I should be glad to have a talk with you about the schools and charities. And, of course, if Mr. Rivers should soften and express any willingness to receive your ministrations I'll not fail to let you know."

On reaching the house, Laurence went straight down the corridor, pulled aside the tapestry curtain, and entered the room beyond. As yesterday, it was fresher in atmosphere than the rest of the interior. The furniture, the knick-knacks, even the little



frill in the open work-box were stationary, untouched, precisely in the same position as last night. Again Laurence examined the room carefully. Very certainly there was no exit from it save the door or the bay-window, and no human being in it save himself.

## IX

That afternoon Captain Bellingham called at Stoke Rivers. He was a large, fair, fresh-coloured man of about five-and-thirty—extremely well-groomed, addicted to field-sports, and an arrant gossip. This last characteristic was much in evidence during his visit. He gossiped of London, of New York, of Sussex, displaying a vast amount of knowledge of other people's affairs.

"Well, my dear fellow, it's uncommonly pleasant to forgather with you again. Those presents your wife sent my small daughter were princely. Sibyl will write to her. The child has a regular Yankee eye for value—and, I tell you, she was impressed. My wife was awfully disappointed at missing you yesterday. She's frightfully gone on Mrs. Rivers. I think she wants to have a look at you to satisfy herself that you're living up to your high privileges in that quarter. Come over to-morrow, can't you, and dine and sleep?"

Laurence explained that his evenings were bespoken.

"Ah, really—by the way, how is the old gentleman? Making headway towards—don't you know? Rather depressing business for you waiting on like this. Pity you can't come and dine and sleep, it would make a little break for you. I've never seen him, you know, but I hear he is rather a formidable, old person. My wife intends asking you a number of questions about him. Of course, you must know there are a whole lot of queer stories current."

"So I hear," Laurence said.

"Oh, it's not for you to hear; it's for you to tell," Jack Bellingham answered, his eyes twinkling. "Why, my dear fellow, your arrival is the excitement of the hour. The whole neighbourhood is sitting on the edge of its respective chairs just bursting for information about Stoke Rivers. You wait a little. I warn you, you're going to be handed round like a plate of cake at an old maid's tea-party; and my wife, in right of her relationship to Mrs. Rivers, means to have the first slice. She means to walk in, collar you, and then skilfully and economically retail you to her whole local acquaintance. To tell the truth, I've been rather worried about Louise lately. She has an idea—I've noticed nothing to justify it myself—that she has rather missed fire down here. She's taken that awfully to heart, you know. And I think she looks to you to give her her opportunity. She thinks if she gets possession of you and all these queer stories, she'll make the running—all the other women will be nowhere, you know."

Laurence laughed. He felt slightly embarrassed.

"But what the dickens is it all about?" he said.

"That's for you to tell us," Captain Bellingham repeated. "Perhaps you'll be rather glad of an audience in a day or two. Anyhow, come over and see my wife as soon as you can. She's great on spook-hunting, psychical research, all that sort of thing. So give her the first chance. Let her have a postcard in the morning. She'll be brokenhearted if she misses you again."

Laurence partook of another solitary dinner, admirably cooked and served, in company with the dancing, Etruscan figures, and the musky-scented orchids. Again, when the meal was finished, he went upstairs through the steady light and close, dry atmosphere to that stately and sombre sickroom. The last twenty-four hours had been very full of disquieting episodes and suggestions.

"I am inclined to reverse the order of proceedings to-night," he said to himself, "and cross-question my uncle, instead of letting him cross-question me. After all, that'll fit in to his scheme of observation well enough. My questions, no doubt, will be indicative of the depths of my native ignorance and the poverty of my powers. They'll enable him to draw conclusions. Conclusions!" he added, smiling—"a sufficiently fatuous occupation, when one thinks of the limited amount of evidence obtainable and the breadth of the inquiry?"

On the stairhead his uncle's valet, a thin, wiry man, long-armed, grey of hair and of skin, met him, and preceded him silently along the corridor. Laurence's relations with servants, and other persons in an inferior position to his own, were usually of a kindly and cordial sort. Such persons told him of their affairs; they admired and trusted him. But the servants in this house, though caring for his comfort with scrupulous forethought and punctuality, remained, so far, impossible of approach. They seemed to him like so many machines, incapable of hopes or fears, affections, even of sins, inhuman in their rigidity and silence. Now the valet announced him, and stood aside to let him pass, with a perfection of drill and an absence of individuality so complete, that it was to Laurence quite actively unpleasant. Immediately after, he met the hungry glance of those coldly brilliant eyes, looking out of the face fixed in outline, transparent, as the crystal skull lying on the table close by. And this house, so full of beings but half alive, of paralysed activities, defective or one-sided development, seemed to the young man, for the moment, terrible. The country churchyard, in which the wind sang, and the sunshine played among the graves with flitting, beckoning shadows, was gay by comparison. No wonder the place had an evil reputation, and that people invented weird stories about it.

A sensation of loneliness, such as he had not known since early childhood, came over Laurence. Almost involuntarily he made an effort towards closer, more sympathetic, intercourse with his host.

"How are you this evening, sir?" he asked. "Better, I hope. It has been a wonderfully charming day."

"I am glad to learn you have found it so. Weather has always appeared to me an accident, unworthy, save in its scientific aspects, of attention. Yet I understand that it exercises strong influence on certain temperaments—emotional temperaments, I apprehend, undisciplined by reason. That the weather to-day has affected you agreeably is matter for congratulation, since it will have helped to mitigate the tedium of a small portion of this period of waiting."

"Oh! there's not much tedium," Laurence answered. He looked across at the elder man smiling very pleasantly.—"I'm beginning to find things here a little too dramatic, if anything. You were good enough to tell me that you found me interesting last night, sir. I only wish I could be half as interesting to you, as you, and your house, and the whole state of affairs here is to me."

"You find it distinctly interesting?" Mr. Rivers inquired, but whether in approval or disapproval Laurence could not determine.

"Unquestionably," he answered. "The house is cram full of treasures. And there are unexpected influences in it, which get hold of one's imagination. It stands alone in my experience, unlike any place I have ever known."

The elder man sunk further back against the pillows, and, with one long, thin hand, drew the violet, fur-lined dressing-gown closer across his knees as though cold.

"Indeed. Have I divorced myself and my surroundings so completely from the ordinary habits of my contemporaries?"

"You've been strong enough to follow your own tastes and lead your own life, and that has produced something unique, something as finished as it is apart. Of course, this provokes a lot of criticism. Other people, I observe, recognise that it is unique too."

"Other people?" Mr. Rivers said loftily. "I have never entertained."

"Exactly," Laurence answered. "That's where part of the uniqueness comes in. We mostly herd together like sheep in a pen, and can't be easy unless we're rubbing sides."—He paused a moment. "Your refusal to rub sides causes great searchings of heart, I assure you. The poor, little parson here, for instance, is tormented by the idea that it is his duty to the Almighty, and to the Church of England, and to his own abnormally developed conscience, to raid you and do a little spiritual gardening in the neglected flower-beds of your soul."

"My soul is my own," Mr. Rivers observed. "That is, if the term soul is, strictly speaking, admissible. Conscious consciousness is all that I can predicate of my other than physical existence."

"The little parson's point of view is quite different. He is by no means backward in predication. He is quite sure you have a soul; but whether it is your own, or whether it doesn't belong to him as curate-in-charge of Stoke Rivers, he is not at all sure. He has strong leanings to the latter belief, I fancy."

"These are puerilities."

"The average man is puerile," Laurence asserted cheerfully. "We carted away Woman last night, sir, you remember, in deference to your slight prejudice against her—though I still maintain she is by no means foreign to our inquiry. But I really can't consent to the carting away of puerility too, or you will never get hold of the average man at all. Forbid his affections and his ineptitudes both, and you don't leave the poor wretch a leg to stand on. Meanwhile, the little parson is not the only person a good deal worked up by the unique character of your habits and surroundings. These give rise, indirectly, to surprising legends."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed. I think they would amuse you. And in connection with all this, sir, there are one or two questions I should most uncommonly like to ask you."

"You may do so," Mr. Rivers said. His nephew's rapid speech and breezy manner made him slightly breathless. He was unaccustomed to be treated in this light and airy fashion. He moved uneasily in his chair, as one who tries to avoid a draught. Laurence observing this, repented of his purpose.

"I don't tire you, sir, do I?" he asked kindly.

"Exhaustion is a consequence of the failure of the will. My will is still obedient to my mind, and my body to my will."

Laurence looked at him with a certain admiration. He was true to his creed, such as it was, and his pride had, consequently, rather a superb quality.

"Well, then," he said, "since I may ask you—I have found from conversation with several of our neighbours that this house, which I took to be a sort of Temple of Reason, is regarded with a good deal of vulgar suspicion."

Though the room was warm, the atmosphere of it close as that of a thundering night in the tropics, Laurence instinctively leaned forward, spreading out his hands to the glowing wood-fire on the hearth.

"I am not superstitious," he continued; "and you very certainly, I take it, are not so. We shall agree in that. Still, I confess, the whole subject of the occult and supernatural is rather fascinating to me. I can't quite keep my hands off it. I find an idea is prevalent that there are manifestations here, queer things are seen, you know, which cannot be put down to natural agency. I want to know if you—"

But Mr. Rivers interrupted him with unaccustomed vehemence of speech and manner.

"Stop!" he said, "stop if you please. This subject is exceedingly distasteful to me."

"Then we won't pursue it," Laurence answered quickly. Yet he wondered; his interest, already considerably aroused, being sensibly increased by the violence displayed by his companion. It was singular; and he paused a little, thinking, before embarking in further conversation. During that pause, Mr. Rivers leaned sideways, slowly and with difficulty raised the crystal skull from its place on the table beside him. He held it in front of him in both hands, and gazed, as though performing some religious rite, into the cavities of the empty eye-sockets. Then stiffly, letting his hands sink, he rested it upon his knees.

"Pardon me," he said, looking full at Laurence, while a shadow, rather than a flush, seemed to pass over his attenuated face. "I was tempted to act unworthily.—I agreed to answer such questions as you might put to me. But perceiving those questions tended to revive a matter which has caused me one of the few humiliations and regrets I have suffered during my life, I shrank. I was tempted weakly to break faith with you and retract my promise."

"Pray, sir, don't take it so seriously," Laurence entreated. "Of course, I should never have approached the subject had I known it was disagreeable to you. It was just the idle curiosity of an idle man. What on earth does it matter?"

"To you very little, presumably, since you are, as you say, idle—your days, that is, filled with a round of amusements deadening—as I fear—to the intellectual and moral conscience. But with me the case is otherwise. The judgment of no human being is of moment to me. But my judgment of myself is of infinite moment."

Mr. Rivers laid one transparent hand upon the dome of the crystal skull, as though for support. His face had grown hard as steel.

"It is therefore incumbent upon me, not in satisfaction of your curiosity, my dear Laurence, but in satisfaction of my own sense of rectitude, that I should accept this opportunity of stating the following facts. I inherited this property—as you will shortly inherit it—from an uncle, a man very much my senior. I had prosecuted my studies abroad, in the learned centres of Germany and France, from an early age. My acquaintance with my uncle was slight. I knew little of his private life. But I had reason to believe him a person of an undisciplined mind, imbued with the extravagant

socialistic views current during the French Revolution, unbridled alike in passions of love and of hate. Questions of character have never interested me; I therefore made no further inquiry regarding my predecessor's private life. My own tastes and habits were already fixed. I settled myself here and continued the studies in experimental physics, philology, and metaphysics, in which I had already engaged. I also added to the collection of pictures and objects of art that I found in the house. My life has been blameless, as most men count blame. I can assert, without fear of contradiction, that my moral and intellectual integrity have been complete. Only in one connection have I been guilty, have I failed—failed, as I now confess, miserably and grossly."

Mr. Rivers paused a moment. His fingers twitched as they rested upon the crystal skull.

"Miserably and grossly," he repeated. "The vulgar gossip which you have heard rests upon a basis of truth. I cannot deny the existence of supernatural manifestations, so called, in one quarter of this house. They are undeniable. I have witnessed them myself."

Laurence felt a queer shiver of excitement run through him. He sat very still.—"Then I wasn't asleep after all," he said to himself, "in that room last night."

"The said manifestations were not only disturbing and distasteful to me; but I perceived that their existence threatened the validity of some of my most carefully reasoned hypotheses, of some of my most ardently cherished beliefs. Of vulgar physical fear, I need hardly tell you, I was incapable; but I trembled before a dislocation of my thought. It followed that I became guilty of an act of flagrant mental cowardice. I refused to submit those manifestations to scientific investigation. I never mentioned them to my correspondents. I took elaborate precautions against ever witnessing them again myself. I made a determined effort to erase the memory of them from my mind. I almost succeeded in forgetting that I ever had witnessed them. Thus I tricked my own intelligence. I lied to my own experience. I committed a crime against my own reason—a crime which I can never hope to expiate."

Moved by the passion of the elder man's self-denunciation, Laurence had risen, and stood close to him.

"Ah! surely you take it too hard—far too hard, sir," he said.

But Mr. Rivers, looking up at him, answered sternly—

"A sin is heinous, not in itself, but in relation to the level of virtue habitually maintained by whoso commits it. And so, even were I not disabled, were I still capable of carrying out these investigations, the unsparing prosecution of which could alone give proof of the sincerity of my repentance, that could not really wipe out the iniquity of the past. In morals I cannot logically admit the possibility of cancelling a

wrong once done. In the realm of physics we know that vibrations, once generated, ring out everlastingly through space. To send forth a contrary set of vibrations is not to limit, or cause the first generated to cease. Their circles may intersect, yet they are practically independent, and cannot neutralise one another. In the realm of morals it is the same. The act once committed passes into the region of persistent and indubitable fact. Of sins, both passive and active, this is equally true. And consequently I am doomed—so long as I retain conscious individuality—to remain hopelessly lowered in my self-esteem."

The sick man spoke with a fierceness of conviction, his voice usually low and even swelling into full sonorous tones; his attenuated frame vibrant with energy; his face illuminated, as though a lamp burned behind that thin investiture of flesh and bone. Laurence saw in him, for the moment, a great orator, more probably a great preacher, wasted. And the thought of that waste of force, waste of power, stung him out of indolence, out of mere easy good nature. He, at least, would shilly-shally no more with life, but play the game—whatever the game presenting itself—whole-heartedly. And again that queer shiver of excitement ran through him; while again he reminded himself he had now reliable testimony that he had met with something far stranger, more incalculable and mysterious, than any vision of a dream, in that clear-coloured room downstairs last night. He stood silent, thinking intently, feeling keenly, his whole nature alert. But a small rustling sound, as of a chill wind among dry leaves in a winter hedge, recalled him to his immediate surroundings. Mr. Rivers had sunk back against the silken cushions, which rustled under his weight. The light had died out of his face, his hands clutched tremblingly at the crystal *memento mori* resting on his knees. For the first time Laurence realised how very near—but for the indomitable strength of will which supported him—he was to death. Laurence bent over him.

"This is heavy, sir," he said, touching the crystal skull. "May I put it back on the table?"

Mr. Rivers bowed his head in assent.

"We have talked too much. It would be wise, I think, for me to leave you."

"It would be so."

"May I call your man before I go—I hardly like to leave you alone."

"Thank you; he will come at the accustomed hour. I do not deviate from habits once formed except under stress of necessity."

Laurence was pushed by the desire to say something gentle, something expressive of the honour in which he held his host's rectitude and sincerity. But Mr. Rivers lay back motionless, his eyes closed. It was difficult to find just the words he wished. He turned away towards the door, when the elder man's voice recalled him.



"Laurence," he said, "Laurence—one word before we part. If you should see fit to undertake those investigations of which we have spoken, and in face of which I showed myself unfaithful and a craven—remember I press nothing upon you, I leave you free to undertake them or not as you please—I have one request to make of you."

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"It is this—that you will under no circumstances communicate the result of those investigations to any person save myself, and only to me should I definitely ask you to do so. Will you give me your word?"

"I give you my word, sir."

And with the feeling that he had bound himself to an engagement of unlooked-for solemnity, the young man went out into the steady brightness of the corridor, while—as last night—the odour of the orchids met him, enfolding him in their thick, musky sweetness, half-way down the dark, shining, oaken-stairs.

## X

As he pulled the edge of the heavy, leather-lined curtain towards him, Laurence laughed a little, in part at his own eagerness, in part defiant of scruples. Waking in the small hours, as a baby-child, he had often imagined that, could he climb the high rails of his cot and steal back unperceived to the day-nursery, he would find all his toys alive and stirring, at play on their own account. And this conception of the reversal of the natural order of things, while it frightened him, yet enchanted his fancy. Something of that childish alarm and enchantment arose in him now. He felt about to bid farewell to common-sense, possibly—to usual established habits of thought, assuredly. He was about to commit himself to an untried element; offering himself as sport to seas unsounded as yet, to unknown forces which might prove malign and merciless. While the promise, by which he had so lately bound himself, introduced into the coming experience an element of secrecy that made—as enforced secrecy so often does make—for a rather dangerous degree of personal liberty.

So he turned the door-handle not without expectation. And this time expectation suffered no disappointment. In front of the tall, satin-wood escritoire, her back towards him, her delicate hands wandering anxiously over the painted and polished surface, he beheld once more the slender, rose-clad figure.

Laurence drew in his breath with a sigh of satisfaction. He crossed the room boldly to-night and stood beside her; and her pale, ethereal loveliness entranced him as he spoke.

"Listen to me," he said. "We are strangers to one another—so strangely strangers that I half distrust the evidence of my senses, as, only too conceivably, you distrust the evidence of yours. I don't pretend to understand what distance of time, or space, or conditions, separates us. I only know that I see you, and that you are unhappy, and that you search for something you are unable to find.—Look here, look here—listen to me and try to lay hold of this idea—that I am a friend, not an enemy; that I come to help, not to hinder you. Try to enter into some sort of relation with me. Try to cross the gulf which seems to lie between us. Try to believe that you have found some one who will keep faith with you, and do his best to serve you; and believing that, put sorrow out of your face—"

He stopped suddenly. When he began speaking he might have been addressing a sleep-walker or a person in a trance. There was no speculation in her sweet eyes. They were wild with a wondering distress, looking on him as though not seeing him. But as he continued to plead with her—speaking slowly, pausing at the close of each sentence in the hope that the sense of his words might so reach and arrest her—a gradual change came over her aspect, as of one awakening from prolonged and troubled slumber. There was a dawning of intelligence in her expression, as in that of

a little child first struggling to apprehend and measure, not by means of its senses merely, but in obedience to the conscious effort of its mind. The drooping corners of the mouth straightened, turned upward, the lips breaking into a timid, questioning smile. She stretched herself a little, clenched her fists gently, rubbed her eyes with them in innocent, baby fashion, stretched again, and then looked full at Laurence—a woman shy, diffident, but in possession of her faculties, expectant, and alive.

"Yes—yes—there, that's right. Now you look, as you used to, look as you should," he exclaimed, his voice low, shaken with very vital excitement. He felt as when—once or twice—bringing a racing yacht in to the finish, a fair spread of blue water between her stern and her competitor's bows, he had felt her pace quicken while the tiller throbbed and danced under his hand. A buoyancy of heart, a delicious conviction of successful attainment was upon him. Sportsman and poet alike rejoiced in Laurence just then, and the spiritual side of his nature was touched as well. He seemed to have witnessed a glad resurrection, enforcing belief in the immortality of the soul, as he gazed on this lovely face in which reason, hope, even gaiety, were so visibly born anew.

"Never mind about that which you have lost," he said. "Let it be for the present. We will arrive at it in time sure enough—leave all that to me. You want these drawers opened, their locks picked?—Well, that shall be done all in good time. But whatever treasures we find there will be but a trifle, it strikes me, compared with that which we have already found to-night. For I have found you—found you once more—and you, thank God, have found yourself."

Again his companion stretched, and passed her hands across her eyes, while her lips parted in a soundless sigh. Silence held her yet, but that appeared to make singularly little difference in their intercourse. For he perceived that she understood, that she sympathised, that she too was penetrated with quick, intimate joy, and an exquisite and innocent good-fellowship, as plainly as though a very torrent of eloquent explanation and asseveration had issued from her mouth. Indeed, this wordlessness had for him an extraordinary charm. Far from a power being lacking, it was to him as though a new power had been granted, and that the most subtle and convincing to the heart.

Laurence stood tall, upright, in the full pride of his young manhood, of his virile energy and strength, before this slender fairy-lady, with her softly gleaming jewels, her dainty frills and laces, her clinging rose-red, old-world, silken gown, and held out his hands to her.

"Come," he said, "the night is fair and windless and full of stars. Shall we go out into it and read the great poem of the sky and the woodland while all men sleep, you and I—good comrades, old friends, though as most mortals count meeting, we have met each other, it would seem, but twice?—You have known sad things. Well, forget

them. You have searched vainly for lost things. Well, forget them too. The finest house at best remains somewhat of a prison, and this room is pervaded by melancholy memories. Leave it. Let us give the past, give convention, give reason even, the slip for once—and go."

For a minute or more she hesitated, looking at Laurence profoundly, as though trying to read his inmost thought. Then she laid her hand in his. It had neither weight nor substance, but touched his palm as a light summer wind might have touched his cheek, or a butterfly's wings might have fluttered, with a just perceptible pulsation, within the hollow of his hands.

And so Laurence threw open the high French window, and together they passed out onto the grey, semicircular flight of steps. Immediately below lay the Italian garden—its formal flower-borders, its faintly dripping fountains, its black, spire-like cypresses, white balustrades and statues, vague, mysterious, in the starlight. The great lawns stretched away beyond, crossed by the broad gravel walk, which showed pale for some fifty yards, and then was lost in the dusky shadow of the grove of lime-trees. In the north was a wide, white light travelling—since the March nights now grew short—along the horizon, through the quiet hours, from the last death-flush of sunset to the first birth-flush of the dawn.

Lawrence watched his companion anxiously as her little feet in their diamond-powdered slippers crossed the window-sill. With that impalpable hand in his, that scarcely perceptible flutter—as of a captive butterfly—against his fingers, he could not but entertain fears that the strong open air might work some change in her; that she might be drawn up and absorbed by the sharp, glittering starlight; that she might be resolved into nothingness by the keen breath of the night, or that some sturdy sea-breeze might arise and blow her quite away. But such as she was—woman, or sprite, or visitant from beyond the gates of the grave—she remained by his side. And together they passed down the garden alleys, and lingered by the dripping fountains watching the sleepless fish that moved—silent as the dainty lady herself—through the water of the lichen-encrusted, stone basins. They stood together beneath the dark cypresses which, even on winter nights, smell dry and warm of the south, and talk in husky, whispering accents of classic lands—of marble columns mellow with age, and saffron-plastered walls, over which great vines hang, and in the hot cracks of which scorpions breed, and light-footed lizards glance and scamper. And, still together, they went on—the unspoken sympathy between them growing, deepening—down the second flight of steps and along the broad, gravelled way. Here, in the open space, the whole panorama of the heavens was disclosed; and then, almost in spite of himself, Laurence broke into utterance. He talked, as never, even in his most brilliant moments, he had talked before. The scene was so majestic, and moreover he had so perfect a listener, every movement of whose graceful body, every glance of whose

profound and gentle eyes expressed comprehension, accord—as when the violin strings answer, in exquisite melody, to the skilfully handled bow.

And so forgetting himself, ceasing to exercise that reticence—half-humorous, half-reverent—with which, as with a cloak, modern, civilised man strives to hide the noblest and purest of his thought, Laurence laid bare his heart and soul to his sweet companion. He told her tender, trivial incidents of his youth and childhood—in themselves of little moment, yet such as leave an indelible mark on the imagination and character. He told her of the splendid hopes of his opening manhood, when, with the magnificent self-confidence of inexperience, the whole world seemed his to conquer if he pleased. He told her of those plays and poems, so full of promise that, could he have realised the fulness of his own conceptions, they must have rendered his name famous through all the coming years. He told her, too, of those brief, fugitive moments of spiritual illumination, when he had felt himself draw very near to the ultimate meaning and purpose of things; when he had apprehended God as the Eternal Lover, the soul of man as the Eternal Bride, and how, in the light of that blessed apprehension, all confusion had ceased, all life, all death, becoming at once very simple and very holy, guiltless alike of suffering and of shame.

Then—as they wandered yet further into the thin shadow of the still leafless lime-trees, and, sitting for a while upon the stone bench beside the broad, dim walk, looked forth under the down-sweeping branches, to the vast expanse of the distant country—he descended from discourse of these high matters. He told her of the joys of manly sports and pastimes, and of the still greater joys of travel and adventure, in far countries, among alien peoples, by land and sea.

Thus did the hours pass in glad and fearless communion of heart with heart, and soul with soul, while upon the horizon the white light walked slowly, surely eastward. And then, at last, it seemed as though some disturbing thought invaded his fairy-lady's mind, causing her attention to waver, her gentle gaiety to wane. The purport of that thought Laurence failed to read, and this troubled him with a sensation of helplessness, as though a gulf was once again opening between his state of being and hers, which he was powerless to cross. She rose from her place beside him and moved restlessly to and fro. And when he pleaded with and questioned her, she moved yet further from him, and stood with one hand raised as imploring silence. She appeared to listen for some call, some summons, quite other than welcome, for he could see the corners of her dear mouth droop once more, while her eyes grew shy and wild. Unwillingly as though constrained by some force she did not love yet must obey, she passed out on to the clear, smooth spaces of the great lawns. The grass blades were touched with a whiteness of frost; but Laurence observed that neither her footsteps, nor the little frills bordering her gown as they swept it, left any track upon the spangled turf.

Sheep bells sounded plaintively from some far-off fold. Rabbits slipped out timorously from the edge of the wood to take their morning feed, and, perceiving no threatening presence, waxed bold, skipping and gambolling upon the frosty grass. Then with a sullen roar, breaking up the gracious quiet of nature with the hoarse voice of man's business, man's necessity of labour, and unappeasable unrest, a train thundered along the valley, leaving a long trail of pale smoke hanging among the grey-brown masses of the indistinguishable trees.

The roar died out as it had come, sullen and imperative to the last. There followed a pause as though for a minute or two all nature, all living creatures, held their breath. And then from the near stables, and from distant homestead and farm, cocks challenged one another—some in tones high and shrill, some faint and low—heralding the sunrise and telling all the world that day was once more born.

Immediately, to his consternation, Laurence beheld his lovely companion and friend turn away; and, without farewell, without smallest apparent recollection of his presence, flit—as some bird, or rather as some rose-red rose-leaf driven by a storm wind—across the lawns, past the dripping fountains and sighing cypresses of the Italian garden, back, back, up the grey steps and in at the open window of the silent house.

He followed her rapidly. The sun-rays shot up into the eastern sky as he crossed the window-sill. Within, the glory of the sunrise struggled with the unyielding glare of the electric light. Every object, every corner and recess, was clearly seen. But the room was vacant. Once again his fairy-lady had vanished leaving no trace, her sweet presence was removed and Laurence found himself alone.

## XI

Something drummed and drummed; and, in obedience to that sound, it appeared to Laurence that he returned—whence he knew not—across the most prodigious spaces ever traversed by the spirit of man. Then the matter explained itself. He was on board ship once again, awakened to the familiar pounding of the engines and drum of the screw. Opening his eyes, they would rest on the white iron and wooden walls of his state-room, and the alert figure of his bedroom steward, announcing—"Fair morning, sir; bath ready, sir." And this impression was so distinct that it took him some seconds to focus his actual whereabouts—the stately and serious bed-chamber at Stoke Rivers, and the portly person of Watkins, the under-butler, standing at the bedside, a silver tea-tray in his large, soft hands.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I have been up twice already and received no answer," he said, his manner correct and respectful as ever, but his face wearing, for once, an expression of quite human solicitude—or was it curiosity? "I spoke to Mr. Renshaw and Mr. Lowndes, and they considered it advisable that I should enter, sir. Mr. Renshaw and Mr. Lowndes felt, with me, not quite comfortable, sir, knowing your habit of early rising."

Watkins set down the tray carefully, turning out the corners of the fine napkin which covered it.

"Your tea, your letters, sir," he added, and then paused.

Laurence tried to rouse himself. Shipboard and the pounding engines were a delusion clearly. But was the night of sweet converse, and the flitting away of a rose-clad, slender figure at the first flush of dawn, a delusion likewise?

"Oh yes, thanks, Watkins, I am all right," he said absently. "I've slept late, have I? What time is it?"

"Between ten minutes and a quarter past eleven when I passed through the hall," the man answered. "Any orders for the stables, sir?"

Laurence was tearing open his letters. One was addressed in his wife's large and elaborate hand. Laughing at her, one day before their marriage, he had declared that did she possess half the amount of character suggested by these opulent hieroglyphics, there would positively be no getting to the end of it, so that his work clearly was cut out for him for the rest of his natural life. Now the sight of that handwriting—though he had possibly ceased to regard it as a perfectly trustworthy index to its writer's personality—affected him with a movement of vague self-reproach. For, as sleep left him, Laurence entertained less and less doubt of the actuality of the existence of his rose-clad fairy-lady; or of the fact that he had spent hours with her—hours, blameless

it is true, yet beautiful beyond all remembered hours of his experience. And though he had done no wrong, yet the very beauty of those hours—since she had not shared it—constituted a certain subtle, subjective infidelity towards his wife. This pricked his conscience the more, that he perceived Virginia must have written to him by the very next mail, but three days after he had sailed. And that was rather charming and thoughtful of her, for she had innumerable engagements claiming her time and attention, and was by no means addicted to anxiety regarding the absent. "Why should she worry," as she remarked at parting, "everybody was always crossing now, and you hardly ever heard of any one not getting to the other side safely enough." Therefore it seemed to Laurence it would be a duty, perhaps also a little salve to his conscience, to do something pleasing—however remotely—to Virginia. He had an order for the stables. He would ride over to luncheon with her friend and admirer, Mrs. Bellingham, at Bishop's Pudbury.

Once on his feet, Laurence was somewhat surprised at his own sensations. He found himself singularly tired, as a man may be by some prolonged concentration of brain or of will. He felt as though he had made some tremendous mental effort; and, now that it was over, depression held both his mind and body. His spirits were not as buoyant as usual, nor was his thought clear. He felt dazed, and incapable of grappling with the strange problems raised by the events of the last twenty-four hours. The swing of possibility they suggested was too great. The average, the *banal* attracted him, as a narcotic attracts one in pain. For the moment he suffered something approaching repulsion towards his recent exaltation and amazing, half-realised discoveries. He wanted to get back on to the ordinary lines of things—be amused, be a trifle stupid, laugh, gossip, forget.

The sun had long since burnt up that sprinkling of frost upon the grass. The air was fragrant and mild. Catkins fringed the hazel twigs, while in the shelter of the deep lanes leaves showed tenderly green. The sap had risen in the trees, so that a broken branch bled. Indications of fertility and growth were everywhere, Nature sensibly putting forth her strength after the sleep of winter. The road which Laurence followed, after crossing the park, turned upward under overhanging trees, and skirted the low, stone wall of the churchyard. And the contrast between this last resting-place of human corpses and the perpetual and so evident fecundity of Nature struck home to him, yet not distressfully. He was not wholly unwilling, in his present mood, to welcome the thought of eventual rest.

He checked his horse, and waited, looking at the place again,—at its dark, feathery yew-trees, its narrow mounds, ranged decently in line—on the surface of which the spring grass raised innumerable blades of vivid green—at its simple monuments, that showed not merely a name and date of departure, but time-honoured words of faith in the justice and mercy of Almighty God. There was an unoccupied space on the hither side of the enclosure, lying pleasantly open to the sun. The grey wall of the chancel,



pierced by low, round-headed windows, backed it. A bush of *Pyrus Japonica* was trained around and between these windows; and the flowers, showing up against their black stems, spread garlands of pure, hot colour over the face of the rough stone. Laurence, to whom the disposal of his body after death had, heretofore, appeared a matter of extreme unimportance, was overtaken by a sudden eagerness to secure for himself rights of burial in this serene and sun-visited spot.

"After all, it must come to me, sooner or later, as to all the rest," he thought; "and why shouldn't I provide for the event according to my fancy? I'll talk to the poor little parson about it. Perhaps he'll be easier regarding the state of my soul and my prospects of salvation if I make provision for my latter end by staking out a burial-plot. I wonder what Virginia would say to that? Probably she's a little transatlantic weakness for embalmers and mausoleums. Mother Earth's lap is best, though, I think!"

And then riding onward, all in the fair spring weather, though he tried to put the thought from him, his heart was somewhat troubled by that flitting, rose-clad figure once again—by the lovely, speechless lips, to which he had brought gentle gaiety, and the profound and serious eyes, to which he had brought human sympathy and trust. Silent or not, woman or disembodied spirit, she was a little too captivating for safety. Should he inquire no further? But, in renouncing all further intercourse with her, would he perpetrate an act of high moral courage, or merely commit one of intellectual cowardice, such as that already committed by his uncle? Here was a problem not easy of solution. Laurence straightened himself in the saddle, and pressed his horse a little. Bishop's Pudbury would be a relief, and should be reached with as small delay as possible. He would try to be amused, a little stupid, to laugh, gossip, and forget—for a time at all events.

Mrs. Bellingham, certainly, offered an excellent contrast to the spirit of his present perturbations. She was a notable example of modern civilisation, guiltless of all mysterious or primitive suggestion. Her prettiness was considerable, according to a neat and unaccentuated type. Her manner was vivacious, her attitudes many but sincere. She wore these—so to speak—to bring out the value of her conversation, as she wore her irreproachably constructed clothes to bring out those of her plump and carefully preserved figure. Her light-brown hair was parted in the middle, waved, and puffed out over the ears—this in imitation of the fashion lately patronised by Virginia Rivers. The set of her purple, boxcloth coat and skirt pleased Laurence's eye, as did that of her white satin and lace blouse. She was really admirably turned out—according to current standards of fashion. She greeted her guest, moreover, with that happy combination of self-consciousness and self-assurance, which has in it at once a flavour of compliment and promise of worthy entertainment. Mrs. Jack Bellingham would never do anything very great; but she aspired and succeeded in doing the small things of life remarkably well.

"Why, Mr. Rivers, this is quite too charming for anything," she said. "But, unfortunately, I am alone here with my children. I devote a great deal of time now to my children. My husband has gone up to town for the day."

"So much the better," Laurence answered cheerfully. "I didn't come to see Jack, dear Mrs. Bellingham, but wholly and solely to see you. Virginia charged me with innumerable messages. And then there are a whole lot of people we both know I want to talk to you about—a few multiplications, subtractions, and divisions, you know, not without a humorous side to them here and there. Will you keep me to luncheon? Oh! that's awfully good of you."

The Pudbury manor-house had lately undergone reconstruction, thereby gaining in convenience what it lost in distinction. It was now as well designed to meet modern requirements, as finished, as generally presentable and as little of an enigma, as its present hostess. Laurence contemplated the elegant, if slightly unhomelike, room with a movement of ironical satisfaction. Its contents were as agreeably obvious and unrecondite as the style and plot of a current magazine story. It made no demand upon the intelligence or the emotions. And Laurence had been in contact with quite other literary subject-matter lately—problems of love, morals, metaphysics, not unworthy to inspire the magnificent obscurities of Browning, or the fine frenzies of Shelley's lyrics. Therefore he hailed the emotional limitations of his existing environment. The indolent side of his nature was paramount. He settled down to chatter genially about Tom, Dick, and Harry, and the fair ladies interested in those worthies, or in whom those worthies were interested. He was amused and amusing, relished his luncheon, his hostess's smart talk, and enjoyed countless reminiscences of Newport and New York. And, as the ease of this attitude of mind began to grow on him, the question very forcibly presented itself:—why strain? Why not always drift thus pleasantly and comfortably down the smooth stream of worldly prosperity? Why try to plumb the depths lying below that smiling surface? For does not this, in the majority of cases, involve an expenditure of energy out of all proportion to the worth of the result? To be light-in-hand and light-of-heart—was not that after all the truest philosophy? To what a hopelessly dreary pass had not the elder Mr. Rivers brought himself by thinking otherwise; and taking his studies, his opinions, himself, in short, so seriously!

So, sipping his coffee in the drawing-room after luncheon, while Mrs. Bellingham maintained the flow of conversation in penetrating and emphatic tones, Laurence thought—yes, on the whole, he did think—it would be wiser and better, to retire upon the former lines of his life,—to eschew high ambitions of sorts, and fall back upon the works and ways of *l'homme moyen sensuel*, upon the great, good-natured, uninspired Commonplace, of which his uncle had accredited him with being so oblivious and complete an exponent. He thought—notwithstanding the tightening of some cord at his heart, perhaps moral, perhaps merely physical—yes, honestly he did think he had better do that, and make his decision here and now. Judging by past experience, he

was doomed in all departments to be second, not to say third-rate. Well, then, best accept that doom smiling. To do so might hurt vanity a bit, yet undoubtedly there would be consolations. Laurence set down his coffee-cup with a little lift of the eyebrows and shoulders, and an expression of countenance somewhat cynical. He would coquet no longer with fairy, rose-clad ladies—he would decline the so strangely offered adventure.

"The truth is, I'm not big enough for it," he thought to himself ruefully.

"You know just how I feel about Virginia," his hostess was saying. "She is a perfectly lovely woman in every way, and her social sense amounts to genius. The thought of her being over makes it possible for me to contemplate spending another winter here in the country. I look forward to seeing Virginia lay hold of this neighbourhood and just put it through. Her brightness, and *verve*, and *savoir faire* will be a perfect revelation. She will positively electrify every person within a fifteen mile radius. But—"

And there the speaker paused. For along the carriage-drive, all in the pleasant sunshine, the children of the house, a trifle inebriated by recent dinner of chicken and rice pudding, by freedom, and the open air, went forth with shoutings and laughter for their afternoon walk. First Sybil and her younger sister, arrayed in straight, scarlet jackets, beneath which showed a long length of tan boot and tan stocking, encasing very active legs. Then the portly coachman, leading a donkey, upon which the three-year-old son and heir of the Bellingham family, also scarlet-coated, made a first essay in horsemanship. Finally, two nurses clothed in white. The little girls ran wildly, their gay figures backed by a bank of shrubbery—rusty red of berberis and glinting green of laurels—while the pink and azure balloon-balls they carried were whisked heavenward by the wind to the uttermost length of each tethering string. Around the procession, barking, circling, jumping high in air after the floating balls, and even threatening assault of the donkey's nose, skirmished a couple of rough Irish terriers. The donkey shied, the coachman admonished, a laughing nurse ran forward and clutched the small cavalier by the outstanding skirt of his coat and by the seat of his nether garments. The little girls shrieked and capered, and in such hilarious fashion the company passed out of sight.

Laurence Rivers's eyes rested rather wistfully upon the scene. It belonged to the great, good-natured, uninspired Commonplace upon which he was just agreeing with himself to retire; and it offered a comely and wholesome enough example of the same. Mrs. Bellingham also had turned towards the window, and the expression of her neat face had softened. The self-consciousness, the worldliness therein usually displayed, were in abeyance, while the beautiful content of motherhood was regnant, visibly enthroned. Laurence had never supposed she could look so charming, and he could have found it in his heart to envy his friend Jack Bellingham. Very early in their

connection Virginia had pointed out to him, with consummate tact but entire lucidity, that the modern husband, who marries a fascinating woman of society and really appreciates her, will give proof of such appreciation by relegating the matter of child-bearing to a dim and distant future. It will come all in good time no doubt, but it can wait. For is not it really a little too much, in these days of enlightened equality between man and woman, to require the latter to forego amusement, to endure serious discomfort, risk her freshness and her figure, even come within measurable distance—in not infrequent cases—of the supremely foolish calamity of death?—Political economy and the health of the race notwithstanding, let the poor breed; let the obscure breed; let that innumerable company of women, to whom life offers so much of a trial and so little of a pastime, that in the sum-total of their infelicity one pain or peril the more cannot make any appreciable difference—let these breed. But spare the fair Virginias, those fine flowers of wealth and worldly circumstance, to whom Fortune shows so radiant a face! It is simple justice and reason so to do—at least such had been Virginia's argument.

But as Laurence now reflected—wiser by some year and a half's experience of woman and matrimony—if life on the lines of the Commonplace is to afford its legitimate compensations, it must not be trained too fine, or jockeyed too carefully. The man's ear must not be too ready to hear specious arguments, nor his imagination to entertain too elaborate sympathies. He must compel those said fine flowers to bow their heads to the common yoke. All his life he—Laurence—had been liable to stultify himself by permitting his imagination to turn up in the wrong place. What good luck to have been born, like his friend cheery Jack Bellingham, devoid of that embarrassing faculty! Good luck for Jack himself, and for his wife—who just looked so delightfully pretty—and for those three nice, shouting, scarlet-coated, small Bellinghams, otherwise only too probably non-existent.

Laurence had ceased suddenly to be much amused; had ceased to relish discussion of mutual friends, reminiscence or anecdote. He rose with the intention of bidding his hostess farewell; but her self-consciousness, her manner and manners, came back with a snap.

"Why, Mr. Rivers, you do not propose to leave yet," she protested. "I am not half through with our conversation, I assure you. We have not yet approached the subject upon which I am most keen for first-hand information. I am perfectly wild to hear on what terms you believe Virginia, with her bright, fearless, highly-developed, modern temperament, will be with your family spectre."

## XII

Laurence drew himself up with a sharp sensation of annoyance, geniality and wistfulness alike departing from his aspect. The matter had never presented itself to him in this combination before, and it offended his taste, even, in a degree, his sense of decency. He paused a moment, and then took refuge in slight insincerity.

"Always assuming, dear Mrs. Bellingham, that there is a family spectre for Virginia, or anybody else, to be on terms with?"

"Why, you do not really propose to call that thrilling fact in question?" the lady answered, very brightly. "That would be too mortifying. It would constitute the climax of the *ennui* from which I have suffered during the many months of this English winter. I had promised myself at least one vital sensation when you and I should meet, and you should tell me the true, inward history of that romantic, old house of yours, Stoke Rivers."

She sat in an attitude, arranged the folds of her boxcloth shirt, patted the lace into place about her neck.

"You make me feel very badly," she said.

Laurence objected to soiling his conscience by lying at least as much as most men. But surely, he argued, there are cases of justifiable perjury, as of justifiable homicide.

"I am awfully sorry," he said, "to dash your hopes of a sensation. But, you see, neither the romantic, old house or its inward history are my property as yet, so I can't give either away however much I may desire to do so."

"I know it. I do not ask you to commit any indiscretion. I do not ask you to tell me anything."

Laurence braced himself.

"How fortunate, since there's nothing to tell!" he said.

His hostess looked hard at him for a moment, and then at the floor.

"There was a time, before I lived among them, when I believed the English to be a simple and undiplomatic nation," she said. "I know better now."

Laurence was half-amused, half-irritated.

"Oh, come!" he retorted, "it's too bad to make it an international question."

"I had promised myself such a fine time in that house," she continued, still gazing abstractedly at the floor. "Virginia is, I consider—and I believe you know that—the

most perfectly lovely woman of my acquaintance. She represents the last word of our American culture; and I would advise every young girl, who was ambitious of social success, to study her as a model. She catches right on to everything new at once, and her power of repartee is great. My admiration for Virginia is so overpowering, that it would really be a wonderful encouragement to my self-respect to get a step ahead of her for once. Well, I concluded I could do that in a perfectly legitimate manner. I planned to ask you to let me go right around that house from cellar to garret, and acquaint myself with the whole interior. I wanted to see it before Virginia had brought our younger and more complex Western civilisation to bear upon it. I promised myself great gratification from doing that."

As she finished speaking, Mrs. Bellingham raised her eyes. That she was in earnest, keenly inquisitive, there could be no doubt.

"But, unhappily, in asking that you would be asking me to commit the greatest possible indiscretion," Laurence answered, laughing a little. "You see, my uncle is alive as yet. And while he lives I must obey orders."

"Orders?"

"Yes; and they are such preposterously unchivalrous orders that I tremble to mention them to you."

Mrs. Bellingham looked away. She grew a trifle anxious, having the greatest fear of hearing anything even remotely, morally or socially, incorrect. But the young man's manner tended to reassure her. He appeared particularly engaging at that moment.

"Yes, it will shock you," he said, "shock you outrageously, coming as you do from a country where no member of your delightful sex is ever requested to take a back seat. My uncle is a brilliantly clever person, but on some points he is a little mad. And simply at Stoke Rivers—I blush to mention it—no woman is admitted, no woman is permitted to exist."

Mrs. Bellingham's eyes positively flashed, her face went extremely pink.

"But this is the most unparalleled country!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Rivers, do you seriously intend me to believe that no lady may enter that house? Why, I ask you, how is it possible to conduct a domestic establishment under such circumstances?"

"Ah! that's the worst of it," Laurence said. He was beginning to be amused again. "I tell you, the condition of that house suggests the most awful reflections."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Yes, awful," he repeated. "For it is the best mounted, the best served, the best kept house I have ever stayed in. It is as clean as a new pin. The whole thing moves on

wheels—and yet never the trace of a petticoat! It follows that one is assailed by the unholy suspicion that woman may be, after all, a quite superfluous luxury; and that the work of the world, even in its humble, domestic aspects, can get along just as well without her. My uncle entertains this opinion anyhow, and gives the most convincing practical exposition of it. He has supplied me with a large amount of information under this head; and, upon my word, I'm afraid I am beginning to see the force of his arguments. After that, I'd better go, hadn't I?"

"Well, I really believe perhaps you had," she answered. For once she looked perplexed, almost flurried. Her face was still decidedly pink. But she rallied herself, and fired a parting shot.—"Unless," she added, "to make amends for having told me so very plainly that my presence would not be tolerated at Stoke Rivers, you relent and give me the whole story of that family spectre."

Laurence raised his head sharply, and once more his sense of amusement evaporated. The return to this theme jarred on him. The lady's persistence appeared to him in singularly bad taste. The reiteration of that word angered him moreover. In hearing it he was sensible of a turn in his blood, as though an insult were being offered to one very dear to him.

"Spectre?" he said slowly. "Pardon me—I—I don't quite follow you. What spectre?"

His hostess was roused in her turn.

"Why, Mr. Rivers, what has happened to you?" she inquired. "What have I said to disturb your equanimity? I had not supposed you to be so sensitive."

Whereupon the folly of his anger became extremely apparent to Laurence; the more so that he had so recently concluded to eschew ambitious adventures and decline upon the large and unexciting levels of the Commonplace. In those regions hasty resentments, hot blood, the fine-gentleman-duelling-spirit, in short, is clearly out of the picture. And then, why quarrel with Mrs. Bellingham of all people? She was a very charming, little person, specially when—as just now—her glance dwelt fondly upon her red-coated babies and their escort of nurses, donkey, and dogs. If she had trodden on his toes, it was unwittingly, and without any intention of malice. So he proceeded to make *amende honorable* with proper despatch.

"Forgive me," he said; "I am an idiot. But the legends to which my poor old uncle's crankiness have given rise really begin to get upon my brain. Wherever I go they crop up. You can understand it becomes a little exasperating.—Good-bye. I have had a delightful time. Love to Jack."

The lady smiled upon him, yet with an air of criticism and slight reserve.

"Oh yes," she said, "certainly, Mr. Rivers, love to Jack. But I am going to write to Virginia and report on our interview. I believe it is incumbent on me as a true friend to do that.—Yes, you may come again just as soon as you like. Now, do I not display a perfectly lovely spirit in inviting you here after you have done just all you know to explode my romance? Mr. Rivers, this day will leave a scar. I know it. I do regret that spectre."

Laurence smiled back, looking down at her.

"Yes, it's a pity, isn't it," he said, "ever to explode a romance? There aren't too many of them about. Perhaps I too could find it in my heart to regret that spectre."

And there, at least, the young man spoke truth, for regrets pursued him on his homeward way. All this talk, moreover, was a nuisance, an intolerable nuisance. And, though he did not stay to analyse the probabilities of when and how, he apprehended up-croppings, developments, and ramifications of the said nuisance in the future. Mrs. Bellingham's question, as to the attitude Virginia might adopt towards the occult element in her husband's fine inheritance, was more uncomfortably pertinent than the questioner could by any means have imagined. It suggested most disturbing complications. Thus Laurence rode onward heedlessly, harassed by vexatious and perplexing thoughts.

"What a confounded bother it all is!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I wish to goodness the poor old man would live for ever—outlive me anyhow. That would be the simplest solution of the situation."

He raised his head and looked about him, then became aware that he must have taken some wrong turn in the labyrinth of cross-country roads between Bishop's Pudbury and Stoke Rivers, that he must have struck too far southward and so lost his way. The mouth of the steep, rutted lane, shut in by copse on either hand, which he had been following, now debouched on a high-lying table-land. Small, rough fields bordered the road, their crumbling, ill-kept banks bare of trees. Some fifty yards ahead, where four roads crossed, stood a lonely, one-story, turnpike house; it was six-sided, white-washed, and had a slated roof, rising extinguisher-like to a single central chimney. Placed in an angle of the intersecting roads, it was without garden ground. The turnpike-gate had long ago disappeared; and the house, a thing that had lost its use and become obsolete, was in a half-ruinous condition. An air of cheap desolation pervaded it. Bundles of rags bulged from the broken window-panes. Long-legged, high-shouldered fowls pecked and squatted in the dust before the half-open door. Yet, seeing it, Laurence was sensible that this unsightly building had a tally somewhere in his memory, and claimed recognition. And this impression received unexpected reinforcement when suddenly its squalid walls changed from dirty-white to warm



primrose, while the surviving glass in its rickety windows gave off dazzling splendours of light.

Anxious to learn the cause of this transformation, the young man drew up, and, laying his right hand upon his horse's sleek quarters, turned half round in the saddle, and stayed thus, looking and listening.

The view was very noble. Southward the fall of the ground was sufficiently abrupt to exclude all middle distance, with the result that the rough grasses, withered bents and sorrel-stalks of the near pasture-field were outlined against the immense sweep of the flat coastline far below—this last, mauve, and russet, and dim green, was broken here and there by a pallor of sandhills and the shimmer of seaward-tending streams. Looking west, the suave contours of the Downs and Beachy Head rose, in indigo and purple, against a great space of saffron-coloured sky. Above them, but with a bar of strong light between, heavy masses of purple-grey cloud gathered, from out which the freshening wind blew chill. The sea, steel-blue and dashed with white-capped waves, lifted a hard, serrated edge against the horizon.

All this Laurence saw. It made a rather splendid picture, big with the drama of approaching storm. Yet he was persuaded something was lacking. As three days ago upon first entering the yellow drawing-room at Stoke Rivers, he had, after the first moment of surprise, instinctively looked for certain ornaments and pieces of furniture, and derived a singular satisfaction from the conviction that they still occupied their accustomed place—so now and here, though to his knowledge he had never before ridden across this piece of exposed and but half-reclaimed common-land, or seen the great view under its existing aspect,—he instinctively gazed seaward in search of that which should support his half-awakened memory, and complete the scene to his satisfaction. For surely—yes, surely—bowling up Channel, under crowded canvas, before the freshening breeze, he should behold a fleet of some eight or ten square-rigged East Indiamen, their carven poops standing high out of the water,—vessels of about a thousand tons' burden, laden with tea and spices, bales of delicate muslins and silks, flasks of utter, porcelain, ivory fans, bright-hued parrots, and unseemly, little apes.

And as convoy of these rich cargoes, to secure them, their merchant captains and bronzed and sturdy crews, against the rapacity of privateers sweeping out from St. Malo and other ports of Northern France, he should behold—yes, surely he should—a couple of smart English frigates, square-rigged too, whose clean scrubbed decks and the black mouths of whose port holes displayed grim argument of cannon, ready for action should occasion so demand. The ships, hugging the land for greater safety from alert and hungry foes, seemed—while the wind filled the bellying sails, straining their tall masts, as they heeled upon that uneasy, blue-grey sea—like some flight of huge,

golden-plumage birds; for all the saffron glory now streaming from beneath the gathering storm-clouds in the west must lie full on them.

For such gallant sight Laurence watched, singularly moved, and with a singular eagerness. And so clear was the vision to his mind, so necessary to the completion of the scene upon which his eyes rested, that for some moments he failed to distinguish where actuality ended and hallucination began. He contemplated the creation of his own brain in absorbed interest; then turned and looked at the rough road and dilapidated turnpike house, and then again out to sea. Only a black-hulled, ocean-going tramp, her deckhouses piled up amidships close against her reeking funnel, laboured slowly down channel in the teeth of the gusty breeze. This was all; and then the young man understood, not without amazement, that the gallant show had been a thing of the imagination only,—at most a thing remembered, but how and whence remembered he could not tell. For how, upon any reasonable hypothesis, could the memory of a man like himself of but just over thirty, put back the clock by close upon a century, and disport itself with incidents belonging by rights to, at least, two generations ago? It was all most exceedingly strange. It amounted to being disquieting. Really he did not half like it. Yet the imagined spectacle had been very inspiring all the same. It had made his blood tingle, and had effectually (or disastrously) exorcised that spirit of indolence and *laissez aller* which he had solicited to take up its abode with him. He sent his horse forward at a sharp trot, while once again he proceeded to revise the situation.

For the idea presented itself that perhaps he had been over self-confident, arrogating to himself a far greater freedom of will than he, in point of fact, possessed. It was all very fine to foreswear adventure, but what if adventure refused to be foresworn? He might easily propose to decline upon modernity, mediocrity, and the Commonplace; but what if these, as seemed just now highly probable, asserted in unmistakable language their determination to have none of him? He reflected that temperament may constitute your genius or your fate, your opportunity or your ruin, as you have the wit to deal with it; but that temperament is indestructible, and that escape from it,—however inconvenient and contrary to your desire that temperament may be,—is obviously and inherently impossible.

As he meditated thus, the road he followed dipped slightly, leaving the bare upland and passing along the under side of a thick belt of wood, which cut off the seaward view. On the left, between the interspaces of the hedgerow trees, the inland country now lay disclosed for many miles. Clouds had gathered so rapidly in the last ten minutes that the sun was obscured, and all the wide expanse was drowned in heavy violet and indigo shadow. Only a ridge of hill, some three-quarters of a mile distant, was caught by long shafts of wild, rainbow light, so that it floated as a narrow, fish-shaped island upon the ocean of stormy colour. And upon that island, uplifted, transmuted, etherealised, rendered at once unreal yet insistent, vividly defined by the

unnatural and searching light, Laurence beheld Stoke Rivers—the long, low house, and its double range of windows, its avenues, and carriage-ways, the block of stable buildings; every detail of the Italian garden, its cypress spires as of full-toned amethyst, its white balustrades and statues iridescent as though made of long-buried Roman glass, its great lawns green as malachite, the dome of its lime-grove touched by a dim glow as of uncut rubies. In this strange and unearthly radiance, Stoke Rivers seemed to call upon Laurence, to challenge his admiration, to assert its existence and its claim upon his heart, with a singular power. It was part of him, and he of it. It laid hands on his past and his future alike. It refused to be taken lightly. As a woman wears her jewels to startle and enthrall a desired lover, so this dwelling-place of his people arrayed itself in marvellous wise to conquer his wavering allegiance and command his thought. It would force him not to disregard its secrets. It wooed him to intimacy, to discovery. It cried to him out, as it seemed, of some unplumbed depth of experience in himself.

That night Mr. Rivers engaged his nephew until past midnight. His manner was gracious, his mind, apparently, unusually at peace. His conversation was remarkably brilliant, both in range of subject and readiness of expression. First dealing with the earliest known examples of art, and displaying critical acquaintance with Chaldean cylinders and stelæ, he passed on to the persistent influence of Eastern ideas upon Western religious thought. He discoursed of Hindu sacred literature and the crowded pantheon of Hindu gods, noting how certain practices connected with their worship and certain symbols pertaining to it have passed into the common use of the Catholic Church. He discoursed of the Gnostic sects, and their influence upon African and Syrian Christianity. Then, invading the Spanish peninsular in the train of the Moors, he delivered himself of a spirited disquisition upon Averrhoes, the lawyer philosopher of Cordova, his doctrine of the Universal Reason and denial of the immortality of the individual soul.

Laurence went forth onto the bright, hot corridor, and paused at the stairhead. He was honestly tired both in mind and body. He needed, and would take, an honest night's rest. But one thing was sure. Whether he had decided or merely yielded, whether he represented the positive or negative element, he knew not; but this he did know, that the Commonplace, and all the ease of it, might wait. He was not ready for that just yet.

### XIII

Of the first twelve keys, some slipped round without effect, some stuck and were withdrawn with difficulty. But the wards of the thirteenth bit into the lock, and the bolt gave with a click. Laying hold of the cylindrical front of the *escritoire*, Laurence pushed it up and back. Within, a row of arcaded pigeon-holes was disclosed; and on either side these, a range of little drawers, the pale, bright wood of which retained its pristine polish, while the colours of the painted medallions adorning them were very fresh though frail. The cupids, the little figures of lover and mistress, courtier and prince, were instinct with vivacity and grace—the heedless vivacity, the artificial grace of those over-ripe, luxurious periods which carry in their womb the seeds of revolution and social catastrophe. Laurence was moved, observing it all. Evidently the bolt had not been shot, the rounded front run back, and this mimic world of fanciful elegance displayed for many years. And then this pretty toy of a thing seemed so slight and incongruous a receptacle for the storage of momentous secrets. Yet that the secrets it held were momentous, dealing with problems of life and death, subtle transformations of flesh and spirit, the young man—notwithstanding the soothing influences of a healthy night's rest, and the pre-eminently unexciting ones of a grey, wet, March afternoon—felt no doubt. For he had given in, as he believed, finally, to the adventure; and with that giving in, his faith in the magnitude of it suffered, by natural rebound, serious increase.

So reverently, and as one who approaches a long disused shrine containing promise of strange and precious relics, he opened the shallow drawers and examined their contents. The first three were filled with packets of letters, written on thin, discoloured paper, and tied, some with pink, some with yellow, sarsenet ribbon. Each packet was neatly dated, the dates ranging, as Laurence gathered in a first hasty survey, from the year 1802 to the year 1805. The remaining drawers contained a collection of objects, miscellaneous in character but united in the thought (as he divined) of whoso placed them there, side by side, by some exquisitely tender sentiment.—A man's paste shoe-buckles, square and bowed, the silver settings of them tarnished to blackness, reposed beside a woman's striped, waist ribbon, cinnamon and white, embroidered in buds and scattered full-blown roses. Here were seals cut from envelopes, the cracked and blistered wax of them impressed with the Rivers's arms and crest; and a store of semi-transparent, delicately tinted shells, spoils of some far-distant, southern coast. There were trinkets, too, rings and bracelets of intricate Indian workmanship; and a cluster of coral charms, of Neapolitan origin, with the tiny golden hand, first and fourth fingers stiffly extended, which keeps off the Evil Eye. Next, little posies, such as a lover might pluck and his mistress might wear for an evening, pinned, to please him, in the bosom of her dress. These last were pressed and flattened, the several hues of the once radiant blossoms faded to an ashen uniformity of tint. They were sadly

brittle, too; and though Laurence raised them with careful fingers, crumbled to nothingness under his touch. Then he lighted on a man's watch, a great, gold warming-pan of a thing, with a guard of black lustre ribbon and a bunch of heavy seals attached. The back of the case bore the Rivers's crest—a bird of doubtful lineage, its wings extended for flight, its talons holding something, which to Laurence always appeared to bear humorous relation to a fool's cap. The case was also engraved with the initials L. R. in flowing and ornate lettering.

And over these initials Laurence paused. They piqued his curiosity. They also, somewhat to his own amusement, provoked in him a feeling suspiciously akin to jealousy. They were his own; yet he could not but imagine that they were also those of a person closely connected with the sweet and mysterious companion, who had walked the lawns and garden alleys with him during the small hours, fled and vanished at cock-crow, two nights back. A very definite purpose of learning more about this same person—of whom, he divined, this pathetic store of objects to be gifts or memorials—possessed Laurence. Had he wronged the gentle lady in life, so causing her after sorrow? Or had some tragic happening parted him from her, without fault of his? And what manner of man had he been, while a dweller here, in ordinary fashion, upon earth? It became of great moment to Laurence to answer these questions. Perhaps those packets of discoloured letters would tell. Meanwhile, there remained another shallow, painted drawer to be searched.

It contained, wrapped face to face, in a lace and lawn handkerchief, two very exquisite miniatures by Cosway. And then, though he courted surprises, agreeing with himself to expect nothing save the unexpected, and to accept all possible extravagance of improbability that might arise with as little dislocation of mind as one accepts the extravagancies of a dream, Laurence stood for a moment speechless, absolutely confounded.

For one miniature represented his fairy-lady, her lovely eyes and lips smiling with discreet gladness, her expression an enchanting union of sprightliness and of content. An azure ribbon was threaded through the soft masses of her elaborately-dressed hair, little curls of which strayed down on to her forehead. The string of pearls was clasped around her throat. She wore her transparent, white, frilled cape and rose-red, silken gown. Her graceful head and slender figure—to the waist—were seen against a background of faint dove-coloured cloud. The painter had painted fondly as a friend, it would seem, as well as a master of his craft.—And the other miniature, by the same hand, showing the same delightful sympathy of artist with his subject, touched by the same poetic insight and grace, was a portrait of whom? Well, of himself—himself, Laurence Rivers, not as he was to-day, but as he had been, ten years ago, at one-and-twenty. With astonishment, bordering very closely on alarm, he observed that colouring, features, the square cutting of the nostrils, a certain softness in the lines of the mouth, the shape of the head, the straight set of the shoulders, all

these were perfectly exact. While the countenance was instinct with that inimitable charm of unsullied youth, that fearlessness and happy self-confidence, the attractive power of which he had only fully realised as they had begun to fade out of his aspect in the course of his passage from early to maturer manhood, while the boundlessly generous aspirations of inexperience were in course of being discredited by increasing knowledge of the standards and habits of this not altogether noble or virtuous world.

Laurence took the miniature in his hand, and considered it closely, with a twinge of self-abasement. Endowed with so ingratiating a personality, so admirable a physical equipment, he ought surely to have made a definite name and place for himself in contemporary history! And what of moment had he to show, after all, for his thirty-one years of living? Practically nothing, he feared. And the young man of the miniature made better play with his handsome person, and the qualities and talents which might be expected to accompany it? He had been a sailor apparently, for he wore the dark-blue, naval uniform of the early years of the century, his brown hair being tied back into a queue. But for these details the resemblance to himself was absolute. And then, suddenly, with a sense of faintness as though his identity were slipping away from him, and his hold on actuality loosening as he imagined it might loosen in the moments immediately preceding death, Laurence remembered that he had worn a precisely similar costume—that of a naval lieutenant of the time of Nelson—at a fancy dress ball given in his honour, at the country house of certain of his mother's relations, on the eve of his twenty-first birthday. He had been mightily chaffed about his good looks and air of assured conquest upon the occasion in question; and had laughingly replied that he, too, intended to fight his battle of Trafalgar and win it, only that he should take jolly good care not to fall in the hour of success, but to survive and thoroughly enjoy the fruits of victory.

The miniatures were oval, each set in a plain gold band. Laurence turned them over in search of a possible inscription. Upon the reverse of the one were engraved the words—"Agnes, a gift to her dear cousin," and the date, "August 1803." Upon the other—"Laurence, a gift to his dear love," and the same date.

Rain had followed on the stormy splendours of the preceding evening; and as the young man raised his eyes absently and stared out of the great bay-window, he became sensible that the outlook was comfortless enough. The gardens and the distant view were blurred and blotted by driving mist; while, in the room itself, there reigned a singularly bleak and cheerless light. A damp, earthy odour, moreover, pervaded the atmosphere, as though the moisture prevailing out of doors had gained access to the house. Carefully, rather sadly, Laurence laid the two miniatures side by side upon the filmy handkerchief. The radiant, pictured faces, the two graceful, young heads turned slightly towards each other as in mutual tenderness and sympathy, offered, he thought, pathetic contrast to the melancholy of this tearful morning. That this young man had in no way wronged the fair and gentle woman, he now felt assured. But that

assurance, so perverse is human nature, did not serve to elate him. Far from it. As he looked first at the charming pair, and then at the driving mist, a sense of great loneliness, almost of desolation, came over him; while the word spectre—which, when employed yesterday by his lively hostess Mrs. Bellingham, had seemed of such meagre and even vulgar significance—now occurred to him with a new and immediate meaning. Spectral—that this room was in the present dreary light. While, if the idea called for further and concrete presentiment, he could—looking on the fearless and hopeful countenance of that other Laurence Rivers—offer it in his own person. Involuntarily he shivered, since, for the moment, his tenure of name, person and individuality, seemed so questionable, a matter of sufferance merely—amounting to no more, in fact, than a remote reversionary interest in another man's goods.

At random he picked up a couple of packets of letters off the top of the escritoire, where he had laid them, and moved across to the window. It was not wholesome to look at those happy faces—one his own—any longer. The letters tied with a pink ribbon were in a woman's hand, sloped and pointed, but with a peculiar elegance of lettering and evenness of line. Then for an instant he debated, questioning whether he could without breach of honour, and of the respect in which all decent-minded persons hold the dead, open and read these letters. The position was extraordinary to the point of abrogating accustomed rules of conduct; yet he felt a certain delicacy in reading a woman's letters and surprising the secrets of her heart. But as he turned them over, glancing at the first page of each, he perceived that in every case they were addressed to himself; for at the top corner of each was written—"To Laurence Rivers, Esq.," and below either "Dear cousin" or "Dear love." Then the irony of the thing taking him, he smiled to himself and said:

"Oh, well, come along, surely I have a right to the smooth as well as the rough. If I am such a very second-hand affair any way, with not so much as a name or face of my own to be proud of, I'll at least have the advantages of my disabilities. I will know how my other, first-hand, self was made love to and made love."

Yet no sooner had he begun to read, than he became aware that he knew that already. For as he perused the thin, deeply-creased pages, he felt, with a certainty independent of and passing all proof, that he had read these sweet effusions, these innocent chronicles of home life, of meetings and partings, pretty pleasures and junketings, not once but many times already. He remembered them. He could almost tell what words would meet his eye as he straightened and turned the fluttering sheets of paper.

"—I am much concerned," wrote Agnes Rivers, "that so many months must elapse before I can again receive news of you. I preach Patience to myself; but that virtue, though a good servant, is but a sorrowful master. I am pursued by fears on your account, which often move me to tears when I am alone, or have retired to my chamber at night. You will reprove my feminine weakness and bid me take courage.

Yet I defy you to maintain such fears are wholly misplaced, in face of the wild scenes of tempest and of battle which you may be called upon to witness."

Again—"It grieves me that I cannot write to you of my affection with the freedom dictated by my heart. But my means of communicating with you amid the convulsions of the present terrible war are so uncertain, that I constantly tremble lest my letters should fall into other hands than yours. My good Mrs. Lambert, who, as you will remember, is ever solicitous for the maintenance of propriety, impresses this danger upon me, and urges reticence and circumspection. I therefore entreat you, dear Laurence, not to measure the depth of my regard by my present expression of it. Recall, rather, all the happy and unclouded hours we have enjoyed together, and let them speak for me."

And again—"Your brother Dudley, though, I grieve to say, not less harsh and imperious towards others, continues to treat me with all brotherly consideration and courtesy. He is very thoughtful of the improvement of my mind, and we still follow our studies in the Italian and Spanish languages. His great knowledge and intelligence are of incalculable advantage to me, and I trust that I prove a docile, if not a very brilliant, pupil. I own my thoughts at times wander, though I strive, in gratitude to my kind preceptor, to keep them fixed upon my tasks. Mrs. Lambert is, unfortunately, as much alarmed by Dudley's opinions and conversation as ever. I could myself wish that he would express himself with less violence on the subject of politics and of religion. But his early travels in the unfortunate country of France, and his intimate association with Mr. Robespierre and other leaders of her sanguinary revolution, have, I much fear, permanently warped his mind and prejudiced his judgment. Yesterday, at dinner, he entered into a discussion with our new rector, Mr. Burkinshaw—a scholarly and estimable person—upon the Rights of Man, and the nature and attributes of the Deity, asserting subversive and atheistical views with so much heat and intemperance of language, that Mrs. Lambert fled from table in tears, while Mr. Burkinshaw was, I could not but see, seriously offended and hurt."

Once more—"The weather recently has been continuously wet and stormy. Dudley reports great destruction of timber in the park. I have been unable to leave the house, and have spent many hours in the east parlour, which your brother kindly bids me regard as my exclusive property. I have read much, I trust with profit. Nor have I neglected my music, though the melancholy character of the season and ever-present fears for your safety have rendered me but a joyless performer. For the songs you most admire, I cannot find voice. Indeed, I struggle with my weakness, and make every effort to present a serene exterior. But Memory is never, perhaps, a more sorry companion than when she speaks of happy scenes."

And finally—"My own dear love, your packet from Madalena has at last reached us. What can I say to you save that my heart dances with rapture? I cannot sit still, but



must needs run from place to place for very gladness. Mrs. Lambert reproves my lack of occupation. But she is mistaken. I am fully occupied in reading and re-reading your letter, and in thanking our Merciful Creator for this unhopèd-for assurance of your safety. I have retired to the stone bench beneath the lime-trees. They are in blossom now, and their agreeable fragrance fills the air. Here I write to you, while the sun shines, and summer winds play lightly with the leaves. Do you remember our sitting here the evening you stole the new black ribbon from my embroidered bag with which to tie your hair? Dear love, now I am convinced that you will be permitted to return to me, and that we shall add yet other happy hours to those already treasured in our hearts. All will be well. Nay—what am I writing?—all is well already. But for my past anxiety and all my cruel fears, I could not have known the rapture of the present. My heart overflows. I would not have one unhappy creature breathe to-day. I have emptied my purse to a beggar; and have expended unpermitted dainties upon my cage-birds, and Dudley's horses and dogs. The servants smile upon me, rejoicing in my joy. Ah! my love, I am half ashamed to wear so gay a face. Dudley has withdrawn to the library. He is preoccupied and silent. Mrs. Lambert, for all her affection, regards me, I fear, with disapproval. But how can I feign indifference? You are safe. You will return to me. In six months I shall attain my majority, and then your brother Dudley can no longer, as my guardian, legally prohibit our marriage. Of that dear union, the consummation of all our prayers and hopes, I can scarcely dare trust myself to—"

And here Laurence found himself forced to cease reading. The page was blotted, the writing obliterated, by rusty stains of the nature of which he could be in no doubt. The further record of Agnes Rivers's pure passion was smothered in blood.

He folded the letters together, tied them up, put them back in the drawer, closed and locked the escritoire. Well, it must have been worth while to have been loved like that! Did women ever love so still, he wondered? He opened the tall French window, and once again went out, hatless, into the driving wet.

## XIV

"Mr. Rivers regrets that he is unable to receive you to-night, sir."

Laurence looked round with something approaching a start at Renshaw, the butler, whose respectful, colourless voice broke in thus upon his meditations. The dining-room struck him as hotter and more oppressive than ever—by contrast probably with the buffeting wind and driving mist in which he had paced the lime-tree walk for a good hour before the dressing-bell rang. To-night the glass bowl, supported by the wanton, dancing, Etruscan figures, was filled with tuberose and carmine-stained Japanese lilies; and the odour given off by these acted on the young man's brain as opium or hashish might have acted—at least so it appeared to him. The longer he meditated, the less could he distinguish between real and unreal, fact and phantasy. The best accredited articles of his moral and scientific creed had passed into the region of the open question. Speculation ran riot, all the accustomed landmarks of his thought being for the time submerged; while the wildest and most extravagant ideas presented themselves as within the range of practical action. That last read letter of Agnes Rivers, and his own resemblance to her lover, had inflamed his imagination and his heart. Even in their one night's intercourse, he had seen intelligence, purpose, gaiety, return to her. Now the daring conception that such a process might be continued, until his sweet and mysterious companion recovered all the senses and attributes of living womanhood, formed itself in his mind. Was it not conceivable that this appearance might be materialised, so that the fair and gracious spirit should once again inhabit a human body, and know all those dear joys of love and motherhood which had been—by some evil fortune, some catastrophe, as he supposed—denied to her? An immense ambition to be the instrument of this restoration, this recovery, grew within him. He would work a miracle, he would be as God, clothing the soul with flesh, raising the dead. And this by no exercise of charlatanism, by no dabbling in old-world superstitions, or dealings in folly of White Magic or of Black; but simply by force of will, by the action of mind on mind, by the incalculable power of a great love. It was impious, perhaps. Morally it was doubtful—circumstanced as he, Laurence, was. But it was the most magnificent experiment ever offered either to man of science, or to poet. Here was the opportunity he had desired, had waited for. Here was his chance in life!

Then the butler's voice cut in, bringing him down to the everyday level. No wonder he looked round a little dazed.

"Mr. Rivers regrets that he will be unable to receive you to-night, sir," it said.

And Laurence asked in answer—

"Is my uncle ill? Is he worse?"

"Mr. Lowndes has brought down word that he is tired, sir. Mr. Armstrong, the agent, arrived from Scotland this afternoon while you were out. Mr. Rivers has had a long interview with him—too long an interview in Mr. Lowndes's opinion."

"I am sorry," Laurence said absently. He fell to caressing his wonderful idea again, but the butler waited.

"Mr. Armstrong requested me to add, sir, that if convenient to you, as you will not be engaged with Mr. Rivers, he would be obliged if you would allow him to speak to you in the course of the evening."

"Oh, by all means," the young man said, rising. Then he added—"Tell Mr. Armstrong I will see him at once. Later I may be occupied. Where? In the small library—yes."

Laurence betook himself to the library, prepared to be bored with a good grace. But he might have spared himself such preparation, for looking on the new-comer, he liked him. The man, in age about sixty, was of barely middle height, broad-shouldered and lean about the flanks. He carried his head forward, stooping slightly, in observant, meditative fashion. He was slow of movement, calm, one capable of having his joke and keeping it to himself. His face was shaped like a kite, remarkable in the breadth of the lower part of the forehead and the high cheek-bones, narrowing down to a long, flat chin. The upper lip was long too, a somewhat pragmatical and self-righteous upper lip. While the eyes, set far apart under the wide brow, showed a clear, kindly blue between the narrow lids that ended in a fan-like system of wrinkles at the outward corners. The nose was thin and straight at the bridge, with wide-winged, open nostrils. The hair, formerly sandy, was now grey, smooth on the low dome of the head, and thickly waved above and behind the flat-set, long-lobed ears. In all a shrewd, humorous, sober countenance, ruddy, moreover, as a well-ripened, autumn apple.

At first the agent's talk was professional, dealing in matters of leases and rights-of-way; of draining operations and the breeding and rearing of cattle; of the iniquitous heaviness of road rates, the culture of hops, and the cutting of copses. But gradually it began to take on a more personal and racial character, since the Scotchman is yet to be born who can go very long in conversation without blowing—be it never so discreetly—the trumpet of his own unrivalled nation. So he fell to dilating upon the superiority of the Scotch to the English system of national education; upon the indolence and general incapacity of the south-country labourer; upon the glaring futilities and imbecilities of district and parish councils; and upon the congenital incapacity of the Anglican clergy—every man-Jack of them—to deliver a sermon which would satisfy the intelligence and theological acumen of the most ordinary congregation north of Tweed.

Laurence listened, amused by the exhibition of the speaker's both conscious and unconscious prejudices. The man was alive; he was self-secure and dependable. Laurence saw he would be a pleasant fellow to work with. And the thought of that work began to occupy his mind, opium dreams giving place before practical interests and activities. Laurence talked in his turn, showing a keenness in business and a knowledge of it, which Armstrong, with pursed-up lips and slow noddings of the head, evidently relished.

"Aweel," he remarked at last, after the younger man had given a particularly lucid description of certain labour-saving farm-implements employed in the wheat-growing states of Western America,— "I trust it is no disrespect to an old master, whom it pleases the Almighty to withdraw to some other sphere of usefulness—or the contrary, for it would be overbold to prophesy largely on that subject of utility in the case of your uncle, Mr. Rivers—it is no disrespect, I say, I trust, for a man who has served such an one for over thirty years to the best of his ability, to feel himself not indisposed to welcome the new master. I am constrained to tell you, Mr. Laurence Rivers, that I looked to find in you some flighty, flimsy, modern run-about of a creature. I acknowledge my error with thanksgiving. The impression you make on my mind is far from unfavourable."

"That's right," Laurence said genially. "I am new to all these landed property concerns as yet; but I expect I shall be able to get round them pretty smartly when the time comes."

"I think you will, I think you will." The agent's blue eyes twinkled with a certain quiet humour, upon the young man, from between their narrow lids. "Your uncle, I must admit, is but a feeble body in the practical domain. His great understanding has, so to speak, not infrequently got between his legs and thrown him down. It is pitiful to see any person so clever that he cannot condescend to take advantage of the handsome position the Almighty has allowed him. I own there have been times when I have felt rebellious against the Lord's too great generosity in the goods of this world—perishable, I know, yet deserving of consideration—to one constitutionally incapable of drawing full profit out of them. Therefore I perceive with thankfulness, Mr. Rivers, you are of a different make."

Laurence leaned back in his chair, and lighted another cigarette. It was early yet—and he liked the man. He would encourage him to talk on for a while longer.

"Oh yes," he said, "you needn't be worried under that head, Armstrong. I've the reputation of by no means quarrelling with my bread and butter, or despising the goodly fruits of this admittedly naughty world, in whatever form I find them."

"Temperance is a canny virtue; and I would recommend moderation in all things, after the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Yet I am glad to find, Mr. Rivers, you have your feet

upon the floor. It will be well for your estates, at the preservation and improvement of which I and my kin have laboured—not unfaithfully—for three generations."

"So long as that?" the young man ejaculated. The statement indirectly suggested a former strain of thought.

"Yes, for three generations—and not without trials. For I would have you understand that a certain impracticability runs in your family, Mr. Rivers—a perversity, not sinful altogether, but very wearing to those that have your temporal interests at heart."

Gently Laurence blew a little cloud out of his nostrils, and watched it float upward across the dark, warm-hued landscape by Nicholas Poussin hanging over the chimney-piece. Against the windows the rain beat, while the heavy folds of the crimson, damask curtains, covering them, swayed just perceptibly in the draught.

"I can believe it," he said. "My people have been afflicted with ideas; and ideas play the very mischief with business, don't they, Armstrong?"

"In their degree, and subject to a thrifty discretion in their application, I would not wholly condemn them," the agent replied. His shrewd glance dwelt on the younger man with undisguised pleasure. He was so handsome, well bred, well made, and apparently so able a fellow.—"But ideas are kittle cattle, Mr. Rivers," he continued, "needing strenuous supervision if you would not have them break out of pasture and run mad, sairly to the dislocation of all legitimate traffic. And it has been the affliction of more than one member of your family to let his ideas run abroad to a length of pernicious extravagance. For instance, my grandfather, a person of capacity and circumspection beyond the average, was factor to your great uncle, Mr. Dudley Rivers, and—"

Laurence kept his eyes fixed on the last blue of the little smoke-cloud curling about the intricate foliations of the upper corner of the picture frame; yet his voice had a certain quickness and vibration in it as he exclaimed—

"Ah! Dudley Rivers—yes. Well, how about him, Armstrong?"

"Not much good, not much good. Like the foolish body recorded by the Psalmist, he had 'said in his heart, There is no God.' And having made that very impious and lying observation, and so disposed of the Deity, he proceeded to supersede the latter in his own person, and attempt the reorganisation of society according to his own hare-brained fancies. Regarding his deliverance from dangerous delusions my grandfather could do but little, being himself a godly man, and holding firmly by the doctrine of Election. If the poor misguided creature would go to the devil, Mr. Rivers, it was—so my grandfather held—because to the devil he was righteously foredoomed and predestined to go. And so my grandfather, relieved of all responsibility in that respect, felt free to apply the whole of his abilities to saving the poor, erring person's treasure

on earth, since it was manifestly not the intention of Providence that he should inherit any treasure in heaven. He had long taken entire charge of those estates in the county of Fife, which belonged to Mr. Dudley's young cousin and ward, Miss Agnes Rivers—"

"Ah!" Laurence ejaculated softly.

"And many a time did my grandfather undertake the tedious journey down here, from the north, to lend a seasonable hand in restraining Mr. Dudley from committing some ruinous foolishness in respect of Miss Agnes, or of his own southern property. For Mr. Dudley was just completely saturated with pernicious opinions derived from the writings of Rousseau, and Tom Paine, and other such seditious persons; and Satan entering into him at intervals, and blinding his small surviving modicum of reason, he proposed to reduce them to practice—poor, demented body."

"Yes," Laurence said, "he had graduated in a rather impossible school, no doubt. But—but—Armstrong, what about his private life—his morals?"

"Blameless—blameless—more's the pity, since his virtues could but come under the head of works of supererogation—so my grandfather held—profitless alike in this world and in the next. Indeed, though a strict man himself, I am constrained to believe he would have experienced relief in seeing Mr. Dudley enjoy the pleasures of sin—they are real, very real while they last, unfortunately—for a season."

Laurence flung away the stump of his cigarette, and turned sideways in his chair.

"Now, as we're on the subject," he said, "and as you seem to know all about these people of mine, what sort of fellow was Dudley's younger brother, my namesake, Laurence Rivers?"

"Weel, I have reason to believe he was a very promising sprig—a likely young gentleman, high-spirited, clean-living, and not without a show of capacity for affairs. My grandparents, both of them, entertained a warm affection for him."—The man paused in his slow sing-song talk, smiling.—"I should surmise him to have been much such a person as yourself, Mr. Rivers, with a natural gift of winning the hearts of those brought into contact with him. But he fell at Trafalgar, shot through the lungs, as no doubt you have heard—cut off before he had opportunity to acquaint the world with the worth of the talents that might reside in him. It was a grievous misfortune, for his death took place but three months before the day appointed for his and his cousin's marriage. And often, as a soft-hearted bit of a laddie, I have cried to hear my grandmother tell of the coming of the awful news and the grief of the poor young lady. She was a gracious, winsome thing, as bright as a sunbeam on a running brook; very pious, too, and charitable, so that no mortal soul could but wish her well that looked on her. But she was shivered by the stroke of her sorrow, as you might shiver

some fragile trifle of an ornament with a careless blow. She would not eat or speak for many days, and her sleep departed from her. And, indeed, during the few months of life that remained to her she rarely uttered a word. Her poor bits of wits seemed to drain out of her with her tears, for all that she was highly educated, and an accomplished musician and sweet singer."

Laurence had risen to his feet. He stood with his back to the fire, his hands behind him, and his head bent.

"Poor child!" he said softly. "Well, she knew how to love, anyway."

"No woman better; but I am thinking, Mr. Rivers, she introduced into her affections a touch of that same extravagance which pertains to so many members of your family. For my grandmother used to tell me that, though altogether gentle and docile, she studied nothing but to turn over her dead love's letters, and play with the various gifts he had bestowed upon her, as a little lass plays with its puppets and toys. It was the pitifulest spectacle under the dome of the sky, that of her affliction; and Mr. Dudley, notwithstanding his reprehensible opinions and infamous heresies, watched over her like a father. His patience knew no bounds, poor body. He would have laid himself down as the ground for her to walk on, could that have accelerated her recovery. He spared no expense of doctors, both foreign and English, to prescribe for her; and carried her away to Bath, by their advice, to drink the waters there. But all the medicinal waters that ever welled up through the length and breadth of God Almighty's curious earth are powerless to ease the ache of a broken heart. She wanted but one thing, and that no mortal soul could give her. And so, poor, white lily of a thing, she just sickened, and faded, and died."

Laurence stood very still, looking down at the hearthrug between his feet, while the rain beat against the windows. The agent watched him for a little space, and then rose, a trifle stiffly and carefully, from his chair.

"I am keeping you over long with my family histories, Mr. Rivers," he said. "But it comes to me that we are about to see great changes in this place very speedily; and our conversation to-night has been a valediction to the old dynasty and a recognition of the new. There has been no lady at Stoke Rivers since Miss Agnes died, and you, so I learn, are a married man."

Laurence left his contemplation of the hearthrug, and drew himself up rather sharply.

"Yes," he said, "my wife is much interested in the prospect of this English property."

He turned his back, and stared into the fire.

"Look here, Armstrong," he said, "where was she—Agnes Rivers, I mean—where was she buried?"

A singularly acute expression came over the agent's countenance. He looked hard at the young man, but the latter did not move or turn his head. The wind, increasing in force broke, as in great waves, against the house front and the curtains swayed sullenly in the draught. Armstrong cleared his throat.

"I am thinking it's a calamitous night for too many poor folks at sea," he remarked; and then added:—"Buried? Weel, presumably at Bath, where she died, Mr. Rivers. A grand funeral took place there, to my grandfather's knowledge, for he was called upon to journey the whole long way from Cupar to attend it, and the snow lay some foot deep in the North. A grand funeral, truly, in appearance, with black horses, and plumes, and lumbering black coaches, and all signs of respect and customary outward manifestations of woe."

Still Laurence did not move; but the gusty wind was so loud that it obliged him to raise his voice in asking—

"Well, well, if there was all this display about the funeral, why *presumably* then?"

"Because I am constrained to admit that a certain mystery surrounded that transaction. My grandparents would never speak directly of it, being prudent persons, and knowing, conceivably, more than it was becoming for them to tell. But there were tongues that said, Mr. Rivers, that no sweet lassie's corpse lay in that coffin; but only books, and cast clothes, and bricks, and rubbish, to make up the weight."

Laurence turned round suddenly. His face was keen, his eyes alight.

"But why?" he asked.

"Partly, I surmise, on account of Mr. Dudley's atheistical views, which caused him to hate and scorn all decent Christian rites and ceremonies. And partly because of the feelings he entertained towards his cousin—for it was well known she was the only human creature that had ever moved him to love—it was apprehended he refused to part with her body even in death."

For a few moments the two men looked hard at each other.

"And what then?" Laurence demanded. Armstrong raised his hands, almost as in repudiation of his own thought.

"The Lord only knows," he said. "As the poet says, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.' But I, being a practical man, do not concern myself with such, Mr. Rivers. I would not learn more of hidden matters than is strictly necessary to salvation. If it is the intention of the Deity that further revelation of laws, either natural or spiritual, should be granted us, such revelation



will, without doubt, come at the time appointed. And so I, personally, would not force the hand of Providence or be over forward in pushing myself into its secret counsels."

He paused, regarding the younger man with much friendliness and some anxiety. But Laurence did not speak. He merely smiled, holding out his hand.

"Aweel, good night to you then, Mr. Rivers," the agent said, taking the outstretched hand and holding it awhile.—"I must repeat, I am glad to carry away so favourable an impression of our first meeting. But, as a word at parting having in mind the tendencies of your family constitution, I would earnestly commend to you those canny virtues, moderation and temperance, in all your undertakings.—I will be resident here for the coming week, or longer should a more protracted stay be incumbent on me, in the interests of your affairs or your uncle's. My sons are good, steady lads, and will mind our northern business for me—a business not unprosperous or decreasing. And so you can notify me at any time should you feel an inclination to acquaint yourself further with the workings of this estate, or other items of poor Mr. Rivers's by no means inconsiderable property."

## XV

For some minutes Laurence remained in the same position before the library fireplace, while the rush and wail of the storm without offered marked contrast to the silence and close warmth reigning within. He knew all the facts of the case now, as far as they were attainable by tradition. They proved to be very simple; but, as he reflected, the simplicity of the symbol by no means invalidates the profound character of the mystery of which it may be the outward and visible sign. Nay, the very simplicity, the tender, human pathos, of this story of love and sorrow, only engaged his heart and provoked his enterprise the more. Counsels of self-saving moderation he waved aside with a smile. Of danger, material, moral, or spiritual, he was defiant. With the Veil of Isis there, visibly confronting him and inviting—in gentlest, most confiding fashion—his hand to lift it, would it not be unpardonably poor-spirited, callous, and unfaithful to draw back?

But Virginia? Laurence moved impatiently from his place. He wished to goodness Armstrong had not referred to Virginia, or rather to that circumscription of his personal liberty which Virginia presented—to his marriage, in short! He was very fond of her. Of course, he was very fond of her—not for a moment did he doubt that. But must it be a matter of primary duty and honour that he should relinquish the part of hero in this piece—this noble and enthralling piece, which made vibrant his whole being, and stirred the finest of him into activity—simply because Virginia's name did not happen to be in the bill? Marriage came perilously near a disaster if it clipped your wings as much as all that! And he would, indeed, be a bigoted moralist who should maintain that no circumstances can be so extraordinary, no opportunities of knowledge or spiritual advancement so rare, that they justify a neglect of conventional rules of conduct, or permit the relegation of ordinary obligations—for a time at least—to the second place!

Thus did the young man argue—ambition, chivalry, and those hereditary tendencies towards a rather violent reduction of theory to practice against which he had so lately been warned, all conspiring to one result. And so, at last, his head erect, and—though he knew it not—that air of assured conquest about him which had sat so charmingly upon his namesake—perhaps his rival—the Laurence Rivers of the Cosway miniature, he swung down the still, crimson-carpeted corridor, pulled the stiff tapestry curtain forward, passed behind it, and entered the room beyond. He laughed a little to himself, he was all of a white heat, he would be as the Gods, working miracles, righting wrong, conquering death.

Sharp disappointment awaited him. The yellow drawing-room was brilliantly lighted. The atmosphere of it was fresh, almost to the point of chill. The miniatures lay side by side upon the escritoire, where he had placed them some four or five hours earlier; but

his sweet fairy-lady was not there to receive him. The room was vacant of all human, all visible, presence save his own.

The hours which followed were among the most poignant that Laurence had ever experienced. He had made so certain that he needed but to open that door to regain the unreal world, yet world—as he believed—of profoundest reality, which enchanted, while it baffled and perplexed him. He found himself compelled to admit, moreover, not without a sense of humiliation, that his attitude was not exclusively pathological or scientific. A good deal of the natural man, and the natural man's affections and vanities, entered into it. He craved once again to see that slender, flitting figure, to feel the vibration of that otherwise impalpable hand, to read the trust and exquisite sympathy of those lovely eyes; he craved again to be aware of the fervour of his own eloquence, the rush and spring of his own thought. Moreover, he felt jealous, absurdly but increasingly jealous, of that other Laurence Rivers, of whom, for all his vitality and immediate consciousness of living energy and active will, he seemed to be but a second edition. The man had forestalled him in face and semblance, forestalled him too in the heart of the woman it would be—it was, he feared—only too easy for him to love.

And so he wandered aimlessly, restlessly about the bright, empty room, almost as his sweet rose-clad lady had wandered on the night he first met her, searching, searching for some lost good; while, as time lengthened and his nerves grew strained by impatient waiting and want of sleep, fears that by his own action he had procured this disappointment began to assail him. He was always over-confident, blundering from too great self-belief. For might it not be that in opening her little treasure-chest, in touching those objects so dear to her dead fingers and dead eyes, in reading her letters—nay, in striving to approach her and establish relations with her at all—he had outraged her delicacy, had, in a sense, assaulted her soul, had been guilty of spiritual insult, as in grosser, material existence a man might assault or insult a woman's person? Had he, unwittingly, transgressed some law obtaining in the world of spirits, in the state of being which lies outside and beyond the Gates of Death, and of which human beings, bound by the conditions of their earthly environment, have as yet no cognisance?—Why should not the mind and heart be sublimated to as exquisite a fineness of texture, in her case, as the body had been? This idea of possible outrage, of unwitting grossness towards her, was horrible to Laurence. It stabbed him with shame, and provoked in him a passionate desire for absolution. If she would only come—only come, that he might implore her pardon, gain forgiveness, or—still better—receive comfortable assurance that he had not sinned!

His restless wanderings brought him at length to the bay-window, and he looked out into the night. The storm had not abated. Dimly he could perceive, in the light streaming outward from the window, the rain-washed steps, the pale balustrades and statues of the garden; the near cypresses, too, bowed and straining in the gale which

shrieked across the open lawns and bellowed hoarsely in the woodland like some fierce beast let loose. And Laurence, viewing this tumult and listening to it, suffered further humiliation. He became but a small thing in his own estimation, weak, futile, incapable. For to what, after all, did his force of will and power of compelling events amount? He thought of Armstrong, the level-headed and circumspect Scotch agent; of his uncle, dignified, and even in mortal illness faithful to the clear purposes of his long life. He thought of Virginia, strong in virtue of her very limitations, glittering as a well-cut jewel, concrete, complete. All these persons occupied a definite place, served, in their degree, a definite end. Whereas, for himself, was he not the veriest sport of nature and of circumstance, endowed with just sufficient wit, sufficient talent, to court failure in any and every direction? His initiative, that had lately showed god-like, now shrivelled to microscopic proportions; while a further unwelcome question presented itself. For had the gracious spectre—he no longer quarrelled with that definition—lived, as he had fondly supposed, through his life, regained reason and glad, human sympathy through the influence of his will, or had the case, in very truth, been precisely the reverse? Had not she been the active, he the merely passive principle? Had he not reached a higher development, and gloried—for a little space—in conscious possession of genius, had he not lived, in short, through her—and this not by exercise of direct intention on her part, but merely in obedience to the might of her love for another man—a man long dead, but whose name he chanced to bear, and whose appearance he chanced to resemble?

And thereupon a hideous persuasion of his own nullity and emptiness took hold of Laurence. Individuality fled away, disintegrated, dissolved, and was not. The component parts of his physical being returned to their original elements—flesh to earth, gases to air, heat to fire, blood to water. While all the qualities of his mind, his tastes and affections, suffered like dispersal, being claimed and absorbed by the members of those many generations, whose earthly existence had contributed to the eventual production of his own. And the terror of this was augmented, in that, although every atom of his being was thus scattered and appropriated, every smallest fraction of that which had gone to compose his personality was dispersed, yet annihilation of thought did not follow. He was reduced to absolute nothingness; but knowledge of disintegration, knowledge of loss, knowledge—rebellious and despairing—of that same nothingness remained.

Appalled, with the instinct of flight upon him as from some menacing and immeasurable danger, Laurence turned and groped his way back—as a blind man gropes—into the centre of the brightly lighted room. The persuasion of his own nothingness seemed to extend itself to his surroundings. All partook of the nature of illusion, from which sense of sight and touch alike seemed powerless to redeem them. And this begot in the young man an immense desolation and a corresponding need of comfort and of quick human sympathy. Involuntarily, in his extremity, his thought

fixed itself, stayed itself, upon Agnes Rivers. Ah! if she would but show herself—she, his well-beloved fairy-lady—he was convinced peace and clear-seeing would follow in her train, that this terror of nothingness would depart, and that sanely, calmly, he should enter into possession of himself once more!

And then, presently, as he moved to and fro in restless search for her, it appeared to him that a rose-red gleam of silk, a just perceptible whiteness of muslin and lace, the faintest vision of a vision of her sweet and lovely face, moved beside him as he moved. It was as though an indefinable tenderness yearned towards him from out some impassable distance, striving to declare itself, to make itself seen and felt, yet without force to master some opposing influence and accomplish its object. And this awoke in Laurence not only an answering tenderness, but an answering struggle. He stood quite still, yet with every nerve, every faculty strained to attain and overcome. He felt braced by a sudden exhilaration of battle. Silently, fiercely, he fought with some awful, unseen enemy,—with dimly apprehended powers of time and place, of death, of things spiritual and things material, which intervened between him and the love which sought to reach him. Never had he desired anything as he desired this love. His individuality was actual enough now; and his whole body ached with the effort to penetrate that resistant medium, to be face to face with that love, and look on it, and so doing to read the riddle both of his future and his past.

But when the warfare was at its height, and the unseen enemy seemed to yield a little, while the slender form of his rose-clad lady grew more distinct to Laurence's eyes, unaccustomed noise and confusion arose within the dead-quiet house. Doors opened and slammed, as with the hurry of panic. Men's footsteps echoed imperatively down the corridors and upon the stairs.—Another moment and he would overcome all resistance, and his dear companion would stand before him, smiling, gracious, full of consolation and of help; but just then voices were raised in quick discussion without. Suddenly the door was thrown open. Upon the threshold was Renshaw the butler, bereft of his usual correctness of demeanour, his eyes starting, his skin mottled with purple stains. Behind him stood Watkins holding back the leather-lined curtain to the utmost of its length, thereby disclosing a triangular vista of dark-panelled passage and the proud heads and arrogant, impassive faces of the rulers of Imperial Rome.

Evidently both men dreaded to venture one step further into the room.

"Will you please to come at once, sir," Renshaw called hoarsely. "Excuse me, sir, you are wanted. Mr. Rivers is very ill. He has asked for you. Mr. Lowndes fears he is dying."

## XVI

The agitation pervading the house was sinister. Laurence felt as though witnessing the convulsions of some human body, seen only heretofore amid the restraints and graceful amenities of society; but now abandoned and indecently torn in its last agony. If indeed Mr. Rivers was dying, his soul was not merely quitting its fragile, fleshly tabernacle; but was also, very sensibly, quitting this larger tabernacle of house and household which it had informed through a long course of years, and moulded to express its tastes, flatter its idiosyncrasies, and forestall its every wish. It was fitting, therefore, though fearful, that this outer envelope of the owner's life should be shaken, and lose its habitual immutability and impervious calm; while his well-drilled servants, usually obedient as machines to the direction of his hand, ran distracted, scared and helpless as a flock of frightened sheep.

The men hurried aimlessly, spoke in whispers. Members of the establishment with whom Laurence was unacquainted invaded the corridor from the direction of the offices. At the foot of the staircase were grouped the stout, French *chef*, in spotless, linen cap and jacket, his attendant scullions, and a couple of men arrayed in long, green baize aprons and black, calico blouses, the full sleeves of which buttoned tight around the wrist. The coachman was there too, a stable helper, and the groom who had accompanied Laurence on his first visit to Bishop's Pudbury. All these persons were well on in middle life, some old, white-haired, and bent. All appeared deeply moved, an inarticulate confusion in their looks, as though finding themselves suddenly confronted by dire calamity. Laurence had seen men look thus in the breathless pause, between recurrent earthquake shocks, among the rocking buildings of a far-away, Spanish-American city. As he passed them, coming from that light, clear-coloured room, they stared at him, and slunk aside as though a fresh terror was added to those which already so unmanned them. In their present state of feeling the seemly decorum of respectful service was relaxed; and to Laurence, overwrought by his recent and strange experiences, it appeared that they shrunk from him as from one unclean and outcast.

He turned rather sternly upon Renshaw. "What is the meaning of all this commotion? If I was wanted, why on earth was I not called sooner?"

The butler's large, smooth, egg-shaped face turned from purple to something approaching grey.

"We had looked for you everywhere, sir, both myself and Mr. Watkins," he answered. "But until Mr. Lowndes suggested it, in consequence of some remark passed by Mr. Rivers, it had never occurred to us that you would be in the yellow drawing-room, sir."—Renshaw cleared his throat, recovering some of his accustomed dignity of bearing. "The electric light is switched on from the corridor outside, you will observe,

sir. It has always been understood that no one—neither the upper or the under servants, sir—are ever required to go into the yellow drawing-room after dusk."

And with these words, and their implication of commerce on his part with something unlawful and malign, sounding in his ears, Laurence passed into his uncle's bed-chamber.

As he did so, a blast of air, hot and dry as from the mouth of a furnace, met him. The fire upon the hearth was piled up into a mountain of blazing coal and wood. The light of it filled the room with a fitful, lurid brilliance such as is produced by a great conflagration. In it, the breasts of the couchant sphinxes glowed, seeming to rise and fall as though they breathed. The caryatides supporting the ebony canopy likewise appeared imbued with life. Their smooth arms and bowed shoulders strained under the weight resting upon them; while the wreaths of fruit and blossom, girding their naked loins, heaved from the painfully sustained effort of nerve and muscle. The snake-locks of the Medusa's head, carved in high relief upon the circular, central panel of the back of the bedstead, writhed, twisted, interlaced and again slid asunder, as in frustrated desire and ceaseless suffering.

And along the middle of the great bed, surrounded by these opulent forms, and, at first sight, far less alive than they, lay Mr. Rivers. His face was so blanched, so unsubstantial, that, but for the glittering eyes still greedy of knowledge, it would have hardly been distinguishable from the white pillows supporting him. His shoulders and chest were muffled in a costly, sable cape; from beneath the lower edge of which his hands, thin as reeds, protruded, lying inert upon the thickly-wadded, blue-and-gold, damask coverlet. On the oak table—moved from its place by the armchair to the bedside—were the few handsomely bound books, the crystal *memento mori* resting on its strip of crimson embroidery, and a silver bell, the handle of it shaped as a slender, winged Mercury, elegantly poised for flight.

Behind the table stood Lowndes, the long-armed, hard-featured valet. He apparently remained untouched by the spirit of anarchy let loose in the house. Laurence, drawing near, looked at him, silently asking instructions. The man fetched a chair and placed it close against the bedside.

"Be so good as to lean down, sir," he said. "Mr. Rivers wishes to converse with you; but he has had a seizure, which has slightly affected both his speech and hearing. He cannot raise his voice."

Laurence did as he was bidden. He leaned towards the old man, resting his right hand upon the haunches of the ebony sphinx, which felt singularly warm to his touch.

"The term of your probation and of mine alike draws to its close," Mr. Rivers said in a small, thin voice; and, for almost the first time in their intercourse, Laurence saw him smile.

"I hope this is only a passing attack, sir, and that you may rally," he answered.—He looked up at Lowndes. "Has everything been done that can be? Have you telegraphed for the doctors?"

"I have administered the prescribed restoratives. But Mr. Rivers ordered that no further measures should be attempted until after his interview with you, sir."

The sick man raised his hand feebly, yet with an imperious gesture.

"I do not propose to ask further advice of physicians," he said. "Their science is but a mockery at this juncture; at least, in the estimation of a person of my habit of mind. That by the employment of drugs and of stimulants they might prolong a semblance of animation in this physical husk of me, I do not deny. But what advantage can accrue from that, when my mental activity is becoming paralysed, and the action of my brain grows sluggish and intermittent? When all that differentiates a human being from the brute beasts has perished, let the animal part perish also. The sooner, the better; for, in itself, it is far from precious."

His voice had become very faint, and he waited, making a determined effort, as Laurence perceived, to rally his ebbing powers.

"Tell Lowndes to go," he whispered. "I wish to be alone with you."

Then as the man-servant noiselessly withdrew, the thin, but barely audible accents again stole out upon the fiercely heated air.

"The body, its necessities, its passions, its perpetually impeding grossness throughout life, is an insult to the mind. But the final act of this long course of insult, namely, the decay of this vile associate, is the culminating insolence, the most unpardonable insult of all. I have trained myself to ignore these thoughts, to disregard them as a proud man disregards some mutilation or personal disfigurement. But they crowd in upon me, refusing to be disregarded, to-night. Here lies the sting of the insult! For as the strength of this vile, animal part of me lessens, far from setting the intellect free, it infects this last with its own increasing degradation. The lower drags the higher down along with it. They grovel together. Contemptible doubts and fears assail me. Discredited traditions press themselves upon my remembrance. And the burden of it all is this, that I have laboured in vain. As the body dies, so dies the mind. All the garnered knowledge of years will be lost, will drop infertile, into the void—the insatiable void which yawns alike for high philosopher and for drivelling pothouse sot."



His voice sank, in uttering the last few words, into a whisper of concentrated bitterness. His eyes closed, and for some minutes the dying man lay motionless.

Laurence could not bring himself to speak. The words to which he had just listened so nearly reproduced and rendered articulate those sensations he had himself so lately endured. The vision of all-absorbing Nothingness again arose before him, as background to those opulent forms, classic and pagan, upon which his eyes immediately rested. An unholy and voluptuous life seemed to move in those forms still. A smile curved the heavy lips of the sphinxes. The rounded, glistening arms of the caryatides appeared outstretched less in support than in solicitation; while the snake-locks of Medusa writhed, pushing upon each other amorously. The flesh, triumphant in vigour and in carnal invitation, seemed, indeed, to flout the intellect; as though the animal functions of mankind and the symbols of these alone had power to survive from age to age, were alone arbiters and architects of human fate. And yet, yet, somewhere—could he but have reached it—Laurence knew there was a way of escape. That he had come very near reaching it in the final moments of that silent struggle downstairs, when the sweet figure of his dear fairy-lady grew increasingly clear to his sight, he could not doubt. And once again, with a great desiring, he desired her; for his faith was strong that of all these things she somehow—how he could not say as yet—held the key.

Just then Mr. Rivers raised his eyelids slightly and turned his head upon the pillow.

"It is very horrible," he said slowly, speaking to himself rather than to his companion. "The quantity of matter is stable. It for ever seeks its own, and finding it re-unites. The destruction of one form is but the necessary prelude to the development of others, and in this process of perpetual redistribution not a fraction of the sum total is lost. There is no waste save in the higher aspects of man's constitution—"

But here Laurence roused himself to protest.

"Matter returns to matter, sir, granted," he said. "Then why not spirit to spirit? Are you not assuming a waste which you cannot prove? And if spirit does return to spirit, what better than that, after all, can we ask?"

"Spirit?" Mr. Rivers retorted, with a fine inflection of irony, and momentary brightening of those half-closed eyes. "You, my dear Laurence, employ words glibly enough which I hesitate to pronounce! Matter I know. It is evident to the senses. Its actual existence—Berkeley, certain Oriental and other philosophers notwithstanding—is, within certain limits, susceptible of proof. And intellect I know. Its existence, though on other lines, is equally susceptible of proof. Its action can be registered and ratified. But spirit?—I will thank you to inform me—what is spirit?"

The young man bowed himself together, resting his elbows on his knees. He smiled with a half-humorous air of apology.

"That I cannot tell you, sir," he said. "I'm better at conviction than at explanation, I'm afraid. I only know—not with my reason, but with my heart—that spirit is, and has been, and must be everlastingly."

"And its mode of expression, its mode of self-revelation?" the other inquired drily.

Laurence straightened himself up, laughing a little.

"One way, the old why—childish, perhaps, yet really rather charming. In and by love, sir—only so, by love."

Tremulously Mr. Rivers drew the rich, sable cape closer about him, though the heat of the room was intense.

"I become very abject," he said at last. "I procrastinate and risk letting slip the opportunity still permitted me. For in my abjection, I own I clutch at straws, miserably anxious for support. I am ashamed that any other human being should witness the mental prostration to which physical illness has reduced me. But time presses, and compels me to delay no longer in confessing my object in calling you to me to-night. Tell me, Laurence, have you investigated those abnormal phenomena of which we spoke, and have your investigations yielded any result?"

The question took the listener somewhat by surprise, and he hesitated before replying. The whole matter had become of such vital importance to him, personal, intimate, among the dearest and most reverently-held secrets of his heart. So he shrank, as before an act of profanation, from submitting the history of his fairy-lady and of his strange relation to her to the criticism of this cold-blooded, sceptical intelligence. Yet he was bound by his promise to report, if called on to do so—bound, too, in mere humanity towards one lying at the point of death, and to whom that history might, conceivably, bring solace and enlightenment.

"Yes, I have investigated the phenomena in part," he answered.

"And the result?"

"Briefly, I think, that which I ventured to state to you just now—that love is the language of the spirit, the only medium through which spirit can declare itself and be apprehended, the one element of our poor human constitution which promises to continue and to preserve to us a measure of coherence and individuality even after death."

The young man leaned forward again, and laid his hand on the warm haunches of the ebony sphinx with a movement of slight defiance.

"Listen," he said, "please, sir, and I'll do my best to tell you exactly what has happened since we spoke of this subject last."

He steadied himself to his task, trying to keep his narrative circumstantial and restrained, to offer nothing more than a bald statement of fact. But the charm of it, once he had started, was a little too much for him. His speech grew lyrical against his will. And Mr. Rivers listened, his eyes closed, his brow drawn into hard lines by the effort of attention. Once he held up his hand.

"Did you question this appearance?" he asked.

"It was useless," Laurence answered, with a queer break in his voice. "She never spoke—that is in words. She was dumb."

"That is unfortunate," Mr. Rivers said coldly. "Well, pray, go on."

And Laurence obeyed; recounting, with but slight reservation, all, even to the events of the last few hours, when he and his sweet companion had vainly sought to reach each other in defiance of some mighty, opposing force, and how, at the crucial moment of the struggle, Mr. Rivers's summons had come.

"There, sir," said he finally—"now you have it all as far as I can give it you. I don't attempt to explain, though I may have my own ideas on the subject. I've tried to put it quite honestly before you, and must leave you to thrash the meaning out of it for yourself."

For some little space the sick man remained silent; then he raised both hands and let them sink back upon the coverlet with the gesture of one who bids farewell to hope.

"Fables!" he said bitterly; "fables! I ask bread of you and you give me a stone. I offer you an unprecedented opportunity of psychological study, and you approach it in the spirit of a ballad-monger or a mountebank! I require from you close observation, scientific acumen, an unrelenting pursuit of truth; and you put me off with some old wives' tale of lost letters, the ravings of an hysterical girl, of re-incarnation, multiple identity, and I know not what farrago of sickly sentiment and outworn superstition! You trouble me with rubbish, which it would be an impertinence to offer as material for serious consideration to a peasant's child, of ordinary mental capacity, in a modern board-school. Nor can I, my dear Laurence, acquit you of insincerity, since you trick out this unworthy stuff in the extravagant language of an erotic poem, while claiming for yourself an attitude wholly platonic and superior to animal passion."

"You are harsh, sir," Laurence was permitted to remark.

Mr. Rivers turned his head on the pillow. His expression was distinctly malevolent.

"I begin to gauge the average man," he replied calmly. "I begin to recognise that he is a willing, probably wilful, self-deceiver—that he is incapable of mental advance, that he will never expunge the mythological element from his religious outlook, or learn to discriminate between emotion, the product of the senses, and accurate knowledge, the product of laborious enquiry and elevated thought."

"Perhaps he is wiser so," Laurence said. "Perhaps—I speak subject to correction, sir—but perhaps he gets into touch, that way, with things not altogether unimportant in the long history of the human race."

"Here, within measurable distance of dissolution, I grow somewhat weary of *perhaps*. Yet I deserve that you should answer me this, since I have shown myself very weak. I had not courage to embrace the remarkable opportunity of investigating the phenomena of which we have spoken when it was offered me in my prime. Now, in my decadence, surreptitiously and at second hand, I try to acquire the knowledge I then repudiated. I clutch at straws, and the straws sink with me. It is just. For the second time I am untrue to my principles. I accept the rebuke."

During the last half hour there had been a lull in the storm; but now the wind, shifting to a point north of west, hurled itself against the house-front with renewed fury, and screamed against the shuddering casements as though determined to gain entrance. The effect was that of personal violence intended, and, with difficulty, repulsed. To Laurence an inrush of the tempest would have been hardly unwelcome, for the heat of the atmosphere oppressed him to the point of distress. Nor was this all. Once more he became aware, so it seemed to him, of the tremendous, unseen presence with which he had struggled earlier this same evening in the yellow drawing-room below. He was aware that it stood on the far side of the great, ebony bed, waiting, and the young man's heart stood still. He saw Mr. Rivers gather the sable cape more closely about him, as he lay staring out into the austere yet luxurious room; and he recognised that for all his mortal weakness there was a certain magnificence in the dying man's aspect.

"And beyond the superb, and always unredeemed, promise of human life, a blank," Mr. Rivers said at last, his voice hollow, and, though so small, asserting itself strangely against the tumult of the storm. "Reason, learning, the senses, carry us thus far, only to project us against a gateless barrier at the last!"

But Laurence's whole nature arose in fierce revolt. Again he renewed that awful struggle, but this time in articulate speech.

"No, no, sir," he cried sharply, authoritatively, "the barrier is not gateless—that is, to any one of us who has ever, even dimly and passingly, known true-love, and that of which true-love is the everlasting exponent and blessed symbol, namely, Almighty God."

"And I have known neither," Mr. Rivers answered. "Love I have never felt. God I have never needed, either as an object of worship, or as incentive to prayer. Therefore, for me, on your own showing, the barrier needs must remain gateless."

He bowed his head slightly, smiling upon the young man with a fine, ironical courtesy.

"I will ask your pardon for any weariness I may have caused you, Laurence," he added. "And now I think we have nothing further to say to one another. I have no quarrel with your fulfilment of your part of the contract. It has been only—possibly—too complete. So I will detain you no longer. You can leave me. I bid you good-night."

The young man would have answered with some kindly words of farewell; but as the other ceased speaking, he became aware that, under the glistening, outstretched arms of the caryatides, that tremendous unseen presence bent downwards, extending itself sensibly over the bed. Suddenly, and with a surprising effect of strength, Mr. Rivers started into a sitting position.

"Lowndes," he called imperatively, and reached out for the handle of the silver bell.

But before Laurence could render him any help he sunk down sideways—as though under the weight of a heavy blow—the upper part of his body hanging over the edge of the bed, and his thin, reed-like hands, with their ancient and mysterious rings, dragging upon the carpet—dead.

## XVII

The afternoon was fair and mild, a pensive charm upon it of misty sunshine and light fugitive shadows—one of those tender, silvery afternoons very characteristic of an English spring. It was as though nature, repentant of the violence of the past night, would disarm resentment by softness of mood, pretty invitations, and all manner of insinuating caresses. Thrushes piped among the high branches, and on the house-roofs starlings whistled and chattered, their crops filled with succulent comfort of worms and slugs. Upon the wide lawns two pairs of grey wag-tails scampered, with interludes of love-making and rapid upward flutterings after young gnats and flies—born out of due time and paying speedy and final penalty of too precocious an advent. The year had fairly turned its back on winter at last, and a promise of genial days, warm, lingering twilights, and tranquil nights was in the air.

Yet the late storm had not departed altogether without witness. For Laurence, pacing the broad walk from the last steps of the Italian garden to the confines of the lime-grove, could hear the hushing of birch-brooms and the ring of an axe. One of the tall cypresses had fallen right across the central alley, and gardeners were still busy chopping it up, carting away blocks of red wood and barrow-loads of scented branches, and obliterating the traces of its downfall.

Laurence paced the walk in a state of dreamy abstraction. The influences of the hour and the place were soothing to him. Their last interview and the final scene in his uncle's bed-chamber had affected him deeply. To-day had been full of detail. He had spent great part of the morning at the little, grey, Norman church, in company with Armstrong, Mr. Beal, and the estate mason, superintending the opening of the Rivers's vault, and such alteration of the position of the coffins it contained as to render possible the addition of another to their number. Upon the coffin-plates he read the names of many members of his family—of Dudley Rivers and others; and that of his own father, Denbigh Rivers, who had died on foreign service in Malta, when he—Laurence—was a child, and whose body had been sent home, not without cost and difficulty, to lie among his kindred in this quiet place. Of Agnes Rivers's coffin—though he closely examined all such as were still intact—he discovered no trace.

"There won't be room for me or mine down there, Armstrong," he said to the agent, as the two stood in the sunny churchyard, flicking the clinging cobwebs of the vault from off their clothes. "Not that I'm particularly sorry for that. Look here, you see the vacant space there by the chancel wall? Just try if you can arrange to have it staked out and reserved, without encroaching on the rights or hurting the feelings of any of the parishioners. I rather fancy lying there—unless I'm lucky enough to die at sea, and be dropped over the ship's side into the clear, blue water, with a shot at my feet."

"Every man to his humour, no doubt, Mr. Rivers," the other answered, in his slow sing-song. "Though I could find it in my heart to wish you a less uneasy resting-place than the swaying deeps of the ocean. Yet I suppose it was just there, and in the manner you have indicated, that your namesake and great-uncle, Laurence Rivers, found burial after the glorious battle of Trafalgar."

Laurence had stopped beating the clinging cobwebs from his sleeve, and turned to the speaker with a look of quick intelligence.

"Why, of course it was," he said, presently adding—"Upon my word, I wonder—will history repeat itself in that particular also!"

Subsequently, there had been letters to write, telegrams to despatch, the disorganised household gently, but firmly, to lay hold on. And now he paced the broad walk in an interval of leisure, listening till the grinding of carriage-wheels upon the gravel of the chestnut avenue should advise him that Mr. Wormald, his uncle's lawyer—whom he had summoned from town—had arrived at Stoke Rivers Road, and completed the transit from that station. And as he thus paced, while the silvery sunshine and shadow gently followed one another across the face of the fair, woodland landscape, a little of the pride of possession awoke in the young man. He had hardly had time to think of that before; nor did it seem quite fitting or seemly to do so when the breath had but so lately left the body lying in that stately room upstairs. Yet it was indisputable, this was precisely the event which, consciously or unconsciously, he had waited for ever since his boyhood. The prospect of one day succeeding to this property had handicapped him; he felt that. It had placed him in a position, socially, slightly beyond his means. It had taken from him the incentive and inclination to carve out an independent career. So far it had been the reverse of an advantage, from the more serious standpoint. But now all that was changed. He had a very definite "name and local habitation." He was absolutely his own master—no longer heir-apparent, but recognised owner and ruler of a by no means contemptible territory. This was as the step from boyhood to manhood—from the last of a public school to the freedom and personal responsibility of youth no longer subject to tutelage. Laurence smiled to himself. It occurred to him he had really got to grow up at last. Well—he had been a precious long time about it! And then, somehow, it occurred to him that this change in his fortunes altered and modified his relation to Virginia. He had lived in Virginia's country, and among her friends, almost exclusively, since his marriage. He had, he was aware, ranked somewhat as Virginia's husband. Now the state of affairs was reversed. He was in a position to claim full masculine prerogatives—those of an old country, of a ripe and finished civilisation, well understood. In future Virginia—she was very charming, very, he'd no quarrel with her of course—only, in future, Virginia would have to rank as his wife.

And, thereupon, involuntarily his eyes sought the bay-window of the yellow drawing-room. At the foot of the semicircular stone steps, on to which that window opened, the gardeners still moved to and fro—slow, brown-clad figures—collecting and wheeling away the *débris* of the fallen cypress. Laurence refused to formulate further the thoughts that arose in his mind. Only one thing was clear to him—clear as the songs and whistlings of the birds, clear as the tinkle and splash of the fountains, the spray of which glittered so brightly silver in the silvery light—Virginia could not come to Stoke Rivers just yet. It was better—better in every way—that her coming should be postponed for a while—till the period of mourning for his uncle was over—till he, Laurence, had mastered all the business, and organised the existent masculine household upon a new basis—till he had thoroughly acquainted himself not only with the working of this, but of the Scotch estate—till he and Virginia were free to keep open house—till—till—

At that moment, perhaps fortunately, the dogcart emerged from the shelter of the great chestnut-trees, and swung round the carriage sweep to the front door. Laurence crossed the lawns and the angle of the Italian garden quickly.—What a pity that cypress had fallen! It broke the line, destroying the symmetry of the garden; and it was almost the tallest and finest grown of the lot.

In the hall Mr. Wormald discoursed affably with the men-servants, while the latter divested him of more than one overcoat. He was a small, withered man, his back bowed and his hands sadly crippled by rheumatic gout, by much handling of pens, and leaning over lengthy legal documents; yet his movements were noticeably alert. His clean-shaven, busy, little face was enlightened by nimble, red-brown, squirrel-like eyes.

"Thank ye, Renshaw," he said. "Gently—ah, yes, you remember! These damp, spring days get into my joints, I promise you. Ah! there you are, Watkins. Yes, sad affair this, and sudden. Great shock to you all, no doubt. Quite so—but I observe that so frequently is the case. A lingering illness, the termination of which grows to seem more and more remote, and then the end with unlooked-for rapidity. Yes, very sad."

Disengaging himself from the sleeves of his second coat, he perceived Laurence's arrival, and his squirrel-like eyes scampered, so to speak, over the young man from head to foot. Like the agent, he appeared to receive an agreeable impression, for he gave a subdued squeak evidently indicative of satisfaction.

"Ah! Mr. Rivers," he exclaimed, "you will not remember me. It is many years since we met. You were a little shaver in an Eton-jacket and round collar. And your poor uncle passed away quite suddenly at last?—Not a matter for regret, I venture to think. Few men would have been more fretted by a consciousness of failing powers. Remarkable intellect"—Mr. Wormald keckled softly, as he passed with the young



man into the library—"quite beyond me, out of my humble range altogether, you know, Mr. Rivers. I admired his conversation; yet I cannot venture to pretend I attached any intelligible meaning to one-half of what your uncle said. But our business relations were very simple. He disliked business too much to wish to prolong the discussion of it. You will find all legal arrangements very direct. The death duties will be heavy; but, otherwise there are no deductions, I believe, save one or two small legacies to the servants.—Dinner, yes, Mr. Rivers, the earlier the better for me. I should be glad to put in a long evening with Armstrong; then we will have everything ready for you in the morning. I have an appointment with a client at five to-morrow afternoon, so I will ask you to let me go up by the two o'clock. I shall not need to encroach on your time to-night."

Therefore it happened, that, comparatively early Laurence found himself free to go down the red-carpeted corridor, pull back the heavy, leather-lined curtain, and enter the room of strange and delectable meetings once again. What fortune, good or bad, awaited him, he could not even surmise. He had learned one thing at least, that, in this connection, nothing was certain save the unforeseen. Nevertheless, he was sensible of slight surprise on finding the room shrouded in vague gloom. By some oversight the electric light had not been turned on. But the March evenings were long, and he had come to the trysting-place before the accustomed hour. The day was not wholly dead yet, and twilight lingered in the neighbourhood of the bay-window. After his first movement of surprise, Laurence found a restful charm in the soft obscurity surrounding him. Once again the room had resumed its effect of friendliness; and if his fairy-lady was not there as yet, no more were malign and opposing powers. The place was kindly and peaceful. It, like the weather, had settled back into a mild and engaging mood.

The young man felt his way across to the window, and sat down in one of the gilt-framed, brocade-covered armchairs on the right of the bay. There he waited, looking out now at the garden, growing mysterious and shadowy in the deepening dusk; now at the tall, satin-wood *escritoire*, the highly polished surfaces of which, reflecting the expiring light, glistened so that the shape of it remained visible after surrounding objects had faded from sight.

How long he waited Laurence did not know, nor did he greatly care. He had been very actively employed for the better part of the last six-and-thirty hours, and both as to mind and body he was in an unusually quiescent state. His energies were in pleasant suspension. The dimly seen room swam before his eyes. He made no effort of resistance. A mist clouded his vision, clouded all his faculties, and he slept.

When he awoke it was high noon. He lay on the stone bench beneath the lime-trees, the innumerable leaves of which rustled and danced in the warm, summer wind. He awoke laughing from a wholly delicious dream—a young man's dream of very lovely

love, which after long denial and delay had found perfect fulfilment. He felt very light and content. Life was sweet, this smiling, summer world infinitely hopeful and sympathetic. Then he stretched himself, smoothed the revers of his flowered, silk waistcoat, and straightened his lawn cravat, which had been somewhat displaced during the pleasant relaxation of slumber. He rubbed a trifle of dust, too, from the knee of his plumb-coloured breeches with his handkerchief. Then he stood up still laughing, yet with a growing hunger in his heart, since he began to realise that those delights were his, as yet, only within the gates of sleep and of dreams. He stretched again, a sigh mingling with his laughter; and then discovered that through the shifting, dappled sunlight and shadow Agnes Rivers approached him with her pretty, flitting, bird-like grace. To-day she wore a pale, lemon-yellow, India-muslin dress, spotted with cinnamon-coloured sprigs, and a white and cinnamon coloured waist ribbon embroidered in blown roses and tiny buds. A black, velvet work-bag, with long yellow and black strings to it, hung upon her arm; while her charming head and neck showed up in high relief against the open blue-grey sunshade she carried tilted over her right shoulder. Laurence went forward to meet her, all aglow from his recent sleep and from the fond imaginations of that delicious dream. Half playfully, half in sharp desire of mastery, he took away her sunshade and work-bag, and threw them down upon the turf. Then grasping both her hands in his, he kissed and kissed them, holding them high and bending his head so that his eyes were on a level with hers. And there must have been something in his eyes fearful, though enchanting, to her perfect maidenliness, for she flushed and tried to withdraw her hands, moving back a step from him with an air of questioning and innocent dignity.

"Laurence, Laurence," she said chidingly, "what does this mean? What has taken you?"

"Only happiness," he answered, "of which, having seen the dear vision, I very badly need the still dearer reality."

"Ah!" she said, "and yet you will go away—how soon we do not know—to this most unhappy war, and leave me desolate."

"Yes, and it is best so, sweetheart," he replied; serious, though still smiling—she was so pure, so trustful, and so very fair. Her gentle beauty racked him—"Best so," he repeated—"best pass the time honourably, fighting for king and country, until your twenty-first birthday is past, and Dudley can no longer forbid our marriage, and I can claim you, make and keep you mine forever and a day—"

And thereupon he stopped abruptly, for his elder brother had come upon them unperceived—Dudley, thin and tall, clothed in sad-coloured, brown-grey coat and vest, the locks of his long, pale hair stirred by the summer wind, in his hand a bundle of papers—Dudley, whose high, narrow head, refined features, and deep-set, fanatical

eyes reminded Laurence strangely of his uncle, Montagu Rivers, lying upstairs in the carven, ebony bed, with the crystal *memento mori* and the silver bell of the elegantly poised Mercury handle on the table beside him.—But how was that? How could it be? He confused two generations. Dudley Rivers's coffin he had seen, in the vault of the little, Norman church, only this morning. The dust lay thick on it. For more than half a century it had reposed there undisturbed; whereas his uncle, Montagu Rivers, died but last night!

Yet even while he thus reasoned, the scene suffered change. All around him was the roar of cannon; and beneath him the screaming of two ships, grinding into one another, side to side, upon the lift and fall of the Atlantic, where the sea grows short towards Gibraltar and the Straits. They screamed, those ships, as fighting stallions scream—a fierce and terrible sound. And all their decks were slippery with blood, through which half-naked men ran red-footed, or falling, wallowed, while the yell of battle went up hoarse from many hundred throats. The white sails, torn and streaming, were dyed wild, lurid colours by the flash of musketry and up-rolling volumes of smoke from the heavy guns. It was as hell let loose. Yet discipline prevailed, as did a desperate and persistent purpose, through all the tumult and slaughter. Laurence himself felt cool, light-hearted even, as he shouted orders and rallied his men in no mild language. His courage was high and his life strong in him. He laughed, notwithstanding the murderous noise, the sickening and brutal sights. But, to his fury, just in the turn of the engagement, when victory seemed assured at last, he felt a shattering blow at the top of his chest, and the blood welled up from his pierced lungs, and all the world about him grew black. He staggered back against the splintered bulwarks, putting his left hand upon the thin packet of letters buttoned inside his uniform against his heart, and called aloud—"Agnes, Agnes."

And out of the blackness a sweet voice, speaking as from some far distance, answered, crying—"Laurence, Laurence"—in accents of tremulous but very exquisite joy. Then within his palm he felt once more that just perceptible pulsation, as of the fluttering wings of a captive butterfly; while, in the ghostly twilight still glimmering in through the great bay-window, he beheld the slender form and rose-red, silken dress of his sweet fairy-lady, there, close at his side.

## XVIII

For some moments the young man dared not move. The anguish of his shattered ribs, the choking up-rush of blood from his lungs, was so present to him, that he turned deadly faint. By degrees he realised that all these sensations were illusory; or rather memory of that which had, long ago, befallen him. Then he asked himself—was the cry which had just now answered his cry illusory, a matter of memory, likewise? This he must ascertain. He began speaking slowly and softly; and the conviction of his identity with that other Laurence Rivers, his namesake, was so complete, that in speaking as he did he had no sense of practising any deceit upon his hearer.

"Agnes," he said, "do you remember the summer morning when, like a lazy fellow, I fell asleep under the lime-trees, and how you came to me just as I woke up, and how we spoke to one another, and how my brother Dudley interrupted our conversation."

A pause followed, during which he listened with almost feverish anxiety, looking up into the sweet, dimly-seen face. Was it possible that she had already gained in physical attributes and powers to the point of audible speech? He almost prayed it might be so; and yet what tremendous issues such development opened up!

At last the low, far-away voice began to answer him. The words came lispily, at first, with a pathetic effort and hesitancy. It was as the utterance of a baby child but just learning to articulate.

"How could I fail to remember that morning, since the joy of it proved the prelude to the sorrow of your departure?"

Laurence could barely control his excitement; but he just managed to remain very still and to continue speaking slowly and softly.

"Was that so?" he said. "I had forgotten."

"Surely it was so," she answered. "For Dudley brought you the orders, which had just been delivered by a despatch-rider, requiring your immediate return to your ship."

"Yes, yes—of course. I begin to recollect," he rejoined. "Lord Nelson had news of the whereabouts of the French fleet, and we put to sea at a few hours' notice. Recollect, dear me, I should rather think I did! It was an awful rush to get one's kit together, and get through, and there was no end of a bother about post-horses."

Laurence rose to his feet. It was impossible to him to sit still any longer. This strange awakening of memory, and the miracle of his sweet, phantom companion's recovered speech, moved him too deeply. He went across to the escritoire.

"Come here, Agnes," he said. "I want to look at you. I must see you clearly. And I—I want you to look at me. Come."

While speaking he struck a match, and lighted, first the tall wax candles standing upon the escritoire, and then those in the candelabra upon the chimney-piece. Beheld in their mellow light, the room assumed a more than ever familiar and friendly aspect. Laurence felt that he was at home—at home, consciously, and with a security and content upon him such as he had never experienced before. It was singularly pleasant to feel thus. Moving back he stood in front of the slender, rose-clad figure. His manner was serious, though very gentle, and his voice somewhat broken by the emotion under which he laboured.

"See, I have opened your little treasure-chest for you," he said. "And I have read your dear letters—that constituted no breach of faith, or act of presumption, considering how often I have read them already. I have put everything carefully back in its place, save our two miniatures, which lie here side by side. I tell you honestly, I am perplexed. I can't fit in the bits of the puzzle, or piece out the story as yet; but that, to my mind, doesn't matter very much. For we are here together, once again, you and I."

He shifted the position of the candles so that their full light should fall upon her.

"Now let me look at you," he said.

And as he looked his eyes grew somewhat moist, for he perceived that which he had blindly desired, blindly sought all his days, that which had been as an ache at his heart even in his gayest hours, because he needed it and had it not—though he had had no knowledge of what indeed it was he needed—now stood visibly before him. Sweet phantom, old-time love, exquisite companion—having found her, how could he ever again let her go? Listening to her pretty, halting speech the flattering belief had once more grown strong in him that he had the power—had he also the will—to restore her to complete and living womanhood. The ambition of so doing possessed him with redoubled force; and the love of her, rooted so deeply in that mysterious former life and former personality of his, possessed him too. Considerations of right and wrong, of duty, even of honour, he brushed aside. The peace and content of the present, the daring effort, the triumph and delight of the future should that effort succeed, rendered him callous to all things beside. Then a touch of self-distrust took him. Did he please, as he was pleased? He wondered.

"Agnes," he asked her almost wistfully, "tell me, have I changed very much?"

Her eyes, which had grown somewhat shy beneath his searching scrutiny, regained their serenity. She replied more readily, and in more assured accents, while a gentle playfulness was perceptible in her bearing.

"You appear older," she said; "but I will not reproach you with that, since I think you have matured in character rather than greatly increased in years. I could fancy you taller, were not such a supposition absurd. The fashion of your clothes is much altered—you affect very sober colours now."

But suddenly her expression changed. A wide-eyed, haunting sadness came back into her lovely face, and she spread abroad her hands in mingled apology and appeal.

"Ah! indeed," she cried, "I fear a long, long period has elapsed during my illness and alienation of mind. You have had time and to spare in which to grow older, to acquire new habits of thought, perchance—but that idea I cannot tolerate—to form fresh ties. I bitterly deplore my weakness, but they assured me of your death. Their purpose was not cruel, I am sure; but when I refused to believe their statements, your brother Dudley and Mrs. Lambart sent for our rector, Mr. Burkinshaw, to talk with me and preach resignation. He preached to deaf ears, poor man! How could I be resigned to see all the joy of my life cut down as grass under the sweep of a scythe? I did not believe them, yet their reiterated assertions so worked on me that they killed hope in me, and, in so doing, killed reason likewise. Yet in my heart of hearts, Laurence, I have always known that you would come again."

She clasped her hands high on her bosom and smiled upon him.

"And you have come, oh! my love," she said; "you have come!"

"Yes, in good truth," he answered, while a sense of fear took him—"I have come."

For he was filled with pity and with wonder concerning the end of this adventure; while her innocent passion softened his whole nature to a great tenderness, as the sun softens the frozen earth in spring. Then he held out his hand to her in invitation, and led her across to the brocade-covered sofa, set corner-wise between the piano and the fireplace, and for a while they both remained silent, sitting there side by side. And as the minutes slid away, the young man's fears departed, and content returned to him. It was so natural to sit with her thus! Yet his content had an underlying pathos in it, since their situation—his and hers—though immediately happy was so very strange.

At last he asked her:—"Did you know me from the first?"

And she replied with an air of gracious diffidence infinitely engaging:—"I can hardly tell you. For so long confusion has reigned in my poor mind that all had become to me vague and undetermined. I was so very tired that even that which I most craved, I, in a measure, shrank from. I seemed to wander everlastingly in blank and desolate places. I seemed to move in an interspace between the confines of two worlds, to neither of which could I gain admittance. I could not go forward, neither could I go back. Everything baffled me; everything was so difficult to understand."

"But now you have left those blank and desolate places? Now you understand?" Laurence asked, keenly interested in, yet a little dreading her answer.

"I think so. Still joy has been too long a stranger, for me wholly to trust it even yet. And I fear there are still lapses and deficiencies in my intelligence. I could fancy—but doubtless these are but silly fancies, born of illness—that I am not as I used to be, and that I feel the miss of much I once had and now have not."

She looked up at him, her eyes troubled once more to their very depths.

"In what am I lacking, Laurence?" she inquired piteously. "I feel that I am lacking, and I tremble lest I should disappoint you. Indeed, I will strive to remedy my fault, whatever it may be, if you will but be patient with me and tell me plainly of it, and give me opportunity to effect a cure."

But he answered her soothingly, stung by the humility and innocence of her attitude.

"You are wanting in nothing that time will not set right. But we must make haste slowly, sweetheart. So put all these sick fancies out of your head. We will worry neither about past or future; but, like true economists, will enjoy the present. Now let us talk of the time before I left you to rejoin my ship. Of that other melancholy time, after I left you and before I came back, and of the changes it has brought along with it, we will talk some other day—I trust there are many days for us ahead."

And so they remained speaking of the incidents of that mysterious former life, of which Laurence's recollection became momentarily more circumstantial and coherent—speaking of little things, merry and tender, such as lovers love—until, more than once, gusts of gentle laughter swept through the yellow drawing-room, which, for such a length of years, had been empty of all sound of human mirth. And not until the rose-red fingers of the dawn—in colour matching his fairy-lady's rose-red gown—first touched the eastern sky above the dome of the lime grove and the broken outline of the woods, did Laurence and Agnes Rivers cease to talk. Then she got up from her place in pretty haste.

"Ah!" she said, smiling, "I must go. Good Mrs. Lambart will reprove my indiscretion in having remained here so late."

But Laurence was bound to ask her one question, which had been in his mind during the whole course of their interview, yet had not so far dared put to her.

"Tell me," he said, "I waited for you—why did you not meet me here last night?"

"Ah!" she replied, "do not let us closely inquire into that. Something terrible was abroad in the house. I think it was the Shadow of Death. It stood between us—or I dreamed it did so.—But we fought against it. We conquered it—at least I dreamed

that we did. And it is gone.—But now, dear love, indeed I too must go. Good-night, or rather good-morrow. Carry happy thoughts away with you, even as I do, to sweeten rest."

And, without more ado, she flitted across the room, as though her little feet in their diamond-powdered slippers could not go soberly, but must dance for very joy, and, passing behind the tall escritoire, Laurence once again was aware that she had disappeared and left no trace.



## XIX

The disposition of Montagu Rivers's property proved—as Mr. Wormald had already advised Laurence it would prove—of a simple and straightforward description. All the servants connected with the house and stables would receive a couple of years' wages. Lowndes, the valet, would in addition draw a substantial pension. Outside these provisions, Laurence inherited wholly and solely. A single clause in the brief will revealed somewhat of the eccentric character of its maker. Mr. Rivers directed that within forty-eight hours of his reported death a London surgeon of acknowledged eminence should use means to ascertain, beyond all possibility of doubt, that death had veritably and indeed taken place. He further directed that Armstrong, the agent, and a local practitioner who had attended him at intervals during his illness, should be present at this rather ghastly demonstration. It was added that the corpse should receive Christian burial not less than twenty-four hours after the autopsy had been carried out. The clause concluded with the following words:—

"I desire these measures to be taken—childish and superstitious though they may appear—as a precaution against that happening, in my own case, which would appear to have happened in the case of a former inhabitant of Stoke Rivers."

The eminent surgeon in question, hastily summoned from amid a press of work, could spare but one evening for his visit. He proved to be a courtly and agreeable person, an amateur of the fine arts, with a turn for copper-plate engravings, a weakness for Italian ivories, and an enthusiasm for antique and renaissance gems. His work in the death-chamber accomplished, he readily turned his attention to more pleasing investigations; and during the hour after dinner, before the coming of the carriage to take him to catch the up-express at Stoke Rivers Road, he examined the contents of certain glass cases in the library, and looked at the engravings hanging in the lower corridor.

"I little imagined, when I left town this afternoon," he said, addressing Laurence with a peculiarly charming smile, "that such delectable entertainment was in store for me. I am proud of my profession—no man more so; but I am not sorry to put it aside for a time and forget injury and disease, and even successful dealing with them, in favour of art. This collection of your uncle's, though not large, is remarkable. It reflects great credit upon his judgment and taste. It contains absolutely no rubbish, hardly, indeed, a single object which it would be just to qualify as second-rate.—Ah! here is another admirable thing, though less in my line than those delightful gems."

The two men had reached the end of the corridor, and the doctor paused in front of the tapestry curtain.

"This is a very fine example," he continued, "though I could not, off hand, be sure of the date. How broad and yet how harmonious in colouring! Just a trifle broad in

subject, too, perhaps; but our forefathers were blessed or cursed—I am often at a loss to decide which—with a more robust taste in sentiment than ourselves. A witty modern writer has spoken of 'the saving grace of coarseness.' There have been times when I have been tempted to endorse his phrase."

As he spoke, he laid hold of the edge of the curtain.

"Dear me, how singularly weighty!" He looked at his host quickly, inquiringly, and with heightened interest. "Singularly weighty," he repeated. "This house enjoys a reputation for a certain originality, I understand. Would it be indiscreet to inquire to what this splendid *portière* either gives, or denies, access?"

Just for a moment Laurence hesitated, staring his guest very full in the face. So far this new acquaintance had interested him greatly. His conversation had been refreshingly varied; moreover, Laurence, in listening to it, had become increasingly and pleasingly impressed with the value and distinction of his lately acquired possessions. He recognised a steadiness and sanity in the great surgeon's outlook; an appreciation of things rare and beautiful, combined with a wisdom born of wide practical experience; a large compassion, too, for the foibles, and sufferings, and sins of poor human nature, unembittered by any flavour of contempt. And so it happened that, during that moment of hesitation, Laurence was sorely disposed to lay bare to this man—whom he would in all probability never meet again—the abnormal situation in which he, at the present time, found himself. If any one could grasp that situation, and deal with it at once justly and sympathetically, he thought this man could do so; since he appeared to have passed the limits of denial and scepticism, and reached that composure and poise of mind wherein revolt ceases and the capacity of acceptance and belief becomes almost unlimited. But—perhaps unfortunately—Laurence put the inclination towards free speech from him as a temptation. Was he not bound by his promise to the dead? He was bound still more, perhaps, by personal pride. It appeared to him free speech would be a yielding, a weakness; so he answered suavely, yet with a sufficient loftiness to leave no room for further question—

"Behind the curtain is that which, indirectly, has procured me the great pleasure of receiving you here to-day."

As he spoke he turned, and led the way in the direction of the hall again.

"I'm uncommonly glad," he added, "that you have such a high opinion of my uncle's little collection. Perhaps it may induce you to come down here again sometime, from Saturday to Monday, and overhaul the contents of these cases at your leisure. I am afraid I'm a bit of a barbarian, and don't reckon with them as reverently as I ought. I am a good deal better up in the points of polo ponies than in those of Popes' rings, I know."

"That is no matter for regret," the doctor replied, in his most courtly manner. "My esteem for the barbarian increases rather than diminishes as I grow older. And I never forget that these delicacies of art are, after all, the refuge of those who have outlived or injured their digestion of, and appetite for, simpler and more wholesome diet. Such dyspeptics are to be commiserated rather than commended. As long as the romance of sport and travel holds you, as long as you still 'love the bright eyes of danger,' you can very well afford to leave the consolations offered by gems, and ivories, and such like sweepings from the ruins of departed civilisations, to the physically and emotionally decrepit."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, youth," he said, "immortal youth, and the rather savage joys of it!—I congratulate you far more profoundly upon the possession of these, and upon the magnificent health which I cannot but perceive to be yours, than upon your extremely interesting house and both its seen"—he paused, looking rather hard at Laurence and smiling—"and unseen treasures.—A cigar? Yes, thanks, I think I will permit myself that indulgence on my way down to the station.—But to return to my contention. Remember we only take to sweet-sop when our teeth are no longer sound enough for ship's biscuit. Eat ship's biscuit and relish it just as long as a merciful Providence permits you to do so, my dear young gentleman. The days of sweet-sop, of the armchair, of what we are pleased to call 'the judicial attitude of mind,' but which is really nothing save the natural consequence of a sluggish and defective circulation, will come all too soon in any case. Adieu to you—"

A flash of carriage lamps at the open hall door, the two men-servants—restored to their habitual correctness of bearing—armed with rugs, greatcoat, and narrow leather bag of slightly sinister aspect—the snort of a horse in the night air, fresh from the comfortable warmth of the stable—and, after further farewells, Laurence went back into the hot, bright, silent house.

"No one need sit up, Renshaw," he said to the waiting butler. "I shall watch in Mr. Rivers's room alone to-night."

For this was to be a night of abstinence, so the young man had decided, from the dear sight of his fairy-lady and the delight of her miraculously recovered speech. He had a duty to perform to the dead man, lying solitary upstairs—though hardly more solitary now, than during the long years past in which he had repudiated all solace of human affection. To Laurence himself life had become almost terribly well worth living since he had set foot in Stoke Rivers little more than a week ago; and it was to this man, of cold and narrow nature, that, after all, he owed this notable enlargement of interests and opportunity—not to mention those material advantages of houses, lands, and costly furnishings which had come to him. Gratitude was very much in place; and it

seemed to him that a silent vigil in that stately bed-chamber would be only fitting, both as an act of piety, and as testimony to the gratitude now no longer permitted expression either in spoken word or kindly act. Nor could Laurence help hoping that during those solemn hours he might arrive at a clear determination regarding the future—ceasing merely to drift passive and acquiescent to the push of circumstance, as a rudderless boat to the push of the tide. He would direct his own course, be master of his own action, prepared to take—for good or ill—all the consequences that action might involve. For, all the while—and it was worse than useless to shirk remembrance of that—all the while, across the Atlantic, under the bright American skies, bright as they, immediate and modern as the civilisation on which they look down, was the vivacious, young, society beauty, whom he had believed he loved, whom he very certainly had married, and to whom—in the opinion of both her world and his own—his honour and his whole future stood pledged. The question of Virginia—for the whole situation resolved itself fundamentally into that—the question of Virginia must be reckoned with, and the results of such reckoning accepted once and for all.

He had not visited that upstairs room since the night of his uncle's death. The impression then received of the furnace-like fire, and the apparent life and motion of those figures of enslaved and half-bestial womanhood supporting the bed, were still present to his recollection. But now, as he passed into the room, he found the change worked there very arresting. All trace of that which had gone forward, earlier in the evening, under the hands of the eminent surgeon, had been obliterated. The room was orderly, stately as ever; but it was very cold. The hearth was swept and empty. One casement stood wide open, and by it entered a continuous breathing of bleak wind. A single electric burner was turned on, and, in the low steady light shed by it, the carved figures of the ebony bed offered no illusion of life or motion; they showed rigid as the long, narrow body they guarded, the angular outline of which was perceptible beneath the fine linen sheet—upon the surface of which sprigs of rosemary and box lay scattered.

Laurence moved across, intending to turn back the upper part of the sheet and look on the face of the dead; but as he did so a bent form rose silently from the armchair, set at right angles to the fireless hearth, and took up its position on the far side of the bed opposite to him. Though by no means addicted to nervous alarms, Laurence felt a chill run through him, right up to the roots of his hair. Was it conceivable that he beheld the Umbra or Corporeal Soul, of which Ovid speaks, and that this phantom would keep watch with him over its own unburied corpse during the coming hours? His sweet fairy-lady was one thing, and this quite another, in the line of disembodied spirits. Stoke Rivers, apparently, was not a comfortable place to die in. Laurence registered a hasty vow that he, for one, would take precious good care to arrange to die somewhere else! But as he gazed, somewhat fearfully, at the intruder, it declared itself

pathetically and pitifully human—nothing more recondite, indeed, than Lowndes, the wiry, long-armed, grey-faced valet.

"I thought it proper to wait till you should come, sir," he said, under his breath. "Though Mr. Rivers has no need of my services now, I have attended on him too constantly to feel it fitting I should be out of call."—His voice quavered, and he cleared his throat.—"He was a gentleman that rarely praised, sir. Some might have thought him harsh; but that was because his mind was so engaged with study. In all the forty years I waited on him, he never gave me an uncivil word; and it is not many gentlemen of whom you can say that."

He lent across, carefully removed some sprigs of box lying high on the sheet, then folded it down quickly and skilfully across the chest. Laurence was aware of a jealous devotion in his attitude. No hands save his own should again touch his dead master. But the sheet once arranged to his satisfaction, he stepped back, a pace or two, into the shadow of the damask curtains.

Then the young man looked long and silently upon the dead. Notwithstanding its extreme emaciation, the face was gentler than in life. This was not merely owing to the closing of the brilliant eyes. An immense calm rested on it. The hunger of the intellect was stayed at last; and the face was majestic in its composure—the face of one who has passed, for ever, beyond the tyranny of desire. Looking on it, Laurence bowed himself reverently in spirit, while the conviction rooted itself in him, that of all virtues the most fertile, the most admirable, is courage. For the weak, the dismayed, for skulkers, liars, and dastards, in whatever department of action or of thought, there is small hope—so he told himself—either here or hereafter. The battle is to the strong; and, therefore, to be strong is the one and only thing which really signifies.

And then it came to him, with a sense of sudden satisfaction, that this most desirable thing, strength, was altogether part of his own inheritance, did he choose to claim it. For the first time he appreciated the value of that strain of fanaticism resident in his blood. He had feared it a little, and apologised to himself for its existence heretofore. He had made a prodigious mistake; for now that strain of fanaticism revealed itself as among the most excellent things of his birthright. He remained motionless, gazing, no longer at the carven bed and its rigid burden, but away to the open casement—in at which came the breathing of the bleak night-wind—his head held high, and a singular compression about the corners of his mouth. Virginia?—Just now Virginia, and all and any obligation he might have contracted towards her, went for very little. He stood apart, complete in himself, regardless of custom, regardless even of so-called morality, should these interfere between him and his purpose. His sense of humour in regard to himself—humour, eternal enemy of all exaggerations and fixed ideas—was in abeyance. He knew that, knew it was dangerous. But then, as the courtly surgeon had so lately reminded him, what so adorable, after all, as those same "bright eyes of

danger"—let danger come, how and when it may?—Conventionalities? He bade them pack, all the sort of them. Their day was over. The day of scruples was over likewise. His position was unexampled. He took the risks, along with the joys, of it. As his forefathers had been, so would he be. He felt an extraordinary exaltation and freedom of spirit. And feeling this he laughed a little, just as he had laughed when rallying his men amid the roar of cannon and scream of the grinding ships, in the famous sea-fight off the southern Spanish coast at Trafalgar.

But the old valet, hearing that most unexpected, and to him unseemly, sound, emerged from the discreet shadow of the damask curtains and stretched his long arms to draw the sheet again up over the face of the corpse.

"You have done, sir?" he asked in accents of severity.

"No," Laurence answered, the excitement of his thoughts still strong upon him—"I have only just begun; but, thank God, or devil, or what you will, I have begun at last."

## XX

The funeral was over. Those few gentlemen of the neighbourhood who had felt it incumbent upon them to appear in person, had departed. So had the empty broughams of their more numerous neighbours, who proposed to offer a maximum of respect to the dead with a minimum of trouble to themselves. The Archdeacon also had started on his homeward journey to Bishop's Pudbury. At Mr. Beal's earnest entreaty he had been invited by Laurence Rivers to take part in the function. The young clergyman had been sadly exercised by scruples regarding the propriety of consigning the mortal remains of an admitted sceptic and scoffer to the grave, with words of Christian hope and blessing. What was left for believers if unbelievers thus benefited? The conscience of his superior officer was happily of less flabby texture.

"Charity before all things, my dear Walter," the latter had said, in his full, sonorous voice, when the ingenuous young man had unfolded his difficulties. "It is not for you, or even for me, to judge and condemn a fellow-creature. If not an active churchman, remember Mr. Rivers displayed no leanings towards Rome or any other schismatic body. For this we must be very thankful. There are occasions, moreover, as you will learn in time, when the purely ecclesiastical attitude may fitly be modified by the knowledge of the man of the world. We yield no point, mark you; but we abstain from pressing a wrong point at a wrong time. Judgment, statesmanship—therein lies the practical application of the sacred injunction, 'Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves.' To raise objections in the present case would be to increase rather than mitigate the possibility of scandal—probably, moreover, it would be to alienate the sympathies of young Mr. Rivers. We must learn never to sacrifice the future to the present, my dear Walter. To do so is to fall into errors of misplaced zeal—a very dangerous thing. Much, I cannot but think, may be done with young Mr. Rivers. Wisely handled, he should prove of considerable local service to the Church."

So the good young man's soul received comfort.

"What a privilege it is to talk with you, sir!" he said. "I always learn so much."

Last to go, as he had been first to arrive at Stoke Rivers, was Captain Bellingham.

"Poor old chap, I tell you, I've had him very much on my mind, Louise, these last few days," he had said to his wife, that morning, at breakfast. "It's only decent charity to see him through. I hear he's looking uncommonly hipped. You thought him rather queer, you know, the day he had luncheon here. Mercy for him the old gentleman died as soon as he did—perfectly mad, too, I hear, and an infernal temper. It's enough to make any one jumpy to be dancing attendance on such a deathbed as that day after day; and in that gloomy, ghostly house too. I couldn't have done it, I know, without getting most frightfully broken up. We must try to get him over here for a day or two.

Write him a nice note, will you, Louise; it would be awfully good of you, and I will do my best to bring him back with me to-night. Ought to be quiet to-morrow, I suppose, for the sake of appearances; but the day after let's have General Powys and the Westons to dinner. I want to rattle him up a bit."

But neither Mrs. Bellingham's neatly worded note, nor her husband's hospitable entreaties, moved Laurence Rivers. He had quite other fish to fry. All he asked for was solitude and sunset; and his courtesy was slightly perfunctory and formal in consequence—so much so, indeed, that on his return Jack Bellingham remarked to his wife:—

"Rivers always was such a good-hearted, sensible sort of fellow, that it's hardly likely coming into this property would turn his head. He's above any vulgarity of that kind. All the same, he really was curiously stand-offish to everybody to-day. The Archdeacon meant to make an afternoon of it, and was a little bit huffed, I think. Rivers was perfectly civil, only he gave us pretty clearly to understand there was no call for any of us to dawdle. I don't know, but somehow I tell you, Louise, I don't quite like his look. We shall see. It would be an awful pity if he followed in the footsteps of the late lamented and turned out a crank."

"I know it," Mrs. Bellingham replied calmly. "But you omit Virginia. I have never seen a woman less likely to tolerate a crank as her husband than Virginia."

And so at length the accustomed quiet settled down on Stoke Rivers. Dinner was over, and the unwelcome daylight fairly flown. Abstinence had gone to sharpen the edge of hunger, and Laurence made his way down the corridor, pulled the curtain towards him, and entered the room of mysterious meetings in a humour to venture much. At the escritoire stood his fairy-lady, and at the sound of the closing door she turned and extended her arms, a world of delicate welcome in her gesture and her face. Then, as he came towards her, she drew back a little, as though penitent of the fervour of her greeting. Her lips moved, but no sound issued from them; and a quick fear went through the young man that, through the action of some malign influence, she had declined upon her former condition and once again become dumb. This raised the spirit of battle in him, and reinforced his resolution to effect her emancipation from the control of whatever opposing power—physical or spiritual—might hold her in its grasp. The more so that, for all her gladness, there was a hint of trouble, a little cloud of distress upon her face, which provoked him to indignation. He hated that—be it what it might—which held her sweet being in thrall.

"Agnes, why is this? Why don't you speak to me?" he demanded.

Whereat she smiled, as one who loves yet deprecates another's unreasoning heat.

"How can I speak," she asked, "until you have first spoken to me?"



"But why not? I don't understand," he said.

"Nor I," she answered; "only I know that so it is. I cannot explain the why and wherefore of this, or of much besides, to myself. I am to myself at once real and unreal—as an echo, a shadow, the reflection in a mirror, is at once real and unreal."

She looked at him seriously, wonderingly, as though trying to take counsel with him against herself.

"I see with your eyes, I speak with your voice, I comprehend with your mind when you are present. When you are absent, I become as the echo unevoked by any sound, as the shadow when neither sun or moon look forth to cast it, as the reflection in the mirror when that of which it was the image has moved away. Only my heart remains to me; and it, when you are absent, longs and searches, journeying from place to place, formless, wordless, and blind, sensible only of its own infelicity, while seeking that which alone can bring it ease and light."

"My poor love!" Laurence said gently, greatly moved; "my poor love!"

For a space he was silent, pondering upon her words, almost staggered by the intensity of her innocent passion. He was not worthy to inspire such devotion. Had that other Laurence Rivers, his predecessor and namesake, been more worthy, he wondered. Shame covered him in face of the deception he was in process of practising upon her. But he put the thought of that from him fiercely. For was he not prepared to take all the risks? Surely his action was justified—was it not a work of mercy to rescue and restore this gentle and homeless ghost? And then, since the air was mild and the young moon lent an added charm to the formal alleys of the Italian garden, Laurence, hoping thereby both to allay his own perturbation of spirit and dissipate the melancholy which still sat in the clear depths of Agnes Rivers's lovely eyes, engaged her to come out, once more, and walk. But though the charm of the garden was great, he almost regretted that he had invited her to leave the shelter of the house, she appeared so anxiously elusive and fragile a creature. Watching her, though his courage was stubborn and his will fiercely set, the task he had undertaken appeared hopeless of accomplishment. But if the task was hopeless, all the more must it be fulfilled—that had been the way of his people, and henceforth it was to be his way. And so he talked to her with a certain lightness, looking at her and smiling.

"Are you happy, Agnes?" he asked her at last.

And she answered with a return to her daintily demure and old-world manner—

"I should, indeed, be ungrateful were I not so, dear Laurence. Yet, since you question me, I must own a distrust of the future works a black thread through all the glad pattern of the present."

She paused, glancing back somewhat timidly at the house. Every window of it was lighted, save those of Mr. Rivers's bed-chamber. These last were dark and blank, producing an arresting effect, and recalling to Laurence the empty eye-sockets of the crystal *memento mori*.

"You are here with me," she continued, "and again I taste happiness. Yet I am oppressed by the persuasion that, as before, in some hour of peculiar promise and security you will be called from my side. And that this time—ah! I fear you may justly reproach my weakness and deride my far-fetched alarms—this time, going, you will not return; or returning, you will no longer find me here to greet you."

"Then very certainly I will never go—that is unless you yourself send me," Laurence said. He walked on a few paces, and then added, speaking almost sullenly, answering his own thoughts rather than her words—"Thank Heaven, I am my own master at last. No one can compel me. I can do as I think fit; and since I think fit to stay, stay I most assuredly will, here among my own people, and in my own house."

He looked at his companion, instinctively desiring to read approval in her eyes; but her expression was one of startled inquiry.

"Forgive me," she said, "either Mrs. Lambart has omitted to tell me, fearing to shock me, or in my heedlessness I have forgotten. Are you indeed master here, dear Laurence? How is that? Can it be that your brother Dudley is dead?"

"Yes," he answered, "the old order has changed—and yet not changed perhaps so very much after all, for it appears the owners of Stoke Rivers, ancient and modern, are very much of one blood. But, in truth, Dudley is gone, and others have gone—God rest both him and them—and I reign in their stead."

"Yes, God rest his soul," she said; and then repeated softly—"Poor Dudley! poor unhappy Dudley!"

But Laurence, noting her pensive bearing, and hearing the gently regretful tones of her voice, was pricked pretty sharply by a point of jealousy from out the long past.

"Is it a matter of so very much grief to you, Agnes," he asked, "to hear the news of your cousin Dudley's death?"

Whereupon she turned on him eyes very reassuringly full of love; while—after a little space—her lips curved into a delicious and almost saucy smile.

"Ah! I feared you had grown old and wise," she exclaimed. "I was foolish to vex myself. I see you are indubitably the same Laurence as ever."

She laughed very sweetly, sweeping him a delicate curtsy.

"The very same Laurence as ever," she repeated exultingly.

Then she flitted away—as though, child-like, joy of heart must needs find relief in movement—down the long alley across the oblique shadows cast by the sentinel cypresses, until she reached the great, stone basin of the terminal fountain. Here she paused, gazing down at the smooth, slow movements of the sleepless fish.

The borders on either side the walk were set out with bulbs and early flowering plants. As yet the majority of these showed but bud, or upstanding sheaths of leaf. The gilly-stocks only were fully in blossom. The clean, homely fragrance of them hung in the still air; but the moonlight had bleached their honest orange and russet faces, making them, like all else of the scene, but varying degrees of light and dark. Alone in this colourless world, frail though it was and ethereal, had the sweet figure of Agnes Rivers retained its actual hues. The brown of her hair, the warm pallor of her skin, the blue of her profound and now laughing eyes, the soft rose-red of her silken gown, defied the chill of the moonlight. And this, as Laurence moved towards her, deepened alike the charm and the mystery of her appearance. It captivated his imagination. It stimulated his ambition. It challenged the deep places of his love. The hopeless task must indeed be accomplished. The impossible must come to pass. Daring that which no other man had dared, he would earn a reward such as no other man had dreamed. But he must be cautious, and discreet, and very gentle. The diplomatist, for a long while to come, must hold the lover in check if the end was to be gained.

And just then Agnes Rivers's voice broke into a little song, hardly articulate, but clear and instinct with delight, even as the songs of birds, very early in spring, when pairing time has but just begun. Yet enchanting as the tones were, there was in them something remote and beyond the compass of human thought, piercing the young man to the very heart, so that he cried to her—

"Ah! my dear, come down, come near. Leave your singing, it is too sweet. It has too much to do with spirit and too little with flesh. It cuts like a knife. There—there—I am not blaming you, God forbid. Only, you have lived so long on the borderland between those two worlds, of which you once spoke, that you have a little lost touch with ordinary mortals such as I. Come down, come near. Don't you see what I mean? Don't you know what I want?"

And after gentle converse, when that morning the dawn broke and with words of tender farewell, his fairy-lady crossed the yellow drawing-room and passed at the back of the outstanding satin-wood escritoire, as her habit was, it appeared to Laurence that, for the first time, a faint shadow followed her little feet. And this filled him with great and far-reaching hope—as the first dim greyness of land along the horizon fills the sailor after long voyaging upon the open sea. Nevertheless, she

vanished as before, leaving him solitary, while of the manner of her going there remained no sign.

## XXI

Days multiplied into weeks, March passed into April, April into May, June came with all its roses, the lime-trees flowered once again, and the scent of them was wafted across the broad lawns and in at the open windows, yet Laurence stayed on at Stoke Rivers. He had ceased to apologise for, or seek to justify his action. The fanatical, extravagant element of his character was fully in the ascendant, and it was conveniently contemptuous of criticism. He had become a law unto himself. He stayed because he intended to stay—there was the beginning and end of the matter. Meanwhile, he made discovery of pleasures subtle and subjective, hitherto unimagined. Living the life of the recluse, he enjoyed that sense of inward harmony and freedom of spirit known only to those who dare divorce themselves from society, with its many tyrannies, and from familiar commerce with their fellowmen. He experienced the sensible increase of will-power, and the mental elation, that are born of solitude, silence, and whole-hearted devotion to a single idea. The values shifted, and many worldly matters, many amusements, which had formerly appeared to him of vital importance, now began to appear slightly absurd. He ate and drank sparingly, since meat and liquor tend to render the action of the brain sluggish, and the imagination somewhat gross. His dear fairy-lady should regain the completeness of her humanity; but he would fit himself to meet her half way on her mysterious return journey from the regions of the dead, by purging himself of all superfluous animality.

And his environment lent itself to these practices and experiments. The household had settled back into its accustomed decorum and regularity. It asked no questions, it obeyed in respectful silence. And, if certain tremors shook it at times in face of its new master's supposed dealings with things occult and supernatural, it accepted them as a necessary part of its service. Indeed, it may be questioned whether Lowndes, the grey-faced, long-armed valet, Renshaw, and Watkins, irreproachably correct of demeanour, would not have suffered far greater inconvenience and perturbation had they been called upon to adapt themselves to the ordinary ways of the ordinary, English country-gentleman. Their pride would have suffered likewise, since eccentricity had been so long enthroned in their midst, that its absence would have seemed a loss of *prestige*, a regrettable coming down in the social scale. They displayed much solicitude for Laurence's comfort, and much grim alacrity in turning guests from his door. Captain Bellingham's fears that his friend might develop into a crank appeared to be in very fair road to fulfilment; but the household rejoiced silently and grimly thereat.

So did not Armstrong, the shrewd and kindly Scotch agent.

"Whether the place induces a whimsicality in the family, or the family in the place, I would not presume to declare," he lamented one day, when having a crack with a

trusted friend and fellow-countryman. "It is like the matter of priority between the owl and the egg, a hidden thing, transcending human wit. But a certain impracticability is assuredly bred in their bones, poor bodies, which needs must eventually come out in the flesh of every one of them. They're over proud of the intelligence of which it has pleased the Almighty to bestow on them so handsome a portion—as the intelligence of Saxons and Southerners go, you understand. And being puffed up with conceit of themselves they proceed to apply their bit of unusual reason in wild and impolitic speculations, to the endangering of their own and other persons' peace and security. A sair pity, a sair pity! Not that I would deny degrees in the natural wrong-headedness of the poor, misguided creatures. The present representative of the family is a young man of excellent parts and practical ability; and though I fear he is going astray in some particulars, I find in him a praiseworthy application to business, by times."

For in good truth, notwithstanding the dominion of his fixed idea, Laurence was determined on the improvement of his somewhat neglected estate. Every afternoon saw him ride forth to visit farm or distant hamlet, to superintend operations of fencing, draining, or building, to mark wood and copse-land for future cutting. Specially was he interested in the construction of a light railway from Stoke Rivers Road to some gypsum quarries at Hazledown, about three miles distant, the worth of which would be doubled by direct and permanent means of transport. Silent and self-absorbed for the most part, he rode about the charming Sussex country while the gay, spring weather matured into the glow and heat of summer. And all the while against his heart lay the poignant delight of a great romance, and in his eyes sat the light of a great adventure. He was very happy, so happy that, while he longed for the attainment of his purpose and strained every nerve to accomplish it, he almost dreaded that accomplishment since it must rob him of the sweet and gracious present.

And that such accomplishment drew on as the summer went forward he could not doubt. For his fairy-lady had grown less timid than of old, braving now the earlier dusk, now the later dawn, as the fancy took her; while a veritable shadow clung unquestionably to her little feet, and lengthened behind or beside her. Though no less slender and graceful than before, her person was less ethereal. It appeared to gain a certain substance, a greater opacity; while her movements were more measured. Once or twice Laurence had fancied he saw her pale face flush under sudden emotion, as though blood once more began to course beneath the clear, smooth skin. Her talk, moreover, was less of the past than of the present. At times she would ask questions, not wholly easy for him to answer without revealing those things regarding which he had agreed with himself to keep silence. But on many matters he had come to speak to her freely, telling her of his daily occupations and affairs, of the books he read, even of passing events of public interest. And to all his talk she listened now thoughtfully, now with pretty mirth, offering not only sympathy, but discreet counsel, while sometimes a touch of far-reaching and singularly mature wisdom gave a significant

value to her speech. There were moments, indeed, when Laurence gazed at her in wonder, for she betrayed a depth and daring of thought impossible to a young girl, however good her training and notable her natural talents—thought only possible to one who had discounted the many subterfuges and illusions of life, as most mortals see and live it, by apprehension of things supramundane, eternal, and so of infinite moment to the conscience and the heart.

She grew in womanhood, and she grew in the charm of distinction and of a fine equality. Yet the mystery surrounding her was to Laurence in no wise lessened. For he began to perceive that, if he held back somewhat from her knowledge concerning himself, she, notwithstanding her transparent sincerity and the perfection of her love, held back somewhat from him. She played with him, she eluded him; and he perceived that her lovely soul—did he dwell with her for a thousand years—would still have its surprises for him, and its secret places, adorably difficult of access. Then, too, for all her increasing humanity, the way of her coming at sundown, and going at sunrise remained unexplained as ever.

One morning in late June, standing in the bay-window, with the fragrance of the blossoming garden and the songs of awakening birds saluting them, he questioned her on this matter. Her hand rested in his—no longer perceptible as a mere pulsation, such as might be caused by the fluttering wings of a captive butterfly. It had substance now, actual, though very delicate, weight. And feeling this, amazement and ecstasy invaded Laurence. His eyes were alight and his blood hot.

"You are going?" he asked. "But why should you go? Stay and see the day in its beauty."

But she smiled on him, a serious and enigmatic smile, though very full of tenderness.

"The day does not belong to me yet," she answered. "I cannot take that which is not mine."

"Everything is ours if we dare take it," Laurence said. "Possession is in the act, not in the fact. You create law by believing in and submitting to it. Cease to believe, cease to submit, the prohibition, the obligation, vanishes into fine air. The day is yours, dear love, and all the vigorous life and joy of it, if you will but venture. Have just a little courage. Try—"

But she shook her pretty head, still smiling, though, as it seemed to Laurence, rather mournfully.

"Then tell me where you go," he said. "Tell me where you pass all the hours when you are not here? See, I have been very patient, I have asked you no questions. And yet, loving you as I do, I have a right to hear."

"Ah!" she answered playfully, though with a touch of sadness—"what an importunate being you have suddenly become! Yet why?—Half your life is hidden from me, dear Laurence, and I do not ask to have it otherwise. Why, then, should not half of mine be hidden from you? Indeed, it is always so between man and woman, I think, whether they know it—as we do—or know it not."

But Laurence was not in the humour to have his inquiry put aside thus lightly.

"Still tell me—tell me," he insisted. "Look here, really I am not unreasonable." He laughed a little, looking at her very charmingly in mingled eagerness and command,—  
"For your exits and entrances are not as those of other women, Agnes, so tell me. Or let me go with you wheresoever you go. Or just—it is very simple—don't go—stay right here, and brave the glory of the sunrise. Stay!—"

As he spoke, long shafts of pale, golden light shot through the openings between the high-standing trees of the eastern woodland, and lay in misty radiance along the dewy lawns, touching the heads of the cypresses, and flashing upon the upspringing waters of the fountains.

"Ah, have patience—but a little trifle of patience yet, dearest love," Agnes Rivers pleaded. "Only wait, and that which is to be will surely declare itself. I would so gladly stay—or gladly take you with me, going; but I can do neither, though why, I do not at present fully comprehend."

She turned, and for a moment stood facing the sunlight, bright in its royal brightness, looking out on the fair, summer landscape, an infinite hope and yearning in her lovely face. Then she folded her hands high upon her bosom—slightly ruffling the smooth surface of her dainty, muslin cape—bowed her head meekly as in worship, and moved away. As she passed, Laurence—standing a little behind her—for the first time heard the soft sound of her rapid footfall, and the whisper of her silken gown.

The young man, too, worshipped the rising sun after his manner—a manner, it must be admitted, by no means of the meekest. The room was empty, but he did not greatly care, for his great purpose seemed so close upon consummation. The crisis was very near now. Before that splendid, June sun rose to-morrow—so he told himself—his work would be complete. She was so nearly human, his dear fairy-lady; her pure spirit so strangely, yet sensibly, in process of clothing itself with sweet, living flesh. He would set bread and wine before her, in the small hours when this bright day was dead. She should eat and drink of a sacramental feast, designed to secure, not eternal life to the soul, in this case, but mortal life to the beautiful, young body which he so desired and loved.



Thus did Laurence Rivers hail the sunrise, filled with an immense pride of his own action, his own will, and the powers of his race, deeming himself a worker of miracles and equal of the immortal gods.

## XXII

Laurence swung himself down from the high, two-wheeled dogcart at the front door. The sky was lowering, the evening sultry after a burning day. Down in the south-east a storm was brewing, with low mutterings of thunder. The air was curiously still, yet now and again, among the thick foliage of the limes and chestnuts, a few leaves would flutter tumultuously as though stricken with panic, and then become motionless as suddenly and causelessly as they had become agitated. Laurence was late and had driven home rapidly, not sparing his horse—a young, thorough-bred brown, which he had bought about a fortnight before, and which was new as yet to harness. It was all of a lather and sweat, and stood with outstretched neck and open, heavily-breathing nostrils. He looked at it with a slight sense of compunction, and gave some orders to the groom. It was a little hard to have pressed the poor beast; but he had been out all the afternoon, mapping out the projected course of the light railway to the Hazledown quarries, with Armstrong and an engineering expert, and he had been kept later than he anticipated. As it was, he had barely time for a bath, and to dress, before dinner at a quarter-past eight. His mind still ran upon questions of gradients and detail of expenditure. He had thrown himself energetically into practical work. It was best to do so, with the climax of his great adventure looming so large just ahead. All day he had been conscious of a quiet, sustained excitement engendered by the double life he was leading. It stimulated the action of his brain. The engineer had warmly approved some of his suggestions and adopted them. This pleased Laurence. It was not a little satisfactory to find himself thus capable and "on the spot," while interests of so very different a character formed the under-current of his thought. It fed self-confidence, and justified his determination of daring action.

After a look, first at the sweating horse and then at the lowering sky, he hurried into the hall. The storm, if it came up at all, would not break yet. Probably it would travel along the northern horizon following the line of the Downs. How hot it was, though! The house felt cool by comparison with the atmosphere outside. Then, just inside the door, the two men-servants met him, Renshaw with a salver in his hand.

"A telegram for you, sir," he said—adding—"do you wish dinner put off for a quarter-of-an-hour or so, sir?"

"No—no," Laurence answered absently, "I shall be down in plenty of time."

As he spoke he tore open the ugly, orange-coloured envelope. The sheet of dirty-pink paper within contained but a few words.

"Wanted here immediately. Return next steamer. Virginia."

Laurence bathed, dressed, dined, while at intervals the thunder muttered far away in the east, and the dark came swiftly as with great strides. In the centre of the table the

cut-glass bowl, upheld by the dancing, golden figures, again to-night, as on the second night of Laurence's visit to Stoke Rivers—which now seemed such an incredibly long time ago—held fantastic, single flowers and sprays of orchids, some mottled, warty, toad-like, some tiger-coloured striped with black. These last gave off a heavy, musky scent. The oppressive heat, too, was suggestive of that earlier evening,—though the windows now stood wide open. But then, whatever the discomfort of his physical sensations, Laurence had been light-hearted enough. His life, if not particularly full of purpose, had at least been free of entanglement. He had neither climbed heights nor sounded depths. His honour was untarnished, by so much as a questionable thought. Now the splendour of life had got him, he was in the full swing of his great opportunity; but his conscience was not clear as at that former period, and that—which seemed not a little ironical—though he had lived more austere than of old, abjuring all frivolity and denying himself all bodily indulgence.

Laurence juggled neither with himself or with the facts of the case. He did not whimper or grumble. In accepting the risks of his own action, he had of necessity accepted this one. It was just the fortune of war—not an altogether pretty fortune for a man who plumed himself on a nice taste in matters of honour, perhaps, but that was hardly to the point. The present position was an inevitable consequence of all which had preceded it, and was bound to present itself sooner or later. Remorse and anger were alike futile and out of place. The question resolved itself into this—what to do next?

Laurence dropped the stump of his cigarette into his finger-bowl, and sat resting his elbows on the table and his forehead in his hands, thinking.—For Virginia meant what she said. Of course she did. Virginia always meant what she said, sometimes a little more—certainly never less. And her reasons for saying that which she said were always perfectly convincing to herself. Virginia was never impulsive; her action was always the outcome of intention. Therefore it was useless to temporise or ask explanations by means of that far-flashing cable. In her letters Virginia had lately commented upon the length of his absence—quite good-temperedly. Virginia was always good-tempered; partly, perhaps, because she had never had occasion to learn what opposition meant. This telegram was her ultimatum; but whether delivered of her own free will and initiative, or in deference to some unusual circumstance, illness, accident, or sudden financial crisis, he could not, of course, divine. Yet even so, the position remained very simple. There were but two paths. One or other he must choose. Either he must obey her, and that unquestioningly and directly—this was Thursday, the next American mail left Liverpool at the end of the week—or he must refuse; and that, he believed, meant a break with Virginia.

Laurence remained very still for a time. A break with Virginia?—Yes; the storm was working round by the north as he had anticipated.—He had no complaint to make against Virginia, Heaven forbid! She was just precisely that which she had always

been—in her own sphere and connection, from the modern and mundane point of view, an eminently and admirably clever person. He agreed with her disciple, Mrs. Bellingham, that in social affairs she possessed a *savoir faire* and intelligence amounting to positive genius. She was absolutely self-reliant. She had never been surprised or nonplussed in all her life, and—and—

Laurence rose to his feet, crossed the room and rang the bell. His face had grown singularly hard. It bore but slight resemblance to that of his namesake, the gallant and debonair young Laurence Rivers of the Cosway miniature. Indeed, his eyes were coldly brilliant, his lips almost as thin as those of Montagu Rivers, his uncle, but lately dead.—Well, he proposed to enlarge Virginia's experience. He proposed to surprise, to nonplus her. It was a blackguardly thing to do, and she, of all women, would be the last to forgive it. So much the better, he did not want her to forgive it. He proposed to repudiate Virginia, he proposed to desert her—and then, fortunately, the American divorce laws are easy.

When Renshaw answered the bell he said—

"Leave the fruit and wine on the table, and bring an uncut loaf of new, white bread. Don't sit up. I shall be late, and I wish to have the house to myself to-night."

## XXIII

Pulling out the heavy curtain, Laurence paused, for an unwonted sound saluted his ears, to which, at first, they refused credence. He opened the door quietly. The sound continued. The keys of the piano were struck so softly that they gave forth little more than the echo of a melody. His fairy-lady sat at the instrument; and, so absorbed was she in the making of this dainty music, that the young man had crossed the room and leaned his elbows on the edge of the flat piano-case opposite to her before she looked up at him. Nor, meeting his eyes, did she leave playing, but let her fingers still draw forth that procession of slender phrases from the discoloured, ivory notes—phrases not only exquisitely refined, but with a tremulous *coquetterie* in them, the music of some polite and graceful minuet, in which Boucher's fine fanciful, little figures of lover and mistress, courtier and prince, painted upon the satin-wood *escritoire*, might have moved and postured, with a hundred pretty arts and invitations at the court of Louis the Fifteenth, over a century ago.

The fine-drawn, little melody, and all its suggestions of past intrigues, heart-burnings, elegant if questionable joys, and luxurious living, knocked at the door of the listener's heart with rather perilous pathos, notwithstanding his stern humour. Agnes Rivers's eyes too, as she looked steadily at him, were at once grave with thought and beseeching as those of a child, covetous of a possible pleasure, yet ready to swallow its poor tears should that pleasure be denied. Her lips were parted, but she did not speak. She only gazed and gazed at him—while still calling forth those frail and courteous harmonies—as though she sought to penetrate the most hidden recesses of his nature.

And all this worked strongly upon Laurence, stirring in him memories of just such hot evenings, when, with windows set wide upon the fragrant garden, and the wild brightness of the summer lightning pulsing—as now—upon the far horizon, they had sat together making music, she and he, nearly a hundred years back. That first love of theirs had been shattered by cruel calamity of wounds and death. It had never found its consummation; and now the ache of its frustration was added to the ache of the present—of his passion so strongly held in check during the last many weeks; of his long-sustained effort, now touching on attainment; of his so recently made resolution to let honour go by the wall rather than again be defrauded of his love.

At length he could no longer endure the playful, yet in a way tragical, music, nor the sustained scrutiny of those grave yet wistful eyes.

"That's enough, Agnes; that's enough," he cried, and, leaning across the case of the piano, laid hold on her hands and raised them off the keyboard. And as he did so the blood leapt in his veins, for the fact was no longer open to question—those hands were firm and softly warm as a living woman's hand should be, and the clasp of them

met and clung in his. He drew her up, making the sweet musician stand opposite to him, while, bending down, he kissed and kissed those dear, warm hands, looking at her, his face on a level with hers. And as he did so her cheeks lost their waxen pallor and became beautifully flushed with clear colour, while—so it seemed to him—he could hear the beating of her heart. And thus for a space they stood speechless, consumed by a very ecstasy of love.

Laurence was the first to break that enchanted silence. For he was feverish to complete the working of the miracle—to establish her in this earthly life upon which she was re-entering, to chain her spirit to this recovered human body by some corporeal act. He was feverish to set a seal upon her new condition, which it should not be possible for her to evade or to break.

"The perfect hour has come," he said, with fierce exultation. "Do you understand what has happened? You asked me once what was lacking. Well, that which was lacking has been restored to you. But it won't do to rest here. We must go on, go forward, so as to make security doubly secure."

Yet she sighed, turning her face away and gently releasing her hands from his grasp.

"Ah! the perfect hour has come—yes," she said. "But, dear Laurence, it came once before, and, remember, along with it came the call for you to depart. Sorrow trod hard on the heels of joy; and I fear—how can I do otherwise?—lest it should do so again to-night."

Laurence felt his throat go dry and his lips stiffen, so that speech did not come quite readily.

"It lies with you to prevent that catastrophe," he answered. "Only be brave. Do as I ask you, and we can put all fear behind us for ever and a day. All the world may call me; I shall not go. It may howl at me, even, using foul names; but what does that matter? I have chosen. I abide by my choice."

As he spoke she moved a little further from him, while the thunder growled and muttered in the north, and the lightning showed fitfully, as with the glare of a burning town, low down in the night sky.

"What has taken you, Laurence?" she asked. "You are strange in manner and in voice. I hardly know you thus. Yet indeed I would do anything you ask, however difficult, if that which you would have me do is not in itself sinful or wrong."

"And this is right," he declared; "incontestably, everlastingly right. Indeed, it is little more than bare justice—the restitution of that which was once ours, the paying of a long-owed debt. In past years happiness was snatched from us by jealous fate. Fate

has repented—though late—and gives us back our happiness. We should be fools not to take it."

He stood by her holding out his hand, his eyes alight as with a dull flame, the determination of conquest very forceful in him.

"See," he said hoarsely, "I have loved you back into life again, Agnes; and so your life belongs to me as no woman's life has ever belonged to a man before. That which I ask, you must do; for, believe me, I comprehend this matter and all the issues of it best."

He led her towards the door and she came meekly, yet with a certain wonder and reserve in her bearing, as one who ponders and questions silently even while they obey. He threw the door wide open revealing the back of the leather-lined curtain. But on the threshold she hesitated and drew back.

"I have never crossed this," she said with gentle decision. "I cannot cross it."

"But you must cross it," he answered, "or all is lost."

A strong shuddering ran through her. The corners of her sweet mouth turned down and quivered, while her hand grew very cold.

"Ah, me! ah, me! my love," she cried, "then I fear indeed all must needs be lost. For to cross this threshold is to force some barrier which I have neither the strength or the right to force. I do not know its name, but it is ancient and venerable, and forbids my passage with authority."

"All the more shall you force it then," Laurence replied. "Just now, sweetheart, I tell you I admit no authority but my own. And barriers are made to be forced, that's the use of them. The more apparently ancient and venerable, the more must they go; so that the new may supersede the decrepit and old, truth may supersede superstition, hope fear, and the living the dead."

He laughed a little, partly in defiance of that more sane and modest self of his, with whom for the time being he had parted company, partly to rally his dear companion's courage, and compel her faltering steps.

"Come," he said; "don't I love you better than my own soul? Would I, of all men, do you any injury, do you think? Surely you can trust me—come."

But still that strong shuddering ran through her and she hung back. Then Laurence lost patience.

"You foolish child," he said, "you are very much a woman. Your words are so wise; yet you prove so weak in action and scare yourself with self-invented terrors."

He set his back against the heavy curtain, pushing it outward. Then he took her delicate body in his arms, lifted her over the threshold, and set her feet on the crimson carpet of the sombre and stately corridor without. The curtain swept back into its place across the door with a dull thud, which mingled ominously with the muttering thunder. Against the panes of the long range of windows the lightning peeped and flickered, as in malicious curiosity of that going forward within, while the Roman emperors looked on, supercilious, impassive, with sightless, marble eyes. His fairy-lady's delicate body had been light as a feather, so light that, lifting it, Laurence had trembled lest it should slip out of his encircling arms, as the little summer winds might slip should one strive to embrace them; and yet that same lifting of her had taxed every muscle in his frame, and set his heart thumping like a steam hammer. It was the very oddest sensation, suggesting that there was something very much more than a narrow piece of polished, oak flooring and deep, pile carpet to lift her across. He stood now, breathless, singularly shaken by the effort, notwithstanding his natural vigour and physical strength—shaken, yet triumphant.

"There, my beloved," he cried, "there! It's not such a very dangerous experiment after all, you see, to go out at an open door!—And now you are redeemed from slavery, free to range the pleasant earth at will and accept all the glad chances of it."

But she shrunk against him, trembling, all her pretty pride humbled, like that of a little child detected in a fault. Her countenance had become shy and wild, moreover, and clear reason had ceased to sit enthroned in her serious and lovely eyes. She looked now, as she had looked on the night he first found her flitting to and fro in the yellow parlour, searching, searching, vainly and hopelessly, for the lost key of the satin-wood escritoire. And Laurence, seeing her thus, was smitten with self-reproach and alarm. Was it possible that, along with the restoration of her body, had returned that alienation of mind from which—as he had learned from her own testimony, and from the well-authenticated tradition of Armstrong, the agent—she had formerly and so pitifully suffered? As more than once before, an immense compassion filled the young man; so that, coaxing her, and using tender and endearing names—such as even the wisest of lovers weakly decline upon at times—he half-led, half-carried her past the doorways of all those brightly-lighted, silent rooms, through the square hall—its flying staircase gleaming upward step above step—until finally the dining-room was reached.

Here the musky odour of the tiger-coloured orchids met them, with the effect, as it seemed, of a presence rather than a scent. It was full of subtle suggestions, that seeming presence, wooing them with insidious provocations of sense to partake of the mysterious, sacramental feast set out before them—a feast designed to wed, irrevocably, the sweet spirit to its so lately recovered body, and rivet upon it once again not only the natural joys, but the inevitable cares and pains, all the grievous burdens of mortal life.



The cloth had been withdrawn and upon the dark surface of the bare table, doubled by vertical reflections, a service of costly china, antique silver, and fine glass, was spread. Rare wines filled the long-necked bottles and quaint high-shouldered decanters; while the painted and gilded dishes held velvet-skinned, hot-house peaches, red-gold nectarines, little black Italian figs, and pyramids of fragrant strawberries set in a fringe of fresh and lustrous leaves. The loaf of white bread was there also, a simple and humble item offering something of contrast to its ornate surroundings.

Laurence placed his fairy-lady in the carven armchair at the head of the table. Seated there, her slight figure, in its high-waisted, rose-red, silken gown and transparent lace and muslin cape, looked singularly youthful and fragile. Her graceful head and white throat showed up against the dark panelling of the wall. Her hands rested languidly upon the arms of her chair. The corners of her mouth still quivered, and her eyes were wide with inarticulate distress. And all the while, opposite to her, in at the windows at the far end of the room, the lightning, away there in the north, peeped evilly and flickered, and sometimes glared, a broad sheet of pale flame, behind the blackness of the distant woods crowning the rounded hills.

Laurence stood close beside her. He filled her glass with wine and placed fruit upon her plate, speaking to her very gently; possessed, meanwhile, by an adoration of her extreme and pensive beauty, a great resolution to complete his work in respect of her, and a distrust lest that work was going sorely amiss. But though he did his best to secure her attention, for many minutes she neither moved nor uttered any sound.

"See, dear love," the young man pleaded—"see, I have made you a dainty supper. Remember, this is the first time I ask you to eat a meal in my house. You were Dudley's guest often enough in old days, and did not refuse what was set before you. Surely it is pleasanter to you to be my guest than his? So do not wander off, even for a little while, to walk those dim and dreary interspaces between two worlds. All that is over. Don't become intangible and remote, or yield yourself to malign influences which would enthrall you and draw you away. Lay hold of your womanhood, sweetheart; and let human love wrap you about, and keep you safe and warm. There is nothing, nothing in all this to fear, if you will but believe me. Eat, my beloved, you have fasted long. You have come from very far—how far heaven only knows! You are faint and weary with the length of the way. Therefore eat, drink—let your body be refreshed and let your heart grow glad."

And presently, while he thus encouraged her, slowly, as one who shakes off the torpor of exhaustion, she stretched, sitting very upright in the great, high-backed chair. The distress and desolation of her expression began to give place to a gentle curiosity. She looked at the costly furnishings of the table, the dancing, golden figures in their flowing robes, the fantastic flowers, the delicious fruits; fingered a silver spoon, and seeing her own reflection in the bowl of it, quaintly distorted, smiled. Then suddenly

putting up both hands and covering her face she gave a quick, little sneeze—sign in the East of Life, but in the West precursor of Death. Of whichever the sign in the present case, incontestible it was, that, with this same little sneeze a change was perceptible in her, which her lover noting, hailed as indicative of success. So he urged her yet more.

"Yes, my beloved, you are tired," he said; "and it is so long since you have sat at table in this room, that very simple things appear perplexing to you. But that's a small matter. The old habits will soon re-assert themselves, and all be natural and obvious enough. For in the coming days I intend we shall very constantly sit here together, you and I; and perhaps others will sit here with us as time goes on"—Laurence paused, his voice shook a little—"our children, fair girls and handsome lads, whom we shall greatly love, and in whose youth our own youth will live again. But to secure all that, Agnes, you must eat and drink now in plain, honest fashion, sleep sound of nights, wake in the kindly sunshine, put morbid fears and fancies far from you and grow strong. You are compounded of too tenuous and sublimated stuff for motherhood as yet. Therefore eat, dear love. Delay no longer. The hours run on towards the morning and this matter must be assured before the morning comes. Do not be wayward. In the name of your love for me, and of all your sorrows, I entreat you, eat and be strong!"

Once again she covered her face with her hand and gave a quick, little sneeze. Then looking full at him, she smiled, though somewhat sadly.

"Let it be even as you wish," she said very meekly. "Give me bread."

Laurence, mightily rejoicing, cut the loaf, and placed the bread upon her plate. Tremblingly, as though putting a great force upon herself, she broke it into little pieces, carried one to her lips, then laid it back beside the others on her plate; next stretched out her hand for the glass of wine her lover held towards her, but shook her head, and set it down untasted. While he, eager to the point of desperation, yet dreading in any way to affright her and so defeat his own ends, fell to coaxing her once more, with a certain playful seriousness.

"See here," he said, "learn by experience. The threshold which you declared impassable was very easily crossed. And this affair of your little supper is exactly parallel. You are the victim of your own imagination. What after all holds you back?"

Once more she essayed valiantly to obey him; but once more laid the morsel of bread down on her plate. The thunder rolled from east to west along the northern heights, and the lightning flickered; but both had grown faint and very distant, while a soft, cool air wandered in at the open window, dispelling the clinging and insidious odour of the orchids, purifying the heavy atmosphere of the room, and lightly stirring the little lace frills of Agnes Rivers's muslin cape.

"What after all holds you back?" he demanded, with some agitation. For that cool draw of air, though pleasant, affected him unexpectedly. It appeared to blow across the valley from Stoke Rivers churchyard, where, in the spring morning three months before, he had watched the little shadows cast by the feathery branches of the age-old yew-trees dance and beckon among the grass-grown graves.

But his fairy-lady pushed her plate aside. All her gentle dignity had returned to her, and a wisdom born of knowledge more profound than that granted to most human creatures sat once again enthroned in her eyes. There was an effulgence in her loveliness which almost awed him, yet she did that which during all their intercourse she had never done before. Calmly, fearlessly, and as of right, she put up her sweet lips and kissed him.

"This holds me back," she said, "that at last all the confusion which oppressed my mind is gone, and that I understand who and what I am. I have striven, and ah! how gladly would I have proved victorious in that strife, for all my heart goes forth in natural desire, not only to obey your dear wishes, but to secure to myself those things which your wishes would bring. I perceive that to eat is to live, not the shadowy, unrelated life of a disembodied spirit, divorced from the activities of earth, yet—by some inherent wilfulness—still so wedded to earth that it cannot enter the peaceful regions of the Faithful Departed. To eat is to live, as you live—and rightly—in the shock and tumult of the world; to love as you love—needs must, dear heart—with all the passions of the unstable flesh, as well as the pure and immutable passion of the soul. I have dallied too long with temptation, and in my weakness brought sorrow on you—perhaps worse than sorrow, disgrace. But the temptation was so potent, the promise of it so enchanting, that, until to-night, I had not grasped its full significance and scope. As to our first mother Eve, ages back, in the mystic garden, so to me to-night to eat, O my love, is sin!"

Laurence straightened himself up, and all the fierceness, the relentlessness of his race, stiffened itself within him; yet he kept himself in hand because love still was paramount to all other emotions.

"And if it be sin, it is too late to vex ourselves about that. You have forced the barrier after all. The curtain, which closes the entrance to your not very cheerful Eden, has swung back into place. I have you, and I keep you. I have fought for you, won you, not wholly without personal loss. So you are to me as the spoils of battle, which a man having taken, is very certainly in no humour hurriedly to give up. And even were this so, had I not these claims on your obedience, to eat, my dear, couldn't be sin. On the contrary, it is bare common-sense—just the next move, logically necessary, in the particularly delicious game which you and I, for cause unknown, are ordained to play together. With logic and common-sense as backers, how can sin have a word to say in the matter?"

"Thus," she answered—"because now as once before, when the perfect hour had come, and things showed so fair that to better them appeared almost impossible, the call has come for you to leave me, and leave me you surely must."

"You are mistaken," Laurence answered hoarsely. "You confuse both the events and obligations of the past with those of the present. The call has not come."

Then Agnes Rivers rose up, pushing the carved chair away from her, and standing with a certain graceful independence before the sumptuously spread table, in the centre of the highly-lighted room, between the open window and the open door. Her person, thus seen, suggested some clear jewel of infinite value in a dark and heavy though splendid setting; or some tender, solitary flower amid the lifeless magnificence of a desert city, rich with the tombs of long-dead kings. A gentle daring, a self-assertion strong as steel yet soft as a silken thread, seemed to animate her whole being.

"Rather is it you that are mistaken," she answered; "but whether with your consent or against it, I cannot tell. It is you that dream just now, my love, and suffer, perhaps subscribe to, delusion—strong man though you are—and I that wake. For the call has come to you; and though you should employ all the eloquence of all the sages to convince me it is otherwise, I could not be convinced."

"You are very stubborn," he said.

"And yet, I spare you," she replied, in a tone of half mirthful, half tender, reproach; "for I only assert the fact. The exact nature of the call I do not know, and I do not ask you to tell it me. I am sufficiently human—you have brought me so far on the backward road, which my naughty feet were only too willing to tread—to greatly long to know the exact nature of that call. Yet, did I know it, I fear it might provoke a wicked spirit of jealousy in me, and of envy towards one who has, in the natural sequence of things, that which I have not, yet fain would have. Therefore do not try me too far, lest my courage fail and I decline from right, and break the perfect circle of our dealings with one another, so painting both past and future with the ugly colours of remorseful regret. You told me you would never leave me again unless I bade you do so. Well, now, the time has come. Redeem your word."

Laurence would have spoken; but, still with that air of almost heavenly mirth, she laid her hand upon his mouth. There was hardly perceptible substance or weight in it; and once again—now with despair, though the sensation was in itself delicious—he felt that fluttering, as of the wings of a captive butterfly, against his lips.

"No, no," she protested, "do not speak, for I am woman enough to be resolved to have the last word. Put away delusion and all extravagance.—Think, after all, what do you leave? Not much, believe me. For I am but a ghost. I have no right to any earthly

dwelling-place, no right to lie in the arms of living man. It would be monstrous, a thing abhorrent to nature, an insult to the awful and unbroken order of cause and effect that has operated from the beginning of being and of time, that I should force the barrier completely, and project myself, at once unburied and unborn, for a second time into the arena of earthly life. It would be an act of rebellion, of self-seeking, beside which that of Lucifer grows pale—for he at least was an archangel, which might give reasonable cause of pride—whereas I?—No, God in His infinite mercy has granted me fulness of understanding just in time; and I have no fear but that, since I voluntarily resign myself, curb my imperious will and forego the desire of my heart, He will further grant me access to that place of refreshment, light, and peace, in which souls wait until their final beatitude. In God's hands are all things, and I now see that behind the loves of earth, just in proportion as those loves are noble and have in them a seed of permanence, stands for ever the love of God Himself, sure and faithful, full of a satisfaction that can never lessen or pass away. I have been blind and very wilful, loving Him too little, loving you too much. But He who made all men and sees how beautiful they are, so that in loving them—they being made in His image—we unconsciously all the while but love His image evident in them—He will surely understand me and forgive."

There Laurence broke in madly—"Ah, stop talking, stop talking! What are words at such a time as this? You are mine by right of conquest, as I have already told you. For God and the eternities I care not, just now, one little bit. You belong to me. I have bought you at a great price. I love you and will enter into possession of my own."

And he essayed to lay hold of her, his blood on fire, for the moment, with frustrated pride, the agony of relinquishment, and passion baulked.

"And I love you too," she answered fearlessly, "so greatly, so absorbingly, that I have broken all bonds of time and space, and defied all laws of life and death, to find you, and behold you, and speak with you again—"

Yet even as she made this declaration, she slipped away from his urgent embrace, even as a rosy snow-wreath slips from the cliff edge, when the sun climbs high in heaven, drawing back to itself, by the power of its strength and heat, snow and vapours, dews and fair, dissolving mists, such as cling at dawn along the water-courses and haunt the quiet underspaces of the woods. There were tears in her sweet eyes, and that airy frame of hers was shaken by sobs; yet her face very brave and of a marvellous brightness.

"Go back to the world, dear love," she said, "and play your part in the great game finely to the close. Let no shame touch you, or breath of dishonour smirch any page of your record. I will go back too—yet rather go forward—reaching a fairer world than yours, a world which in my folly I disdained, being blinded by the things of sense.

There I shall await your coming; and we shall be one at last, being one with Almighty and Eternal God."

She passed from the room; but, though Laurence followed her swiftly, he found the corridor empty. The yellow drawing-room, when he entered it, was vacant too, though retaining its gracious and friendly aspect. A cool wind blew through it, laden with the scent of the rose borders of the Italian garden. The storm was over, and the night sky was clear and very full of stars.

## XXIV

Quite a number of people had come to luncheon. Quite a number still remained, though it was past four o'clock, upon the great, deep-eaved verandah, in attendance on Virginia. There was a babel of clear, penetrating voices, occasionally an outbreak of laughter, though, in point of fact, notwithstanding its ready verbal wit, the New World is less addicted to laughter than the Old. Laurence had listened, had put in a lazy sentence here and there; but now the entertainment began to pall on him slightly. It was too continuous. They were all so young, so emphatic, so tireless in the business of pleasure, these bright, clear-cut, young people. He remembered it was mail day. The English letters and newspapers should have arrived by now. He got up and sauntered, cigarette in mouth, into the great, pale living-room. The Venetian shutters were closed, and the room, with its spare though elegant furniture, and butter-coloured, parquet floor, was full of a clear, green light, quiet, and excellently cool. Sure enough, on one of the tables lay, in goodly array, lately arrived letters and papers. Laurence began opening these in desultory fashion. The glass doors, standing wide on to the verandah, framed Virginia's perfectly finished person lying back in a rocking-chair. Her profile was outlined against a soft, sea-green cushion. She was talking, others were listening, as was usually the case in respect of Virginia. Beyond the hand-rail and uprights of the verandah, could be seen a long sweep of rather coarse grass, and the waters of the river, white in the brilliant, afternoon light, whereon lay some trim rowing-boats and smart pleasure-yachts at anchor. The water was absolutely still, even and gleaming as the surface of a silver mirror; yet it lapped with a just audible gurgle and suck against the indentations of the low, green banks. And this cool, liquid sound formed an agreeable undertone to those clear, penetrating voices, the ceaseless chirrup of crickets and strident fiddlings of countless grasshoppers.

Behind the ample, wide-ranging, wooden house—spotless in its purity of white paint, dignified by its ranges of dark-green, slatted shutters, its grey-brown, shingled roofs, and many gables—a certain puritan simplicity pervading it, somewhat quaintly at variance with its highly-developed appliances of modern comfort, and the almost surprisingly civilised examples of modern humanity now domiciled within it—behind it the ground trended upward, through pleasant orchards of apple, pear, and peach trees, past commodious wooden barns and stables, long, grey snake-fences, and corn patches, where the pumpkins began to grow golden beneath the wide, glistening leaves, the giant cobs and silken tassels of the maize. Down to meet this spacious foreground unencumbered by superfluous detail, wandered the sparse, untamed, ubiquitous woodland of the New England States. Everywhere slender, long-limbed trees, endless scrub, festooning vines, heavy with bunches of little fox-grapes, and below outcroppings of grey rock. Some two months hence, the edge of the woodland would be fringed by spires of golden-rod and processions of purple asters, while the

maples set forth an amazement of verdigris green, lemon-colour, and all manner of radiant pinks and scarlets, and sumach dyed the hollows blood-red; but as yet the woods retained their summer tints. There was a slight want of atmosphere no doubt. The landscape was oddly lacking in values of distance; while the sky was blue to the point of crudity, and the sun blazed, had blazed, would blaze, with a youthful and tireless energy—not unsuggestive of the conversation of Virginia and all those friends of hers—throughout the unshadowed and unmitigated day.

To right and left were other hospitable mansions, the limits of their private grounds unmarked by jealous wall or paling. A wide-ranging spirit of good-nature and confidence appeared to reign; yet, in point of fact, the inhabitants of these agreeable country houses formed a distinctly close corporation. The Van Reenan property had been broken up into building lots on the death of its first owner, old Erasmus Van Reenan, merchant and financier of New York, nearly seventy years ago. But the said lots had been acquired by members of his numerous family; and still Van Reenans, direct and collateral, their children and their children's children, found relaxation at times in this amiable, American Capua. But woe to any intruder from the outer world, unless furnished with irreproachable passport and the very highest of high-class references, who should venture to set sacrilegious foot on this thrice sacred ground! For, as Laurence had frequently reflected—not without a measure of amusement—nothing is so essentially aristocratic as a democratic country, nothing so socially exclusive as an immature civilisation.

It was the first time since her marriage that Virginia had honoured the Van Reenan property with her presence; but being debarred, by the fact of her mourning for her husband's uncle, from participation in the gay life of those summer resorts where the *élite* of the smart world do mostly congregate, she had elected to retire upon one of these many-gabled, ancestral mansions. She was explaining all this—and really it appeared to require a surprising amount of explanation—to Mr. Horace Greener, a young man of distinguished, social pretensions, the constant frequenter of her entertainments both in Newport and New York, who, finding himself obliged to visit the city on business, had sought at once physical refreshment and satisfaction of the emotion of friendship by running out by train, to-day, to visit her.

Virginia's clear intonations rose superior to the chorus of feminine voices around her, their singular vivacity and singular composure alike offering an unconscious challenge to Laurence's mental attitude as he lazily tore open his English letters and newspapers. He had left Stoke Rivers just three weeks, and all that time he had been a prey to vacuity, to a sort of gnawing emptiness. At moments a blind rage took him, but only at moments. In the main his attitude was cynical. Disappointment had embittered him. Nothing mattered much, nothing ever would matter much again. He had had his great chance and lost it, muddled it somehow. A bigger man would have over-ridden the difficulties of the affair. But he was a bungler, a poor creature. He was



profoundly contemptuous of himself, and not a little contemptuous also of men and things.

But here was a thick packet from Armstrong, and that awoke an unexpected interest in him. It would be quite pleasant to have news of the light railway, and the gypsum quarries.—Nice fellow, that young engineer, and not at all conceited. Most experts have such a confoundedly good opinion of themselves!—Laurence fell to whistling softly, and involuntarily he recalled the slender, courtly music of a certain eighteenth century minuet. Then he stopped suddenly, an immense nostalgia taking him for a very different scene and place, and—well, a general outlook less secure and circumscribed, and, he had almost said, trivial. He didn't want to be censorious—who was he, after all, in good truth, to be that?—but Horace Greener's trim, light-clad person, leaning against a pillar of the verandah close to Virginia's rocking-chair, caught his eye. The young man was excellently got up, he was well-bred, agreeable, would pass muster in any society; yet Laurence wearied mightily of him just then—of his neatly handsome features, which would photograph so well and paint so poorly, and of his alert and civil manner.

"No, I imagined you would be surprised to find me so at home in this idyllic and patriarchal *milieu*, Mr. Greener," Virginia was saying. "I rather counted upon that. You did not accredit me with so much adaptability. Some other of my friends have observed upon that also. And I assure you I am rewarded; for I find it the most recuperative process a woman can go through to retire upon herself and upon nature in this way. My parents had been anxious to come out here all summer this year, and when I concluded to join them we worked out a regular scheme. I assure you it has called forth a quite affecting display of family affection. There are nine houses on the place. They are all full. We all meet daily. Even my cousin, Mrs. Bellingham, has come over with her children from Europe.—Yes, I am very glad you should have met Louise again, Mr. Greener. The English life does not altogether suit her. I observed she was wanting at first in animation. It does her good to see old friends. I apprehend she feels rather exiled. I wonder if I shall feel rather exiled? But I don't propose to take it that way. I propose every one there shall feel exiled because they have not had the inestimable advantage of being born on this side. Do you not think that is the true patriotic platform, now, Mr. Greener?"—

There was another letter. Laurence knew the handwriting, but he could couple no name with it. Yet certainly he knew it, and the sight of it conveyed to him an impression vaguely amusing. He laid aside the agent's voluminous packet and opened the envelope.

"Why, the poor little Padre Sahib, to be sure," he exclaimed, half aloud. "Have they been tripping him up with strings again across the school door?"

But as he read, amusement gave place to quite other sentiments. His eyebrows drew together, and his face, for all its healthy sunburn, blanched to the indistinct, dusty grey of his well-cut flannels.

"This very shocking discovery has, as you will, I feel sure, readily conceive, quite unnerved me," wrote Walter Samuel Beal. "But for the support and invaluable advice of the Archdeacon I should have sunk under the burden of responsibility thrown upon me. A case so extraordinary has rarely, if ever, arisen, I should suppose, during the whole history of the Christian ministry. I should add that the oak coffin was so charred at one corner as to reveal a second coffin, composed of lead, within. As the inscription upon the coffin plate was quite legible, and as Mr. Armstrong was in possession of information bearing upon this very painful matter, I abstained from further investigation myself and entreated others also to do so."

"Thank God for that," Laurence muttered.

There was a drawing back of chairs upon the verandah, an outbreak of rapid question and answer, of laughter, reiterated and extensive farewells. Virginia's clear voice still rose dominant. She was marshalling her forces, arranging future meetings, making appointments, ordering her plan of campaign—and outside, all the while, the sun blazed on the surface of the white waters of the river, the ripple lapped against the green, indented banks, the crickets and grasshoppers kept up their strident serenade.

"I felt that neither my courage nor my judgment was equal to the ordeal," wrote the worthy young clergyman. "I dreaded to entangle myself in legal questions of which I virtually know nothing. I can never express the gratitude I owe to the Archdeacon. He advised that the coffin should be placed provisionally in the plot of ground reserved by you in our parish churchyard. He even came over the considerable distance from Bishop's Pudbury, and himself read the shortened form which he had selected from the burial service. For this I was deeply thankful, as agitation might, I fear, have prevented my performing the last solemn rites in a suitably impressive manner—"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Greener, I will go and put on my golfing suit," this vivaciously from Virginia. "It will be cooler in an hour. We shall have the wind off the river.—Willie Van Reenan's theatricals? Yes, I know it, Louise; I am coming to that directly. Now, Mr. Greener, if you will walk over to her house with Mrs. Bellingham, I will drive around and take you on to the links. I will arrange to have Laurence meet us at the club pavilion. And, Louise, when you see Willie tell him he can come right on here after dinner, and I will cast the play with him. We can count on you for Lord Follington, Mr. Greener? Yes—you really are very kind."

Laurence still stood by the table littered with envelopes and papers. He was reading the agent's missive, or rather trying to do so, for the words were not wholly easy to focus. His eyes had a mist before them, and a singular sensation gained upon him—

that of the inherent duality of his being. For some time now he had only been conscious of the existence of the modern Laurence Rivers, wholly and solely the modern Laurence Rivers, and he, baffled and discomfited, by no means at his best. Now that earlier life, the strong emotions and steady purposes of it, crowded in on him calling to and claiming him, until his actual circumstances and surroundings became singularly incredible. The heels of Virginia's very pretty shoes tapped lightly upon the butter-coloured boards of the verandah. She straightened a chair or two, replaced some magazines which slipped from a basket-work lounge on to the floor. Her movements were direct and deliberate; and all the while her trailing skirts made a dragging sound like the wheels of a little cart. In a moment more she would come into the house. The young man tried to pull himself together; but it was so unbelievable to him, just now, this whole matter of Virginia.

He looked across at her, as he might have looked at the merest acquaintance, and found her extremely effective as she came through the cool, green light of the great living-room, her tall, slight, yet rounded figure backed by the untempered brightness of sky and water. Her transparent, black muslin dress was thick with beautiful hand-embroidery upon the tight-fitting sleeves and the shoulders of the bodice. It was girt with a soft, black, chiffon girdle, knotted low down, emphasising the length of the waist, and the spring of the hips—around which her dress fitted very closely. Below the knees her skirts stood away fanwise, over a bewildering arrangement of white, silk kiltings and flounces, which hid her feet and gave a slightly Japanese effect to her costume. Her fair, brown hair was loosely waved and puffed out over the ears. Her eyes, a light hazel, harmonized charmingly with the even tint of her rather sallow skin. Her neck was noticeably long, and her face in shape, colouring, and feature bore an arresting resemblance to that of certain of Botticelli's Madonnas. This, taken in connection with her extremely fashionable attire and her otherwise declared and complete modernity, had in it great piquancy, an element trenching on actual, though unconscious profanity.

To Laurence, looking at her through the eyes of that elder personality of his, these details and these suggestions were conspicuous. She presented a perfect example of an immensely effective type. He recognised that; yet he stared at it in almost desperate wonder, and something approaching hopelessness.

"Why, you are there!" she exclaimed. "I am glad. I wanted you."

"Your people have all cleared out, haven't they?"

"Yes, they have gone. They had a grand time, I believe. I really think it was very well your uncle's death put me into mourning. It has afforded me the opportunity of giving my family a lovely summer. It might have been a catastrophe; I have made it into an occasion. They appreciate that."

Virginia made these statements with evident self-complacency.

"Of course," Laurence said. He still stared at her. She placed her hands on her hips, smoothing down her close-fitting skirt. Her hands were very small. Much art had been expended upon the finger nails.

"I think it was perfectly sweet of Horace Greener to come right on and see me," she continued. "It was like a breath of air from the outside. And I was glad he should know how finely everything was going. I think they all thought I might feel a little left over. He knows now it is they who are left over.—Laurence, you must hurry. I arranged you should be at the club pavilion in an hour. I have to change my dress; but if it should still be very hot I will not play. I will have you take my place."

"Horace Greener is a charming fellow," he answered, "all the same I'm afraid I can't play golf with him this afternoon."

"But I told him you would do so," Virginia rejoined, with absolute assurance. "It is settled. I never go back on an engagement."

"Ah! but I'm afraid I do," Laurence said. "Specially in the case of engagements about the making of which I have not been consulted."

So far the young lady had been occupied with her own conversation and her own person to the exclusion of any particular observation of her companion. Now she deigned to regard him more closely.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, "you appear to me to be looking pretty wretched."

"Upon my word I believe I am pretty wretched," Laurence answered, smiling. "My home letters have brought me some news I don't in the very least like. It entails a journey to England. And instead of playing golf with Horace Greener, I must take the seven o'clock train to New York, and see if there is a decent state-room vacant on any of the outward-bound liners."

It was, in a way, characteristic of Virginia that her face, notwithstanding her natural vivacity, possessed no great mobility or range of expression. There were such a number of emotions she had never been called upon to entertain. And now no movement of appeal or regret crossed it. It merely hardened a little, becoming as serenely obstinate as heretofore it had been serenely complacent. She spoke with exactly the same conviction and assurance.

"But you cannot do that," she said.

"Oh, yes, but indeed I can," Laurence replied quite good-temperedly. He felt so singularly unrelated to her, that assertion was sufficient. It did not enter his head to protest or argue.

"You misunderstand," she said; "it is that I do not intend to have you do it."

He paused a moment, making an honest effort to range himself in line with her thought.

"Oh, come along," he began. But the young lady interrupted him with the same unwavering composure—

"You place me in an objectionable position," she declared, "by forcing me to explain. That is not considerate. You should meet me half-way; you should be beforehand so as to secure me against the annoyance of referring to all that. I had determined to sink it. But you make that impossible. It is derogatory to me to explain."

Laurence sat down on the arm of the nearest chair. He felt curiously helpless, and yet all the while he was getting the bit between his teeth. If obstinacy was about, well, he had his share of it. Across the Atlantic matters of such profound moment were awaiting him. It was difficult to reckon seriously and courteously with this unlooked-for opposition, and not to brush it impatiently aside. It seemed little short of ridiculous.

"I give you my word, Virginia, I don't know what you are talking about," he said. "I have the most cogent reasons for going over—you haven't given me an opportunity of stating them yet, but that doesn't alter the fact. It is necessary I should go; and after all, you know, I am not such a conceited ass as to imagine you can't do without me for three weeks or so."

"I am not thinking of myself, I am thinking of others," she remarked, with a certain *naïveté*.

Laurence smiled.

"Oh, in that case I can book my passage with a clear conscience," he said.

But the young lady continued:—

"It is extraordinary to me how little regard you have for appearances. Comments were made upon the length of your former absence. They came round to me. That was not to be endured in the case of my husband. I put a stop to all that by cabling for you."

"Ah! yes, I see," Laurence said slowly. "When I arrived there certainly seemed no very obvious reason for the sending of that cable. That was unlike you. When I thought of it I confess I was puzzled."

"If you leave again after so short a stay, it will give colour to those comments." Virginia spoke with emphasis, almost with solemnity. "I do not propose to submit to that. So you must choose, Laurence. Either you must give up going, or you must wait

till it is convenient to me to go with you. I do not care for a summer voyage; it is dull. Between the seasons nobody one ever heard of is crossing. One may meet the wrong people. My leaving would cause great disappointment here. It would break up their summer. Still I would risk that to avoid the other. It would be a scramble too, and nothing is more annoying than a scramble, but I dare say I could arrange to be ready in two weeks from now."

"That's very good of you," Laurence replied. "But unfortunately I must go at once, and, pardon my saying so, it will be better for me to go alone. Everything is at sixes and sevens. Confusion reigns at Stoke Rivers. I would not take you there under existing circumstances. You'd receive a quite wrong impression. Oh, it would be utterly disastrous!" he exclaimed.

For the first time he beheld Virginia depart from her faultless self-complacency, lose herself a little and display signs of anger. Her chin went up with a quick jerk, her eyes flashed, her features seemed for the moment swollen. This shocked him, it was so wholly unprecedented. He felt very sorry, as though he had been careless and clumsy, as though he had broken something hitherto flawless, and therefore charming, if not of supreme intrinsic value.

"I begin to believe," she cried, "you have an intention I shall never see Stoke Rivers at all."

"No, no, my dear," he answered rapidly, rising as he spoke. "Nothing of the kind. You are very distinctly mistaken. I have never been more ready that you should see Stoke Rivers than within the last hour—that is, when Stoke Rivers is fit to be seen. The poor, old house seems to have been in jeopardy of final disappearance about a week ago. There's where my bad news comes in. They write me word of a nasty fire there. Nobody's fault—an electric light wire heated, and not being properly cased charred some of the panelling which finally caught alight. The house has been kept at such a high temperature for years, that the woodwork is like so much tinder."

Virginia's chin was still in the air, but she had in great measure recovered her self-control. Her manner was rather elaborately cold.

"That is a pity," she said calmly. "But, of course, the house and its contents are insured."

"Oh, yes, the loss is more a matter of sentiment than of money. Only one room is burnt out, as far as I can gather; and it didn't contain any very valuable pictures, or any part of my uncle's collection."

"Probably it is as well this fire occurred, then," Virginia observed. "I have always supposed Stoke Rivers would need some reconstruction before it came up to the level of modern requirements."

"Possibly—" he spoke rather drily. "Only, you see, I happened to entertain a peculiar fondness for this particular room, and I am sorry to part with the outward and visible signs of certain memories."

The young lady did not answer immediately, but examined the dial-plate of the little watch, set in diamonds, upon her wrist.

"The carriage will be here," she said. "I have not time to change my dress. I cannot play golf with Horace Greener. It is very embarrassing. I have no valid excuse to offer him."

"Oh, the heat, my dear, the heat," Laurence said, smiling. "Any excuse is valid if you make it with sufficient conviction."

Virginia looked hard at him.—"I wonder just what you mean by that," she retorted. She put up her hand, puffing her hair out a little more over her ears. "That fire was not very serious on your own admission," she continued, "I cannot see that it necessitates your hurrying over with this frantic haste. And if I am to live in it it would be desirable I should overlook the reconstruction of the house myself."

Her tone was meditative. Her statements were concise. Laurence felt his back against the wall. He must take the consequences of his own action however distasteful and disagreeable. His course would have been very obvious had his record been quite clean in regard to Virginia; but, he was an honest man. Something of exquisite, of incalculable value had tempted him; and the peculiarities of his temperament had heightened that temptation. He had been saved from falling, not by his own virtue, but by the virtue and self-sacrifice of one adorably his superior. He could not plume himself upon the achievement. He acknowledged that his conscience was not clear in respect of Virginia; and this necessitated the payment of a heavy penalty in connection with his own self-esteem. His pride rebelled against "giving himself away," against further self-revelation; only, the logic of the situation prevailed. It cut him to the quick, yet it had to be done.

"You're quite right," he said. "The matter of the fire could have waited a little, I dare say, though it isn't exactly satisfactory to know part of one's house is roofless under a wet, English, July sky; but I had other bad news to-day." He paused a moment. "I heard of the funeral of a very dear connection of mine."

Virginia moved slightly, sweeping those fanwise-cut flounces to one side.

"Funeral?" she said quickly. "Really you have the very oddest manner of statement. Had you not already heard of his death, then?"

The young man moved too. He turned away, and a poignant sensation tore and hacked at him, so to speak. It hurt him physically. He gazed out over the dazzling whiteness

of the smooth river seeing nothing, his whole being tense with the effort to resist the showing of that pain.

"Yes, yes, I have heard of her death, but I refused to believe it," he answered.

There was a moment of ominous silence, save for the shrilling of the insects, and lapping of the stream.

"Oh, a woman!" she said, with an almost alarming calm. "Have I ever heard of her?"

"I think not," Laurence answered.

"Then Louise had grounds for her assertions," she said, still with that deadly calm. "I thought it unworthy to listen. I forbade her to write or speak to me upon the subject. I—"

Laurence wheeled round. His eyes were dangerous. All the fanaticism of his race, and something finer than that, looked out of them.

"Think what you please of me," he cried; "but of her, think no evil. Never dare to think any evil. She was one of the saints of God; and you, of all women, have no cause to misjudge her. She saved me from committing a great sin."

A singular expression crossed the young lady's face, an imperious desire to ask, to search out the ultimate of the matter. But it was momentary. Spoilt child of fortune, she was too unaccustomed to vital drama to know how to deal with it. It staggered, it also slightly disgusted her. She could not rise to it. So conventionality proved stronger than even this very legitimate curiosity. Virginia remained true to her somewhat artificial traditions, to her own canons of good taste and self-respect, to that singular clause of the social creed which declares the thing unsaid also non-existent. Virginia appeared, in a way, admirable just then, yet she gave the measure of her nature. It was not great. She turned aside, with a movement of well-defined and lofty superiority.

"Are you aware that you become very indelicate?" she asked.

"Most men are indelicate at times, unfortunately."

"But not over here," she said. "American women do not permit that. You must remember whom you have married."—She waited a little. "The English standards are different, I presume," she added, not without a touch of sarcasm.

"I begin to think they are," Laurence answered.—He was paying, paying abominably; yet there was a sensible relief in so doing.—"They are based on the logic of fact," he continued. "And fact is more often indelicate than not. It has never yet, you see, learned to be a respecter of persons."



There was a pause, in which once again the fiddlings of the grasshoppers and soothing lap of the water became audible.

"Do you still propose to go to England?"

Laurence nodded. "Yes," he said.

"Then"—began Virginia; but the young man held up his hand, partly in warning, partly demanding a cessation of hostilities. His thought had taken a new departure in regard to his wife. Somehow she had destroyed her own legend. She was more slight and shallow a creature than he had supposed, and he would never really stand in awe of her again. His smile was sad yet wholly friendly.

"Then—in a couple of weeks or so—I shall come back and fetch you," he declared. "And then, like wise and politic human beings, we will eschew controversy, each giving the other as much room as possible. I fancy you'll find we shall shake down pretty easily, and rub along like most other married people.—Meanwhile what's becoming of poor, neglected Horace Greener? Go and amuse both yourself and him, my dear. If you're not in before I start—well—for the moment, *addio*."

## XXV

It was all very much in keeping with his mood—the reposeful landscape, heavy with the solid green of the August foliage, the sweep of the low, grey sky, the warm, still rain which drew forth an indefinable fragrance from the pastures and hedgerows, the wayside flowers, and the underwood. Already the evenings had begun to shorten. The rambling village-street and its inevitable commotion of boys and dogs left behind, Laurence looked away, with a stirring of the heart, over this goodly land of which he was owner, as the brown thorough-bred breasted the hilly road leading up from the station to Stoke Rivers house. The prospect at once soothed and stimulated him. Emotion had been conspicuous principally by its absence lately; it was pleasant to feel again.

At the hall-door the two men-servants met him; and Renshaw's large, egg-shaped countenance bore an expression almost paternal.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, his complexion ripening to mulberry with the effort of speech—"I do not wish to put myself forward, or go beyond my place, but I must express the pleasure we take in welcoming you home, sir. I speak not only for myself, but for Mr. Lowndes and Mr. Watkins, and all the other servants—both upper and under, sir."

Lowndes, the grey-haired, long-armed valet, subsequently gave vent to even more cordial sentiments.

"Excepting for the fire, we have been very dull during your absence, sir," he said, as he laid out the young man's dress clothes, with a critical eye to their packing which did not evidently quite commend itself to his taste. "Living in this house has been like living inside a run-down clock. I hope you have returned to make some stay, sir. We want a head; we have forgotten how to take a holiday and amuse ourselves. Our habits have been so very regular for so many years, you see, sir, we feel lost without our accustomed duties."

This too was pleasant. To be precious in the sight of those who serve you lends a singular graciousness to the conduct of daily life. Laurence felt at harmony with himself and his surroundings, and with that sense of harmony arose certain stirrings of hope. During the days and nights of the past week, while the great ship ploughed her way eastward across the mighty ridge and furrow of the Atlantic, he had not been wholly unconscious of that hope—the hope that even now all might not be over, and that he might once again be blessed by the vision, for however brief a space, of his dear fairy-lady. Yet he had kept that hope under with a stern hand. It was present, but at the postern gate, so to speak, of the castle of his reason and his will. He kept it there, doing his heart much violence by refusing it admittance and entertainment,

since he knew that, once admitted, it would have proved so dangerously absorbing and alluring a guest. He tried to deny it admittance still; yet he shuffled a little with his own conscience, permitting himself a renewing of the routine which had marked his former sojourn at Stoke Rivers. He dressed, dined, and waited until the twilight had very sensibly closed in before visiting that which might remain of the room of mysterious and enchanted meetings.

The near end of the corridor offered no noticeable signs of disturbance or injury. Still it appeared to Laurence that, as on a former occasion, a spirit of disorder, the winnowing wings of a profound and elemental fear, had but lately swept through it. He could have imagined the sightless, marble faces of the Roman emperors less impassive, less wholly scornful, their heads carried with something less of arrogant and invincible pride. An acrid odour of burned stuffs, burned woodwork, pervaded the place. He had cabled instructions that nothing might be removed, nothing renovated before his arrival. The tapestry curtain still hung in its accustomed position; but it was blackened and shrivelled to the obliteration of the figures wrought upon it. The satyr no longer leered, from his monticule, upon the naked and reluctant woman hurried towards him by the company of naughty loves. Tongues of fire had licked away that pictured wantonness and purged its offence.

Behind the wreck of the *portière*, the door—its panels split and tormented by flame—stood wide open, as on the night when, straining every muscle to carry that apparently so light and fragile burden, Laurence had lifted Agnes Rivers across the threshold. Once within the yellow drawing-room the desolation of that heretofore gracious and friendly apartment touched hard on tragedy, seen, as now, in the furtive, evening light. The rain had ceased, and through the remaining sheets of glass, in the partially boarded and barricaded bay-window, the flower-beds of the Italian garden showed in rich variety of leaf and blossom. The statues gleamed calm and graceful from their white pedestals. The spires of the cypresses rose with a certain velvet softness of density towards the pensive and slowly clearing sky. But the room itself was ruined in most unsightly fashion, stained by smoke, rendered clammy and dank in places by water. Wreckage of the pretty, costly furniture lay scattered in formless heaps upon the blackened floor—with here and there a shred of fine porcelain, the gilt handle of a drawer, the pages of a book reduced to tinder, or the unlovely remnant of carpet or hanging. It was as a place that has suffered siege, and which relentless foemen have sacked and trodden underfoot. So that it came to Laurence, very surely, that not here would he find his sweet fairy-lady, were he indeed destined, in this life, ever to find her again. Her gentle spirit could never be subjected to the indignity of dwelling amid this scene of destruction. Some incongruities are inadmissible to the imagination. They are too violent, too gross. Therefore the days of his beloved companion's pilgrimage were ended—it could not be otherwise—in respect of this once so comely place.

But though convinced that here it was useless to await her presence, there remained somewhat for Laurence in all tenderness and reverence to see. Since the electric light was now unavailable, he had ordered candles to be placed upon the chimney-piece, which, though yellow and disfigured, still remained practically intact. He moved across from the neighbourhood of the doorway—sad, little clouds of corpse-coloured ashes arising about his feet as he stepped—and put a match to the candles. Then, as the light of them strengthened and steadied, he looked, shading his eyes with his hand, towards that portion of the wall at right angles to which the painted, satin-wood escritoire, with all its pathetic store of cherished love-tokens, had formerly stood. The high wainscot and brocade-covered panels masking this space had been entirely burned away, disclosing a low, vaulted chamber hollowed out of the thickness of the outer wall. This chamber had been roughly and somewhat clumsily ceiled. The whole construction showed unmistakeable traces of hasty and unskilled labour.

Yet Laurence looked at this rough-hewn place of sepulture with an infinite tenderness, a chastened reverence, while a very vital emotion clutched at his throat, and far-reaching questions of life past, life future, and the august purposes of being through the abyss of the ages and on to the ultimate goal of things, held and sifted his intelligence and his heart. For it was here, upon the morning following the fire, that Agnes Rivers's coffin had been found. And it was from here, from this hard and narrow bed—by what alchemy and agency he knew not—it transcended his powers to conceive—that her sweet ghost had come forth nightly, through all those long and dreary years of which it sickened him to think, flitting impalpable, in vain endeavour to find the key to her little treasure chest, that was also the key to the love she had so pathetically lost. And it was here also, to this same hard and narrow bed, that she had returned with quick and innocently gladsome farewells in the first flush of returning day, when that love, by unprecedented circumstance—circumstance trenching on actual miracle—had been restored to her.

Viewing that harsh and meagre resting-place which for the better part of a century had held all that remained of her dear body, Laurence felt himself strangely reconciled to actual happenings. For it was better, ten thousand times better, that all now subsisting of her mortal investiture should rest in Mother Earth's lap—blessed and set apart by the faith and piety of ages as was that pleasant plot of sun-visited grass, where the little shadows danced and beckoned, in the age-old quiet of Stoke Rivers's churchyard. There he would go and watch for her possible coming, and pay her the homage of his devotion, when the small hours drew on towards to-morrow's dawn.

Meanwhile there was time to be passed, and he did not care to leave this spot, though its present desolation tore at his very vitals, with memories of incalculable promise, and of unconsummated delight. As, awakening from his dream of satisfied love long ago, during that strange former existence, in the summer noon under the light, sibilant shelter of the lime grove, so now he hungered for completeness of possession, for the

crowning of desire. Yet he kept himself in hand, even as he had kept the young, brown, thorough-bred horse in hand, when, finding the level, would have broken its pace and run riot more than once on the road up from the station. He moved away and sat down on the defaced and ragged sill of the bay-window. The moon had risen, but its mild light was often obscured by softly-moving floats of thin, opalescent vapour. These crossed its face in apparently endless procession, herded up from southward and the narrow Channel sea. Laurence watched them, at first almost unconsciously, his mind occupied with other, and, to himself, more immediate and vital interests. But at length their slow and stately progress began to work upon his imagination, and insinuate itself into the very substance and foundation of his thought. He began to see in them a procession of the souls of all those generations of men and women, whose efforts and emotions, power of intellect, fiercely pursued ambitions, passionate devotions, passionate revolts, had gone to generate his own constitution, mental and physical, and determine his ultimate fate. And so he came to regard them with a sustained and deepening attention, since their aspect seemed pregnant with suggestion of admonition, of encouragement, of warning, or restraint. Once again he decided to keep vigil in this house, to watch with the unnumbered and unrecorded dead whose offspring and inheritor he was. Not until all of them should have passed by, and the moon ride solitary in the heavens, would he go across the valley—himself now somewhat bitterly solitary—and visit Agnes Rivers's grave.

But that procession of low-floating vapours proved long in passing. More than once a break came in it, making the young man suppose that the whole of them was gone by. And then again, out of the south, now one alone, now in close ranged companies, strangely shaped, as though draped in dragging shrouds, that interminable procession crossed the vault of the sky. A terror of incalculable number, of unthinkable multitude, began to lay hold on him, as still they came, and came. Was it conceivable that each human life had this almost appalling vista of human lives behind it, of which it was the outcome and result, and in which it had, consciously or unconsciously, taken part? There was a certain splendour in the thought, though it left but little room for personal vanity. Yet even while watching, and pondering of all this, the personal note remained—for he pondered also, not without profound discouragement, of his great adventure which just now appeared so signally to have failed. At the half hours and hours the striking clocks warned him that the night was far spent, but still that endless and mystic procession passed before his watching eyes. As once before, in this same room, his individuality seemed to sink away from him, while a horrible sense of his own nullity and nothingness prevailed. But at last, at last, when the first chill grey of the dawn began just perceptibly to lighten the horizon behind the lime grove, the last of these trailing vapours arose, passed over and disappeared. The moon declined towards her setting, yet, though she hung low, the whole field of heaven was at length her own.

Then Laurence rose, and went away across the quiet park and up the deep, tree-shadowed lane to the churchyard, on the hillside across the valley, sheltered by the bank of high-lying woods. The grass was long, starred with tall-growing buttercups, blue speedwell, and ox-eye daisies, heavy and hanging with wet. Only the plot beneath the grey wall of the little chancel was neatly mown, while, on the near side of it, conspicuous from the smooth surface of the turf rising immediately surrounding it, was a new-made grave. The sods covering it were kept in place by a cage of osier rods. Some one—and Laurence found it in his heart to bless that unknown ministrant—had laid a spray of pink wild-rose upon the head of the grave, twisted into a little crown, at once of blossom and of thorns.

Laurence stood at the foot of the long, narrow mound, and again he kept vigil—hearing the breathing of the moist earth, the quick sounds of the woodland, and that strange, indeterminate, stirring of awakening life—beast, bird, insect, herb, and tree—which immediately precedes the birth of day. More than once his heart thumped against his ribs, and the love-light sprang into his eyes, for, deceived by the growing colour of the east, he fancied for an instant he again beheld the dear rose-red of his fairy-lady's clinging, old-world, silken gown. But that fond delusion was soon dissipated. Wherever her light footsteps might now tread, they would never, in visible fashion, tend earthwards again.

Then on a sudden, from the stables up at the house, came the crowing of a cock, answered in gallant challenge from cottage and from farmyard—growing faint in the far distance, ringing out again close at hand, lusty and vigorous, full of the joy of living. Stung by the merry sound, Laurence straightened himself up, looked away from the osier-bound, rose-crowned grave, over the fertile, peaceful landscape. The hops hung heavy upon the poles. The corn warmed to ruddy yellow. The grass and hedgerows, as the sun's rays touched them, glittered with a thousand diamond points, even as his lost love's little, embroidered slippers had glittered when he first led her forth along the alleys of the Italian garden. A glad wind swept up landward, from that great thoroughfare of the nations, that highway of stately ships, the narrow Channel sea. It raced through the woodland, swayed the sombre, plume-like branches of the ancient yew-trees, and passed, exultant, to fulfil its cleanly, life-giving mission elsewhere. Laurence took a long breath, filling his lungs with it. It was good to taste, sane and wholesome. And then, somehow, those divine words came to him, spoken in the far Syrian country nearly two thousand years ago.—"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

Laurence stood erect and very still, his head held high, his face keen, his lips parted in silent laughter, his whole being vibrant with the surprise of a great conviction, a great discovery. For at length he too saw and understood. He perceived that his love far from being lost was his, close and intimately, as she had never been before, in either

this life, or that other half-remembered life, in both of which he had loved her so well. He perceived that his amazing and desperate experiment, far from being a failure, was on a high-road to a success hitherto undreamed of. He perceived that his splendid adventure, far from being ended, had but just begun; and that, could he but keep faith with his present seeing, it would not end until he too had pushed back the heavy curtain, and finally crossed the threshold of so-called death. Nor would it end even then, were light lived in the light of this his present seeing. The future was illimitable, since the goal of it was nothing less than union with the Divine Principle itself. However innumerable the company of human lives that had gone to produce his own, his individuality was secure henceforth, since he had recognised and embraced the life which alone eternally exists and subsists—the life in, and of, God.

Five months ago, crossing the Atlantic, in the chill of the March night, while the big ship steamed eastward and the stars danced in the rigging as she sunk and swung in the trough and then rose—as a horse at a fence—at the coming wave, he had asked himself the question as to the profit of gaining the whole world, if in so doing a man should lose his own soul. All his experience since then had been a setting of that vital question at rest for ever. For he had found his soul. The matter was simply to the point of laughter, when once apprehended. In bidding him farewell, his sweet companion had promised him that she and he would at last be made one, being one with Almighty God. He had heard that as he might mere rhetoric, idle though pretty words, placing it in some unimaginable future, his mind still in bondage to human conception of time and space. Now he beheld this consummation as already accomplished, immediately present, constant, here, now, permanent. All that it needed was just an attitude and habit of mind, and then work. Work, not so much for any great benefit derivable by others from that work (though the desire of the welfare of others must be a fundamental element in that work); but for the maintenance of the said all-important attitude and habit of mind in himself. Almost any work would do. There was his property; and, happily, sufficient of the feudal idea still remains in England to make the possession of a great landed-estate fruitful in humane relations between class and class. There was the dear earth, too, to till and sow, and render more fertile, and more useful to man. There were politics and public affairs. In the light of his present illumination he dare approach these things, strong to carve out a career for himself, yet for ever keeping his secret against his heart. Salvation is for the individual, each individual must find it for him or herself. Souls cannot be saved in batches. But to each and all it may, and will, come, if they have courage, and fortitude, and the single eye which refuses illusion.

"And so farewell, yet never farewell, my first, and last, and only love," he said, looking at the osier-bound grave, while the shadows of the feathery yew-trees danced and beckoned upon the churchyard grass. "There have been partings before, cruel to be born; there may be partings again, but they will be transitory. I am not afraid that I

shall ever lose you, or you me. I am secure in that. Meanwhile for your sake, O dear soul of me—for so indeed you are—I will make the best use of the years I may still have to live here on earth. And since you once were woman, no woman shall ever suffer at my hands—all womanhood being sacred thenceforth since you once were woman.—Now the work of the world calls, and, God helping me, I will help to do it. After all, dear love, we go forth together,—amen."

There are things Virginia does not quite comprehend in her husband. She tells the Van Reenan family, that "the English character is very obscure." But she has had no more dramatic moments in respect of that character. She pays a long visit yearly to "the other side," and is as popular as ever. On this side too she has had her social triumphs. The yellow drawing-room at Stoke Rivers has been rebuilt, but Laurence keeps it for his own use. He has moved the books into it from the libraries, thus giving Virginia a large suite of rooms for social entertainments. Lately, when the red flame of war threatened the integrity of the British Empire, Laurence went south; and for a time lived that larger life—in which woman takes her place, perhaps her safest one, as a hope or a memory merely—the life a man lives among men. Jack Bellingham volunteered also. He thinks Laurence a better fellow than ever; yet is perplexed at moments as to whether he has, or has not, developed—like so many of his family—into a thorough-paced crank.

**THE END**

**Freeditorial** 