

THE TERRACES OF NIGHT

IN this unusual collection of stories Miss Margery Lawrence shows her versatility to remarkable effect. It is a long jump from the tragic actuality of *The Madonna of Seven Moons* to this group of admirably written tales of the Occult, but each and all are more than fascinating, and the reader will find himself hard put to it to lay the volume down once he has taken it up.

It would be invidious to make distinctions between any of these most excellent stories, but in particular *The Ikon*, a piece of gravely beautiful fantasy; *Mare Amore*, a tale of the sea that has the tang of blue waters in every line; and that truly magnificent thriller, *The Portrait of Comtesse X.*, stand out among this brilliant collection as especially worthy of note.

By Margery Lawrence

The Madonna of Seven Moons

Snapdragon

Bohemian Glass

etc.

THE TERRACES OF NIGHT

*Being further Chronicles of the "Club of
the Round Table"*

by

MARGERY LAWRENCE

THIRD IMPRESSION



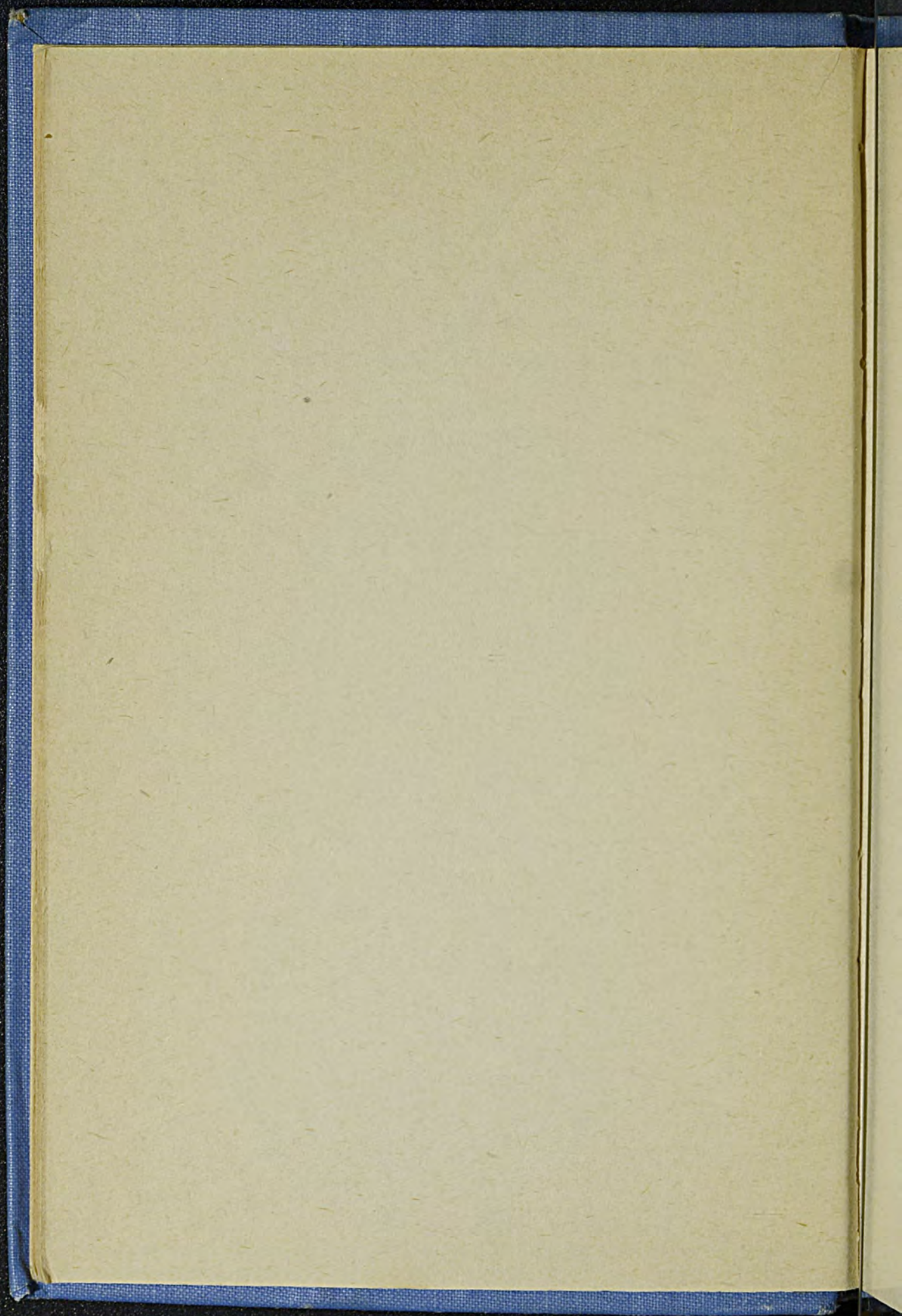
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To
LILIKA
With whom I heard the "Pipes of Pan"



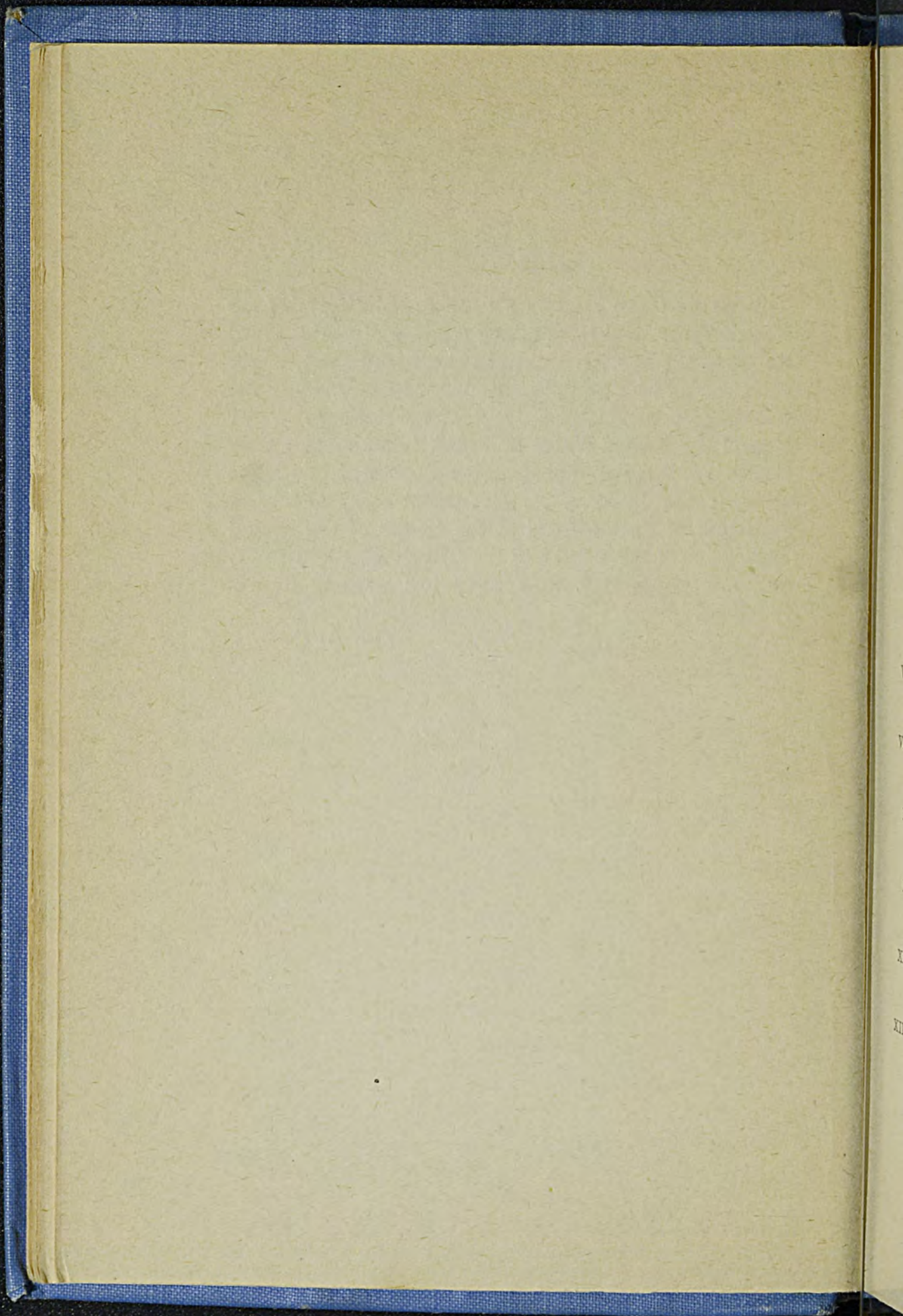
“He who goes walking on the terraces of night has only himself to blame if he meets with strange things.”—*Chinese Proverb.*

The Author's acknowledgments are due to the editors of *Cosmopolitan*, *Nash's*, *The Tatler*, *Cassells*, *Britannia* and the *London . . .* in whose friendly pages sundry of the following stories have appeared.

FOREWORD

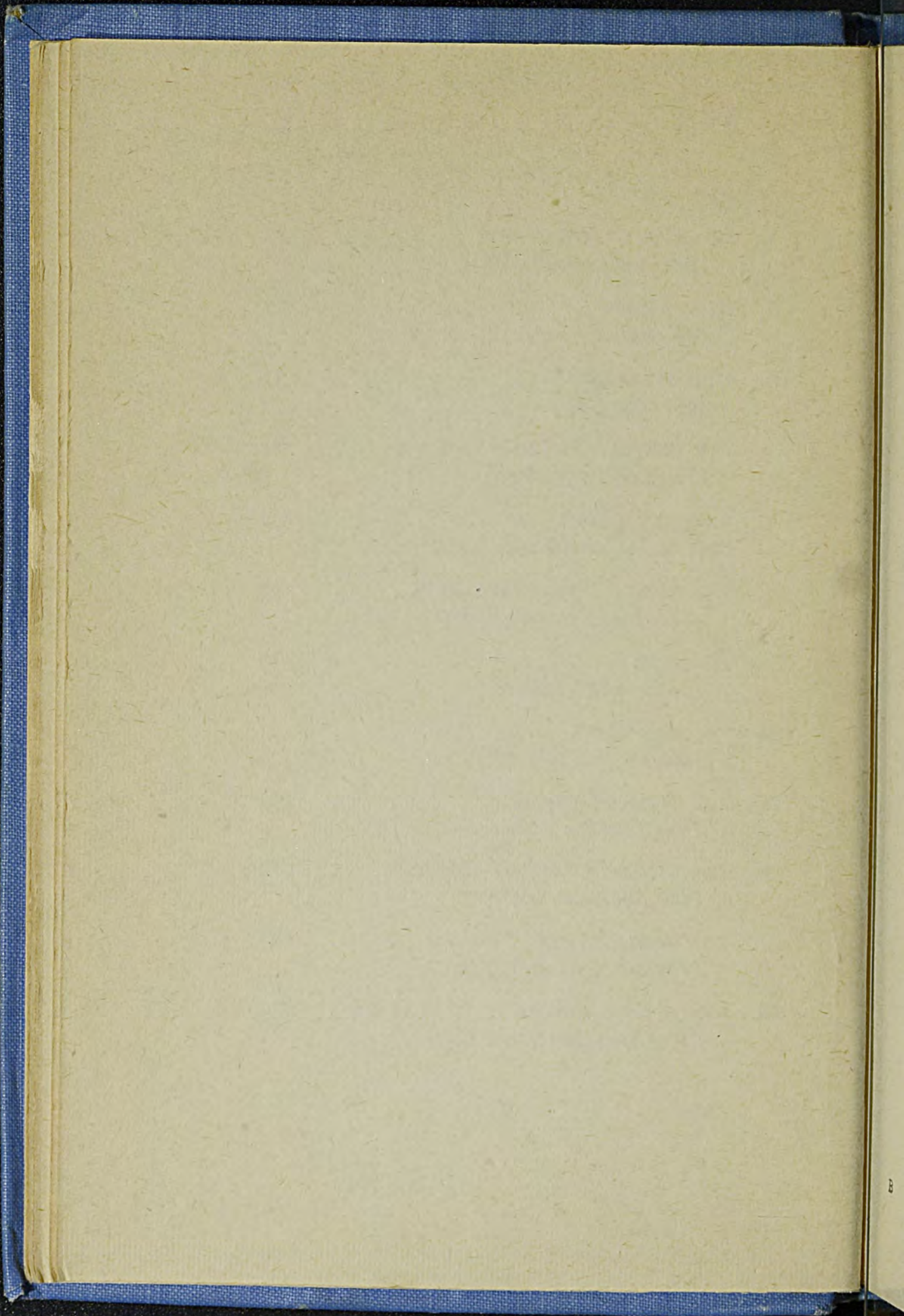
Some time ago I wrote a book called *Nights of the Round Table*, which contained a group of stories heard by me at the monthly meetings in a friend's flat, where each and all who came had, sooner or later, to pay the tribute of a good story. But of no ordinary story! Round the Round Table at Frank Saunderson's only stories of Strange Things were permitted, and the stranger the better. . . . Herewith, then, a further collection of stories heard at the "Club of the Round Table," with my thanks to the friends who told them, and my hopes that they have lost nothing in my re-telling.

THE AUTHOR.



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The Antiquarian's Tale
THE CRYSTAL SNUFF-BOX

*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious and do not
refer to any living persons.*

THE TERRACES OF NIGHT

The Antiquarian's Tale

THE CRYSTAL SNUFF-BOX

PETER WILBROUGH, well-dressed, eight-and-twenty, and on his way to meet the girl of his heart, pretty Isabel Dillingham, stood craning his handsome head to see into the window at Andrew Crane's antique shop, Bury Street, St. James'.

It was fortunate for Mr. Crane that Mr. Wilbrough's luxurious flat was situated only a few doors away, so that the luckless Peter must needs pass temptation every day on his way to the usual haunts of the young man about town—and it must be admitted that Peter did not always avoid temptation with the strength of mind that he should, having a pretty taste in antiques, and an excellent income. But his recently announced engagement to the fair Isabel, and the expenses consequent thereupon, had rendered his visits to Mr. Crane's fewer and farther between than usual; therefore it was with a beaming smile that the proprietor of the "Sign of the Hourglass" moved forward to greet him as he stepped down into the dark little shop.

"The snuff-box in the window—certainly, Mr. Wilbrough! You keeping well, sir? Haven't seen you for a long time. There you are, sir—quaint little piece, and genuine. Oh yes, sir—you know me . . . genuine enough it is, you can bank on that!"

It was certainly quaint—an oblong square box of clear white crystal bound and hinged with gilt metal; the lid was formed of two pieces of crystal laid face to face, enclosing a small piece of finely worked embroidery on faded yellow satin. A central posy of tiny flowers in shades of brown, surrounded with twirling, twisting letters in black—letters that spelt, in quaint old-world spelling, the phrase whose oddness and incongruity had attracted Peter's attention in the window:

"Beauty draws us by a single hair."

Mr. Wilbrough turned the box about in his well-manicured hands—it was less pretty than quaint; original, charming. . . . At any rate, Isabel might like it for pins or something. He would take it. . . . Mr. Wilbrough being still in that fatuous state of adoration that impels the lover to fling daily offerings at the feet of the adored.

"Right, Crane; pack it up and I'll take it with me. Lady Isabel might like it—or else I'll keep it myself. G'day."

But the purchasing of the Crystal Snuff-box, swiftly as it had been effected, had delayed the hastening lover ten minutes on his way to the Carlton and tea, and it may be that sheer annoyance caused pretty Isabel Dillingham to refuse, with a toss of her golden-fair head, the proffered gift. . . . It was a dull, ugly little thing, she avowed, and not in the *least* interesting. And even if it had been, there was no use in Peter's thinking he could arrive late for an appointment with her and then "smarm" things over with a present. . . . She hated waiting, and he knew she did! The young lady hunched and pouted all through tea, and refused to be amiable—at least, crushed and miserable. Peter took himself off, after dropping his inamorata at the parental door in Grosvenor Square, and retired disconsolate to his flat.

Throwing the despised snuff-box morosely on the fire-side table, he poured himself out a whisky-and-soda. It was only six-thirty, although it was growing dark—lots of time for a drink and a snooze before he need change to take Isabel out to the Embassy, at nine. He did hope she'd have recovered her temper by then; he hated doing anything to upset her . . . but after all, he had only been ten minutes late! Nothing to what she often was herself. . . . Lying back in his deep leather chair, comfortably warmed by the insidious mixture of Johnny Walker and a good log-fire, the young man meditated, half asleep and half awake.

The red glow of the firelight flickered on the comfortable little room, in the shining array of old pewter in the corner-cupboard, on the fluted edge of an old Venetian mirror, on Chelsea porcelain and Georgian silver and antique brass. It struck a light, bright as a tiny star, from the crystal box upon the round walnut table at his elbow, a light so bright

that it arrested Mr. Wilbrough's drowsy attention, and he stared at it, half asleep. How it winked and sparkled, that tiny corner where the fire struck it! . . . Made one blink and dazzle to watch it. . . . Suppose that was what those fellers did to one when they hypnotized one? Made one stare at something that dazzled, till one got sleepy—why, he *was* getting sleepy, actually, which was damn funny, come to think of it! . . . Ee—yah, he certainly could do with a snooze. Rowing with Is'bel . . . exhaustin' . . . exhaustin' business. . . . Woven were tryin' things . . . haugh! Hongrh—haugh! . . . The impeccable Sims, appearing a few moments later to attend on his young lord and master, withdrew softly. Mr. Peter Wilbrough was deeply and completely asleep.

Although Mr. Wilbrough was again late for his appointment with his lady-love that evening, she greeted him with a smile instead of the afternoon's frown—being, to tell the truth, rather ashamed of her recent peevishness. By way of being extra-specially nice, both to look at as well as to talk to, she had donned a new and wonderful frock of gleaming gold tissue that seemed to catch and reflect the lights in her casque of shining yellow hair—but for the first time in their acquaintance Peter did not comment on the extreme good looks of his fiancée. He looked white and tired and curiously strained. Concluding that their recent quarrel was the reason for his depressed air, the girl, secretly repentant, exerted herself to be charming, and even interjected a quick “Oh, it didn't matter,” when half-way through the dinner he suddenly as if, indeed he had only just realized it, apologized for his late arrival.

“Don't know how it happened, but I'm awfully sorry.” Under the influence of champagne, *sole Florentine*, and the cheerful atmosphere of lights and music, Peter was regaining his old spirits if not quite his old looks—for he still looked oddly pale and tired. “The fact is, Belle darling, I was asleep!”

Isabel laughed.

“Sleepy, were you? It doesn't seem to have rested you much, Peter—you look all-in!”

“I know,” admitted the young man. “I had a rotten

nightmare—must have been broodin' over your wrathiness, my angel. Dreamt like hell, and woke as weak as a kitten."

"Dreaming? What about?" she queried.

Peter wrinkled his brows, faintly puzzled. "I *knew*, exactly, but I can't remember now," he admitted. "Only that I was glad enough to wake up! I believe there was a woman in it; not you, but a dark woman that scared me rather. . . . She seemed to be runnin' after me somehow. . . ."

"Sounds like Sonia Varens," commented Isabel dryly.

Mr. Wilbrough promptly changed the subject, as the said Miss Varens—an old flame of his—was rather a sore point with Isabel.

The talk drifting to a more absorbing topic—that of the imminent Great Day at St. Margaret's, Isabel promptly forgot her betrothed's curious dream; but not so Mr. Wilbrough. Under the cloak of eager talk and laughter, his mind kept recurring with an odd persistence to it, delving eagerly, excitedly, into his memory in an endeavour to remember, to reconstruct it—for, despite his admission to Isabel of his "scare", that frightened feeling had been accompanied by an odd, breathless fascination that made him long to turn and look at the fear that was pursuing him—a fear feminine in form, he knew; tall and dark, but veiled; surrounded with a dark cloud of some sort through which great eyes gleamed, ever fixed on his.

It had been a weird dream, but there, it was over and not worth talking about, especially since it seemed possible it might annoy Isabel again, which God forbid. Therefore Peter discreetly held his tongue, and the rest of the evening passed as usual, in dancing, chatter, light laughter and the usual badinage that passes for love-making among the casual generation of to-day.

Peter's car being for the moment off duty, the Dillinghams' sumptuous red limousine carried the two young people to their respective homes at last, Isabel insisting on first dropping Peter at his flat in St. James', declaring that in his white and weary condition, which had certainly returned towards the end of the evening, the quicker he got to bed the better. As the girl peered out from the car to see the young man who, despite her modern pose of nonchalance, she secretly adored, safely within the

shelter of 12, Bury Street, she happened to glance up at his sitting-room window, a square of ruddy amber against the black front of the house.

"Peter!" A sharp voice arrested Mr. Wilbrough as he inserted his latchkey into the door. "Peter—who's that in your rooms at this time of night?"

The young man stared, turned and came back to the car. Standing back, he peered up at the lighted window, perplexed.

"What—Sims has left the light on, that's all!"

"Don't talk rubbish to me!" snapped the young lady, scrambling out of the car with a great display of silk-clad leg. "She's moved away now, but I saw her shadow distinctly against the blind. Peter, you've got a woman up there!"

Strong in the consciousness of virtue, Mr. Wilbrough loudly protested. It was perfect rubbish. A woman up there! Rot and rubbish, complete and utter, unless the impeccable Sims had fallen from grace and concealed a woman of his own about his employer's flat—in which case Sims could look for instant dismissal in the morning, admirable valet as he was. But Isabel was not to be appeased—that be hanged for a tale. She would come up and see for herself, if it *was* two o'clock in the morning. There *had* been a woman there—a tall woman with a hood or something about her head—maybe Sonia Varens, the little beast, had bribed her way into the flat, and was lying in wait for its occupant. . . . The said young lady being quite capable of doing such a thing, as he well knew, Mr. Peter Wilbrough's heart thumped in considerable apprehension as he followed his determined fiancée up the winding stairs.

Great, therefore, was his relief, as great as Isabel's angry bewilderment, to discover the flat absolutely empty; the fire burning quietly on the hearth, with the lamp ready lit upon the table beside it; all things neat and orderly as the admirable Sims invariably left them. In the bedroom nothing to be seen; a fresh pair of the apricot *crêpe-de-Chine* pyjamas Mr. Wilbrough affected reposing demurely upon the mulberry-satin eiderdown; nobody in the bathroom; nobody in hiding behind the curtains. . . . There was no denying it, the "woman" must have been a mere passing shadow, possibly thrown from a window opposite;

an impression due to some trick of light; a figment of a jealous woman's brain . . . though this last possibility was wisely not voiced by the accused, whatever his own private opinion!

Standing at the window watching the car draw away up the steep old-fashioned street, Peter Wilbrough heaved a sigh of relief.

"Crazy, bless her heart; she's perfectly crazy! Sees that confounded Sonia in every corner . . ." He sighed again, and turned towards the room with a yawn—turned, and started violently. For just beyond the circle of light cast by the shaded lamp, it seemed that a woman stood, a tall woman dressed in a pale yellow satin gown, her dark hair piled high about her lovely head in countless curls and ringlets; her long white fingers resting lightly on the Crystal Box!

With a gasp of terrified astonishment, Mr. Wilbrough passed his hand across his eyes and stared again—and gasped again, but this time with relief, for there was nothing there! Only the dying firelight, and the quiet room, and his whisky-and-soda waiting beside the lamp; just as usual. . . . Hurriedly the young man poured himself out an unusually stiff nightcap and drank it off, more agitated than he cared to admit.

"Lord! Talk of 'thought-transference'," he muttered, as he set down the empty glass, "there's a case for you! Poor little Belle starts yapping about some damn woman, and for a second I—actually with my own eyes—think I see her! Must be getting barmy in my old age. . . . But, hang it all, it was so amazingly real! I shan't be in such a hurry to laugh at people talking about ghosts and so on, now I know how easy it is to think oneself into seein' 'em. . . ."

It was about a week later, to be exact, that Peter Wilbrough woke to the disquieting discovery that somehow, in some curious way, he seemed to be developing a most distressing trick of blundering; of saying and doing the wrong thing when in company with Lady Isabel Dillingham that was, to say the least of it, not conducive to harmonious relations between them.

Previously notable for his charming manners with women

—as, indeed, he should be, his training having been considerable and in various experienced hands!—he now seemed increasingly incapable of, as the Irishman said, “Opening his mouth without putting his foot into it.” Some power beyond himself seemed to urge him to say and do the most unforgivably clumsy things. The same malign fate seemed now to be influencing him to be late for every appointment; to forget the when and where of meetings; to order Fuller’s chocolates when the little lady had stipulated for Page and Shaw’s; size six in gloves when he knew perfectly well she only took fives; get tickets for Shakespeare when she wanted to see revue, and generally behave like a man either trying deliberately to pick a quarrel, or else becoming absent and thoughtless to a really alarming degree!

Amazed and offended as the young lady naturally was, her amazement was nothing to the startled perturbation of the unfortunate victim, who, panic-stricken after a series of quite outrageous slights, foresaw his adored one “chucking” him, and gloomily declared she would be entirely justified if she did . . . but for once he was mistaken.

Isabel Dillingham was no fool; moreover, she loved her betrothed. Realizing, as she soon and shrewdly did, that his increasingly frequent lapses from good manners did not arise from any desire to be rude, but from sheer inability to help himself, she bit her lip and forgave, overlooked, made excuses, both to herself and the outside world, till Society, always acid, shrugged incredulous shoulders and decided that “Really, darling Isabel seemed to have lost all proper pride. Couldn’t she *see* that Peter Wilbrough was fed up with the whole thing?”

For, slowly, but with increasing frequency, “things” were being said. Odd and unpleasant things, about Peter Wilbrough. Only whispered as yet, but as time went on the whispers grew. He was indulging in various and unpleasant habits—“Look at the way he *looks* now, my dear, and how he dresses! And you know how smart he used to be. . . .” He was to be met at all hours of the night, it was reported, wandering about London, wearing any old coat thrown over his evening clothes; wandering vaguely, with a hunted, haunted sort of look; started when spoken to, and admitted, if one asked him why this

thus-ness, that he "was walking because he couldn't sleep, because of the dreams!"

He had taken to refusing invitations—or worse, accepting them and then standing in some corner staring blankly at the crowd, or else muttering vaguely to himself; or talking to some imaginary person at his side. . . . And worse still: "Isabel, darling, I know it's going to hurt, but you *ought to know*: he keeps a woman in his flat, or at least one visits him there! She's been *seen*—not only through the window—she's been seen, two or three times at dusk, walking beside him in the streets; and twice Freddy Langham, who lives opposite, has seen her dart into the doorway of No. 12 and vanish—so of course she must have a key. It can't be anybody decent, or he wouldn't only meet her at night; and it's only at night that she appears—a tall woman in a sort of dark cloak-and-hood arrangement. . . ."

Thus Society, first in private, finally in chorus, and Isabel smiled, and setting her dimpled white chin firm, shook her head again and yet again. She trusted Peter, although her trust was having daily to face many dire attacks from within as well as without. Five weeks now since this curious *malaise* had attacked Peter, and he was not only no better, but it seemed, even worse. When Lady Mary Stanley, the disseminator of the piece of news about Freddy Langham, had departed, full of the comfortable consciousness of duty done and a slap at the prettiest girl in London obtained at one and the same time, Isabel sat lost in anxious thought, toasting her smart brown satin slippers at the fire in her own little sanctum at the top of the house in Grosvenor Square. What was the best thing to do now?

She had long ago given up her idea that Sonia Varens had anything to do with Peter's strange behaviour. Sonia was safely in Cannes and, report had it, now engaged to an Italian marquis, so that was that. No, this was something much odder, more disquieting than any ordinary *affaire*. . . . Once, in the beginning, her fiancé had blunderingly tried to discuss the situation with her in a vain endeavour to fathom it, and although that was some time ago now, and it was many days since poor hag-ridden Peter Wilbrough had emerged from the state of silent brooding that seemed his usual mood of late, Isabel had

not forgotten one or two things he had said—unheeded at the time, but now emerging clear-cut, sinister, like black rocks peeping from the billows of a surging mysterious sea.

“I’m *always* having these funny dreams now . . . can’t get away from them. . . . Had ’em every night since that time I told you about the first! I get up sometimes in the night and walk and walk, rather than let myself sleep, they worry me so. . . . No, nothing definite, but it’s always—a woman. A woman who scares me stiff—and fascinates me at the same time. I wish to heaven I could see her face clearly. . . . I see her eyes, and when she looks at me straight I feel like the old buffer in the Bible, wasn’t it, whose bones turned to water. . . . God, it’s awful, that feeling! A sort of feeling as if she was sucking all my whole self, my soul and every damn thing, out of me with her eyes. . . .

“I often feel that the only thing that saves me from letting go is the thought of you. I hang on to you like mad—try to shut my eyes and picture you in that gold frock you wore that first night after She came; or in the green sweater I like, striding over the moors with Dan; or bathing in the cove near home. And then slowly, very slowly, I seem to sort of ‘come out of it’, as if I was rising to the surface and gasping—for air, after swimming a bit too long under water! I can’t make it out. I try to get away from her, but she pursues me—it’s awful! At first it was only at night she came—in dreams—but now . . . now she comes as soon as it gets dusk. I turn suddenly, and see her melt into the shadows . . . and she’s not there, and I tell myself I’m imagining things. . . .

“I look at my book again, and I know she’s back at my elbow. I come in late, and just before I turn up the light I see the gleam of her yellow gown, the shine of her great eyes . . . looking at me, always looking, with a sort of odd secret smile, as if she was trying to say ‘Let go, don’t struggle any more . . . you know I’m bound to win in the long run!’ And the worst of it all is, Belle, that I feel she’s right—sooner or later she’ll catch me when I’m too tired to fight, too tired even to think of you, and she’ll win. I shan’t be able to stand out any more. . . . It’s odd, isn’t it? A dream—it *must* be only a vivid sort of dream—something that isn’t real, and yet, it’s sapping

my life away, bit by bit. . . . I can't make out why she wants me, or what she wants me for, can you?"

She knew! Sitting by the fire in the dusk of the chilly January day, she knew—that for some reason, Something from the Outer Spaces, some sinister, ruthless Thing that once wore feminine flesh, had come near and touched Peter Wilbrough, and that he was right: unless something could be done, sooner or later this Woman who had come to woo him, to possess and vanquish him utterly and completely, would win—and presumably retreat, triumphant, whence she came with her prey; the soul, the very inner man himself, of Peter Wilbrough. . . . The thought was utterly horrible, and stung to action, the girl sprang to her feet. It couldn't be! It couldn't! Yet all sorts of things were happening that a month ago she would have called utterly ridiculous and impossible!

This Woman—she was a nothing, a shadowy, invisible dream, a Horror from the world of the Unseen—yet she was now so real, perhaps had grown so strong through poor distracted Peter's thoughts, for ever concentrated, that others, even, had caught glimpses of her! Witness the unconscious testimony of Mary Stanley, Langham and the rest. Slinking by night at Peter's heels, darting into the dark shadowy doorway of Number 12, flitting across that blind where Isabel herself had first seen her. . . . For by now the girl had long relinquished any idea that her rival was any flesh-and-blood woman who could be faced and fought. God, if there was only anything she could do! . . . After a moment's indecision the girl ran out of the room, and in a few moments, huddled in a fur coat, was pushing home the self-starter of the smart little blue Buick that had been Peter's first present to her after the announcing of their engagement.

It was a cold, crisp night, and the streets clear; the sting of the rushing wind against her hot cheeks cooled them a trifle, and steadied her jangled nerves; the swift little car made short work of the distance, and it was barely seventy-three when she drew up outside No. 12.

A slightly surprised Sims admitted her to the flat, but its occupant was still out. Drawing off her heavy driving gloves, the girl dropped wearily into a chair.

"Give me a whisky-and-soda, Sims, for goodness sake! I'll wait; you don't suppose he'll be long, do you?"

Sims' long, lean face was wooden, expressionless, as he poured out the required drink.

"Couldn't say, me lady. Very uncertain these days, Mr. Peter is, to be sure—very uncertain. Was you dinin' with him to-night, me lady? Mr. Peter doesn't tell me as he used, where he's going."

"Yes, we were dining out somewhere, and dancing, just to try and cheer him up; get him out of himself a bit." She drank a gulp of the stinging spirits thankfully. "But I don't feel like it, after all; think we'll go and have a grill somewhere, and not bother to change."

"Right, me lady. Then I'll put out a dark suit for Mr. Peter."

The man moved to the door, and paused. At the movement Isabel glanced after him, and their eyes met in a sudden dramatic glance of understanding. The girl spoke quickly, fearfully:

"Sims! You—know?"

The valet moved his feet uncomfortably, and twisted the door-handle. His voice, as he answered, dropped to a nervous whisper.

"I don't *know*, me lady . . . but I seen what Mr. Peter says *he* seen! I seen the Woman!"

It seemed to Isabel afterwards, looking back, that at that moment there grew a faint Something in the room, a feeling as if a Presence, passing, halted and turned to listen. Cool, alert . . . a draught eddied about the room, soft as a breath, then dropped to a hush as if the very air held still, listening; but at the moment she was too agitated to notice. Gripping the chair-arm with her slim, nervous hands, she stared at the valet.

"Seen *Her*!" Her voice sank to a whisper too, and it seemed the Silence in the room grew deeper and more dire. "When? How often? Tell me!"

"Not at first. . . . I useter think Mr. Peter'd just had one or two extra when he talked about her at first. But then, I wasn't sure! I tried to kid myself it was just fancy-like, but it wasn't. . . . I see her the first time a day or so after Mr. Peter brought home the Crystal Box there. I got a feeling She's something to do with that damn thing. I don't like it. First she was just a whisper in the dark, an odd scent like a sort of perfume, that came and went quick as a breath . . . then a shadow that wasn't

just like other shadows, that used to stand watching Mr. Peter while he slept, and slip away behind the curtain or the screen when I stared 'ard. There wasn't nothing there, ever, when I stared *really* 'ard, but always just behind your eye, if you get me, my lady—a blink, and she wasn't there! Only a shadow—an ordinary shadow. But *before* the blink . . . she 'ad been there, I'd take my dying oath!"

The fervour and conviction of the man's tone was unmistakable. Isabel shuddered, despite her firm-held courage, as he went on.

"Now . . . now she's clearer. It's as if she was more sure-like, and sometimes shows herself to me by way of saying 'yah-boo! I got him, for all you, and I don't care!' I seen her twice on the stairs, slippin' by; I seen her walkin' by Mr. Peter in the street, standing like a shadow at his elbow while he's readin' . . . just a shadow, in an old-fashioned sorter yellow gown, with dark 'air piled up high. . . . But my God, me lady, 'er eyes that watch and watch 'im! I pray the Lord that she don't never turn and look at me with them eyes. . . ."

Surely the room was growing colder and colder? With a huge effort Isabel pulled herself together, and smiled defiantly, courageously, into the drawn face of the valet.

"I see. I see! Well, we have to fight, Sims—what, I don't know, but something strange and dreadful. . . . We've got to fight it, all of us. . . ."

Sims stood against the half-open door of the kitchen. As he turned to go he spoke, lugubriously but certainly.

"Fight? You can take it from me, me lady, Mr. Peter's got no more fight left in 'im, and *I* can't do nothing. I'm—outside. It's *you* that's the one thing She can't kill—yet! Mr. Peter's just hanging on to you. If she can once get past you, she'll get 'im, for good and all. . . ."

The door closed behind him, and silence descended upon the little flat. Lying back in the deep chair beside the fire, the girl linked her slender hands together behind her head, the left starred with the winking emerald glory of her engagement ring. Thoughtfully she twisted it round and round; how happy they had been choosing it, she and Peter, in that dirty little antique shop he loved so! It fitted very loosely, though; her finger must have got thinner.

She must have it made smaller. Idly she drew it off, her attention momentarily distracted from the sinister conversation with Sims, and of a sudden dropped it sharply upon the glowing hearth. Springing to her feet, she fished it out of the embers with the poker, just in time—only to drop it again; and as she dived for it under the table, knocked it sideways most clumsily again into the fire!

A faint impression was growing, an impression horrible but persistent, that there was something more than mere accident in this endeavour to make her lose or spoil her ring. As, for the third time, she rescued the jewel from the fire—and again dropping it, trod upon it as she stepped forward to pick it up from the carpet—the impression became conviction, and albeit her cheeks were hot with mingled defiance and terror, the girl spoke aloud to the unseen Presence that watched her.

“I know, now. You’ve been trying all along to break things between Peter and me! I know it’s *you* that’s managed to cloud his mind and his memories so that he forgets things—muddles, puts everybody against him—so that you can isolate him, get him all to yourself! I know, and I love him still, and I’m *going* to stick to him. If he goes absolutely mad I shall stick and stick. . . . *Now*, what are you going to do?”

Clutching the battered scrap of metal that had been her cherished ring, the girl backed against the fire and waited breathlessly—oddly convinced, despite the emptiness of the quiet firelit room, that she spoke to One who not only heard, but would answer—though not in words. The consciousness of the Presence beat and pulsated all about her, cold, imperious, evil—so evil that the girl shuddered and grew sick with fear as she waited, peering into the floating, drifting shadows that filled the corners and twined about the tall screen, the high-backed Jacobean chairs, the deep settee. Straightening herself resolutely, she waited, then she spoke again.

“I’ll tell you—I believe Sims is right. I believe you came into this place with the Crystal Box! Anyhow, I’m going to smash it, and see what happens then. It’s my last hope—and I don’t know what *will* happen, but I’m going to do it!”

Although her words were brave, the challenge was spoken in little more than a broken whisper, for in truth the Power

was growing so swiftly, so terribly now in the shadow-filled room, that for all her courage the girl was shaking in every limb, her brow pearly with sweat under the waves of shining fair hair, her hands cold and clammy with terror. In the firelight the Crystal Box glimmered demurely in its accustomed place, the ruddy light reflected in its shining sides. . . . Clenching her hands, Isabel stepped forward to pick it up, but reeled back, gasping and startled—for the Woman was there!

Behind the Box she grew swiftly into shape, one long white hand covering the shining thing as though to defend it—though the shapes of the furniture, the outline of the window and the velvet folds of the curtains were distinct to be seen *through* her, still she was there, menacing, grim . . . and horribly *real*, for all her shadowiness! Tall and slender and darkly beautiful, in a maize-yellow satin gown, with her hair piled high in a fantastic tower of black silken curls . . . half-numbered with the fascination of sheer terror, the girl noted it.

That was the "hood" so many people had seen, that she herself had seen in shadowy profile against the blind that evening so long ago. . . . Even as she stared, the Shadow seemed to melt, to waver. And surely the room was swiftly growing dark? The outline of the Woman was growing fainter, her yellow gown blurring into the shadows that poured up now, it seemed, from every side like streaming veils of blackness! Only the glow of two terrible eyes shone out from beneath the shadow of that cloud of dusky hair. . . . Like lambent stars of evil they shone, relentless, unwinking, holding one's own gaze with a fierce, dominant intensity that seemed to sear one's very soul within one. . . . Oh, poor Peter, what he had suffered—how he must have struggled, to hold out for so long against this terrible Power, this Will that forced one's own down, however hard one fought!

Now the shadows poured up faster and faster. Most curiously like long ribbons of hair they seemed—dark streaming hair, long curling strands that wound and twisted about one's fingers like little Abbie Whitaker's long brown curls. Faster and faster the shadows drove, weaving and gliding about the room swiftly, uncannily, like dark hair seen through water! like seaweed, strangling, serpentlike. . . . Oh, God, she was sinking, sinking into darkness!

Everything was dim and clouded, and the only thing remaining, two dreadful merciless eyes, set in a mist of streaming silken hair. . . . Peter! Peter! Help!

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Indeed, it was fortunate for Lady Isabel Dillingham that Peter, wearily dragging himself up the last flight of stairs, heard the wild cry from within, then thrusting his key into the lock, tumbled distracted into the sitting-room. At the same moment an affrighted Sims rushed from the kitchen, and between them they raised the prone figure of the girl, from where she lay flat on the hearth, before the dancing fire. She had fallen face forward, and her congested face and stifled shriek told their own story. . . . She was half-strangled, and more than half; but after a strong dram of brandy, she came more or less to herself, and, curled thankfully within the circle of Peter Wilbrough's arm, gasped out her incredible tale. Listening, the young man nodded soberly.

"I know—I've seen her—I know, my darling!" Reverently he kissed her hand. "But you've won, sweet—how I know, I can't tell—but you *have*, I knew the minute I heard you scream! All my manhood, my energy, my own self—everything *She* sapped from me—came back with a rush, and I know now, from the 'feel' of things in the flat, that it's all over. But how . . .?"

He turned as Sims spoke at his elbow, holding out something in one lean palm. Holding it gingerly, cautiously, as one holds a wasp or poisonous snake that even in death may be dangerous.

"Here, sir, I found it on the floor. Just fallen off the table, when me lady fell down. . . ."

It was the Crystal Box! Or rather, what remained of it—for the fall to the tiled hearth had broken and ruined it for ever, and only a few shining shards and fragments, a wisp of embroidered satin and what looked like a scrap of paper, remained. Sims laid the pieces thankfully on the divan and retired, as across them the two lovers looked soberly at each other.

"It's done—I broke her . . . 'focus', or whatever they call it!" whispered Isabel fearfully. "I felt—suddenly, to-day, I *knew*—that *that*, in some way, brought her at

first, and if *it* was broken, her power would be broken too, and she would go away. . . ."

But Peter was already examining the scraps with sudden alert interest.

"Look. My God, I think we've got the clue to the whole thing!" He held out a folded scrap of paper, evidently inserted flat between the two slips of crystal that, laid together, had formed the lid—hidden by the piece of embroidered satin, its presence had been unsuspected, but as the young man spelt out the old crabbed writing, the mystery of the Crystal Box and its dreadful Owner were made clear at last, and the haunting of Peter Wilbrough laid finally and completely to rest.

Within this Boxe I have hid, knoweing More than my Neighboures of hidden Things, a Secret Waye back from the Dethe to wych I goe. Many I won to mee by the darke gloary of my Haire, and to my maister's service, for wych hee has enspelled my Haire so that it shall still serve mee, for all Dethe and His minions!

The paper, yellow and thin with age, was signed boldly: *Eliz. Denning.*

Awed into silence, the two turned over the remaining fragments, and a cry from Isabel brought her lover's head round startled.

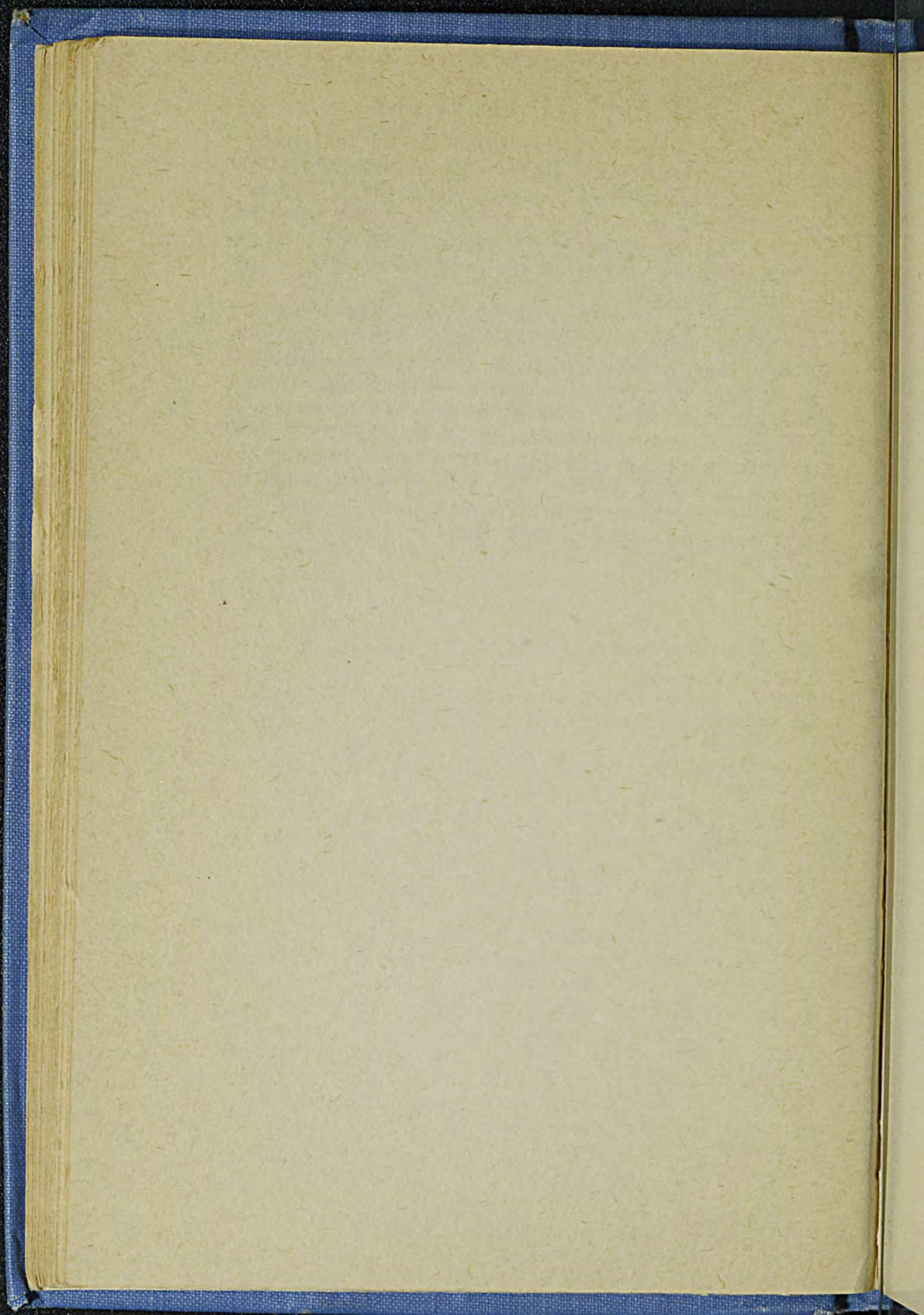
"Peter, here she is—on the back of the other piece of the lid!"

It was true. Painted on a slip of ivory fixed to the crystal was the miniature of a woman—of the Woman herself—clad in a gown of yellow satin, her eyes, even in the miniature, dark and dreadfully intent beneath the luxuriant black hair—that hair that had been her pride in life—piled high upon her graceful head. . . . And under the miniature, in another hand, was written: *Eliz. Denning. Burnt as a wytch. December 1668.*

It is worthy of note that on further investigation the embroidery on the scrap of yellow satin was found to be executed in human hair—pieces of her victim's hair, or so Isabel with a shiver avowed—and the legend around, the strange words: "Beauty drawes us with a single haire", with a strand of the Woman's own. At least, it matched the picture's black locks. And what of the strange words

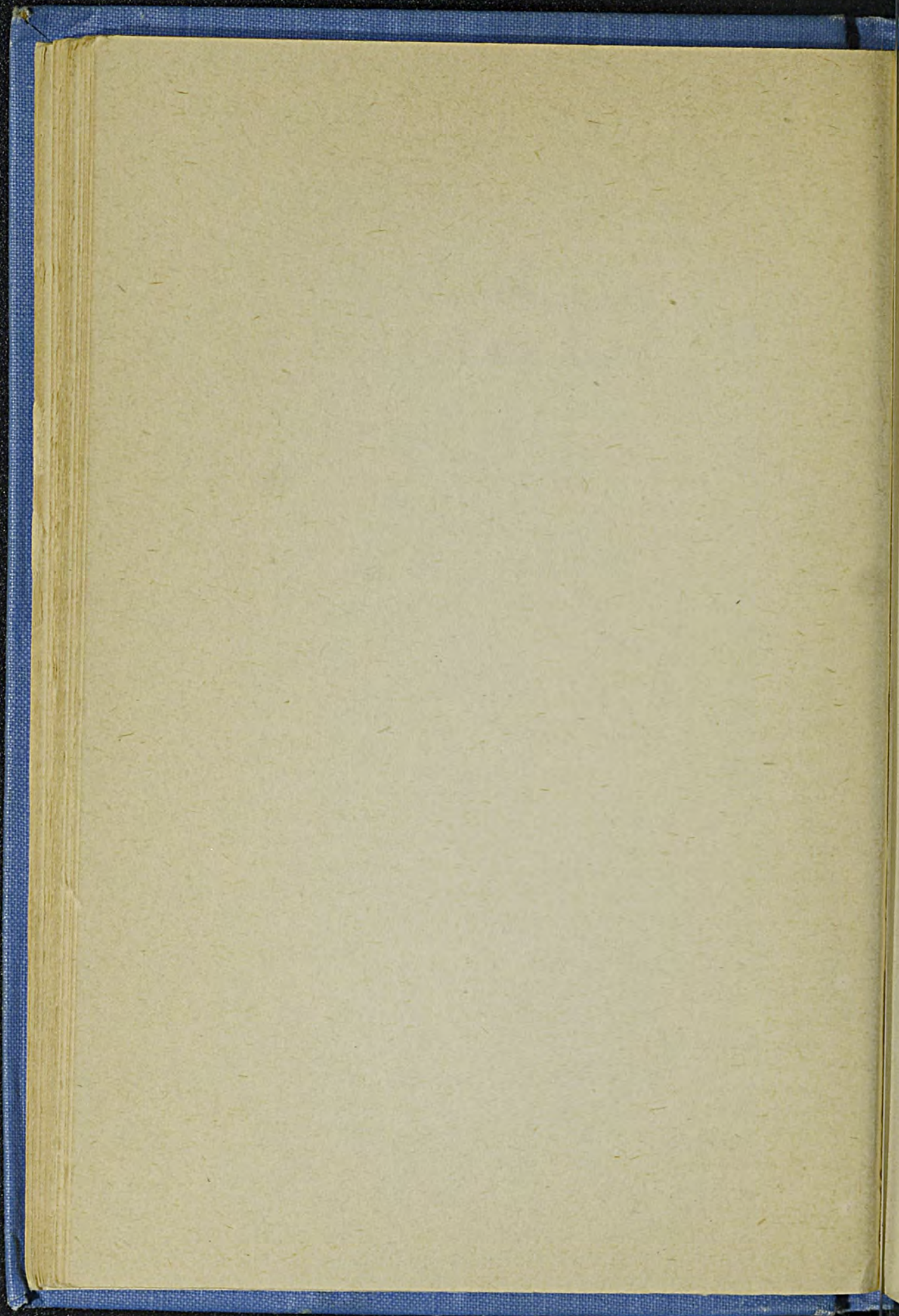
of a "Secret Waye backe"? What should that mean, indeed, if not that while that strand of living "Haire" remained in the world of men the Woman might find her "Waye Backe" there, did she choose? At any rate, the unholy thing was promptly consigned to the fire, and so the Horror passed away from the lives of Peter Wilbrough and Isabel Dillingham.

One thing—or rather, two things only, remain to remind them of that night of terror. One, Peter has a rooted dislike of women, however charming, with dark silk hair; and two, a fine, ineradicable white line like a scar around Isabel's delicate throat. Should the curious comment upon it, Peter hastily intervenes—for Isabel shivers a little, and a look comes into her eyes that he hates to see, knowing, as he does, how near she went to death to save him—since that sinister mark was made, strange as it may seem, by a single strangling strand of dark Hair!



The Sailor's Tale

MARE AMORE



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The Sailor's Tale

MARE AMORE

KITTY BELLASIS, wife of Commander Norman Bellasis, retired, ex of the Royal Navy, stood at the long window of the drawing-room of her pretty country house and stared out at the garden, drumming on the panes with her fingers. Drumming a little impatiently, in truth, since her husband and the friend who had arrived to spend the day with them were already a little late for lunch, and there was an especially good lunch: fried fish, cutlets and new peas, and a cheese *soufflé*, all of which would spoil by waiting. . . . Little Mrs. Bellasis sighed impatiently, and frowned as she glanced at her wrist-watch, then at the clock.

She might have known it would be like this. Was not the visitor old "Pen" Rigby, boon companion of Bellasis in his seafaring days? And did not Norman Bellasis invariably lose all sense of time and duty when one of his old naval friends came down to Dorset to look him up, on their brief spells of time ashore? Devoutly little Mrs. Bellasis wished they would not come at all. She would have given years of her life—and being already forty-one (although with her slim, alert figure, thick brown hair untouched by grey, and state of childlessness, she passed as a rule for a woman five to eight years younger) she did not utter the wish without due realization of what it meant—to have been able to divorce her husband from his old friends as completely as she had divorced him from his first love, the sea!

It had not been easy, that. Norman Bellasis was a born sailor, and his passion for the sea had been part of his very being—deep, abiding; indeed, there were times when Kitty Bellasis uneasily wondered whether, after all, his love for herself did not come second, in his innermost heart, to another and older love? Ever since she had first fallen in love with him, when they were both young things in their early twenties, she had been jealous of the sea; jealous of the years of his early manhood spent upon it before she

met him; jealous of the men who shared with him the great freemasonry of the ocean; jealous of the happy light that came into his eyes whenever he turned his steps towards his ship—even as he bade her farewell that light would flame high in them, and start a smouldering flame of bitterness within her heart. She was jealous of the knowledge he had, intimate and curious, of the great waters and their ways—jealous, above all, of the long periods he must perforce spend away from her, on the bosom of that ancient lover of men, the Sea!

Yet for many years, since they had nothing but his pay to live on, she endured it, albeit with a grim inner determination to terminate the endurance as soon as might be if the gods were kind. . . . And soon after her thirty-eighth birthday it seemed that they were minded to be kind at last. For a distant uncle died and left Kitty Bellasis heiress to all his money—sufficient to bring her in a regular income, small, yet larger than anything her husband could possibly make in the Navy; also (and more important still), a charming country house with farm-buildings already well stocked and staffed, in Dorsetshire.

Even thus, it had taken Kitty Bellasis many months of patient arguing, wrangling, pleading, to persuade her husband to “chuck his job”, as he put it. Bewildered, a little hurt, for the first time he realized how deeply and intensely his little wife hated the sea that meant so much to him; and was vaguely troubled by the realization.

He loved his profession; loved his ship, a lean, wicked-looking cruiser; loved his men, tanned, laughing fellows with bright eyes and the lilt of the sea in their walk—but he also loved his wife with the simplicity and sincerity peculiar to sailors, despite the rubbish that is talked about “wives in every port”, and for long the two warring forces rode his simple soul like a nightmare. He did not want to become a country gentleman in the very least; the idea of settling down “on the land” for the rest of his life was entirely new and distasteful to him.

Vaguely he told his comrades that he was “determined to stand his ground”, but Kitty’s determination was a hundred per cent more concentrated and intense than his own; and, so, reluctant, bewildered, yet acquiescent, he found himself sending in his papers at the end of six months, buying unfamiliar tweeds and leggings, studying

books on crops and cows, and getting out his seldom-used golf clubs, since Kitty said importantly that now he would have to take up golf, and there were some awfully nice people she knew down in Dorset who would put him up for the local golf club. So, with a strange aching blank at his heart, Norman Bellasis took his leave of the sea.

As she packed up the final batch of their possessions on the last day in the shabby little furnished flat in Plymouth that had seen so much of their married life, Mrs. Bellasis felt a fierce surge of triumph seize her. It had come at last—they were leaving the sea and all that it meant! Now, at last, she would have her husband, her adored husband, with his blue, honest eyes; his merry laugh; his short, stocky, typically sailor's figure, all to herself, for all time. . . . She had beaten the sea!

She glanced out of the window—their apartment overlooked the bay—and laughed aloud in triumph! There it lay, wide and flat and grey, monotonous, that sinister waste that mysteriously held so much of her husband's heart . . . but to-morrow it would be left behind! So far behind that they would forget that it had ever existed. . . . Yet for many nights after they came down to "Forest Farm" (so called for its proximity to a great rambling belt of woodland), even Kitty Bellasis found it difficult to sleep, missing for the first time in her life the purring murmur of the waves along the shore. The voice of the sea that lulls the world to sleep.

But it was many a long day now since she had even thought of those days; and to-day, all unexpectedly, as she stood drumming her fingers against the pane, the remembrance popped up in her mind, like a jack-in-the-box, out of the void. . . . Then, smiling, she realized the reason, and laughed at herself for a fool. Of course. . . . It was the wind sweeping the forest! For two or three days now it had been blowing steadily, now light, now strong, and as it swept the surface of the heaving plain of green, there were times when one might almost think one heard the sea; the hollow, distant roar of it, dying away and returning again, ceaselessly, eternally. . . . But even as she listened the wind dropped to a mere whisper, and the sound died away.

All the farm portion of the pretty little house lay at the back, surrounded by a substantial wall. The house itself

fronted on to a large old-fashioned garden—it was a long, low structure, whitewashed, with a tiled roof weathered to a dozen shades of red and brown and green, and boasting several clusters of quaint and interesting chimney stacks.

The garden was certainly a credit to its new owners. A pergola and summer shelter gave token of the Commander's handiness with carpenter's tools, while a wilderness of roses, Mrs. Bellasis' particular care, ran all down one side of the charming little pleasance, and beds of gay "annuals" vied with the window-boxes that bordered each window in lending the white house a lavish trimming of colour and scent. The whole group of buildings, garden and all, stood, as it were, at the far end of a "peninsula" of downland that ran up like an inquiring finger into the wide green sweep of the forest, so that it was both sheltered and open to the sunshine at one and the same time.

Forest Farm was certainly a charming little establishment, and one to please the heart of any woman. Stock and crops were doing well; the "factor" was a reliable man, his wife a perfect cook; and the summer was for once being all an English summer should be and seldom is. There should have been no reason for Mrs. Bellasis' somewhat hard little mouth to tighten as it did, as she saw at last, against the dark wall of the woods just beyond the white gate, two figures approaching. Her husband and old Pen Rigby, square and bluff as ever, still wearing the naval blue he clung to even when on shore. . . . Her mouth tightened further, and she frowned on seeing it. The only fly in her ointment, the only cloud on her serene happiness, were these occasional "reminders" of old days, after which her husband was already restless, irritable for hours and sometimes days.

Pen was in particular a visitor she dreaded. He *would* sport that uniform redolent of old times; would chat all the time of naval "shop", chaff his old companion for having turned "landlubber", and so on—and all that was inevitably disturbing. Acidly she wished he had not come, as she wished every time one of Bellasis' ex-colleagues visited him. . . . But there was no time for thought or speculation. With a hasty ring at the bell as an indication to Mrs. Jenks to serve lunch, she shook her pretty spotted pink-and-white linen frock into place, and as the men entered the wide French windows, came forward holding

out her hand with the usual conventional smile of welcome.

Captain Rigby greeted her with bluff courtesy, commented admiringly upon the garden, her looks, her husband's health, and assented eagerly to her suggestion of immediate lunch. Pecking at her share of the meal, a faint frown lurking between her alert hazel eyes, Kitty Bellasis listened as the two men talked; Rigby with his mouth full, eager, enthusiastic, as his type invariably is; Bellasis more quiet, self-contained, less of a talker than a listener. . . .

"Charmin' little place you've got down here," boomed the big man through a mouthful of cutlet. "But I'm damned if I can place you as a country gent, my boy! Though I suppose by now you're used to it—don't miss the sea at all?"

Bellasis glanced quickly up. There was a faint gleam in his eyes, and he opened his mouth; then he glanced at his wife, and the words he meant to speak changed on his lips to something else.

"Oh, I don't know!" he said, with a faintly embarrassed laugh. "After all, we've been here—how long, Kitty?"

"Three years!"

Her tone held a faint edge, and Bellasis glanced unhappily at her before he replied. His reply was obviously meant to conciliate—to attempt to square, as it were, the truth with what would be palatable to his wife's ears.

"Er—yes. Three years. Three years do make a difference to one's feelings, of course—and I've become quite the country squireen, as you can see!"

He laughed again, awkwardly, a flush mounting to his smooth brown cheek. At forty-four Norman Bellasis looked but little older, albeit a trifle squarer, more stolid, than he had looked at twenty-four; and Kitty Bellasis' heart yearned inarticulately over him as she watched him. Rigby bluffly interrupted, reaching for a fresh piece of toast.

"Squireen be hanged! You're a cut-and-dried tarry-back, Bell, and always will be; nobody'll ever mistake you for anything else but a sailor!"

How often had people made that remark, thought the listening woman venomously. The fact that it was true made the stab all the sharper. . . . Rigby continued, all

unconscious of the fury he was creating in the bosom of the quiet little woman at his side.

"You never ought to ha' left the sea, you know! Headquarters are always askin' after you. . . . I believe you could get another billet any time you wanted. Honestly, what you're doing, a damn' bluewater-man like you, settling down to grow roses and turnips and pinch pigs to see if they're fat enough for market, I'm blessed if I can think. . . ."

"My husband," said Kitty Bellasis acidly, "left the Navy mainly because I asked him to!"

She was sitting very upright, a pink flush on either cheek and a dangerous glint in her eyes. The hint was not lost upon Rigby, imperceptive as he undoubtedly was. With a muttered apology he changed the subject, and nothing more was said about the sea. . . .

Unless, perhaps, during the men's subsequent wanderings about the farm, whither, disliking the effect of mud and dung upon her pretty slippers, Mrs. Bellasis could not make up her mind to accompany them. Devoutly she hoped the matter had not been raised again. It would be too bad if after all her careful work, after these three years during which, apparently, Norman Bellasis had settled gradually down into the pleasant, monotonous life of a country gentleman, they were to be upset, all because of a casual remark made by a breezy insensitive fool in naval gold and blue!

It was late—between six and seven o'clock—when the two friends came in at last. There was only time for a brief cocktail and a biscuit before Norman Bellasis brought out the smart new Humber that last season's successful crops had brought them, and packing his stout friend into the little seat beside him, set out for the station to catch the London train. It was perhaps unfortunate that the very last remark Captain Rigby made, as he waved a hand in farewell to his hostess, standing in the doorway in the slanting light of the dying sunshine, should have been flavoured with the one subject she disliked to hear.

"Listen to the way the wind's getting up in the forest out there! Sounds just like the sea, doesn't it?"

That evening Norman Bellasis was peculiarly silent. Always these visits—indeed, any reminder of his old life—

disturbed and upset him for a time, but to-night there was a restless quality in his silence that faintly puzzled and distressed his wife. As they sat after dinner, each side of the flaming logs in the pretty old-world brick fireplace—despite the warmth of the June days, the evenings still demanded fires—the lamplight that they both preferred to electricity casting a mellow glow over old oak furniture, cosy velvet hangings, cushions, piano, all the rest of the little personal plenishings that they had chosen together, she eyed him furtively, wistfully, noting an added line or two in his pleasant sun-tanned face, an extra brushing of grey, like silver powder, each side of his crisp brown hair. He had aged during the last three years. Rebelliously she told herself that he would have aged anyway; that they were neither of them growing any younger. . . . But she could not gainsay the fact that he *had* aged more markedly and speedily since he had left the Navy!

While he had been at sea he had remained a boy despite the mounting years. Now he was definitely a middle-aged man, charming, affectionate, attentive, but lacking the gay, youthful element that, like the flame inside a lamp, makes all the difference between a thing really youthfully alive, and that same thing merely tamely existing. He was now—and she realized it for the first time to-night with grim and unmistakable force—he was a lamp with the flame turned down. . . .

Rising on a sudden irresistible impulse of panic she plumped herself down on her knees beside him, where he sat quietly reading, a large album open before him and, disregarding his exclamation of half-shy surprise—for he was an undemonstrative man, and she was not given to outward displays of affection as a rule—put her arms round his neck and held him close. Embarrassed, he laughed, and patted her on the back as he kissed her—she lay half-way across the book in his lap, hence he could not close it, but it did not escape her quick perception that he had made a clumsy, involuntary movement to do so. She glanced down at it—and her heart stood still; then moved onward with a faintly increased pulsation. It was an old book of sea-pictures. Postcards, large professional photographs, mere personal “snaps” taken by himself or others . . . she could not speak for a moment, and he spoke, hastily, half-apologetically:

"Seeing old Rigby made me want to look up these rubbishy things, Kit. Just—just to remind me, you know."

Crouched back on her heels, her small oval face in red shadow as she sat with her back to the blazing logs, she looked at him sideways. Her voice was bitter as gall.

"Must you always want—reminding, then?"

The sailor flushed, miserably enough.

"I don't know. Oh, Kit," he paused and spread his hands vaguely, helplessly. "It's *so* damn difficult to explain! We've had this out so often. . . ."

She rose to her feet and went over to the window. Pulling the heavy velvet curtain aside, she stood looking out towards the forest, trying to regain her temper. Angry, frightened in some dim undefined way, she yet knew that she must keep her temper, or she was lost . . . for a dramatic moment she stood still, striving for balance, for self-control, staring out at the outline of the forest-clad hills, like the line of a shadowy ocean heaving in dark irregular billows against the dusky star-patterned blueness of the sky. The restless wind had sprung up again, and through the window, now the heavy curtains were pulled aside, its voice sang, hollow, thunderous, among the distant tree tops . . . an arm stole tentatively about her still slender waist.

"There's going to be a storm, if I'm any judge of wind!" said Bellasis' voice behind her.

She glanced up and managed a smile at his wistful anxious face at her shoulder. Like the small boy he so much resembled, he had come stealing up, longing to kiss and make friends, ready to do anything to bring the light to her eyes again—on impulse she laid her head against his shoulder, sighing, for the moment tranquillized. But his next words drove repose from her mind once more—set it afresh on its old course, angry, restless, frightened of she knew not what. . . .

"Sounds just like the sound of the sea, doesn't it?"

Releasing his clasp of her waist, Bellasis threw the windows widely apart, and stepped out upon the narrow paved veranda that ran across the front of the house. On the opening of the windows, the voice of the wind suddenly arose and rushed at them, shouting, triumphant—it had risen considerably since the afternoon, and indeed, in its

singing roar, hollow, resounding, did undeniably resemble, and that with uncanny strength, the voice of the eternal sea, breaking on distant shores. Alone, triumphant, immortal. . . .

There was a tang of coming rain in the air, that brought with it a faint unpleasant chill—a chill, again, resembling the dank chilliness that precedes a storm at sea. With a curious dim fear stirring her heart, Kitty Bellasis stood watching her husband standing motionless upon the darkened lawn, his face turned towards the forest, his greying hair ruffled by the fingers of the wind, his eyes wide, remotely happy, as she had seen them so often in the old days, when, his shore leave over, he kissed her, turned on his heel and went away—back to the sea!

A gust of anger rose suddenly in the woman's breast, and took possession of her. Anger against herself, as much as anything else, in truth. It was, of course, mere chance, coupled with the presence of old Pen Rigby and his eternal talk of the sea and sea-faring things—that the ordinary wind that so often harried the forest and the downs should, this night of all nights, remind them both so strongly of the sea, that bogey she had dreamt laid, forgotten for good and all! The wind went roaring tumultuously through the tree-tops, banging and thundering in the hollows with a sound like Gatling guns, ruffling the leaves sideways in sudden flurries till their silver undersides looked like breaking foam on a lee-shore . . . muttering darkly in the distance, then coming nearer to break in crashing thunders about their ears as a storm breaks about a ship at sea . . . there she was again, comparing everything with the sea! A perfectly ordinary storm was rising, such as she had heard rise an indefinite number of times before, that was all. . . . She shivered suddenly and set her teeth, resolute.

This was mere nerviness! The result of worrying, the effect of suggestion, of one sort and another, upon both herself and her husband she adored—above all she must not add to it herself, or that would drive the rivets in still farther. She must drive away again, and this time for good, the green ghost that seemed still to haunt them! Throwing back her head, she braced herself, and, stepping out upon the veranda, slipped a possessive hand through her husband's arm.

"Sounds just like the sea, as you say, dear!" No use

in funking all mention of the subject—that was no way to fight a thing. “Almost like old times, hearing it at our door!”

He turned a face curiously blank towards her. For a moment it seemed as if he neither saw nor heard her; as though he were withdrawn, as it were, into some distant world of the spirit where his soul wandered, remote, detached, ecstatic . . . then suddenly he was himself again, bluff, pleasant Commander Bellasis, R.N., standing outside his charming country house on a stormy night, with his adored wife beside him, her hair blown abroad, like her filmy black chiffon skirts. Instantly he was all solicitude for her, lest she catch cold, spoil her frock, have her hair disturbed, and she smiled a triumphant smile as he guided her indoors, shut the windows once more, and drew the shutters close—and the voice of the wind, that was so like the voice of the sea she hated, faded almost into nothingness.

But not for long. Almost as soon as they had settled down to the nightly game of cards with which they invariably finished an evening, Jenks, the “factor” who with his wife ran the small household, came in with a long face portending trouble.

It appeared that there was a bad storm rising, and a gust of wind had just caught the back door, and banged it off its hinges very near, so that they couldn't fasten it—not to feel safe-like about it. . . . Even as he spoke, as if to confirm his words there came a fresh gust. A tinkling crash on the veranda betokened the fall of a loose tile from the ancient roof, the windows rattled furiously, and a puff of purple wood-smoke flared out into the warm room like a fairy balloon. Frowning—he hated to have his game of cards disturbed—the Commander rose and trod heavily out of the room after his henchman, while Kitty, chin on hand, stared sombrely after him. This wind—it was getting on her nerves . . . as he left the room her husband had left the door open, and through the open back door she could hear the wind again.

The house was a wide oblong, not a square, and the back door only just at the end of a short passage beyond the small entrance-hall—she could hear her husband's voice raised, discussing, arguing, hear the rougher voice of Jenks, as they wrangled over the broken hinge, but stronger than

all she heard now the wind, risen, it seemed, even in the short half-hour since they had come in, to thrice its original force! Like a ranging animal it roamed about the house, thrusting its fingers into cranny and hole, puffing down the chimneys, rattling the windows, sniffing under lintels, and all the time singing hoarsely aloud with that strangely borrowed voice—that voice that in all her happy three years in Dorset, Mrs. Bellasis had never heard before. The voice of the sea. . . .

She listened with strained ears, as through the now open back-door the strange voice sang to her, but now, it seemed, it sang in a curiously different tone. It sang to her alone. It pleaded . . . gone was the joyous defiance that had hurled itself against her as she stood, her hand through her husband's arm in the garden but a short half-hour ago! Now it was soft: pleading, beseeching, tender as the voice of a woman. Now it crooned, and wept and implored, begging for sympathy, for understanding. . . . Her eyes wide and frightened, but defiant still, Kitty Bellasis rose to her feet, staring before her at the open door, the *portière* of which still waved faintly in the draught. A little eddy of wind crept about her, lifted the curls of her hair and laid them down again; stole sighing to the flamelit fireplace, ruffled the flounces of her frock. . . . Something—something appallingly huge and powerful, laid siege to her pity—something ancient, colossal, before whose majesty she blanched and quivered in terror. Something that had laid aside, for love's sake, all arrogance, all ruthlessness, even all power, for the moment, was pleading with her . . . a vast inchoate Force, a Power before whom her very flesh dwindled and shrank spoke to her, using the voice of the Wind and the Forest! Clutching the edge of the table she swayed, terrified, amazed, on the verge of fainting; listening, hearing, yet knowing all the time that it was with some inner ear that she listened, not with the ears of her body at all. . . . Through the veil of the shouting wind it sang to her, wordless, pleading its cause in a threnody vast and terrifying yet small and sweet as a woman's voice. Like a giant heartbeat it came to her, through the throbbing of the wind.

"Let go! He is not yours, you know it! You keep him trapped by reason of your love, your body, your woman's spell . . . but he was not yours in the beginning. He was

mine, and he is still mine at heart! Let him go . . . and I will be kind. But defy me. . . ."

The unspoken threat throbbed and pulsed silently about her, but still the swaying woman held her ground, though the sweat poured down her brow, and she ground her teeth together to anchor her quivering self-control. She spoke at last, hoarsely, a little above a whisper, and as she spoke, it seemed to her that something listened. . . .

"I will not! He is mine, and I will never let him go. Never, never, never! I will die first. . . ."

It seemed she had scarcely reached the last word when lo, the atmosphere of the room changed, totally and completely! It was suddenly—empty, and most horribly empty—then with a screech that rang most horribly like a howl of wild appalling laughter, the storm was upon them! The clap of banging doors accompanied it, the crash of a breaking window, and the shrieks of the frightened maids as they came running into the hall . . . dazed and shaken, Kitty Bellasis found herself in the hall too, her husband, his hair blown wildly awry, his coat wet with rain and spattered with stray leaves, at her side, panting a little but laughing like a boy.

"My God, what a storm we're in for!" He dusted both strong hands together—she noticed they were scratched and dirty. "It's going to be a corker—hark at the wind! Come here. . . ."

He dragged her unresisting down the passage toward the back door. The back of the house faced directly upon the forest, and the sound of the wind was even stronger here, it seemed. Overhead the storm-clouds scudded helter-skelter, and the wet moon shone in blinks as the purple rags flapped hurrying across its face. Only just beyond the frail walls of the little farm rose the dark sweep of the forest, stretching away to the skyline, an endless vista of tree-tops undulating in waves and humps and hollows like a stretch of dark and restless waters. With the surface now uneasy, rising, falling, it looked uncannily like the sea itself—but like no real sea; it was a black and sinister ghost-sea, a nightmare ocean without glimmer of light or foam or ripple upon its bosom! A wide and terrible plain of heaving darkness, that yet spoke with the voice of the sea itself . . . far out it boomed and thundered, hollow, distant, menacing, but near at hand the rattle of a thousand leaves

ruffled by the furious little winds that eddied, like guerilla soldiers, about the flanks of the main armies, made a sound like the harsh crash and rattle of the pebbles on a lonely shore, dragged at by the fingers of the maddened waves. Now more than ever it sounded as though Ocean itself, unseen but dreadfully actual, surged threatening, savage, about their very doors, and shivering, the woman turned away. She was very cold.

"Come," she said, speaking very low—for of a sudden all Kitty Bellasis' fierce defiance had left her and only a simple frightened woman caught in a vast web of which she knew neither beginning nor ending, and did not dare to guess, remained. Barring the door with a shiver, she led the way towards the rickety stairs that led upwards to their bedroom.

"Come, darling . . . it's late. Come—to sleep."

Obediently he followed her, and she did not dare to glance behind, fearing to see the glow and radiance in his face as he listened to the shouting of the boisterous wind that now rocked the little house as a ship is rocked in the arms of a storm. She did not dare to look . . . but she knew too well that it was there. . . .

Only Mr. and Mrs. Jenks slept in the house, the other maids went down at nights to their homes in the village. The sound of their laughing voices as they struggled through the wind and rain down the garden path rose faintly to Kitty Bellasis' ears as she lay awake beside her sleeping husband, and on impulse she wished she had suggested that Bess and Ella had stayed for the night in the house. She felt curiously forlorn and alone; as though she longed to draw about her the protective mantle of human companionship, to hide beneath it from some vague alien force, or at least to use it to bolster up her flagging courage . . . for, alone in the darkness, hearing the windows creak and rattle, her husband's even breathing in the dark beside her, she realized that her courage was slowly slipping from her. She was afraid! She who had never known what fear was, was afraid at last. Afraid of that huge elemental Force that dimly she felt was arrayed against her, to filch from her the thing she held dearest in life . . . was he yet to be drawn away from her, despite her fierce passion for him, her determination to hold him?

This stealthy sapping of her courage unnerved her—was

this to be the way she was to be defeated? Was this to go on until she grew listless, apathetic, cowed, let him go from sheer lack of energy to keep him back? Clenching her hands under the bedclothes, she told herself fiercely not to be a fool. She had allowed an unlucky concatenation of circumstances to affect her nerves, to influence her strangely . . . her inner obsession about the Sea—a thing perhaps rather exaggerated in itself—had caused her to exaggerate everything connected with it!

The appearance of old Rigby, with his ceaseless talk of old days and old ways, had helped things on, and the strange voice of the wind—which, of course, *could* not be anything but quite ordinary wind, only somehow to-day she could not help hearing in it something she did not seem to have heard before. Absurd, of course, but there it was. Through these simple things, all capable of the most ordinary explanation, she had allowed herself to actually imagine, for those fantastic moments in the drawing-room, to think that the Sea itself was speaking to her—speaking through and with the voice of the wind in the Forest—imploing her to release her lover, to let him return. . . . Now she saw that it was all quite absurd and childish, and she would compose herself to sleep, as Norman had done, bless him. Yet despite her brave words her skin crept and her hands grew clammy, and in her ears still rang the sound of the wind roaring in the forest far out—roaring with the voice of the Sea. . . .

A gust caught the window—lightly latched as it was of necessity, since for artistic reasons the Bellasis had left the old house as much as possible in its original state—and it flew open with a crash that made her jump and quiver like a cornered hare . . . yet it did not wake her husband. The sky was still full of flying clouds, but for the moment the moon sailed clear of them, and in the silver gleam she saw her husband lying, his hands lightly crossed on his breast, his face turned sideways towards the window so that one brown cheek pressed the pillow. His lips were slightly parted as he slept, and in a moment's lull in the raging storm she heard a faint sound issuing from them. She bent close and listened, and her cheek blanched . . . for he was singing! Faintly, below his breath, but clearly and regularly, as he used to sing in his midshipman's days, an old sea-chanty.

"As I was a-walking down Paddington Street
(*With a heave ho, blow the man down!*)
A pretty young maiden I chanced for to meet.
(*Give me some time to blow the man down!*)"

She sank back on her pillow, quivering. . . . It was no use. She would never eradicate this love of the Sea—but with all her strength she would resist it! She would never let him go—she would twine her arms about his neck and weep and plead, did he suggest returning, as she had sometimes dreaded he might—but she did not think he would. He had long ago relinquished any effort to make her sympathize or understand his love of the Sea. In anything else she was tolerant, sympathetic, charming, but in this she was fixed; immutable as Time itself. She would never let him go. Sooner death! Sooner death. . . .

Vaguely she stared out into the darkness of the room. The light had fled, as a veiling of black and angry clouds flung themselves across the moon's face, and only a glimmer here and there, reflected on small shining surfaces, the mirror, the clock-face, the brass andirons in the ancient fireplace, the glass in the framed photograph of her husband on the mantelpiece lit the sombre darkness . . . yet as she stared, it seemed that the glimmerings *moved!* That they were not stable, as usual . . . and that there were more of them than there should be, all slipping and changing, melting into each other like ripples of light moving on the surface of a stealthily rising flood . . . she smiled faintly at herself and sighed.

How horribly nervy she had allowed herself to get to-night, to be sure. The worrying about the sea seemed to have seeped into her very brain, so that she thought she saw it or heard it or sensed it at every turn. . . . Then suddenly she held still, stiff, paralysed, for she knew the truth. *The Sea was there*—in the room with her! Silently it pressed in, through every nook and cranny, pouring in through the window, rising through the floor, stealing, forcing its way under the cracks of the door . . . as she stared with bulging eyes, lying spellbound beside her sleeping husband, she watched it rise, and knew the exquisite perfection of terror! First a mere film upon the floor, dimly shining as it crawled and slithered, she saw the loose rug rise with the stealthy pressure of the water beneath it, until

it lapped the legs of dressing-table, chairs and bed. . . . With distended eyes, utterly unable to move, she watched it rise and rise, stealthy, silent, inexorable, and as it rose it brought with it all the soul of the Sea!

No mere flood of water, real or imaginary, filled the tiny chamber in the farmhouse on the Dorset downs, but the great illimitable Sea itself, seagreen, luminous, eternal! Tall weeds, purple and olive and bronze, stretched their hungry fingers towards the bed, and tossed their streaming hair, beaded with gleaming crystal bubbles. Anemones, like starry living flowers, massed themselves in the corners, crimson and orange-colour, yellow and mauve, while tiny blue crabs ran busily among them, and rainbow-coloured fish, their fins like trailing lengths of transparent gauze, swam in and out, their solemn unwinking eyes fixed like the glass eyes of automatons!

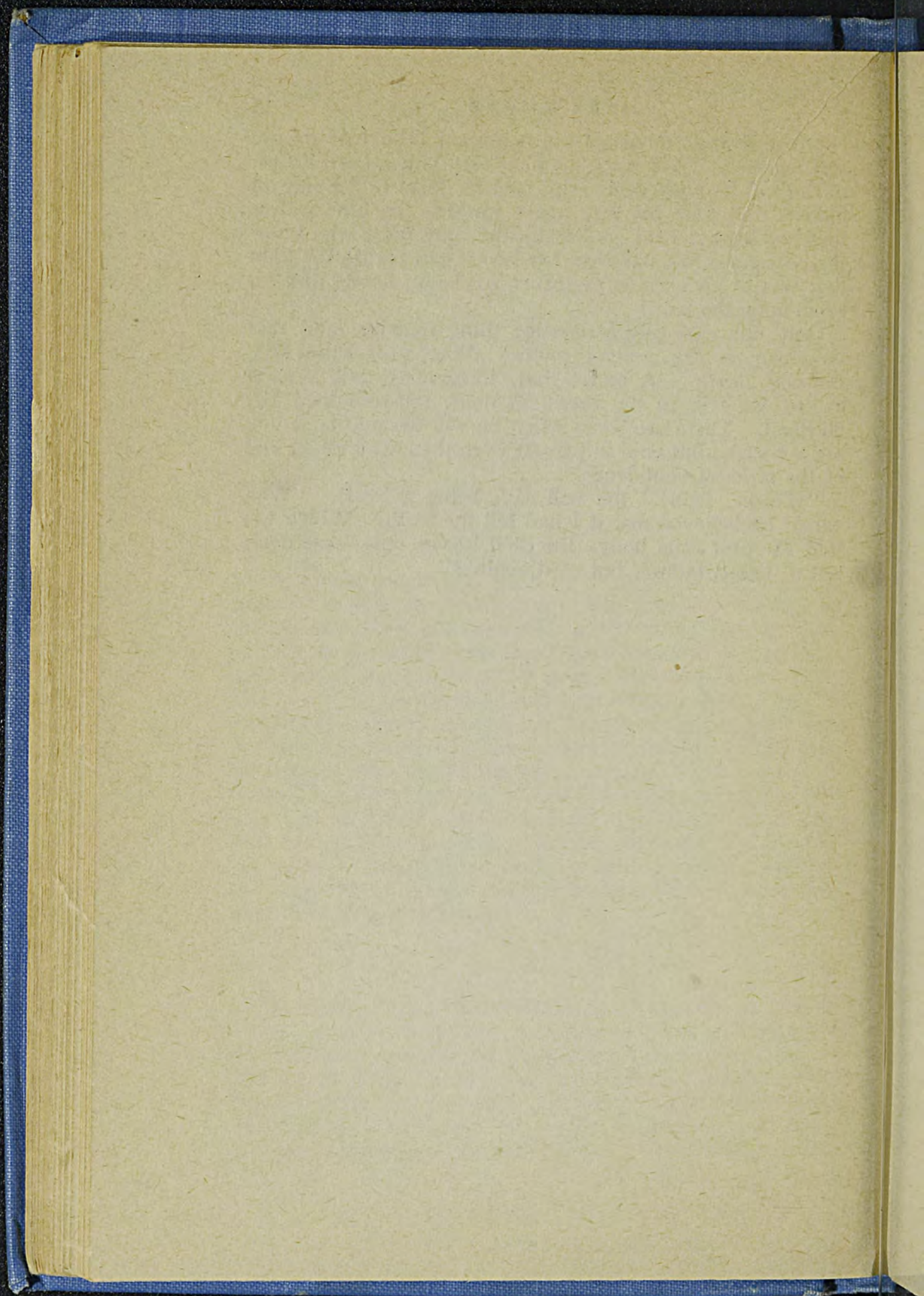
It did not seem strange to little Mrs. Bellasis, now sunk in some strange sort of trance, to see the moonlight, as the moon sailed out at last, glint on a smooth sheet of water, now level with the bedclothes; it did not seem strange to her to see huge clams open and shut their scalloped mouths where her husband's shoe-box stood, or even to see, from a forest of giant sponges, a great black conger-eel glide by . . . and now the flood was level with the bed! It was lapping the fingers of her hand, hanging over the edge, but so gently, so softly that she never moved—so gently that at last she even smiled, happily, vaguely, the terror wiped completely from her face, so that it was the vacant, dreaming face of a little child. And the flood rose higher, and the soul of Kitty Bellasis, who had defied the Sea, floated out upon it, tranquilly, peacefully, so that she died without knowing that she died. So that it seemed that the Sea was kind in triumph, after all. . . .

The doctor from Titherton—hamlet nearest to Forest Farm—hastily fetched by a white-faced Jenks on the morning following the terrible June storm—that storm that is still talked of in Dorset with bated breath—gave a certificate of death by heart-failure, of course; there was nothing else that he could say, in public at least, about Mrs. Bellasis' strange and sudden death. For many months

Norman Bellasis mourned his dominant little wife deeply and sincerely. Yet since a sailor born is a sailor always, in the end he packed his grip, sold his farm to the nearest bidder, and took his way again towards the blue waters that had always held his heart—and only those who know the power the Sea has over her lovers can realize the light that was in his eyes as he turned his back, finally and for ever, upon the land!

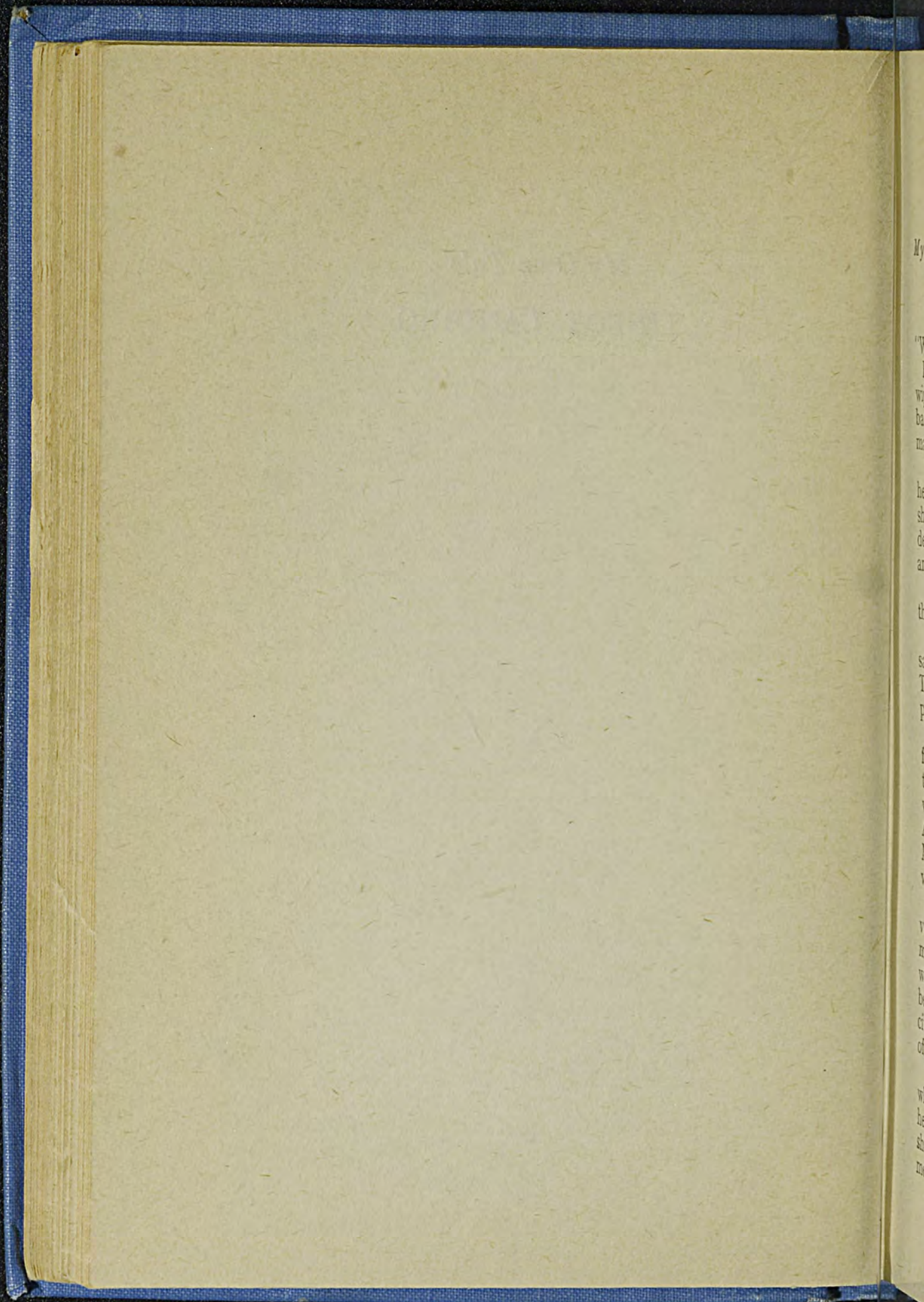
Only one curiously interesting thing remains (and that unknown to the general public) about poor little Mrs. Bellasis' death. A secret that, fortunately, will remain locked for ever in the breast of dour, self-contained Dr. McPhail. There are times when he will discuss it—if you are a friend—but only in private even then, and under seal of the strictest confidence. . . .

“Whisht, mon!” (he will say, being a Scot). “Wha would ha believed me, if I had tell the truth? Which wis that the puir little body—the de'il knows how—was deid, not o' hearrt-failure, but o' droonin'?”



My Own Tale

TINPOT LANDING



TINPOT LANDING

"WHY 'Tinpot Landing'?" demanded Tony Kenyon.

Fat little Hans Vechten shrugged his shoulders, and wiped his perspiring brow for the fifteenth time with a large bandanna handkerchief whose flaring scarlet almost matched his face.

"Why—it's always been called dat since I remember," he said reflectively. "Thing it's begos someone stuck sheeds of tin or zinc round der piles of der house to geep der andts. vrom glimbing up. . . . Though even a sdray andt might be welcome as gompany at Tinpot Landing!"

Tony laughed, and flung his cigarette-stub into the river that creamed its way silkily along the little steamer's sides.

"You can't scare me with the 'loneliness' bogey!" he said with the lordliness of youth. "I'll find plenty to do! There's sure to be shooting and fishing—or something—to pass the time."

Hans Vechten smiled oddly as he glanced at the pleasant-faced young fellow at his side—Tony Kenyon, new, if not to the Dark Continent, at least to Western Africa; on his way to take up his appointment as agent of the "West African Trading Company" at the loneliest outpost on the Mawa River, and trying hard to hide his inner pride and vainglory at his first really responsible post.

The little Dutchman liked his young passenger, and felt vaguely somewhat sorry for him. Africa is a hard task-mistress for a child, and this child had only known her when she smiled upon him—there is a vast difference between farming in "British East" within hail of towns and civilization, and venturing into the lowering dark wastes of the "West"!

Vechten threw out a fat eloquent hand towards the shore, where miles of dark green forest, sombre, impenetrable, heaved and billowed itself into the distance to meet the shimmering steely blue of the horizon; near at hand regiments of lean twisted mangroves, black, olive, purple, stood

kneedeep in the slimy water to stare, it seemed, at the passing steamer, and on the left side of the river lay a wide expanse of mud-flats, where birds flittered among the reeds, and huge river horses, like fat blue slugs, lay wallowing in the warm shallows. But for the most part sheer forest closed the river in; trees, trees, sinister, huge, ogrelike, hung with twisted creepers, beneath which the atmosphere lay warm and steamy as a huge greenhouse, and the silence could almost be cut with a knife.

"What sord of serious hunting can you do in gountry like dis?" demanded the Dutchman. "Tinpot Landing is chust a clearing on der edge of der river! Noding but swamp and forest beside—if I'd been your fader, mein younck friend, I'd have told you to stop near Kenya, where you had all sords of pritty ladies to ride with nows and thens, and peoples to talk to, and an easy life. . . ."

Tony Kenyon frowned.

"Sanders, the chap who had Tinpot Landing before me, stuck it for four years," he remarked, a little nettled. "And I only signed on for two!"

"Sanders," said Vechten, "was older by a long way dan you, also he wass safing money to ged married. Dat's why he stuck it so long. Id's good money—hass to be, or der Company wouldn't ged anyone to apply for der job at all."

"I know it'll be lonely-ish," allowed the younger man. "And if one can't do much shooting or fishing that's rather damnable. But I've got plenty of books, and so on, and oh—one can always find something to do!"

He spoke with a breezy confidence that he did not altogether feel—it was certainly annoying to find that the agent of the Company's headquarters in Lagos had coloured Tinpot Landing in much more favourable terms than it actually deserved.

"What happened to Sanders? Did he get the better job he deserved after his four years?" he asked idly.

"Sanders? Why, he tied, poor tevil! Didn't dey tell you?" Vechten looked faintly surprised. "Tied of malaria a few days before he wass due to leave, poor chap. He wass a nice chap. . . . Last time I called at Tinpot Landing dere wass only hiss headboy—a Hausa chap called 'Plumjam' for some reason, I don'd know why—carrying on till anoder agent came, and he showed me hiss grave. Plumjam buriet him—behind der bungalow."

"Br-rh! Hope to God his ghost doesn't walk!" laughed Tony. "Luckily I'm salted against malaria—should like to see the mosquito who could land me with a bout of fever!"

Yet despite his youthful self-confidence, it must be admitted that when a few hours later Tony Kenyon found himself disembarking upon a tiny jetty, where a tall Hausa "boy", the oddly named Plumjam—impressively dignified despite the ludicrous effect of a small European straw "boater", worn in alliance with ordinary native garb—waited to welcome him, with before him, his future home, a sturdy little bungalow, standing beside a group of out-buildings and native huts, backed by the impenetrable dark-green wall of the forest and bathed in welcoming sunshine, he felt a faint sinking sensation at the pit of the stomach, and a childish desire to turn and run. For Tinpot Landing, even in the sunshine, seemed disquietingly small and solitary. A tiny clearing in the very heart of the African bush, a fragment of civilization in a giant and indifferent wilderness. . . .

Secretly he hoped that the *Lou Helen* might be tying up to the jetty for the night, but Vechten's time was limited, and he was anxious to leave before dusk. Plumjam had carried on his chief's work to the best of his ability, and there were a few cases standing ready to be conveyed to the Company's Headquarters in Lagos; but these were soon dumped on board, and with much snorting and protest, the little steamer backed and turned until she was headed down river. With a cheery word and a clap on the back, the little Dutchman bade his young friend good-bye and climbed on board, and puffing, the *Lou Helen* drew away, heading for Lagos and civilization once more. . . . As he stood watching it depart, the captain standing on the stern, his round face beaming like a red moon above the rail, Tony Kenyon felt that faint and unpleasant sinking at the base of his stomach grip him once more.

Now that it came to the crux, there was something rather grim in knowing that when the battered little steamer had turned the far bend of the river he would be entirely *alone* but for a few natives, for the first time in his life. For three solid months, then for three again, and three more on the top of that, and so on for two long years. . . . It didn't seem so good somehow, standing here thinking of

that, with those phalanxes of great macabre trees standing watching you, with the brown river running silently past only a few feet away, and only that little group of natives, detached and alien as animals, to whom you could turn in time of need.

However, one did not give in to these things! After the *Lou Helen* had finally vanished round the bend of the river, the new agent, pulling himself resolutely together, proceeded to take stock of his new quarters—a gesture that did a good deal to cheer him. The bungalow was built upon piles, as were all the other buildings in the little clearing, since the Mawa had the pleasing habit of coming down in spate during the rainy season, and sweeping more conventionally built houses bodily away. As Vechten had said, these piles were faced on the outside, by way of protection against ants, with sheets of tin cut from old biscuit boxes, metal cases and so on, which still shone bravely despite the coating of dirt and age, giving the little buildings the look of being supported, one and all, on groups of square tin feet.

The bungalow itself was built partly of corrugated iron, partly of wood and adobe—the native building material, river-mud mixed with chopped grass and fibre—and boasted a hideous iron roof that was, however, almost hidden in a flood of starry white “nipa” flowers like a stray snowdrift that had settled there. A veranda ran all round the house, and a few steps led up to it from the ground to the main door—this led directly into the living-room, and as he stepped inside Tony Kenyon drew a faint breath of surprise. He had known the bungalow was furnished, but had not dreamt it would seem so altogether “lived in”—for an absurd moment he felt almost embarrassed at entering, as if his predecessor, the dead Sanders, must step out from some inner doorway and demand by what right he was there!

Obviously the faithful Plumjam had merely kept the place reasonably clean and tidy, and left most of his dead chief's possessions in their respective places, pending his successor's arrival. It was the same all over the tiny house. Several zinc-lined boxes were still full of Sanders' clothes, pleasant ancient garments smelling of tobacco and shaving-soap; his guns, boots, fishing-rods were still stacked in their accustomed corners. A pair of well-worn ebony-backed

hair-brushes lay side by side on the top of the chest of drawers that served as a toilet-table in the small bedroom, and a pair of blue pyjamas still lay across the striped red, green and yellow native-woven coverlet, on the narrow camp-bed where Sanders had breathed his last, defeated by the grim inexorable Bush . . . with a little shiver of mingled distaste and pity, Tony deposited his own suit-case upon the bed, and turned away to explore the rest of the tiny bungalow.

There was not much more. A bathroom of sorts containing a tin tub and improvised "shower"—a perforated sheet of tin suspended from the ceiling, through which, presumably, the useful Plumjam poured water upon his employer standing in the tub below. A kitchen, likewise of sorts, another tiny room opening off the main room, used for the storage of oddments—boxes, odd sticks, guns, butterfly nets, old papers and so on—and the main or living-room itself, that served as office, dining-and-drawing-room, lounge and study all combined. This was a sizable room, with two long windows opening on to the veranda, and contained, beside a large desk loaded with dusty papers, a central table, two or three lounge chairs made of wood or wicker, with cretonne-covered cushions obviously sent from England, shelves stacked with dog-eared books and magazines, a pipe-rack equally stacked with pipes, and a gramophone in a square wooden case that the prevailing damp had, alas, long rendered useless except as a spare side-table.

The walls were covered with pictures cut from magazines, with multifarious snapshots, and various maps, sketches, and hand-drawn diagrams of the locality margined with mysterious pencilled notes, and two large framed photographs were placed carefully in the most prominent places. One of a sweet-faced elderly woman, and the other of a girl who signed herself briefly "Eve".

It was obvious that the girl was the outstanding feminine influence in the dead agent's life, for by far the largest proportion of the many snapshots that patterned the bare wooden walls were of her—evidently sent out from England, for the backgrounds were never tropical, as in all the rest. There were also two or three snaps of Sanders himself, presumably taken by Plumjam. A tall rangy fellow, ugly, yet pleasant to look on. . . .

Interested, Tony wandered about examining and appraising while Plumjam unpacked his goods and laid his supper out upon the table in the living-room under the friendly light of the single yellow-shaded oil lamp. Sardines, tomato soup, corned beef and tinned apricots. Sitting alone after his meal, smoking and staring about him, the young man decided that photographs were friendly things to welcome a fellow condemned to solitude for two long years, and that photographs of this unknown girl most friendly of all. She was not exactly pretty, but the wide-apart steady eyes and firmly cut mouth were attractive—it was a face that grew on you somehow. You felt you would never grow tired of looking at it as you might of some much prettier faces. . . .

It was easy to learn the relationship between "Eve" and the lean, smiling Sanders of the snapshots. One of the first things that Tony found when going, as in duty bound, through his predecessor's papers, was a huge bundle of letters signed "Eve", but they were all without address except sometimes briefly "home", or more rarely "Paris" or "London". Evidently the two were engaged to be married. They were old friends—even related in some way, he gathered; probably cousins; she was waiting for him to make enough money to marry her, but that was all that emerged definitely from the scribbled pile. Even her surname remained a mystery. . . .

"Confound it," thought Tony as he regretfully slipped the last letter back into its envelope. "I can't do anything—but surely she will have got the official announcement of his death by now, and will write me telling me where to send his things?"

Meanwhile, he deposited the letters in a freshly emptied drawer of the desk, along with various other personal papers, although of these there were singularly few, since the correspondence was mainly merely business stuff. There were a few letters from men-friends, from "Eve's" mother likewise, also a daily journal mainly concerned with records of the amount of stuff per month or week brought in by the natives for despatch to the Company . . . it was easy to gather from these scattered records that Sanders must have been a good twelve or fifteen years older than his *fiancée*. A man kindly, humorous, eminently likeable, the sort of man that other men instinctively take to . . .

there were times, as time went on, that Tony Kenyon, sensing with inward qualms the first stealthy onset of the depression that attacks those who face the desert places of the world alone and undefended save by their own valiance, found himself wishing, wistfully and hungrily, that Sanders—genial, friendly, companionable soul as the homelike atmosphere of the little bungalow told he must have been—could return and bulwark him against the overwhelming loneliness that at times threatened to undermine his courage!

But at first everything was too new, and too interesting in its novelty, for him to plumb the full depths of his solitude, though the actual work was easy enough—too easy to keep an imaginative mind thoroughly occupied. It consisted of receiving and logging up the stuff brought in by the natives—kola nuts, copra, calabar beans and a small amount of palm-oil for the most part, though the maw of the Company was large, and monkey-skins, bird-plumage for the European markets, aromatic or medicinal roots, rare woods and an occasional small quantity of ivory, against the law as this was, passed through their agent's hands in the course of his duty. Tony's job was to deal with these. To give receipts to the native "collectors"; pay their wages, consisting mainly of lengths of bright-coloured stuffs, tobacco, salt or beads; to store the goods delivered in ant-proof cases in which to await the arrival of the *Lou Helen*; to keep an accurate log of the daily proceedings . . . and after that, he was his own master.

A very little exploring satisfied him that Vechten had been right anent the hopelessness of obtaining any shooting—the forest was too thick and swampy for expeditions of this kind to be anything but a weariness to the flesh as well as substantially dangerous to health and limb. The river was not productive of much in the way of fishing, developing into almost continuous rapids a little higher up—the utter monotony of the forest made mere wandering a bore, and he soon gave that amusement up as a bad job. The official "log" developed into a voluminous diary, and he took to trying to learn the difficult Hausa dialect from Plumjam, as also to perfect his playing on the little "uke" he had brought with him into the wilderness. . . . In the silence of the long dull evenings its tuneful squeak defied the grim brooding darkness of the forest like a Tom Thumb challenging Goliath, tiny but valiant!

He taught himself to play patience with an old pack of cards found in Sanders' desk, and wrote innumerable letters to anybody he could think of; busied himself in fact valiantly and persistently, yet despite himself the daily and hourly silence—since the guttural talk of the outdoor natives meant no more than the chattering of the monkeys in the Bush, and Plumjam rarely spoke unless addressed—began to fret his nerves, and there were times when he resolutely refused to look ahead. Two years! And the first three months had been so long! There is no denying that when, for the first time since his arrival at Tinpot Landing, Tony Kenyon heard the hoot of the *Lou Helen* in the far distance, his heart was thumping with excitement, and an hour before the steamer was due, he was waiting upon the quay clad in a fresh white suit, eager to fall upon the skipper's fat neck. Vechten clapped him paternally upon the back and invited him to dinner on board, an invitation that Tony, weary of Plumjam's rather limited culinary accomplishments, eagerly accepted . . . it was during dinner that Vechten, fishing out a bunch of letters from his pocket, tossed them over the table to his guest.

"Id iss gurious," he remarked in his guttural English. "Zome ledders for poor Sanders are amongst your mail. In a woman's hand. I know id, the girl he meant to marry, I dink. Id must be months now dat she hear noding from him, ant yet she go on wriding. . . . Ach, women, dey are mizzderious liddle gusses!"

"Mizzderious" was scarcely the word, thought Tony, puzzled beyond measure as he turned the letters over and over. He stuffed them finally into his pocket without comment, and turned eagerly to the kindly Dutchman, drinking in his talk, his laughter, his stories, with a pathetic hungry pleasure that spoke aloud of his hunger for the company of his fellows, until between excitement, interest, and the plentiful good schnapps with which the old man plied him it was an uproariously tipsy and cheerful young man who ultimately tumbled into his bed at four o'clock the following morning!

But awakening brought with it the usual Nemesis of a severe headache, and a few hours later, when the *Lou Helen* had chugged her way downstream and out of sight, the young agent in charge of Tinpot Landing despatched the

mystified Plumjam, plus two of his henchmen, to the stores, and on their bringing forth the few cases of spirits kept there in case of accidents, dumped them dramatically in the river! Theatrical as the *geste* was in the long run it was probably a wise one—yet Tony Kenyon was to regret it poignantly as time went on, when the long days and nights grew drearier, and he found himself longing for some form of drug to banish the abysmal depression that now attacked him more and more frequently.

The new batch of letters from "Eve" provided no more information as to her whereabouts than the previous ones he had found among Sanders' papers, but they read curiously as if she still thought her love living and waiting for her—but Tony read no farther than the first one or two, feeling an odd embarrassment at reading love-letters so palpably not intended for his eye. Not that they could be called "love-letters" in the literal sense of the word; rather they seemed letters cheery, affectionate, friendly, like those of a young sister to an elder brother—with a little sigh of exasperation Tony stored them away with the others, and turned once more to his work.

But the rot of protracted loneliness was already setting in. Work, once reduced to a routine, became mechanical; the novelty and interest of life at Tinpot Landing wore thin and thinner still, and the young man waxed, as young men will, nervy and irritable under the strain of silence and solitude. So by degrees it came to pass that the two photographs, "Eve" and her lover, Sanders, whose lean kindly countenance still smiled gravely from the wall of the living-room, became almost real to Tony Kenyon, and he found himself talking to them, each in turn, or both together, with a solemn eagerness that was at once pathetic and a little alarming.

Sanders, he felt, was like a sort of elder brother. One could talk to Sanders, straight, sensibly, about the funny feelings one had when one was alone, and Sanders would neither laugh nor fail to understand. . . . Indeed, there were times, as the weeks passed on, and Plumjam, like a slim brown ghost, went finally out of the room after dinner, and drew the mosquito-curtains close behind him, when Sanders himself seemed to enter softly from the veranda, sit down in the empty chair facing young Kenyon's own, and taking out his pipe, fill and light it and sit, listening,

nodding, his steady eyes quiet on the young man's light restless ones, a companion unseen, but none the less real and valued.

The personality of "Eve" was at no time, oddly enough, as tangible as that of Sanders. She represented Woman, an ideal, a lovely phantom too vague and far-off to hope to touch except in dreams. But by degrees the man's presence, quiet, kindly, sympathetic, seemed to loom more and more solid and actual about the little bungalow as the days dragged by, and Tony Kenyon's nerves wore more and more frayed as solitude, depression, and the damp unhealthy atmosphere of Tinpot Landing wore him slowly but steadily down.

Six months, and the *Lou Helen* came again, bringing yet another batch of letters from Eve to her dead lover; the kindly skipper, frowning at the young man's white face and strained air, tried hard to persuade him to throw in his hand, and return to civilization with him, but Tony shook his head, and with set teeth watched the *Lou Helen* sail away once more. Not only for the sake of his future good name with the Company would he stick it to the end, but for the sake of his own self-respect, that refused point blank to admit defeat at the hands of grim relentless Nature, who, by the weapons of dire loneliness, "nerves", boredom and fever, was trying to grind him down into the ranks of the failures. . . .

When the squat little steamer had sailed away, leaving him to silence and his own company once more, he went wearily back to the bungalow, and sitting down, turned over the last batch of letters from "Eve" with a faint apathetic interest. Poor girl. . . . Poor girl! Dimly he admired the steadfastness that could go on writing so faithfully without receiving any answer, month after month after poor Sanders lay dead under the mangroves in the clearing behind the bungalow! Dimly he set himself to emulate the strange girl's staunchness and loyalty by sticking doggedly and regularly to the daily routine that by the end of six months had become a nightmare to him. A nightmare only lightened by his now-nightly talks with the invisible Sanders, talks over which the anxious Plumjam shook his woolly head doubtfully, and the other natives whispered, scared, affrighted. Hour after hour the new Boss sat talking, gesticulating, nodding towards an empty

chair, and surely he was going mad, the devils of the forest had their claws into his soul!

But every nervous system, even the strongest, has its limit, and at last that limit was reached. The young agent in charge of Tinpot Landing went down with a fierce attack of that malaria against which he had thought himself immune, shortly before the *Lou Helen* was due to pay her third visit to Tinpot Landing. When she anchored at last, the quarterly consignment of goods for despatch to the Company's Headquarters stood awaiting her on the primitive quay attended by the grave-faced Plumjam alone, for Tony Kenyon lay prostrate on his bed in a high fever. . . .

Fat, kindly Hans Vechten, much concerned, lingered as long as he dared at the sick man's bedside, scratching his head and praying for a temporary glimpse of lucidity in his young friend's ravings, but he was obliged to give it up at last as a bad job, and departed grumbling into the blue once more—but leaving behind him a certain mysterious parcel of goods that the gods, who are sometimes merciful, had chosen to send Tony Kenyon by way of a surprise!

• • • • •

It was fully a week before the young man realized that the vision that had sat at his bedside, administering medicine, soothing drinks, cold water spongings, and what not, was not a mere figment of his fevered imagination! Vaguely he stared at her, seeing a tall, slim girl in fresh blue-spotted linen, with brown hair wavy and crisp surrounding her charming serious face like a nimbus, and wide-set grey eyes fixed on his—stretching out a lean pallid hand, he grasped at her as if afraid she might melt into the distance before he caught her, and breathed an awestruck question.

"Eve?"

The vision nodded a grave head.

"Yes. I'm Eve, and I'm real, and looking after you . . . now take this, and don't try to talk or understand anything!"

A glassful of cool fresh lime-juice and soda was held to his lips, and still staring, still marvelling, Tony Kenyon fell asleep clinging to the hand of the vision in blue, secretly miserably sure he was dreaming, and that she

would be gone when he awoke. But she was there when he woke again hours and hours later—when he woke during the night, and cried out for her, terrified, convinced afresh that it all was a dream, lo, she crept in from the next room, more visionary than ever in boyish striped pyjamas under a loose white wrapper! She was there still when he woke in the mornings, when the sunshine crept through the close-drawn mosquito-net curtains, and the cicalas sang merrily in the bush outside, when Plumjam, beaming, brought in breakfast spread for two, with coffee, bananas, and tiny river-fish fried in oil till they curled up like the question marks to all the inquiries that Tony Kenyon longed to make, and realized that he was still too ill and weak to make. . . .

Wisely the new-comer forbade him to ask questions until he mended—but he mended rapidly. Youth and health were on his side, and the direly needed tonic of companionship worked hand in hand with his own strong constitution to overcome his weakness, until it was only a short time before he was well enough to lie, wrapped in a light rug and dressing-gown, on a lounge chair on the veranda, beaming and cheerful, albeit white-faced, and watching his miraculously sent companion with a gaze still entirely amazed and by now abjectly adoring. He had been, until now, far too weak to concentrate on anything but getting well, but with regained strength came overwhelming curiosity and wonder . . . it was on one cool and lovely evening about a fortnight after her arrival that Eve Dersingham, to give her her full name, at last opened the subject that her companion was so longing to explore.

They had finished dinner, and were sitting in the amber glow of the big oil-lamp upon the veranda, listening to the croak and flop of the giant frogs in the river, the soft swirl of the dark-gleaming water as it poured past the piles of the landing-stage, the occasional crash of branches overhead as a stray monkey swung its way home to bed along the tree-tops that are the highways of the world of the "*bandar-log*". Eve sat smoking tranquilly, staring before her, her thick soft hair like a halo against the ruddy lampshade on the table just beyond her, a soft green muslin frock following the lines of her graceful body, one narrow hand, ringless, hanging idly over the arm of a deck-chair. Tony spoke hesitatingly, struggling after a memory.

"Forgive my asking . . . but didn't you wear an engagement ring when you came first?" he asked diffidently.

She nodded soberly.

"Yes. You see, when I came, I thought I was still engaged to Len. . . ."

Tony bit his lip—he was faintly, wistfully jealous of the link between the shadowy long-legged man who had so long companioned him, and the girl whom he now realized he loved with all his hungry young heart. Sanders—the faint yet tangible ghost-friend that he called Sanders—seemed to have retreated somewhat since Eve's advent, yet still stood in the offing, watching waiting, it seemed, for something to happen . . . he moved uneasily, and the girl went on, speaking reflectively as she blew rings of lilac smoke up to the creeper-draped roof of the veranda.

"You're well enough now to hear everything, I think—not that I *can* tell you everything, I don't understand myself, even now! Listen!" She turned to him suddenly and threw out her hands. "Are you *sure* that Len is dead?"

Puzzled, the young man stared at her.

"Dead? Of course he is!" he said. "Ask Plumjam. He saw him die, and buried him. I've seen his grave, poor chap, under the mangoes behind the bungalow. I've stuck up a cross of sorts, and tried my best to keep it decent, but the weeds grow in this swampy land like the dickens, and it is difficult. . . ."

"When did he die?" went on the girl.

Tony hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Five or six months before I took over, and I've been here nearly a year now—that's about sixteen months!" He was not prepared for the girl's answer, made with her eyes on his.

"Tony—I know you wouldn't lie to me! But if Len is dead, then what—who—*how* is it that, with the exception of the lapse of a few months, ever since he is supposed to have died, he has been writing regularly to me?"

She fumbled in her bag, and producing a bundle of tattered letters tied with ribbons, threw them across the table to him. Kenyon's eyes widened as he studied the postmarks on the envelopes. All dated during the past year, all posted from Lagos, whence his own mail was

dispatched for home . . . he sat up, startled and vaguely disquieted.

"But this is absurd!" he ejaculated. "You're *sure* it is his writing—that someone isn't playing a hoax on you?"

Eve shook her head.

"Never. I know Len's writing, his turn of phrase, the way he put things, too well! Why, he was my cousin—we were brought up together." She hesitated and brought out the rest of the sentence with a faint rush and a deepening of her pretty colour. "That's why, when he asked me to marry him, I consented. When he left England to come out here four years ago, he asked me if, when he was making enough money, I would come out and marry him, and I said yes, because . . . well, I *was* very fond of him, and I knew he would be good to me, and Mother was so happy to think that when she died I wouldn't be left alone. . . ." She twisted her hands together and stared out into the darkening bush. "All those reasons seem now rather mean and small for accepting a man's love. I know now I was only giving him a rather childish sort of affection in return. But I didn't know any better then! I didn't know anything about love. . . .!"

"Do you know—now?" breathed Tony, vastly daring.

She bent her head, voiceless—weak as he was, he stretched his arms out, hungry for her, joyful, as with a quick convulsive movement she slid to her knees at his side, and buried her soft brown head on his shoulder. For a few moments they were still, held close in each other's arms, while the kindly moon that has witnessed so many love-scenes smiled down between the interlacing branches of the trees, and the bats wheeled and darted about the eaves of the veranda, curtained with starry white *nipa* flowers that strewed the dusk with scent. . . .

"My God!" breathed the young man at last, ecstatically. "I believe I fell in love with you from the first moment I saw your photograph on poor old Sanders' desk! But that *you* should love *me*! I'm all in a muddle still as to how or why you came out here, I'm sure it's a miracle straight from Heaven, but come close to me and explain. . . ."

Curled at his side on a cushion thrown upon the rough board flooring of the veranda, Eve told her lover how she

had lost her mother about fourteen months previously of heart-failure. Of how she had taken a course of training in the hope of getting an engagement as private secretary, only to fail ignominiously, finding her experience not sufficient for a highly paid post, and the only ones open to her so poorly salaried that it would be utterly impossible to live upon her earnings. For a short time she had lived precariously upon the few hundreds left her by her mother, alone and all but friendless, and deeply troubled over the fact that shortly before her mother's death all letters from her betrothed had suddenly ceased! Ceased curiously and completely, despite the fact that she was herself writing to him as regularly as ever—she had all but given up hope when lo, many weary months later, three months after Tony Kenyon's arrival at Tinpot Landing in fact, out of the blue the letters began coming again!

"The first," said Eve, her wide blue-grey eyes fixed on Tony's, "was dated about the time you must have arrived here. Written from the old address—Tinpot Landing—same style, same affectionate way of writing and signing himself, as ever. Of course, I was *frightfully* hurt and angry at his leaving me so long without a word, but I was so thankful to see his writing again, and to know I wasn't forgotten and alone in the world, that I couldn't keep up being cross for long. . . ."

"How did he explain his not writing?" asked Tony, open-eyed.

The girl shook her head.

"I asked him, of course, in my very first letter back, why on earth he had kept silence for such ages, but his answer wasn't a bit satisfactory! He only said he couldn't explain, but it was inevitable, and some day he'd be able to tell me. The odd thing is, he seemed to know all about mother's death and what had happened to me since. Then he went straight on to urge me to sell everything I could lay hands on and come straight out here to him . . . yet at the time, according to Plumjam, he was already dead and buried!"

For an astonished second the two stared at each other in silence. Fear touched them with an icy finger. It sounded at once horrible and ridiculous, that a man already dead and in his grave should send a letter summoning a woman to marry him! With an involuntary shiver Tony

pulled himself together, and spoke in a voice deliberately brusque and normal.

"Absurd! There *must* be some mistake!"

"There's no mistake about these letters, anyway," insisted Eve. She ran her fingers through the scattered envelopes in his lap. "Read them! All of them headed Tinpot Landing, all written at intervals over this year, all urging me to come out here as fast as I can!"

There was no denying written facts. There they were, a whole series of letters clearly written in the upright regular hand already familiar to Tony through his perusal of Sanders' multitudinous neatly kept records. Kindly, affectionate letters urging the girl to "come out, come out whatever anybody says. Sell everything you have and come, and I'll swear you'll never regret it. . . ."

Tony's brow was creased with a puzzled frown as he laid the last sheet down. It was somehow incredibly uncanny and unpleasant to read these intimate letters, and know them to be written by a man reported, as firmly and solidly as report could have it, dead sixteen months, and buried as deep as Abraham! The girl went on, hurriedly, eagerly, as he fingered the scribbled sheets.

"I hesitated a bit at first . . . you see, that long silence had shaken my faith in him a little. And then, too," her flush deepened adorably, "I'd begun to have just a tiny streak of doubt as to whether I loved poor Len as he loved me! As I *ought* to love him if I meant to marry him . . . but . . . well, there seemed nothing else to do. I couldn't get a job, and he wrote and wrote—so at last I managed to borrow enough money for the passage from mother's old solicitor, and here I am!"

Putting the letters together, Tony retied them with a firm decisive movement.

"My theory is that Sanders *isn't* dead at all, but hiding somewhere for some reason!" he said firmly. "But if he is—why on earth should you be so brutally and horribly hoaxed? To drag you out here on a wildgoose chase . . . when did you find out Sanders was dead, or supposed to be dead?"

"At the office of the Company at Lagos!" said Eve distressfully. "I went there, of course, to make inquiries about getting here, and the first thing the little agent did was to ask me why. Then he began to make silly jokes

about Tinpot Landing not being a health resort for young ladies. I stiffened up and said I'd come to marry Len, and he nearly fell flat—when he recovered he explained Len was dead and that *you* were there instead! I argued with him, of course—showed him Len's last letter headed 'Tinpot Landing', and dated, to prove he must be mistaken, and he was completely floored, but insisted that Len was dead . . . then I got frightened and angry both, but I wasn't turning back. I was going through with the thing by that time!" The lift of her determined chin was a pleasant thing to see.

"And when I landed—the man was right! It *wasn't* Len, but you. . . . You were lying in bed raving and shouting with fever, and there was no sense to be got out of you, of course. But I felt I *couldn't* turn my back and leave you there, although Captain Vechten warned me it meant my staying here three months before he could return. So he went, and I stayed behind. Not only because I *couldn't* have left you like that, but because I felt it in my bones that I *must* stay, if only to try and find out the truth. I know old Len would want me to do that, whatever has happened to him. . . ."

She shivered suddenly, and drew closer to her young lover. Over her head Tony glanced towards the wide-set French windows leading into the little living-room. He had a swift fleeting impression, intangible but curiously vivid, that a tall rangy figure smoking a pipe had paused in the doorway, surveyed them both with a faint wistful smile of content, and gone as swiftly as he had come. Could Sanders' ghost . . . but of course, that was rubbish! Those odd absurd fancies that had ruled him before Eve came were mere figments of a restless, nervy brain, overstrained with work and loneliness . . . aloud he spoke, firmly and clearly, as much to steady his own nerves as to soothe hers.

"Well, whatever is the explanation of the whole extraordinary business, beloved, God bless it, since it's brought us together. We can get the captain to marry us on his next visit—or if he can't, collar a parson as soon as may be—weather the rest of this damn' appointment together, and then hey for a decent post nearer civilization! But first. . . ." his brow clouded, and he set his lips. "I *must* try to solve this infernal mystery of poor Sanders'

death. And I can only solve it in one way—and that a way you may not like. . . .”

He eyed her sideways, uncertain. She paled but nodded, clasping her hands together.

“You mean—dig open the poor darling’s grave? Oh, Tony, is it necessary? It seems so horrible!”

“It does,” said Tony gloomily. “And I wouldn’t for a thousand pounds think of doing so if I didn’t feel it would solve one part of this problem at least, whether or not anybody is actually buried there. Plumjam swears he buried Sanders there with his own hands, but, of course, if they’re bribed heavily enough most natives will lie like troopers! I don’t want to hint at anything unpleasant, for God knows I liked the look of Sanders, and don’t believe he’d do such a thing, but it *has* happened before, you know, that a white man has chosen for some reason of his own to disappear into the wilds. Gone native, taken to drink or dope, lost his balance somehow. . . .”

Eve nodded. With a soft murmur of rustling skirts she rose to her feet, and flung the stub of her last cigarette into the dark heart of the bush.

“If we must, we must!” she said reluctantly. “But oh, if we could only fathom it all without that! It seems so crude and horrible, and I know dear old Len would never have done anything rotten—nothing he’d need to disappear for. He was the kindest, the straightest, the most generous soul in the world.”

She paused with a sudden shiver, and glanced over her shoulder. “Odd! I felt just then as if Len was standing smiling at me. . . .”

Rising groggily to his feet, her lover took her into his arms, and held her close as she went on, her lips against his cheek.

“It’s odd, Tony, but somehow I don’t feel as if I’m playing Len false by falling in love with you. If he’d been alive I’d have gone to him and said, ‘Look here, Len, I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve made a mistake. I love Tony, not you!’ He would have winced a bit, but never been bitter or mean, and he would have said, ‘I’m much older than you, child, and all I want is your happiness. If Kenyon can give you this and I can’t, I’ll stand back and wish you both all the luck in the world . . .’ and he’d have meant it!”

"I know," whispered Tony to her curling hair. "He must have been a fine chap—a good chap—I can tell that from his photographs. We'll never forget him. For whatever the explanation is, *somehow* he's brought us together. . . ."

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Young, healthy and happier than she had ever thought to be, Eve Dersingham should, on this night of nights, have been able to sleep soundly, but for some curious reason, she found she could not. Plumjam had fitted up comfortable quarters for her out of the small room already mentioned next to the living-room. Cleared of the guns, boots, papers, all the rest of the miscellaneous stuff with which a bachelor living in the wilds inevitably surrounds himself, and provided with a camp-bed, a gilt framed wall-mirror proudly produced from the store-hut, a dressing-table hastily rigged up out of sugar boxes, and a camp-stool in lieu of a chair, it made a pleasant and comfortable little den enough, and even since Tony had been well enough to leave alone during the nights, the girl had slept there in the greatest peace and tranquillity.

But to-night she was curiously wakeful. Fidgety, restless, her mind darting from one thought to another, like a moth circling a flame, circling around the amazing mystery of her old lover's death, or supposed death. . . . What *was* the explanation of the letters? Could it be as Tony had hinted, that Len Sanders, straightest and whitest of men, had, for reasons of his own, chosen to disappear into the heart of Africa, as divers men had done before him—got someone, perhaps Plumjam, perhaps some other native, to go on forwarding letters to her so as she should come out all unknowing, on a fool's errand?

But that was so utterly foreign to her knowledge of the man! The kindest, most gentle and generous soul in the world, as she had described him to her lover. . . . It was impossible that he should have dragged her out to this God-forsaken corner of the world, for no reason at all, as far as she could see. It seemed that the gruesome task of opening his lonely grave among the mangroves was the only way of proving the thing at least; whether or no there was a body in that grave at all, and whether, if so, that body was Sanders' or that of some stray native, perhaps,

buried as a blind. She sighed heavily, perplexed and distressed beyond measure, then started, as a soft step sounded outside upon the veranda.

Her room, which, like all the rooms in the bungalow, had wide door-windows standing open upon the veranda for greater coolness, lay between Tony Kenyon's own bedroom and the main living-room. The step had come from Tony's room, yet it was not like his step! It was slow, halting, more like that of an old man than a young one, vigorous despite recent illness—slipping out of bed, the girl flung on her dressing-gown, and stealing to the window, pulled the mosquito-net aside and peeped out.

Yes! There was Tony, a tall shadow against the strong moonlight, clad like herself in pyjamas and dressing-gown, moving slowly, uncertainly along the veranda towards the living-room . . . pausing only to thrust her feet into slippers, for fear of snakes, Eve stepped softly out upon the veranda, and keeping close to the house wall, stole after the moving figure, her heart in her mouth. Puzzled, alarmed as she was, yet something seemed to keep her from crying out, from seizing him by the arm, as was her first impulse—as he turned towards the door leading into the living-room, she caught a glimpse of him in profile, and in the light of the lamp that they had forgetfully left burning upon the veranda-table, she saw that his eyes were open, but fixed. He was asleep!

His lips were set in a faint, contented smile, he breathed lightly, easily, but he was moving tranced a figure in a dream . . . silent, scared, she watched him enter the living-room, go straight towards the desk, and pulling up a chair, sit down before it. Her heart thumping like a sledge-hammer, her brain a tumult of excited wondering speculations through which the amazing truth was, like a distant light, already beginning to dawn, she watched him fumble for a pencil, set a pad of writing paper square before him, and began to write. . . . Stealing noiselessly into the room, her breath held taut with excitement, her wrapper clutched tightly about her, she peered over his shoulder, and all but gave a loud and terrified cry of wonder—for *Tony Kenyon was writing in the dead man's hand!*

There he sat, staring before him with the strange blank stare of the sleepwalker, tracing slowly but clearly upon the sheet of blank white paper, the neat upright lettering

characteristic of Len Sanders, dead over a year ago . . . so, still gasping, unable to believe her eyes, Eve Dersingham read her old lover's explanation, blessing, and farewell! Read it as it was indited by the hand of her new lover, dictated and controlled by the old—dictated and controlled as had been all the earlier letters that had succeeded in bringing these two young souls together. . . .

Dear Child [the letter ran],

I did not know that I should have to resort to this letter-writing business again, but to save you the pain and trouble of having to dig my poor old body up to-morrow to satisfy your quite legitimate curiosity, I am forced to do so. Don't trouble, my child! My body lies there all right—my worn-out clothes—but though what the world calls dead, I live still, and by the favour of the gods I have, through this lad's unconscious hand, been able to serve and save you, my dear. Dying as I did, and when I did, I thought of you, my little love, and thinking, was troubled. You were alone and poor . . . what could I do for you? Then when I woke after the Great Sleep, and found not death, but fresh life, I cast about wondering how I might help you still—and found the right solution positively jogging my elbow! Here was this lad—fine, courageous, young, a fit mate for you, far better than I should ever have been, dearly as I loved you, my little Eve. . . .

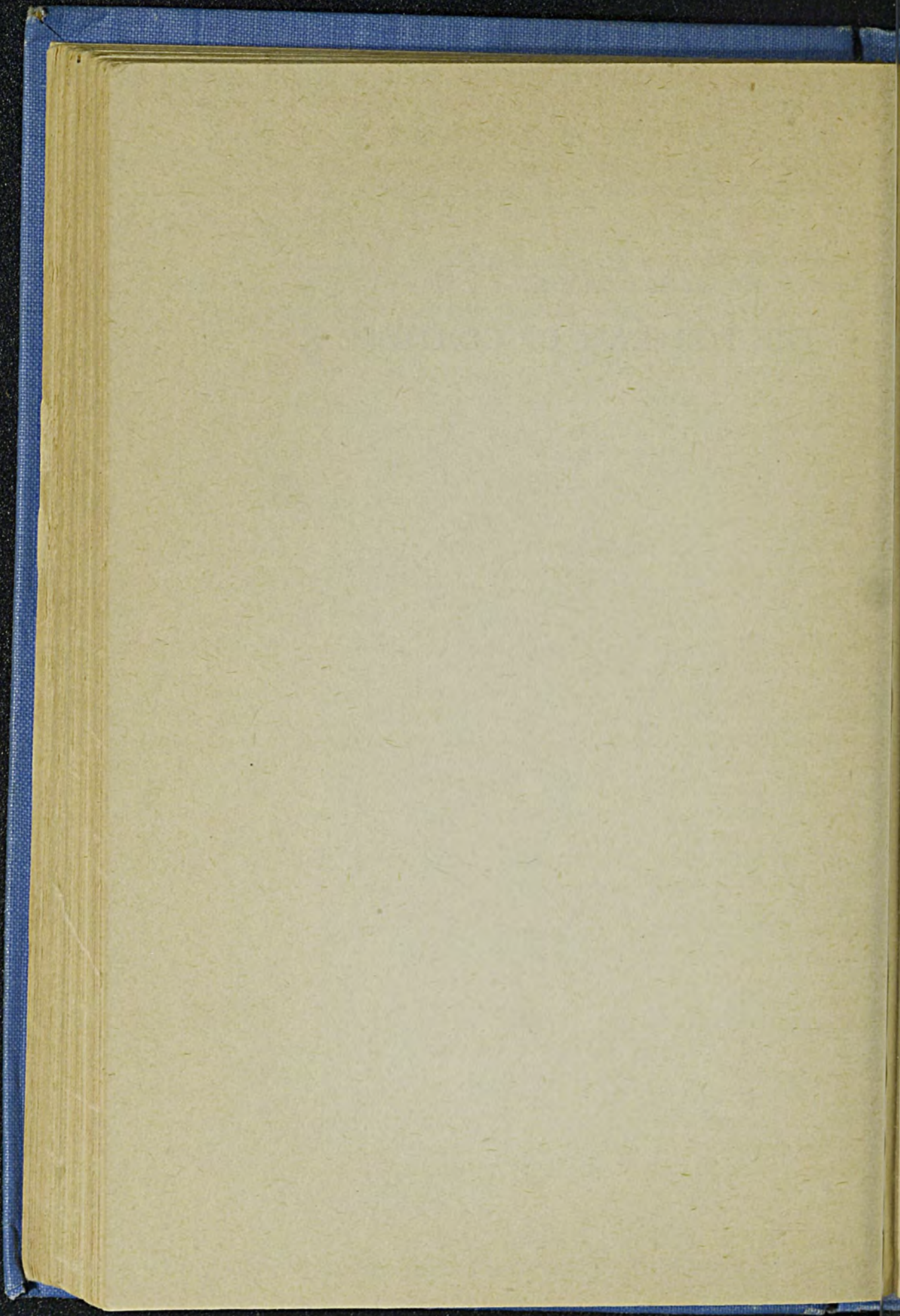
It was pure luck that I drifted about my old quarters, unable to make up my mind to go onwards and leave you to take your chance in the world, wondering, worrying as to how I might do something for you, I saw the blue light of the psychic flame about him, and knew him not only clear and honest, but a medium ready to my hand! The idea came to me like a flash, one day as I sat studying him as he fought against loneliness and terror and temptation, and, all unconsciously calling upon me for help, put himself en rapport with me—and I knew I could use him for my purpose! The rest was easy. So through his hand I began again to write to you, child; through his hand I have written all the letters since I 'died'; in them, deliberately, I urged you to come out, knowing you and he fit mates for each other, knowing that he will make you happy, and that in the long run all is for good in God's mysterious world.

Bless you, my children—think of me sometimes! Some day we shall meet. But now I have done my work, and must go onwards. . . .

(Author's Note.—The above story was taken down from the lips of "Tony" and "Eve" themselves, who declared to me that it was true both in substance and in fact.)

The Concierge's Tale

THE PORTRAIT OF COMTESSE X



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The Concierge's Tale

THE PORTRAIT OF COMTESSE X

HE was a mysterious creature, was Monsieur Gilles Rousselier. Tall, lean, with wild dark locks of hair and deep-set eyes—in the early thirties, one would say—shabby and out-at-elbows as a tramp, though his clothes were well cut enough.

He came here one bleak November day, with a portfolio of drawings under one arm, and under the other a brown paper parcel containing all his other worldly possessions. I was not here at the moment, else I should certainly have refused him as a tenant—I, who have my living to make by letting these rooms! But he had eyes like a deer's, dark-brown and wistful, and you know what women are . . . he had a starved hungry look, too, in his wide black hat and rain-spattered grey tweed suit. Louise, my wife, surveyed him, and, despite his obvious poverty, despite his saying (honestly enough, one admitted!) that at the moment he could not pay the deposit that is customary on taking a room, she took him in.

And not only that, *ma foi!* She gave him the large studio at the back, my best-letting room, and more, cooked him a meal forthwith—omelette, bread, cheese and wine . . . crazy! I was angry enough when I returned to find this vagabond installed in the finest room in the house, but my wife rounded on me; vowed she should give food and shelter to whom she chose, reminded me of the entirely unpractical example of our Lady on these matters . . . *é la la!* . . . I left her to talk and said nothing, but I determined to see that our new tenant paid at least his board, or out he should go, brown eyes and all!

I was surly enough to start with, naturally, but the fellow had a way with him. Odd—one found oneself liking him against one's will; forgiving him, making excuses for him, his moods and vagaries. Despite his lack of money he was gay enough at times, though, like all these artist-fellows, when the gloom got him by the throat there was

no lifting it. He would stare into the bit of fire my wife persisted in allowing him—though Monsieur understands it is an extra, that—stare fixedly, his chin on one long paint-stained hand, a cigarette burning itself out unnoticed in the other . . . stare and stare unblinking, till it made my eyes water to see him. I challenged him once—asked how he learnt to do that, to keep his great eyes open without fluttering his lashes—blinking, you call it, eh? He looked at me oddly and laughed.

“Do not ask me that, my little Lespinasse, my jewel of a concierge! I learnt how a very long time ago—when I learnt other things that I am trying now to forget. There are things it is not good for man to know, lest he challenge the gods with their own powers of life, and maybe death. . . .”

I thought of his words afterwards with a shiver, but then I did not understand. Indeed, he was often saying things like that, so that it puzzled me to guess what it meant. He was difficult to *ranger*—one could not place him easily. He was well born, one could see that, his speech and manners, slender height and long delicate hands were aristocratic, though he deliberately affected a *patois* in his talk as though he were endeavouring to break away from his old world and ways.

He had lived in his youth in a great *château*, I gathered; had been sent then to a great college in Dresden to study science . . . but there it was the story stopped. He had, apparently, been expelled from the college in disgrace of some sort; in disgrace so grave that when his haughty father heard of it, he turned him out likewise, and the young man flung away into the world alone, embittered, defiant, with only a trivial gift for painting to depend on to earn him bread-and-butter.

Tactfully as she questioned, as she fussed about the studio, my wife could never unearth the name of his family (for, of course, “Rousselier” was obviously his *nom-de-guerre*), yet in an unguarded moment he owned that his first name, Gilles, was taken from an old ancestor of his, who was a great sinner in his day, a man cursed alike by God and man. Laughing, he said once—mysteriously enough, we thought—that his old grand-grand-uncle was doubtless responsible for his taking more interest than he should in hidden things . . . this again was beyond

us, so we left it uncomprehended, as we left many of his sayings.

Only one thing he spoke of frankly, and that, a girl. Hélène, the daughter of the noble duke owning the neighbouring estate to his father's; they had known each other from childhood, and the loss of this adorable child, for she was but eighteen when he left his home, had hit him more sharply than all else. He had stacks of sketches of her; mostly crude young efforts executed in his early boyhood, of Hélène as a child, a small white-faced thing with a halo of curling ruddy hair, and narrowed eyes that looked out at you with a curiously cat-like stare—beautiful, oh yes, yet somehow, to me, cold and with an oddly cruel look about the provocative thin upper-lip, the faintly upward slant to the long eyes.

Later, there came more ambitious sketches, yet none quite completed . . . yes, that picture that you see on the wall there, labelled "Portrait of Countess X" . . . that was the only one he finished. Wait, Monsieur, and you shall hear in time. This girl Hélène—she was a veritable obsession! He would talk about her by the hour while my wife cleaned the studio, set to rights his shabby camp-bed with its rug that did duty for blanket and sheet, washed his wretched battered collection of cups and plates . . . I was angry with my good Louise! *Dieu*, the energy she would spend seeing to this tatterdemalion, and leaving better-paying tenants alone! But it is no use to talk to a woman. Had Louise, my wife, been less old and fat, bless her heart, I might have waxed jealous of the young man. But there—'twas her kind heart and his hungry dark eyes together, so what could I say? Also, I will say he paid when he could, and paid generously. He did a little work at times for a firm of decorators; painted book-covers, handbags, shoe-leather and so on . . . work he hated, but took for sheer pride's sake—and once, after many weeks, he had an order for a real picture!

When that commission brought its cheque—what a feast! He took us all, Louise and me, and little Germaine and Alphonse, to the famous *Lampe Rouge* in the Boulevard Italien and bade us order what we would.

Louise wore her plaid silk gown and a black velvet coat, and a hat with a green feather, and I bought new brown boots that squeaked, and Germaine had a red cloth frock

. . . by the beard of little St. Jacques, we were a merry party! We ate *moules marinières* and *potage reine*, steak with olives and mushrooms, and fresh green figs with cream . . . *ma foi*, what a meal! Gilles ate like a fiend and drank too, till his thin cheeks were red and his eyes shone. . . .

When we had all eaten well, he said he would show us some tricks to make us laugh. We sat at a corner table of the *Lampe Rouge*, so few could see us—it was, what do you say?—"round an angle". That was well, for now indeed came the part of the evening that we do not like even now to remember.

Louise, my wife, she is a lively woman, Monsieur. *Très gaie*, laughing, *vivace*, despite her age—she was always thus, and now she began to tease our Gilles about his trick of staring so hard, so straight, and never winking.

He looked at her suddenly, under his lashes, so—and for a moment I had a feeling that there peeped out a Gilles I did not know, I did not even want to know. I felt a little cold, yet the feeling passed away in a flash, and I scoffed at myself for foolishness.

He was valiant with wine—good strong wine we had drunk, and plenty of it—but his eyes were steady enough in his flushed face as he answered. His stare? He could do strange things with that stare, if we only knew. . . .

Now, would Madame Louise look across the restaurant, to where four fat men sat, replete, sleepy after their meal, and single out the one who sat with his back towards us, the bald one with the thick neck? Yes . . . now, watch well what would happen!

Gilles was sitting with his back to the room, but there was a great mirror behind us upon the wall, against which we sat, Louise and me, with little Germaine between us, and of a sudden we saw him stare into this, his eyes fixed hard upon the back of the fat man. There was a long moment's pause, then, of a sudden the man rose, turned, and came with short stilted steps across the restaurant towards us!

Two or three steps only he took, then suddenly Gilles laughed, relaxing, and the fat man, bewildered, gaped around him at the people staring open-mouthed at his sudden uprising . . . then he sat down again ruffled, furious, amidst a volley of amazed questions from his friends.

Despite the sudden little shock of fright that she admitted afterwards this gave her, Louise scoffed.

"*Hé*, then! That is not so much—that! It is foolish to think that just because you look at a man he should turn and get up! It was a good chance, that is all. . . ."

She went on laughing loudly, rather foolishly—the wine was certainly strong—and the young man's face hardened a little.

"You think that a chance, Madame? Will you call it 'chance' still when I make that glass at your elbow, when I look at it, fall and roll across the table to me here?"

We were silent, impressed, yet disturbed. Louise tossed her head in disbelief, the children stared, yet we sat silent, watching while he squared his much darned elbows on the table, and frowning, bent that strange stare hard upon the tall wineglass.

At his silent concentration, uneasily Louise began to giggle, but her giggle broke off abruptly in the middle as she saw the glass shake, tremble on its squat stem, and at last fall over prone upon its side, and roll, roll, roll, across the table till it knocked against the young man's hand!

"Mother of God!" quoth Louise, frankly scared.

He laughed, a quick laugh of triumph, but I felt cold and oddly nervous . . . *pardieu*, I did not like this new strange Gilles at all, and wished we had not come. But the two little ones were frankly delighted, as children are with a new toy, and Germaine clapped her hands in ecstasy.

"Again, again . . . *cher oncle* Gilles, make another thing tumble, or walk when you tell it, or fly . . . can you make things fly?"

Again that oddly furtive look, swift, wary, from Louise to me and back again! It seemed that on the moment the young man bit back a rejoinder, or changed it into something else, afraid.

"Fly? That is as may be! If I sent you flying through the air above the tables of the *Lampe Rouge*, my little Germaine, it may be I should get into serious trouble, and I have caught trouble enough that way already! No . . . but I will show you something strange again. Look now, at that great grey cat there. You see her? Now, watch!"

Proud, stately as befitted the pet cat of an establishment like the *Lampe Rouge*, the grey cat perched beside *Madame la Patronne* at the cash-desk—Madame Camille, of the bright dark eyes and immense bust, stiffly upholstered in black satin, who sat daily at the seat of custom, and whose said bright eyes no defaulting customer could ever hope to escape. Under the absent stroking of her plump white hand the grey cat reared its head, somnolent, sensually content.

“Josèphe” was old and dignified, resenting any attempt at hurrying him. Nobody had ever seen Josèphe move at a greater pace than a dignified walk . . . Judge then of Madame’s start and shriek of horror when without a word of warning, the great cat, turning, struck violently at her hand, and bolting off the cash-desk, went round the room like a streak of grey lightning, leaping from table to table, sending glasses flying in every direction, amidst shrieks of startled women, curses of men fiercely scratched in their endeavour to catch the creature amidst scattered food, overturned chairs . . . in effect, pandemonium let loose! Twice the crazy animal circled the restaurant, then Gilles Rousselier, leaping into the middle of the floor, uttered a curious call on a low hissing note, and lo! the cat, leaping to his shoulder, sat there like a stone image, suddenly quelled, at peace, purring as he had done under Madame’s hand!

Imagine, Monsieur, the scene! Madame Camille in hysterics, vowing the cat was mad and must be killed, angry clients vociferating to their agitated waiters, pointing out wine spilt, frocks torn, ugly scratches down white arms . . . In the midst of this excitement, as we sat subdued, and to tell the truth not a little frightened, I became aware that a tall woman had emerged from a distant corner and was talking to Gilles—talking like an old friend. Her back was towards me for the moment, but I heard her voice, clear, mocking, as she stood with one hand on her slender hip, a hand I saw starred with a marvellous diamond.

“So, Gilles, you are still at your old ways!”

I did not understand the allusion, but I was not really listening, absorbed as I was in seeing the utter change in the young man’s face.

Radiant, worshipping, transformed—I knew who it was at once. Only one woman could bring that look into his

eyes; the girl of his tragic youth, "Hélène" of the olden days. . . .

He answered as one speaks in a dream.

"You! I never dreamt of seeing you here. Hélène—oh, my dear, my dear! I came to Paris to forget, not to remember, but forgetfulness is not so easy when it comes to forgetting you."

She laughed on a faintly flattered note.

"Really? Men are not usually so faithful! But you were always an exception, in your tastes as in your ways. Well, I was bored with the haunts of the mighty, so I came here in search of novelty—and find you! Where are you living, *mon cher*? I shall come and see you. I might even—who knows—sit again for you?"

The young man's glowing eyes were like stars as he answered, eagerly, joyously:

"I have a studio at number 18, Rue des Pins . . . I am here to-night with a little party from there. Permit me—Monsieur and Madame Jules Lespinasse—Madame la Comtesse de Château d'Yves!"

My Louise bowed, stiffly as a dummy, her flushed cheeks hot; as for me, I scowled a moment, thinking Gilles meant to poke fun, as you call it, at our humble little party before this haughty, lovely creature in the sables and diamonds . . . but he did not. And she? Her smile of greeting was charming enough to make one forget the tiny flicker of mockery in her eyes as she regarded my new boots, Germaine's red frock, the feathered hat, so proudly bought, of my good Louise. . . .

"Ah! Madame, you forgive my interrupting your party, I trust? Monsieur here is a very old friend that I meet now for the first time for many years. . . ."

She had already turned away again towards the young man, and Louise looked at me, her eyes eloquent. Bundling Germaine and Alphonse off the seat together, despite their whines of protest, and clutching her bag, she arose with a dignity that matched even that of Madame la Comtesse.

"Madame, we go. It is time already, and you will doubtless have much to say to your friend. Monsieur Rousselier, I thank you for a charming *soirée*. We shall meet to-morrow, I trust. Come, Jules!"

She sailed out. Ah, but I was proud then of my fat

Louise! As I followed I could not but see that the two had taken their seats at our deserted table, and were already deep in conversation. . . .

I sighed, disturbed. But my disturbance was nothing to Louise's, for she raged and stormed at the lady, at her insolent air, her flaunting jewels, her beauty, even at her ruddy hair, which, woman-like, she swore was dyed. Indeed, Louise was a little sore at this finish of the evening that had been so gay and so completely hers, and though she forgave the man his share in it readily enough, she was not so ready to forgive the woman. Though at first she declared Monsieur Gilles could fend for himself in future, her good heart, as usual, won the battle against her bad temper, and she went up to our strange tenant's room the next day to find him, as she sourly said afterwards, like a creature drunk, drugged, utterly mad with happiness; wandering about the studio, picking up his work, putting it down again, talking at random, laughing, singing, his eyes brilliant, his cheeks dashed with a flame of scarlet . . . and all because that woman, fair and cruel, had once more come into his life! In an outburst of confidence he told Louise the story.

It appears that they had sworn their faith to each other; he had trusted in her even when his family turned him out, but, alas, she had been forced to wed an elderly count the year after his departure; a *mariage de convenance*, arranged by her parents, of course, but as my Louise said dryly enough, we had no proof that the lady herself offered any very strenuous opposition to the scheme! At all events, her marriage had seemed the very end of all things to young Rousselier, who had clung to her faith like a drowning man to a rope. It had parted, and he had flung all prudence overboard, drunk, dived, played the fool with his life till one day, reduced to utter penury, he had wandered down the Rue des Pins and found shelter with us in battered dark old Number 18.

And now they met again so strangely. . . . True, he was still poor, very poor, but he had his art, the future he hoped for, and she was free now. Widowed this twelve months, lovelier than ever—and still more wondrous, she was coming to sit to him! To let him make a picture of her that should hang in the salon, bring him fame and fortune and riches in a day, and with time her hand . . .

and he would live down the old sins and follies in her arms!

Kindling into an ecstasy of happiness, he hugged Louise, glumly blackleading the battered grate, round the neck, and calling down the banisters, demanded that Germaine or Alphonse should go and buy flowers to deck the shabby studio, sweet cakes for my lady's dainty taste, a cushion for her to sit on. . . .

It was certainly madness, but madness of a sane human sort that I personally preferred greatly to the exhibition of that other sort of madness he had given at the *Lampe Rouge*. So the flowers were bought, and my lady came that very day, punctual to the minute, swathed in priceless furs, her narrow eyes alight under their kohl-laden lashes, her ruddy copper hair glowing beneath the curled brim of her velvet hat. . . .

She was a wonderful-looking creature, Madame la Comtesse d'Yves. Slender and lithe and white-skinned, with a trick of sitting motionless, watchful, that was for all the world like a cat awaiting a chance to spring. She made a marvellous sitter, and the picture, eagerly begun, seemed to grow under his fingers like a magic thing. Monsieur Gilles worked feverishly, ceaselessly, almost as though his whole life depended on this picture, and indeed I could not but see, as it progressed, how greatly in advance it was of anything else he had done. It was his—what do you call it?—his swan-song, his last work, and despite the clumsiness in parts of the execution, it was a real portrait, a living, breathing presentment of the lovely woman who had sat for it.

Well, the day of the great exhibition came—the "Salon des Modernes", most talked-of show of the year. Poor fellow, he was in ferment, a fever of excitement when he heard the picture was accepted. Madame had bade him order a handsome frame, even sent her manservant to carry the great canvas to the door of the exhibition on Hanging Day. But he would not go himself. He could not face the fashionable throngs that would be there—moreover, I think, he feared to meet someone who would recognize him, someone from the old world he had left behind—but he besought me to go! Me, grubby old Jules Lespinasse, the concierge—to hang about the picture, hear what the critics said, tell him whether the thing was a success . . . well, well! I did not like the idea at first, yet our Paris is not

like your London, Monsieur, where one must wear a shining hat and spats on the feet before going in to mingle with the *haut monde* at a picture show. Here in Paris, if one has money to pay, one goes where one wills—as one will! So I went, brushed and clean and as smart as I could muster, and soon I found it, in a far corner, with a big crowd of people staring. . . . I was so excited, I forgot my shyness and my shabbiness, and elbowed my way close to hear what they said—yes, yes, the picture had made its hit. Even I could see that. There was ever a crowd near it, discussing it, wondering, questioning who the artist was. . . .

I pretended to stare very hard at a little picture nearby while I listened, when lo, a charming voice spoke near me . . . it was Madame herself!

Lovelier than ever, in her favourite black, hung with pearls like strung tears, a great feather curling low to caress her pale pure cheek—she was talking to a gentleman, tall, elegant, I could not but hear their conversation as he bent over her hand.

“Hélène? Well met, *ma chère*! You are a clever woman to have discovered the young genius who did this!”

He indicated the picture with a wave of his gloved hand. She laughed, well pleased.

“It is excellent, *n'est-ce-pas*? Painted with understanding. . . .”

“Painted with love, you mean!” said the gentleman dryly. “The poor fool who painted this must needs have been in love with you, fair Belle Dame Sans Merci, like the rest of us!”

She laughed, but not in denial, rather in faint triumph, as he went on.

“Your last flame, though, I think, *ma mie*! De Mouraye will see to it that you are kept in better order after your marriage to him! Tell me, is it true you marry soon?”

I strained my ears for the answer—it came loud and clear enough.

“Oh yes—in a few weeks' time! I have told few people as yet. Yes, you are right about my little artist. A Bohemian flame—but they are easily dropped, my friend, when one wearies as quickly as I do!”

They moved away in the crowd and I, my ears burning,

furious, wended my way as fast as I could out of the room to the Rue des Pins and my faithful wife.

Over our supper at *soupe maigre* and *omelette* I told Louise, and she sat simmering with fury, vowing revenge, heaven knows what . . . one thing she insisted on, that I tell M. Gilles what I had overheard at once and expose Madame for what she was. . . .

It is true, Hélène de Château d'Yves had done a bitterly cruel thing! Just to satisfy her vanity she had taken up this poor cast-off toy of hers from the gutter where she found it, to play with again for awhile; then, to bring still further incense to the shrine of her greedy vanity, she had forced him to work on this portrait, bribing him with honeyed words and false promises till the work was done, the picture hung, bringing her the notice, the interest, the praise and admiration she lived for. And all the time the poor fool was building his brittle fool's paradise, his dreams of a rose-garlanded future with her . . . but there was no use in delaying. To-night she had promised to sup with him, Louise said—but would she come, now that she had had out of him all she wanted to get?

I climbed the stairs heavily and tapped on the door—it was the more difficult to begin, since he turned on me so radiant a face.

The studio was ablaze with light, tall red candles stuck in reckless profusion all about the room; a spray of vermilion roses awaiting her in her favourite chair, and huge chrysanthemums, red and golden as her hair, nodding their tufted heads in every corner. The table was spread for a feast, with fresh butter and bread, salad, little delicate slices of raw ham and sausage, cream cheese, and a gallant flask of red Chianti . . . ah me! So sure of his love, of his success, he had prepared their betrothal supper, and it was I who had to break his dream!

His face grew of a sudden, sober, anxious, as he saw my downcast eyes, and he motioned me to a chair. . . . I told him all. That his picture was a success. The world stood round it to applaud, but that she—she had already turned away, and with another man!

He listened dazed, blank, at first, then smiled suddenly—and I saw that even now, he did not believe!

“My little Jules, my good kind Jules, you do not understand! My lovely Hélène lives alone in a hard cold world,

where she is forced to wear its mask, and speak its cynic tongue . . . marry another? Fie for shame, my little Jules . . . so she may speak for a moment, to deceive her haughty friends, lest they scoff at her for plighting her troth to a penniless painter . . . but I trust her. I know her, my own lady. She has promised to come to-night—to celebrate our betrothal—see the feast laid ready, the lover waiting! Break faith with me? Ha, ha, I would as soon believe the Virgin should break faith with her worshippers!” Then, because still he saw the doubt in my eyes, he laid his hands on my shoulders and shook me gently to and fro, laughing, secure in his love and faith.

“See here, my Jules—I will wager my lady comes to-night, or I have lost faith in women, in the world, in God Himself!”

“Heaven grant your faith is justified!” I blurted . . . but I did not take the wager. I knew. . . .

She did not come. For hours Louise and I sat each side of the cosy fire in our room at the foot of the stairs, watching the entrance through the glass of our door, but no smooth-running car drew up to deliver a fair slender woman with a white skin and narrow green eyes. . . .

The lights burnt long in the studio, but Gilles was silent, we heard no sound. In the morning, bright-eyed and hard-looking, his mouth that could laugh so gaily set in a thin, bitter line, he wrote a note to Madame’s hotel and begged me to deliver it.

It was answered with a brief scrawl on scented paper, but she did not come. The fame of the “Portrait of Comtesse X.” waxed daily, and many were the reporters that now toiled up the narrow stairs to the studio to see “M. Gilles”, the obscure painter who had leapt into fame in a day.

Now, indeed, he could have had commissions and to spare, yet he worked no more, though he sold many of his old pictures at once, and generously paid and overpaid his debt to us, notwithstanding Louise’s tearful protests that she was no Jew and had not worked for francs . . . but the Gilles Rousselier of these days was not the merry scape-grace artist we knew, but a strange and lowering man with hollow dark eyes from which little Germaine shrank in fear, and a hard brooding silence in place of the old gay songs and stories. He seemed to eat nothing, to sleep

scarcely at all, and nightly we heard him tread the boards of the studio, walking, walking.

Then of a sudden, at the height of its success, Gilles Rousselier withdrew the "Portrait of Comtesse X." from the "Salon des Modernes"! The papers raised an outcry, the authorities begged him to reinstate the picture that had been the *clou* of the year's show, but he was adamant. At last Madame la Comtesse herself sent him a curt little note, which he answered with another yet more curt.

If you will come and ask me to send it back, Hélène . . . then we shall see!

She came. It was a cold raw day in late December, and I was alone in Number 18.

I looked through my little window and saw her alighting, and rushed to open the door of the car, for it was raining and growing dark; but she was too quick. She ran past me up the stairs, her face set in an ugly expression of hard rage. I stared after her flying figure, mechanically noting the rich chinchilla fur cloak, the little silver heels to her slippers, as they clapped the steep stairs. She had obviously come on her way to some great evening party.

Hesitatingly I stood at the foot of the stairs, and I admit, at last, driven by curiosity, followed her up to the studio.

In her haste she had left the door ajar, and from where I stood in the shelter of a heavy green baize portière that Louise had hung there to keep out the draught, I could see most of the great bare room, the fireplace, the window.

She was standing beside the fire, one silver-shod foot on the kerb, one hand on her hip in her old attitude of haughty nonchalance. . . . *Dieu*, but she looked beautiful, and I understood the look in the eyes of the haggard man who faced her across the hearth!

She wore a sheath-like gown of oyster-coloured sequins, slender and glittering as a Christmas candle, and her powdered arms bore bracelets of diamonds reaching almost to each elbow. Pearls roped her throat and studded her little ears, pearls pellucid as the cool clear skin they touched; only her painted lips and red-ochre hair struck sudden notes of colour against the white, those and the sharp green of her foot-long jade cigarette-holder . . . he was speaking as I listened, his voice level, hard.

"So this time you come to ask me a favour, Hélène! Do you think it likely I shall grant it?"

Her lips curled scornfully.

"My dear Gilles—how can you refuse? *Mon Dieu*, you are not so rich, I take it, that you can decline good money! I tell you de Mouraye wants the picture—he will give you what you ask."

"De Mouraye—*that* man? The man for whom you left me?" He barked out the words in an uncontrollable agony, but she answered him with contempt that bit deeper than a sword.

"Left you? My good Gilles, be sensible! What is this foolishness? Will you say that because you pleased me a little—because for a little while I lent you my lips to kiss, my body to caress, that therefore, I am yours to keep as long as you will? Fie, for shame, my friend. You are an egoist!"

The lovely voice was mocking, light as a flute, utterly heartless. The man winced as he heard and clenched his hands together in an involuntary spasm.

"My God—then it meant nothing? Our precious hours here, your vows of love, your kisses, your promise to me that if this picture made me famous. . . ."

She stirred uneasily, and her eyes flickered a little.

"One says . . . what does one say? It was strange, romantic, to run across you in that little café with those quaint people! I wanted a fresh thrill, a new interest. You always fascinated me in our childish days with those strange powers you used sometimes, the knowledge I thought you possessed. To be honest, when I saw you there in the corner of the *Lampe Rouge* and watched you, as I thought, deliberately send that cat mad, I said to myself with a rush of excitement, 'Here it is! The thrill I need, the man who can give it to me, the man I always secretly remembered. . . .'"

He was on his knees at her feet now, imploring, torn between hope and fear as she went on, inexorably, her voice hard as her set lips.

"To be honest, that alone is why I took up again the thread we broke. I hoped to find the magician, the strange mysterious boy I used to know, the wonder-worker, and I waited, eager, greedy . . . and I found, what? A lover! Faugh! What did I want with a lover, I who have so

many? I grew so enraged I all but left you . . . then I thought at least this foolish picture of yours would make perhaps a little fame for me, and I waited still longer, hoping that at last you might show me something of your old strange powers—but no! Love, love, a maudlin yearning fool at my feet—so I went, as I had always meant to do. I do not care one pin for you, nor ever did, Gilles de Rochouart!—so there is the truth for you, since you will not let me have my picture!”

The vindictive voice died away, and the man rose silently to his feet, towering over the woman. For a second I paused, frightened, for there was something oddly menacing in his gaunt dark height, like a death-shadow beside her gay jewelled grace, but I need not have feared. He spoke quite quietly, yet there was *something* in his voice that sent a creeping trickle of water down my spine!

“I see, I understand. I am a fool, *ma chère Hélène*, and you are a clever woman, that is all! It may be I *will* send you my picture—or rather, I will send it to your husband, after your marriage.”

There was a curious, strained pause, and he went on, in a suddenly changed note. “But one thing you say hits me severely, my fair and false love—that you have lost your belief in my old powers. Ah, that bites deep, if truly you think so, you who believed in me so much in days of old!”

Obviously she was a little disconcerted, alarmed, at his mocking tone. Huddling her grey furry wrap about her, she answered sulkily.

“Bah, I was a young fool, and easily impressed by a few conjuring tricks. I admit, the cat . . . but I think that was a mere chance, my friend, a chance that caught my eye and brought me round to you. All that is folly. . . .”

“As all love!” he said bitterly.

Then driven by a gust of utter despair, he caught her in his arms, and losing his head, begged her to stay, to love him even a little, not to send him away, with the desperate frenzy of a man who feels his last hold on life slipping from him.

Dragging away, her face dark with anger, she flung an insulting word at him, and darting to the door so swiftly

that I had barely time to slip aside, ran furiously down the echoing stairs.

As she reached the foot the door of the studio was flung open, and Gilles Rousselier, his face racked with anger and thwarted passion, stood against the red light like a gaunt avenging shadow, and shouted after her . . . and his voice brought the sweat of terror out in beads on my brow where I slunk against the wall of the passage.

"Good night, fair Hélène! I accept your challenge. We shall see yet—what I can do!"

The slow days dragged on, and each one member of my little household was secretly keyed up to a pitch of acute excitement about Madame la Comtesse's approaching wedding. In vain I cursed us all, myself, Louise, the children, for hysterical fools, yet it was useless. The atmosphere was electric, waiting on tiptoe, it seemed, for something, and every paper was diligently scanned for details of the bride's trousseau, jewels, future life and so on. Too poor to buy a paper for himself, as a rule we lent ours to Monsieur Gilles, but on one excuse or the other Louise contrived now to avoid this, in the faint hope that he might thus cease to take an interest in his lost love's forthcoming marriage. But to our surprise he did not even ask for it, made no comment—yet as the days passed by he grew whiter and whiter, and more lined and haggard, and indeed what wonder, for he seemed to live on air. It was a bitter winter, the snow lay piled along the gutters, yet the good food we sent him was left practically untasted, and in vain Louise lectured and reproached. He did not even seem to hear her, very often, and would listen absently, with his great hollow eyes, unblinking, fixed on hers, till she shivered and stopped, and at last would not talk to him any more.

He went out one day, two days before the wedding, and returned with a parcel of small presents—a gay orange-coloured scarf for Louise, new shoes for Germaine and Alphonse, a pipe for me. Touched, we protested against such generosity—I shall never forget the wistful note in his voice as he replied.

"*Mes amis*, you are perhaps the only true friends I ever

had or shall have. Should I disappear from your lives I should like to think you had some small thing to remember me by. . . ."

Nervously, I wondered whether he was hinting at suicide, and hoped not—it kills a place, does a suicide, an ordinary death is bad enough, and I have my living to make out of the Rue des Pins! Another thing I noted that disquieted me a little; his old trick of "staring", as the children called it, seemed to have revived in full force.

I would go in sometimes and find him sitting, staring into the fire, at a blank space in the wall, or into a small round crystal he had, with that oddly fixed gaze, and the tense atmosphere of the room would hit me like a blow and wake a most unpleasant unease within me, an unease that was not quite fear but that brought fear hovering in its wake. Once I ventured to put a hand on his shoulder, to break his strange "trance", and when he turned his dazed heavy gaze upon me, I dared to beg him to leave these strange experiments, that they could lead to no good. He looked at me steadily, and his eyes were sombre caverns, dark and desolate, where no light moved any more.

"Have no fear, my good Jules." For once he forgot to speak the *patois* he usually adopted, and his voice was the voice of a *seigneur*, of a man accustomed to command. "It may be we shall part soon—so I tell you this, for your private ear alone. It is true that I *am*—experimenting; trying to revive, to strengthen an old power I once knew well, too well! Call it an unlawful power if you will—I stand to-day an outcast and a ruined man for the learning and practice of it, that is true. Yet for the sake of a woman I swore to renounce it, and for many years, till that evening at the *Lampe Rouge*, when wine made me reckless, I had not touched it. I had sworn never to open the book of that terrible lore again—that vow I renewed when my love Hélène came once more into my life; yet, since that vow was based upon her faith to me, and that faith is lost and broken, I stand absolved of my vow, and so, for the wreaking of my just revenge I open the book once more! Yet now I would read further, dare more than I have ever dared before, and I must practise, since the wheels of knowledge are rusted from long disuse. . . ."

He was talking in riddles, but I dared not ask for explanations; I retreated, frightened, and left him, chin sunk on

breast, gazing before him with sombre eyes. After that we left him to himself, too frightened to approach further.

The wedding day dawned cold and frosty, and my Louise, driven by curiosity, dressing herself in her best, went forth to see what she could of the ceremony, bidding me keep watch warily on Monsieur Gilles, since like myself she dreaded what might befall.

Yet there was no need. He did not go out, but remained seemingly asleep all day, and Louise had returned and recounted all the glories of the wedding, the bride in spotless ermine, the claret-coloured limousine against the piled snow, the fashionable guests in bright velvets and furs and jewels, chattering like a crowd of gorgeous magpies, long ere he woke. Indeed, it was fully eight o'clock at night when he called over the stairs to us to demand a meal.

When Louise went in to lay the table she told me he did not look at her nor greet her as of old, but lay on his back on the bed once more, half dressed, smoking and staring at the ceiling, laughing low to himself from time to time—poor Louise, by now indeed, she was cold with fear of this strange dour man who had taken the place of the cheerful vagabond of old days, and after she had set the table with a good meal of stewed chicken, salad and cheese, she went off to evening mass to pray for him, poor soul.

But as for me, I could not rest, and at last I went softly into a small closet beside the studio, a little room filled with boxes and carpets, broken chairs and old rubbish of all kinds—Monsieur knows the sort of place. This room had a tiny window looking into the studio, and here I hid myself, balanced perilously on a broken step-ladder, and my heart thumping, peered down on our mysterious guest.

He had finished eating, and sat drinking his wine sombrely before the fire. As I looked he leaped suddenly to his feet, and facing the picture that looked down on him from above the chimney-piece, supreme in its supercilious beauty, spoke, loudly enough for me to hear even through the murky glass of my little peephole.

“Well, my lady? I have judged rightly, I think! You should this hour be seated beside your new-made husband at the nuptial feast. . . .” His face twisted horribly, sardonically, and I saw he was playing with the crystal ball, the firelight dancing on it in his long hand.

"I wonder, would you scoff still did you know that in this pretty glass ball of mine I have watched your every step this day, from boudoir to church, from church to Mairie, from Mairie to hotel . . . that I have seen you, but now, take your place beside Gaston de Mouraye at the dinner-table?"

Then he had not been sleeping after all! My back crept as I strained my ears to hear.

He went on, tossing the gleaming ball idly in the fire-light. "Yes . . . it is time! Look deep into his eyes, fair lady, preen your lovely self in the long mirrors, in your satin and lace, gloat on the glitter of ruby and diamond, taste the rich flavour of wine and food—for the last time! Unless . . . unless the Dark Powers fail me, you have looked your last on life to-night!"

He had dropped on the last word into a chair facing the picture. From his nerveless hand the crystal ball fell and rolled into a corner, but he took no heed. Already his eyes were fixed, intent on the fair scornful face of the pictured lady. She looked, in the dancing light, almost as though she heard and answered his threat with a gesture of defiance, her narrow challenging face thrown haughtily back, one nonchalant hand on her hip, her ruddy hair a flame of colour in the dusk. The room fell silent, a silence so intense that the squeak and scuttle of the mice behind the old wainscot sounded loud in the stillness, and the siffle of falling snow on the sill outside sang "hush . . . hush . . ." like a mother soothing her children to sleep.

I grew colder and colder, not with the frost alone, since I was wrapped in warm clothes, but with a shivering inner terror that numbed my very soul as I sat and watched that motionless figure, still as a statue, staring, ever staring with great fixed eyes at the picture that looked so blankly back at him. . . .

I sat and watched, with that terror gathering more and more within me, a fear that was a fear of something more entirely dreadful than anything that had ever before touched the fringe of my little humdrum life . . . for it seemed, gradually but certainly, there grew a Power in the room below! A Power that gathered and gathered, stronger every breathless moment, swifter and more swift, with a low tense vibration faintly like the humming, distant yet but just perceptible, of a great and awful dynamo;

cold, strong beyond human understanding, and utterly relentless. . . .

The shadows shifted and streamed like soft black chiffon veils before the red glow of the fire, sunk to heaped embers; filmed the dark huddled form of the man, crouched low in his chair, the only glint of life in him his burning eyes—and with the shadows there entered, velvet-footed, sinister, this Thing, this inexorable ancient Power, the Force that was to do Gilles Rousselier's will. Dimly I felt it was in a way a *blind* thing, this Force! Less an actual Personality than a vague inchoate Power, obedient to this man's will in a sense, yet far huger, more terrifying than even he could dream. The curious "humming" sound grew and grew, yet I knew it was not with the actual ears I heard it, but with some inner sense that vibrated in response to it—then of a sudden I seemed to hear another sound. A distant crying voice, the voice of a woman, faint, windy, echoing . . . the voice of a woman in mortal terror!

"Gilles, Gilles . . . for God's sake, let me go!"

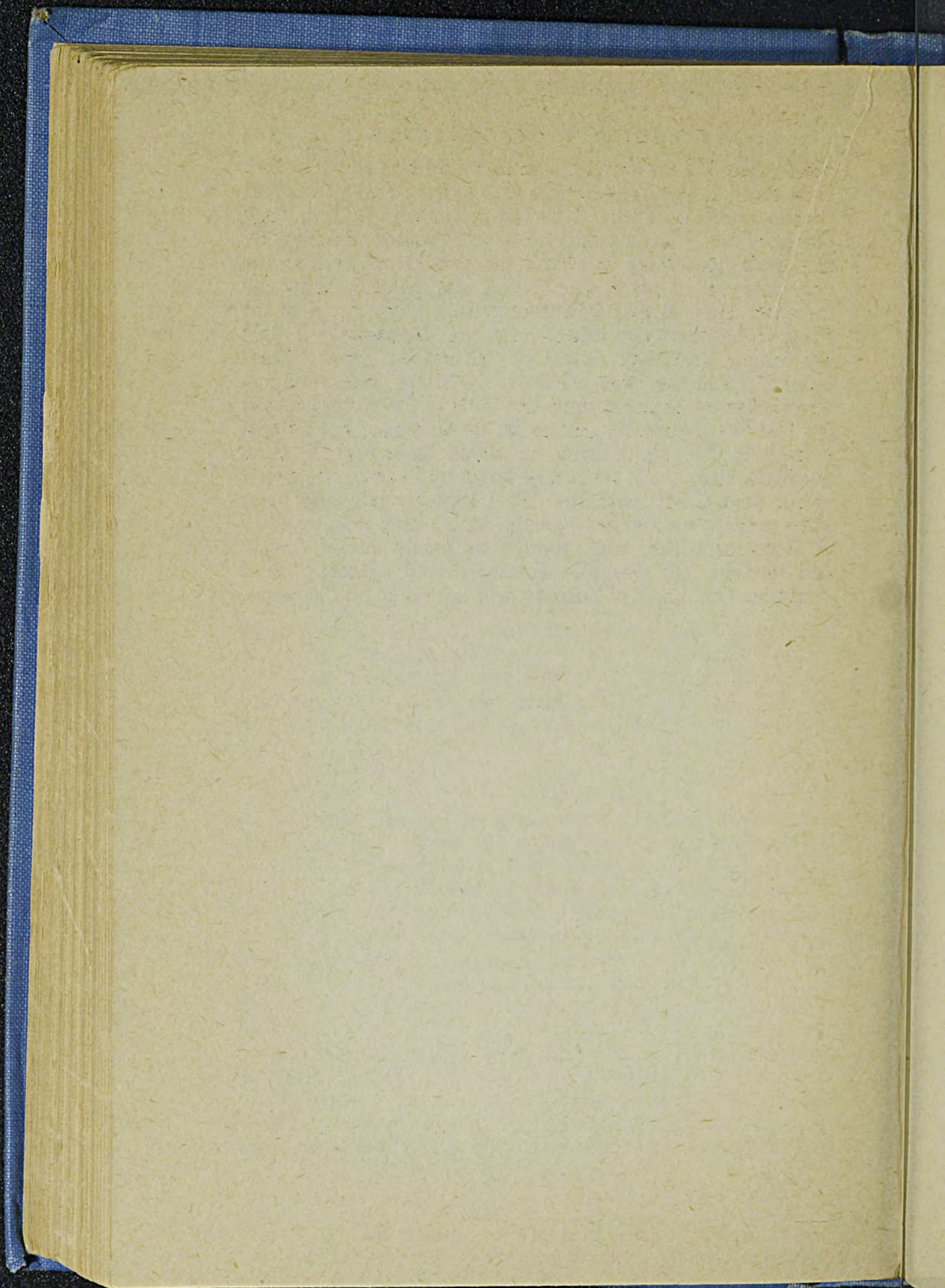
Mother of God! My whole soul seemed to rise within me in one great shout of terror, and at that moment, glaring down into the darkened studio, I saw the man rise, swaying wildly on his feet, his eyes ablaze with triumph, stretching out furious arms to the picture . . . and lo, with an appalling crash it fell at his feet, and I, I knew no more!

.

You who live in the great world, Monsieur, doubtless know the rest. How the young and lovely Madame de Mouraye, the original of the "Portrait of Comtesse X", died suddenly at dinner on the night of her wedding? It was whispered that there was a strange scene there as she died—that she rose of a sudden from her seat beside her new-made husband and staring before her as one who sees a ghost, shrieked suddenly "*Gilles, Gilles, let me go!*" and fell suddenly across the silver and the shining glass—dead. . . .

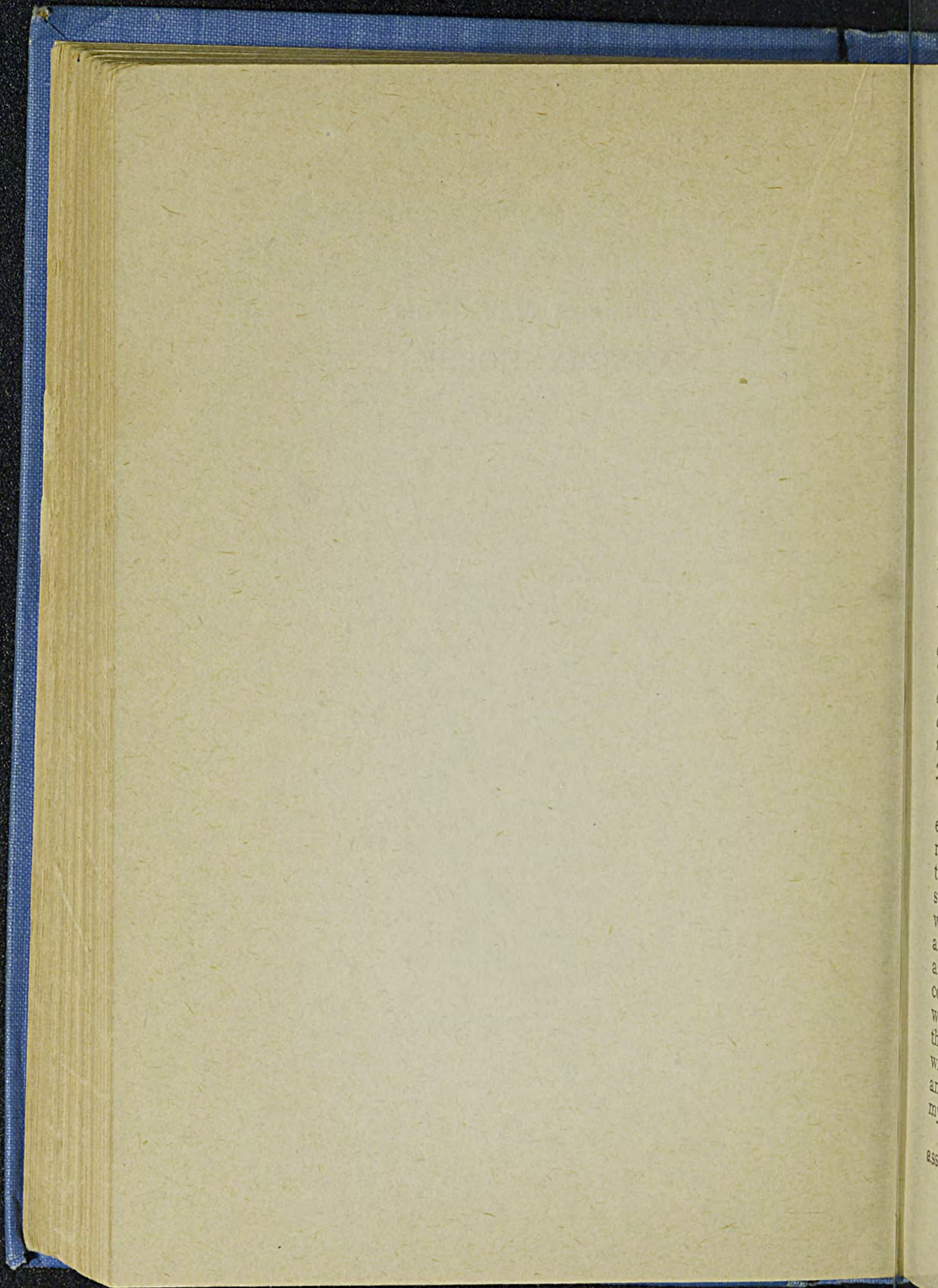
"She was delirious," they said, and I, I who heard so horribly that last wild call, said nothing. What *could* I say? Who would have believed my story, that I sat perched up there among the rugs and dusty boxes, and watched Gilles de Rochouart, in silence and shadows,

deliberately kill the woman who had used him so wickedly? How could I, poor and simple and foolish, make the great doctors understand what I do not understand myself—how that poor fool, driven mad by love and passion, deliberately employed *Something* to wreak his vengeance, and at the very moment of his triumph died also himself, killed by the sheer force of that Power as it drew away again to the Place from whence it came? No, no, Monsieur! I held my tongue and they talked of “overstrain” and “heart failure”, and all was well. . . . There was found a scrawled scrap of paper upon the table in the studio, directing that the picture be sent to M. de Mouraye, but he sent it back to No. 18, vowing he would have nothing from M. Rousselier . . . it seemed he knew by hearsay somewhat of our poor Gilles’ past life. So I kept the fair lady here, since nobody wanted her—partly, too, I keep it in memory of Monsieur Gilles, who, though he surely sinned deeply and terribly, yet was also greatly sinned against. And doubtless Our Lady of Sorrows will take that into account.



The Business Man's Tale

NANNORY HOUSE



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NANNORY HOUSE

I HAD known the Merediths, George and Lina, for a good many years—since, in fact, we had been students together at the Slade in our very early youth!—and despite the divergence of our paths in later life, George in the direction of writing, and I in the direction of business, we had never quite lost touch with each other. I was, therefore, unsurprised and more than a little delighted to see, lying on my breakfast table one sunny September morning, a large white envelope addressed to me in Lina's sprawling hand. The note was headed "Nannory House", and ran thus:

Dear old Boy,

If you're not doing anything more amusing, do run down and look us up here. George had a lucky splash with "Lonely Lady", so we made up our minds to do what we've always wanted to do—take a country house on a long lease, and settle down! We've only just moved in, and are still maidless, but I know you don't mind roughing it—pack up your grip and come.

"Nannory House"—"Nannory House?" Now where on earth had I heard that name? Some fleeting tag of memory worried me as I put down Lina's note and opened the railway guide. Freyne, it seemed, was the nearest station, from which one drove, or hoped to, to Nannory, which was the name of the village also, it seemed, as well as the house. Evidently Nannory House was the Manor, as it were . . . as I put down the guide and turned to my cooling bacon and eggs, I started, suddenly remembering where I had heard that name before. The other day at the club, a member, Fred Junior, was talking to a stranger who was lunching with him; I was sitting at the next table, and caught the tail end of a sentence . . . it had stuck in my head, I suppose, because of the oddness of the name.

" . . . at last! They had to leave the damn' place. I assure you! Nannory House, near Freyne. . . ."

I wondered, as, a few hours later, my modest suitcase packed with necessities, and my head with pleasurable anticipations, I was sitting in the leisurely "local" that was all in the shape of trains that ran to Freyne, why the last tenants of Nannory House had 'had to leave'. Full of friendly zeal, I resolved to inform George as soon as might be of the overheard remark, and to satisfy myself that my friends had not been duped into taking some place that drains or damp or draughts alike made unhealthy or depressing . . . but George's beaming countenance and hefty handshake, as he greeted me on the tiny platform of Freyne, certainly set my mind at rest concerning his health, both mental and physical! And Lina? Lina, it seemed, was absolutely O.K.

"She'd have come to meet you," George assured me, shouldering my bag with friendly energy, and leading the way to the tiny wicket-gate, 'only she's so anxious that you should see the place looking nice that she's rushing about with flowers and vases and cushions and things, in an overall and gloves, all hot and excited. Amazing the way she adores this new place of ours!'"

In the dusty lane outside the station, a businesslike little "Whippet" awaited us—the back of the car was already chock-a-block with various bundles, boxes and parcels, but George somehow found room for my suitcase amongst them, and in a few minutes we drew swiftly away into the sunshiny lanes.

"You've to do a lot of your own catering, apparently?" I joked, with a backward glance at the heap, which consisted mainly of tins of soup, jam, biscuits, and various foodstuffs. George frowned faintly and increased his speed.

"As a matter of fact, that *is* the one catch about the place," he said. "Servants! Of course the agent never warned us it might be difficult to get servants locally—but Lina's never had any difficulty before, as you know. Wherever we've been she's always managed to scratch up a wench in a day or so, but the local wenches seem to have some odd superstitious dislike of the place."

I pounced on the hint at once, delighted.

"I've got it—*that's* what Fred must have meant, of course. Nannory House is haunted!"

The car swerved a little, and I glanced at George,

astonished. He was faintly flushed, and his voice sounded irritated as he replied.

"Don't talk rubbish . . . ghosts are rot! We've never seen or heard a thing! Still, I admit that *is* the story—only how you can have heard of it before you came down here beats me."

I recited my story, and George listened as we drove along through winding lanes sweet with the scent of sun-baked grass and clover. As I finished he nodded gloomily.

"That'd be the Hannays he was talking about. They had the place before us—left after six months, and sub-let it to us through an agent, without giving any reason. They certainly let it go cheap . . . and it's a beautiful old place. Look!"

He slowed the car down on the crest of a rise, and I drew a quick breath of sudden appreciation. Before us the land dropped swiftly down and away into a shallow sunfilled valley; a small river ran meandering through the middle of it, beside the white ribbon of the road, and far off, half-way down the valley, half-buried in a straggling copse of trees, was a rambling old grey house, looking, as it lay brooding, as it were, over the few scattered cottages about it, like some ancient mother-bird, patient, waiting, in a green nest of trees, watching its straying young ones adventuring into the sun. Certainly, as I first saw it in the sunlight of that glorious September evening, Nannory House was beautiful, therefore I cannot explain why, after that first moment, it impressed me somehow *unpleasantly*. I got—let the psychics explain it, I cannot—swift but definite, the sense of a grim inflexible power, of some hidden menace. The mother bird, as it were, changed swiftly and horribly into a crouching beast awaiting its chance to spring . . . but there was no time to analyse impressions; George drove in the clutch and we dropped down the steep incline into the valley below like a stone slung from the hand of a child, and the rolling cloud of our dust lay on the still air behind us like a trail of smoke.

At the foot of the hill an old stone bridge, its side-niches for foot-passengers, proclaiming its antiquity, crossed the tiny river, narrow, but rapid and deep, which, twisting at right angles beyond the bridge, ran on beside the road as if trying to outpace us in our swift little Whippet. The

valley was spread, like a carpet, with patches of colour; yellow cornfields and silvery wheat, the browns and reds of turned earth, with here and there a patch of purple beet, and far-off, the shimmering emerald of the water-meadows beyond Nannory House, standing in its island of dark green clustering trees—as we ran into the first straggling outliers of these the road grew cool and shadowed, and presently the low flower-sprinkled bank beyond the little river gave place to a stout grey stone wall, once high but now crumbling and green, with moss and weeds where the water licked its base. About half a mile along this was broken by a modern wooden gate, with two great flag-stones, laid flat, serving to bridge the stream before it—the gate was standing hospitably open, and in we swept, up a wide semicircular drive to a great white house, set against a backing of ancient trees. Staring up at it, I wondered, for a brief puzzled moment, why, on the crest of the hill, I had “seen” it larger, more spreading, as it were, and certainly definitely *grey*, not white—but I had no time to speculate, for Lina, gay, red-headed and untidy as ever, bounced out of the front door, and kissed me soundly as I climbed out of the car, while George beamed in huge approval as he heaved out parcel after parcel from the back.

“Frank, darling, I *am* glad to see you! You’ll have real pot luck you know—but there’s a decent room for you to sleep in, and some sort of a meal to eat, thanks to my hard work and the invaluable Menken!”

“Who’s Menken?” I asked interestedly.

“He’s a darling!” said Lina emphatically.

“Damn’ useful old bird,” struck in George. “Lina found him working at the vicar’s as odd-job man, and asked him if he’d put in some time gardening here, and he’s simply followed her about like a dog ever since. Funny solitary old devil, ‘without chick nor child,’ as the saying is. . . .”

As he spoke a figure appeared round the corner of the house; a lean handsome old man, hawk-eyed, with thick tousled greying hair, in shirt sleeves and heavy boots, wearing the traditional gardener’s apron of green baize tied with a length of bass about his waist. He looked at me, then at Lina, and back again at me, and I was irresistibly reminded of the quick suspicious glance of a faithful dog, standing beside his mistress’ skirts, ready to start forward on the faintest hint from her—but on the second glance at

me the element of suspicion in his eyes had vanished, and I had that same half-flattered, satisfied feeling that one has at being "accepted" by a guardian watch-dog. He addressed Lina brusquely, yet respectfully, in a deep voice which was curiously pleasant despite its peasant burr.

"Supper's ready, marm. Shall I put these tins in the cupboard for ye?"

"Oh do, Menken," said Lina. Then added with a faint note of apology in her voice. "I'm ever so sorry to give you so much indoor work to do, you know, when you came as gardener. I hope soon we'll get a maid and be able to release you. . . ."

Menken stooped, and sweeping up the heap of parcels into his green apron, turned away.

"Ye won't never get a girl hereabouts, marm, as I've told ye!" he said cryptically over one shoulder. "And if you get one down fra' London, all I can say is, I hope she'll stay!"

He disappeared into the house with his load, and George frowned and glanced furtively at me. It was obvious that any hint of "strangeness" at Nannory House faintly annoyed him. He would have preferred to ignore it—but not so Lina! She spoke blithely over one shoulder as she led the way through the wide handsome entrance hall that was lounge, dining-room and drawing-room in one, towards the stairs that wound upwards at one end.

"Oh yes, Frank—we've got a haunted house! A real live one—though I can't find out yet just what haunts it. Menken can't or won't tell me details . . . but he can't deny there *is* a ghost! I wonder whether it's a Wailing Lady, or a Head rolling about by itself, or a Thing that Gibbers. . . ."

"Shut up, you little idiot!" I said forcibly.

Why, I don't know, but all of a sudden, as she spoke I felt an odd stab of superstitious fear—I realized that I would sooner not joke about ghosts in Nannory House! I felt as if something listened as we spoke, mounting the winding stairs in single file—stood by and smiled, quietly and terribly . . . it was a sunny September evening, and I a sober business man of forty-two, but I got that feeling just the same, and it sent a cold shiver down my spine! A shiver that speeded up my dressing and washing con-

siderably, despite the charm of my little attic bedroom with the sloping roof, blue and green flowered chintzes and quaint low wooden bed . . . however, it passed away after a while, and I descended the stairs in good spirits to the big lounge.

The room was curiously built. It ran from side to side of the house, as it were, with the front door and two leaded-paned windows set in the middle of the outer wall, the stairs and a door leading to the kitchen quarters at one end, and at the other an old brick fireplace and two wide French windows (as obviously modern as the fireplace was old) standing open upon a paved veranda. The walls were washed light sunshiny yellow, and long art-green linen curtains and cushions and bowls of late pink roses lightened the sturdy oak of the furniture—yet despite its charm, the room seemed to me remote, aloof, a little “chilly” as it were; perhaps because of the flooring, which was paved with brick tiles laid in a quaint herring-bone design of black and grey and red. This flooring, uneven and cracked in places, was obviously much older than the rest of the room—Lina caught my glance upon it, and laughed.

“Quaint, isn’t it?” she said. “And nice and cool now. But a stone floor’ll be rather chilly in winter. We shall have to put down matting or carpets then. Funny—I shan’t want to, you know. I love the house as it is. I’m awfully happy here.”

“Odd old place!” I said pouring myself out a glass of sherry as an *apéritif*, and hungrily eyeing a dish of real country cream, while George made an attack upon a gigantic cold veal-and-ham pie, and Lina mixed the salad, crisp green lettuce and sliced tomatoes, in a deep blue Delft dish.

“It’s a darling place!” said Lina blithely. “I felt, the very minute I saw it, that I wanted to come and live here. It felt like coming home. . . .” Afterwards I remembered her words with an odd qualm, but at the moment dinner was pre-eminently important. We had a very merry meal, and a most excellent one, for which Lina’s apologies were completely unnecessary, and after dinner we removed ourselves out upon the veranda, where the ubiquitous Menken had already placed three lounge-chairs and a table for coffee. Stretched out luxuriously opposite George, smoking an excellent cigar, with Lina presiding over the

bubbling Cona like a pretty red-headed witch over some infernal brew, I felt well-pleased with life, and lay surveying the twilight scene before me in great content—it was too dark to see much of the garden, but I could make out the sweep of the lawn dotted with flowerbeds, and beyond that a dark bank of the old trees with which the house was as it were surrounded, almost imprisoned. I mentioned it to George, who nodded acquiescence, and said that much of the old greenery was to be cut away.

“Of course,” he added quickly. “I shall have it done very carefully—don’t want to spoil the character of the place. But at present there’s too much gloom. Too many trees—one feels shut in, somehow.”

“I feel that, quite often,” interrupted Lina dreamily. Her face, set in its nimbus of shining hair, and lit by the flame from the lamp beneath the glass coffee-globe, looked for the moment curiously ethereal, almost ghostly. “Much as I love the place, sometimes I feel, do you know, when I’m quite alone, as if there was something here keeping me from getting out . . . a sort of *prisoned* feeling. As if the great barred gate were there again, and the old wall high and solid as it used to be, with the river beyond hemming one side like a moat, and the marshes the other . . . so that you could only hope to escape if someone threw a silken ladder over the wall, and a strong man on a swift horse stood waiting outside to carry you away. . . .”

I interrupted. Somehow I did not like the tone of Lina’s remarks at all, nor the rapt dreamy look on her face; my brief sense of placid content had fled.

“Oh, all old houses have some such atmosphere, Lina—it’s nothing!”

She turned and looked at me, startled—the “fey” look had fled.

“Of course, it isn’t anything,” she said, wide-eyed, surprised. “I only get the ‘prison feeling’ sometimes, generally when I’m alone—it’s missing Georgie-boy, of course. But when I told old Menken the other day he stared at me as if I’d said something awful!”

Her bright laugh rang out as she pulled the flame away and stirred the bubbling coffee—I stared about me, up at the crazy roof of the veranda, a cheap and obviously more or less modern construction upheld by rusty iron posts whose native ugliness was only partially hidden by twining

festoons of late-flowering rambler roses in every shade of pink and red, and dissented.

"This is modern enough, Lina! Stuck on within the last ten years, I should say! But I suppose you mean the main part of the house is old. *How* old is it?"

"I don't know a bit," said Lina vaguely. "It's been a manor-house, of course. It's been a farmhouse, and there's still a dairy, with flat stone shelves for cream pans, like 'Lorna Doone'; but that's too damp to use now except as an outhouse. Then it's been an inn at one time—there are some old stables still—and during the last fifty years Menken tells me somebody tried to turn it into a summer hotel and failed; then it was a hospital for soldiers, and then some lunatics took it for running a 'Nature Colony' where they went about without clothes and scandalized the villagers to death! But nobody, lately anyway, seems to have stayed very long.

"But it's the place's *earlier* history that really interests me. I fancy the original building must date back to the Middle Ages—the cellars are enormous, and run right under the road; Menken told me so, and I went down to explore, but couldn't get far. They're blocked up or fallen in—but they're far too big for an ordinary house. Then I'm perpetually finding odd pieces of stone flooring, or corners of broken walls, right far out in the garden, that proves the foundations stretch ever so much farther than the present house. . . ."

"No?" I said, startled and interested. "It must have been a thundering big place once!"

"It was," said Lina sombrely. She pushed the flame beneath the globe again and stood staring down at it, rapt, dreamy—with a swift little uncanny shiver I heard the 'fey' note creep once more into her voice. "It was a huge rambling grey pile, with barred windows and long cold stone-floored passage-ways . . . and the great outer wall—so high it was, so strong—stretched far down the road, and far behind into the fields, and shut out all but the sunshine, and the waving tree-tops! Then, the water-meadows behind were all marshland, coloured like a carpet in the spring with yellow kingcups and blue forget-me-nots and bog-myrtle—and there sometimes one might go and gather rushes for basket-weaving, and herbs to make simples for the peasants' ills. From the marshes one could glimpse

the winding road and long to fly to it—to gallop away from a prisoned world where all went clad in duffle-grey, where colour and scent, song and laughter were all alike accounted sinful. . . .”

Surely it was never slangy, modern Lina who was speaking? George and I were sitting bolt upright in our chairs by this time, startled, staring, and as we gaped, with a sudden bubbling snort the coffee boiled up and over, and a spurting drop fell upon Lina's wrist. With a sharp little shriek of pain she sprang back—George and I sprang to our feet, I to rescue the coffee, and he, husband-like, to apply a cooling handkerchief, when there came a quick running step, and at the far end of the veranda appeared old Menken, breathing hard and fearfully. He fell back on seeing the three of us together, and paused, and George, already somewhat ruffled and alarmed by Lina's curious outburst, snapped out at him angrily.

“Well—what on earth's the matter, Menken? What brings *you* here?”

Half-hesitating, the old man advanced a few steps along the paved terrace, and halted—my attention was attracted to the paving by his movement, and for a moment I paid no attention to his answer, in my sudden interest. Comparatively modern as was the iron veranda built over it, the brick flooring of the “walk” was obviously of the same period as that in the dining-room—but this narrow passageway, barely four feet wide, was worn down in an even groove, near the house wall, as if by the passage of many hundreds of weary feet up and down, up and down! Worn precisely as the cloisters of some cathedral are worn . . . Cloisters! I started, for on the instant I knew I had discovered the origin of Nannory House. A convent. “Nannory”, a nunnery—what a fool I had been. Of course! I was so thrilled by this discovery that I did not hear Menken's answer to George, but I heard George's rejoinder, and turned, arrested.

“Thought she might have ‘seen’ . . . don't be a superstitious fool, man! Now take yourself and your idiotic stories to bed!”

The stooping figure shambled swiftly off into the dusk, and Lina, her bright normal self again, dabbed ruefully at her smarting wrist.

“Don't be snappy to him, Georgie dear,” she said

soothingly. "Suppose he thought I'd seen the ghost, and came to help—the dear thing! Thank goodness the coffee's made—let's see, what were we talking about when this damn' stuff boiled up?"

"My dear," said George, aggrievedly. "You were doing all the talking, so you ought to remember?"

"I talking?" retorted Lina, wide-eyed. "Why, I wasn't. I remember that Frank was just saying what a big place this must have been—and then the coffee boiled up!"

"Rubbish!" said George roundly. "You were going on at a simply frightful rate, yarning about what this place used to be like. . . ."

Obeying some curious warning instinct I kicked him on the ankle and he subsided, as Lina rounded upon him in indignant denial. For she *did* deny it! It was obvious that she had no memory whatever of that "fey" moment, no notion that she had even been speaking—obedient to my hint, George said nothing more until she went upstairs to bed, and then he turned instantly to me, amazed and aggrieved.

"What's the game, Frank? She *must* have been having us on, you know—why wouldn't you let me pin her down to it?"

"Because I don't want her scared—neither do you," I said firmly. "Because, believe it or not, George, Lina isn't rotting! I know something about this sort of thing, as you know, and I was watching her, and I assure you that for the moment she was in a sort of trance—talking quite mechanically, without consciousness, if you know what I mean?"

George scowled and fidgeted—he hates, after the manner of the thoroughly healthy male, anything even remotely resembling the abnormal.

"You *aren't* trying to tell me . . ." he began, but I interrupted, firmly and definitely. I knew how to manage George!

"I mean that Lina's the type of which mediums are made—it's no use your frowning or objecting, because it's a fact. It's a gift like any other, though I don't advise its being deliberately developed except in unusual cases. But I've always thought Lina psychic, and now I'm sure. I think that to-night, just for a moment, she "tapped", as it were, one of the thought-currents that hang about this

old house, and described to us, quite literally and truthfully, what it was like—it's an old convent you know. I'm sure of that."

"Menken's been telling you about the ghost, evidently!" said George moodily.

"He hasn't," I said. "What is it?"

George opened his mouth, and, shutting it again, shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm not going to put ideas into your head. You're a damn' Celt, and imaginative enough of your own accord—if I told you what to expect, you might start seeing it just to complete things! Anyway, for God's sake don't discuss anything of this sort with Lina, if you can avoid it. I daresay you're right about her—but I hope it doesn't happen again, that's all."

I must say that during the ensuing week nothing even remotely resembling the curious episode of that first evening happened. The weather remained perfect, and the three of us, forgetting our ages and responsibilities, frolicked about the old house, the garden, the water-meadow and countryside generally in the most irresponsible and delightful way. We picknicked, fished in the tiny stream—which I found broadened out beyond the house into a widish pool, obviously once the fishpool of the old convent—for, as was subsequently proved, I was entirely right in my conclusion as to the origin of Nannory House. We went over to Freyne in the car, helped Menken in the apple-gathering in the orchard, weeded and dug and planted, and spent our evenings playing bridge, listening to the radio, or merely talking, as in the old days—so, peacefully and uneventfully, passed an entire week after my advent.

It was as if, having frowned upon me to start with, Nannory House now chose to smile, bland, charming, innocent, so that my first faint feeling of vague distrust faded; all but disappeared, lulled for the moment into security. "The influence", the atmosphere that hung about the house, whatever it was, that I had sensed—thanks, I suppose to the Celtic blood about which George had teased me—so sharply at the beginning had retreated,

was standing back. Biding its time. . . . The phrase occurred to me once or twice, and I hastily thrust it into the background.

It wasn't a very pleasant or comfortable phrase to think about. I felt, I repeat, lulled, as it were, into security, yet deep in my heart I knew it was only temporary; that very soon something would move swiftly forward towards its appointed end—it was not mere chance, but the slow and steady march of Fate that had brought the Merediths to Nannory House!

We were sitting one afternoon, Lina and I, on the wall by the gate, dangling our bare legs over the swift-running stream that ran below it. Lina, sunburnt as an Indian, clad in a skimpy butcher-blue linen frock, wearing a pair of shabby *espadrilles*, her ruddy hair in a bush about her face, looked a mere schoolgirl, instead of a woman married fully ten years—I teased her about it as we sat, watching the long dusty ribbon of the road for George and the car, and she laughed and frowned, screwing up her eyes in the funny adorable way she had.

"I know—I *feel* idiotically young just now!" she admitted. "I can't even remember I'm married, sometimes—it gives me quite a shock to turn round and find George in the room, do you know? It feels somehow all wrong, since we came here. So much so, that he's sleeping in the little dressing-room these days!"

She laughed lightly, but an odd little fear plucked at me—why, I don't know. Deliberately I steered the conversation away from personalities by turning and looking at the house, lying back like a huge white sleeping cat among its dark encircling trees.

"Funny," I said. "I can't think now why the place ever looked grey to me. The first time I saw it, from the hill by Freyne, I could have sworn it was a *grey* house—and much larger than it actually is."

Lina turned and looked at me and I blinked, startled. For a fleeting minute it seemed to me that another girl, a much younger girl, gleamed out at me from the depths of her hazel eyes as she answered—an answer so surprising that I almost fell off the wall as I heard it!

"But—it *is* grey? Grey stones, grey walls—a great grey prison. . . ."

I gaped at her and she paused, then laughed, oddly,

confusedly . . . and it was Lina again who looked at me from the hazel eyes in Lina's face!

"Grey?" she said surprisedly . . . and instantly I knew that, as before on that first evening, she did not know that she had spoken! "I don't know what you mean, Frank? It's *white*—a typical old-world white house."

"A minute ago you said it looked grey."

I spoke snappishly, a little frightened—Lina drew a hand across her eyes and answered confusedly.

"Did I? Well. . . . I remember I did get that impression—that it was grey—when I saw it first from Freyne Hill. And yes, the whole place looked somehow bigger. . . ."

With one accord we turned and looked round at the house, as if for reassurement—and as we stared, we gave a simultaneous gasp of astonishment, for there, walking quietly up the wide sweep of the drive before the house, clear in the golden afternoon sunshine, was the black-clad figure of a nun!

Now there was but one entrance, as far as I knew, to Nannory House and its grounds, and that one the gate on which Lina and I had mounted guard to wait for George, at least ten minutes ago, during which time but one single human being had passed us going along the road—a solitary motor-cyclist, snorting along in a cloud of floury dust! Yet there the nun was, walking along, solid, obvious, a short little stout figure, her hands folded before her in the voluminous folds of her habit, her head bent—yet despite the stolid homeliness of the figure, in the depths of my being I shivered, cold, feeling the swift touch of an ominous deep-seated fear!

"Well, I'm blessed!" Lina ejaculated. "Where on earth did she get in?"

"There must be some other way in," I said hastily. Lina shook her head doubtfully.

"Only a gate out to the water-meadows at the back—and that's usually padlocked. I can't make it out. Still, she's far too solid for a ghost, and it's six o'clock, not at all ghost time!"

Her bright laugh rang out—yet somehow I wished she would not laugh. Despite my own common sense that jeered at me, I did not like the look of that squat determined figure marching steadily in the sunlight towards the tranquil house. Lina jumped down from the wall,

setting her brief blue frock into place with an expert twist.

"I expect she's come for a subscription," she said. "I didn't know there was a convent near, and I never like nuns much somehow. They always frighten me a little. Goodness knows why! But still, I'd better go and deal with her. . . ." She was gone, running up the drive after the solitary black figure, and on a sudden impulse I ran after her.

The figure of the nun was now level with the front door, and obviously, one expected her to mount the steps, ring the bell, and await an answer. But she did not reach a hand to the bell at all! The door stood open, and without a pause she walked calmly through it, straight into the house. Lina flung me an indignant glance over her shoulder as she ran, and I heard her splutter something about "darned cheek" . . . neck to neck we reached the front door and ran into the hall. But it was empty, from end to end! Lina dashed out into the veranda, while I made for the kitchen quarters, but in both cases we drew a blank. There was nobody in the bedrooms, nobody in the garden, except Menken, asleep in the potting-shed. We met, after a final end-to-end search of the garden, in the drive again before the front door, and Lina gave a vexed laugh as her eyes met mine.

"I'm damned!" she said frankly. "She *was* there, wasn't she? We both saw her there, solid enough! A fat little black nun stumping up the drive—either we both drank too much gin and ginger-beer for lunch, and are seeing things, or we've got hallucinations, and are going dippy. What do *you* think?"

I was not prepared, as a matter of fact, to say precisely *what* I actually thought—if, indeed, my thoughts were sufficiently coherent to express in speech at all—but I was saved from answering by the chug-chug of the car, and its snorting sweep into the drive, bearing a beaming George at the wheel, the usual assortment of parcels behind him, and a stranger, a perky red-bearded little man in spectacles, at his side. Leaping out, George introduced the stranger with a flourish of satisfaction.

"Lina—Frank! This is old John Fraser, one of my old school friends, now the doctor in Freyne—just fancy! Ran into him in the High Street and brought him back to dinner,

... Come on in, old man, and Lina will mix you the finest cocktail you ever tasted!"

Dr. Fraser—of whom I remembered dimly hearing George speak once or twice in the old days—proved a dry pleasant little man, with red-brown eyes like a squirrel's to match his squirrel-red wispy beard, and a quick wit. We three men yarned pleasantly over cigarettes as Lina mixed the cocktails, and in the "reminiscing" that inevitably took place as he and George exchanged news of their respective lives and adventures since their last meeting, the curious incident of the nun was for the moment forgotten. But only for the moment. Later on, when we sat in the mellow candlelight over dinner, enjoying yet another of the amazingly successful impromptu meals that Lina and Menken between them seemed so successful in providing, Lina suddenly introduced the subject.

"Such a funny thing happened to-day, George," she said. "A nun came—begging, I suppose—while we were waiting for you by the gate, and had the cheek to walk slap into the house without ringing or anything! Frank and I were after her almost at once, but we couldn't find her anywhere—I suppose she knew the house, thought I wasn't in, and went off quickly. But she must have run like a hare to have done it. . . ."

Fraser stroked his thin beard.

"A nun?" he said reflectively. Then laughed. "You can call yourself lucky you saw her in broad daylight, Mrs. Meredith, or the neighbours'll be saying you saw the ghost of Nannory House!"

"A nun—oh, is the ghost a nun?" demanded Lina, bright-eyed and excited. "Oh, *do* you know the story—go on and tell us!"

She propped her chin on her cupped hands, elbows on the table, and stared eagerly into the little man's face—across the table I looked at George; he was frowning faintly, but there was no avoiding it. And truth to tell, in my heart of hearts, I too wanted to hear the story—even if the telling of it brought the Shadow a little nearer.

"Oh, yes—the ghost is a nun. The old Abbess of the place—didn't you know that this house is built upon the foundations of an old nunnery—that's why it's called 'Nannory House'?" I smiled a smile of secret self-satisfaction as the little man continued. "Oh, yes, there's a

story, and rather a good one, too. I'll tell you, if you like." He paused, lighted a cigarette, and plunged straightway into his tale.

"They say that this was once a great and famous nunnery, headed by a grim and implacable old Abbess, who ruled over her sisterhood with a rod of steel. Now there arrived one day among the nuns a young girl—Alicia Maltravers was her name—sent to the convent for family reasons. This girl had lands and money, and the Abbess was only too pleased to collar her and her property for the Abbey . . . but man proposes and love disposes, and it seems Alicia Maltravers was fated for love and not the veil; anyway, despite the strict rules of the convent, love came to her, swift and overwhelming. One Roger d'Enquen, a Norman-born lord, who was staying in the neighbourhood, saw her, according to old traditions, one morning out with the other Sisters, gathering rushes on the marshes, while he rode by to the hawking—and it was the world well lost for love between them, from that moment onwards! At any rate, Alicia was missing one night from her accustomed place among the Sisters, when they filed in to take their places for their meagre supper in the refectory . . . did you know, by the way, that this room where we're sitting is actually part of the old refectory. . . .?"

"Yes," said Lina mechanically. "I knew! Go on."

I stirred uneasily. I did not like her tone, nor did I feel easy at the trend of the tale, yet there was no way of stopping it. The little doctor went on.

"When search was made they found a torn scrap of her grey nun's habit clinging to the coping of the wall beside the great locked gate, where she must have climbed over into her lover's arms and away. The scandal was terrific, since the Maltravers family were well known at Court, and Roger d'Enquen was not only already married, but a Catholic to boot, so that no marriage was possible to gild the pill of scandal for the family's swallowing! The lovers fled abroad, and disappeared—but the girl's family never got over their rage and chagrin at the disgrace to their name, and at last they brought power to bear to arraign the Abbess before the courts of the day on a charge of laxity, or alternatively, of accepting a bribe from Roger d'Enquen to let the girl escape.

"They could 'cook' a case, if it paid them, as well in

the Middle Ages as to-day, and despite the brave defence that the stern old lady put up for herself, she was dismissed from her high post; her nuns were scattered abroad among other sisterhoods, and her beloved convent taken over by one of the Maltravers who fancied it as a country seat. But she did not live to endure her fate for long. A few months afterwards she died, broken-hearted, chafing bitterly, furiously, a fierce old lioness driven from her lair . . . and as she died, in her rage and despair she sent a message out into the wide world, to the girl whose rash impulsive action had brought ruin upon her and her community."

"What was the message?" said Lina in a low voice. Vaguely I noticed, as she spoke that just beyond the window stood old Menken, his deep-set eyes shining uncannily bright in his lean handsome old face as he listened . . . oddly enough, it did not strike me as strange or unusual that he should be listening to the quaint old tale with the same strained, almost painful interest as the rest of us.

"The message ran something like this," said the doctor. "That Alicia Maltravers, wherever she might wander, bore with her the curse of a broken vow—and that some day sooner or later she must return and face her punishment."

"What," said Lina, "was the punishment of a nun who had broken her vows?"

A voice spoke from the window, and with one accord we turned sharply, a cold chill of superstitious fear catching at each of our hearts—at least I knew it caught at mine!

"Death!" said the voice. It was Menken speaking, and for a brief second we all held still, frightened. For it did not seem—just for a moment—as if it was Menken speaking at all, but a man much younger; a man with a voice resonant, cultured, beautiful. . . . It was Lina who broke the awkward pause, springing to her feet, with a little embarrassed laugh.

"Really, what a jumpy lot of idiots you've made us, Dr. Fraser!" But her laughter sounded oddly strained "You've even got my darling Menken 'all het up', as the saying is. Did you come to tell us coffee was ready, Menken? All right, we'll come out."

She swept out of the French windows to the veranda, and like a shadow the old man faded away into the darkness. With one accord we dropped all discussion of the story of

Nannory House, and talked almost feverishly of other things; the weather, the state of the crops—politics, art, books. . . . Yet I think all of us, in our secret hearts, were still pondering, nervously, uneasily, the doctor's story. Vaguely frightened, yet unwilling to admit that we were frightened. . . . I know now that *I* was; that the telling of the story had, as it were, brought something nearer to us, as the lighting of a flame will bring wild things from the woods to prowl and hover about it. With all my heart I wished that George, and above all Lina, had never come to Nannory House!

I watched Lina furtively as, the coffee made and distributed, she wandered absently away upon the veranda, head bent, her hands clasped behind her, the cigarette between her lips a red spark in the gloom. Up and down and back again, she paced the old cloister, her white gown rippling, filmy as a moth's wing, fluttering about her—up and down the cloister where those gentle prisoned women had walked so many hundred years ago, while George and little Fraser yarned, and I lay back listening and watching . . . and suddenly, as I watched, something happened! Lina paused to light, after the shocking habit of the confirmed cigarette-smoker, a fresh cigarette from the stub of her old one—and as she stood a few feet away from us, just beyond the circle of lamplight, her head bent over her hands, cupped to shelter the smouldering flame, it seemed to me that she *changed*, suddenly and horribly, and that a slender, grey-clad nun stood there, sobbing heartbrokenly, her face buried in her hands!

The illusion—for so, of course it *was*, my bewildered mind told me—was so strong that I clutched the arm of my chair, staring, unable to speak. But still it seemed that the nun stood there and wept, and now another figure shaped itself out of the Shadows beyond her! A dark, hooded Thing, squat, grim, menacing. . . . With an involuntary cry of terror I sprang to my feet, and found the astonished eyes of my three friends upon me, and Lina, herself once more, amazed and laughing, a just-lighted cigarette between her fingers!

"What on earth's the matter?" they all chorused in alarm. I could only mumble confusedly, and point along the veranda with, I admit, a very uncertain finger.

"The nun again!" I stuttered. "She's gone—but she

was standing just there. . . ." For a moment Lina paused, and I fancied grew a little white as we eyed each other, but Fraser's hearty laugh broke the tensity of the moment.

"By Jove!" he laughed. "You *do* pay me a compliment, if you see spooks in exact accordance with my story!"

Mechanically I joined in the laughter against me—but despite all the jeerings I admit I had invited, my innermost soul told me that I had seen truly, that the fear I felt for Lina was real and desperate, and that I could do nothing to hinder or prevent that befalling which must befall, in due accordance with Fate! The net was closing slowly about us all, but chiefly, I knew, about Lina, and it was with a curious sinking of the heart, a feeling of premonition that I answered her blithe "good night", and saw her white skirts flutter down the long room, up the stairs and away into the darkness above.

The nights were beginning to draw in chilly, as September nights are apt to do, so on Lina's departure to bed, we men moved the little table within doors, put a match to the piled logs in the deep brick fireplace, and resumed our talk in the mellow firelit gloom. The shadows gathered about us, as the night darkened outside, the logs glowed and faded slowly to red embers as George and Fraser talked, interested as only two long-parted friends can be in each other, and at last, weary, troubled, yet curiously wide awake, I got up, deciding to go to bed, and knocking out the dottle of my pipe against the overmantel, turned to say good night to George and Fraser. I turned, I say; the movement brought me round to face the long room, now lying deep in shadow but for the shallow gleam of our fire, and I gasped—at my gasp the two turned round, and I knew, from George's leap to his feet, from the doctor's quick-drawn breath of horror, that *this* time they too saw as I did!

Down the stairs, a pale shadow against the gloom, Lina was coming—Lina walking slowly, mechanically, her eyes fixed and empty as those of a sleep-walker, her crossed hands held out before her as though tied together. She was barefoot and draped vaguely in white, her lovely hair hidden beneath a closely tied coiflike headdress . . . for a single crazy moment I wondered whether, obeying some

whimsical impulse, she had chosen to dress up as a ghostly nun to serve me out for my "panicking", but as I stared, the brief impression fled in terror—for she was not alone!

Just behind her came a hooded figure, dark and squat and menacing, one hand upon her shoulder, impelling her forward as a gaoler impels his victim . . . down the stairs, down the long room they came, without a sound, towards the veranda, moving with a hideous purposeful steadiness, when suddenly a figure sprang past us from the veranda where he must have lain in hiding, obeying who knows what strange dim instinct—old Menken!

Past us, past the dim circle of fading firelight from which, like spectators, spell-bound, helpless, we watched the strange scene, he rushed, and for a dramatic second halted, staring at the advancing couple, the tranced pale figure and her grim captor—and then, as they still came steadily on, he did a thing for which I shall always honour him! For I (and I am, I trust, a man not altogether without valiance, as my war-record proves), I would not have dared so to challenge the burning eyes that gleamed, like hell-fires, in that shadowed face behind Lina's shoulder! But he—he stepped forward, and seizing Lina by both arms, dragged her, literally it seems, from the grip of the ghostly fingers that were guiding her to the dark outdoors and God knows what mysterious death, and flung her behind him. Without a sound the girl crumpled and slid to the ground in a dead faint, but for the moment all our eyes were for Menken and the Thing he faced—that black-hooded Shadow in the garb of a nun, a gleaming rosary swinging from her waist.

Before the prone body of the girl he stood, a fierce figure in rough workman's dress, his grizzled hair wild—yet unaccountably, as I stared, somehow it was not Menken that I saw standing there, defying Fate in the chequered light and shadow! I saw a knight, strong and splendid in gleaming mail, steel-helmeted and sword in hand, defending his lady. . . . And surely it was never Menken's quavering old voice that, ringing, magnificent, shouted defiance to the Shade that faced him?

"The fault was mine—mine be the punishment. Take me—I am ready!"

Fraser always swears that at this point there was a lightning-flash—it had been stormy all day—but I am not

sure! All I *know* is that I saw the black figure that stood there quiver like a flame in a wind—draw back, and then, it seemed—strike! Suddenly, as a snake strikes. . . . That she raised one lean hand above her head, and that with the gesture, from those hooded eyes there blazed suddenly a blinding and terrible light. Like a lightning-flash it flamed, tearing through the room, dazzling us all for a second—and when we recovered our sight and our senses once more, the room was empty, the Abbess had vanished, and only a tranquil patch of moonlight lay where she had been. But prone upon his back, his arms flung wide, lay Menken—stone-dead, with his hawklike features fixed in a stern smile of triumph!

Fraser and I had carried the body of the old man out of sight on to the veranda before Lina came round, and George, with some confused maunderings about sleep-walking, that she was, happily, too dazed to question, hustled her safely back to bed before she had time to realize the remarkable garb she was wearing . . . which was, in truth, a sheet and a linen towel pinned and twisted into a clumsy imitation of a nun's dress. Why? Instinct, I suppose, a sort of "throw-back" to the past . . . like her recollection of the house as "grey", and dislike of a man in her room . . . and oh, heaps of other things.

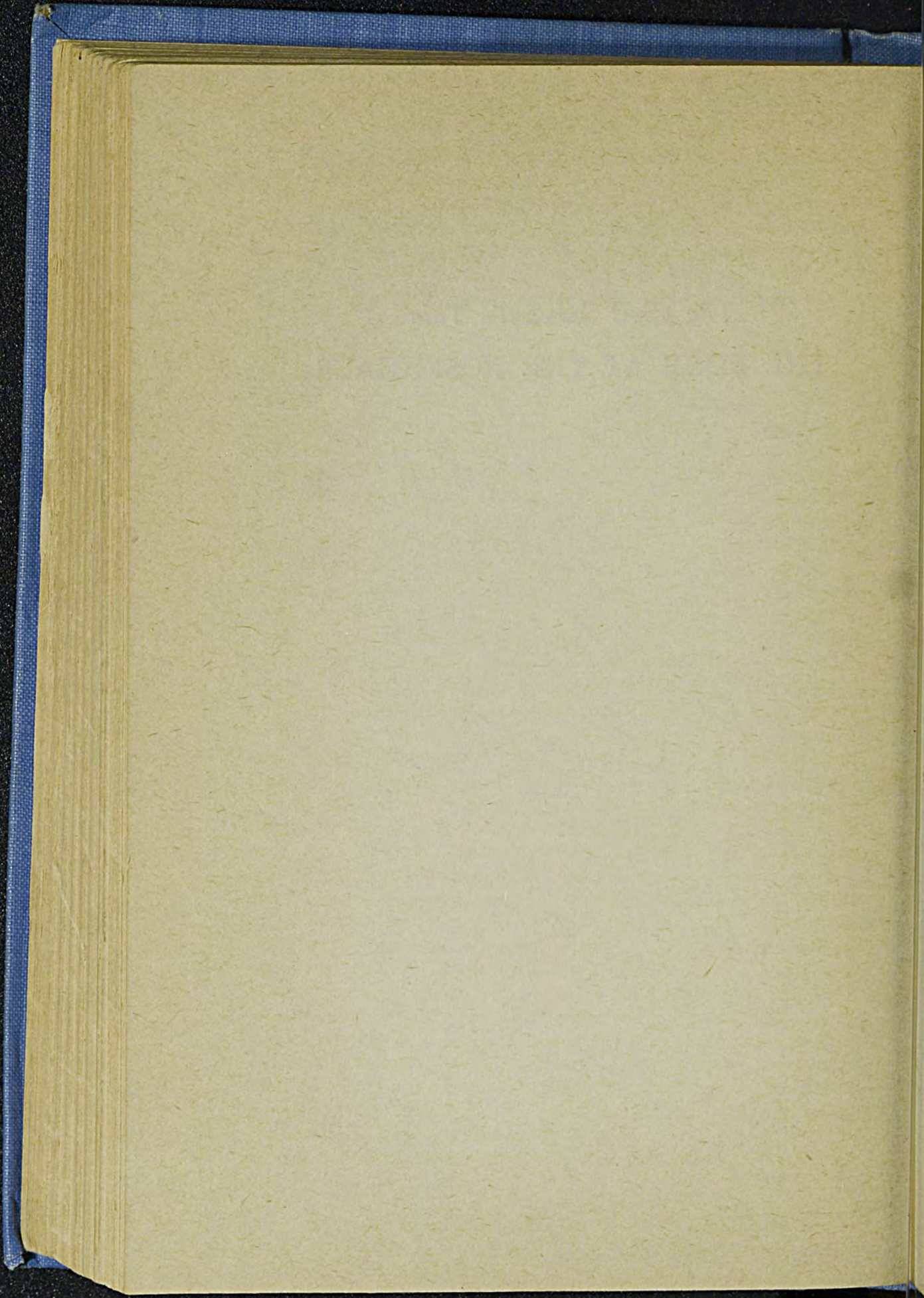
Which brings me to my "explanation"—there is to me only one *really* satisfactory one, though that, of course, George flatly refused to accept. In which, from his point of view, he is probably right, since to accept my solution means perforce to accept a good many things rather disquieting to a man whose preferences are strongly for the normal and everyday! I, personally, believe that in that amazing scene in the moonlit refectory of the old convent, we three men were privileged to see the final working out of an ancient play, played by the three original protagonists. With this sole difference, that the two culprits were clothed in flesh and blood, though of a different race and time, and the third was no longer of earth. . . .

Lina with her strange knowledge of Nannory House, her mingled love and dread of it—was she not once Alicia

Maltravers, the nun whose sin brought ruin and disgrace upon her sisterhood? And as for Menken, who gave his life to pay her debt—was he not, long ago, Roger d'Enquen, a certain Norman lord? At any rate, they tell me that George and Lina have lived happily at Nannory House these six years past, that the curse is lifted, and the grim dark ghost of the vengeful Abbess walks no longer!

The Civil Servant's Tale

THE ROOM AT THE ROSENHAUS



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The Civil Servant's Tale

THE ROOM AT THE ROSENHAUS

TOM MACINTOSH, Civil Servant, aged thirty-eight and on leave for the first time in five years, leant over the rail of the tiny green and white steamer chugging slowly up the blue length of Achensee—that marvellous lake lost among the mountains that is one of the Austrian Tyrol's loveliest and most closely guarded secrets—and snuffing the warm, pine-scented air with luxurious satisfaction, revelled in the knowledge of three week's idleness to come.

It still seemed a dream that he should be here at all, complete with rucksack, stout shoes and alpenstock, to renew acquaintance with the mountains he had always adored, and—since the death of their parents threw the entire support of a delicate younger sister upon his shoulders—never thought to see again. But an unexpected legacy, and Leila's still more unexpected marriage to the young doctor who had been attending her, had signed, for Tom MacIntosh, the order of release from the double bondage of duty and poverty, and it was with a light heart that he watched once more unfolding before him the gorgeous wooded heights, deep ravines filled with green dusk and the sound of falling waters, and little hill-perched hamlets of much-loved memory. . . .

It was on the advice of a mountain-climbing friend that he had headed, the moment his sister's wedding-festivities were over, for Achensee, a part of the Tyrol with which he was not acquainted, and the journey had been long and wearisome—from London to Innsbruck, thence to tiny Jenbach, then by funicular up the mountain side, and finally by steamer down the lake, which lies in a deep valley between two giant mountain-walls, is a trip long-drawn-out and tiring to a degree. It was, therefore, with considerable relief that the weary Londoner saw at last the mountains retreat, as it were, on one side of the lake, leaving a wide green plain of meadowland and at the edge of the plain, with one foot in the water and one on land,

Pertisau, the tiny lake-side village that was his final destination.

Pertisau straggles along the water's edge for a mile or more, a scattered string of picturesque steeple-roofed little dwellings, with an occasional square white-washed pension or hotel, looking like a cardboard hat-box standing in the middle of a group of dolls' houses. All built of wood for the most part, or of "lebst", that curious compost of way-side stones mixed with mud and cement that is still much in use in parts of Austria; some washed pink or lemon or white, others green with climbing things, but all alike with the high-peaked roofs and elaborate carved wooden superstructure common to all Tyrolean houses. A wide expanse of green meadows, orchards, and carefully cultivated fields stretched away behind the village, a long white quay like a pointing finger ran out before it into the blue waters of the lake . . . with an almighty churning and snorting, the little steamer drew up beside the quay, the passengers filed ashore, and MacIntosh, beaming at the beauty about him like a man enchanted, handed over his modest baggage to the care of a perspiring young porter in a dusty linen suit and round red cap, and followed him down the quay, across the dusty square and into the cool portals of the "Fürstenhaus" with the most pleasurable feelings of anticipation.

The "Fürstenhaus" was the largest of the square white buildings before alluded to, and boasted a wide brick-paved veranda roofed with vines; a cool inner *Esszimmer*, lined with tables already spread for dinner, and, to judge from the appetizing odour ascending from the kitchen, a more than excellent cuisine. Thankfully dropping his rucksack upon a chair, MacIntosh sank into a chair and lighted a cigarette as he waited for the advent of the proprietor, feeling well content with life. But his content was of short duration. When Herr Sichel appeared, a pink and perspiring individual closely resembling, with his shining shaven head and protuberant paunch, a prize pig suddenly adorned with tight blue alpaca trousers and an American sailor's hat, his brow was furrowed with distress as he broke out into instant incoherent speech, half-German and half-English.

The Herr's room—*ach, was für eine Katastrophe!* But yes, of course, the Herr's room had been booked this three

weeks past, but alas, who could tell what might happen? The lady—an *Engländerin* of the most noble, the most genteel, who had been occupying it, and who had made arrangements to go the day before, was now ill and unable to move, with a doctor in attendance. . . . MacIntosh frowned, helpless and annoyed.

"Well," he said dryly—thankful that his German, albeit rusty, was at least better than mine host's English, which was barely comprehensible. "I'm too tired to solve the problem! You booked a room for me, and it's not my fault that the lady's ill—I suggest you find me another room, here or somewhere else. I don't care where I sleep—but I've got to sleep somewhere! Anyway, now let me have a glass of beer, and something to eat. I'm starving."

An obsequious waiter dashed forward to take his order, and too tired to worry further for the moment, he drank beer and ate savoury *Wienerschnitzel*, red cabbage salad, and sticky almond *küchen*, showered with caraway seeds, with great content, while the proprietor, his brow furrowed with distress, disappeared into the house. He was just consuming the last crumbs of *küchen* with great relish, when the plump gentleman appeared again, his face creased into a curious expression between doubt and relief. He had found a room—a little way up the road—in the house of a *gnädige Frau*, who was so gracious as to have a room to let. Frau Hellner, of the "Rosenhaus". . . . If the Herr did not object to sleeping there, he could come and take his principal meals at the "Fürstenhaus", until his own room was vacant. Hans, the porter would take his luggage up for him—the Herr would not mind?

The worthy Herr Sichel made the suggestion with an air of diffidence that faintly puzzled MacIntosh, who accepted the compromise with a sigh of relief. And when, indeed, after following the useful Hans a few yards up a narrow road, white with dust and fragrant with the scent of sunburnt grass and flowers, he stopped at the gate of a small whitewashed house, balconied all round with carved wood, and possessed of an incredibly steep tiled roof crowned with a rampant lion as a weather cock, he swiftly decided that to sleep here, a little way out of the village, among the scented fields, was infinitely preferable to sleeping at the 'Fürstenhaus', with the dust and clamour

of the tiny square about its doors, and took possession of his new quarters with great content.

Frau Hellner was scarcely as gracious as her description—a dusty, scared-looking little woman in black, silent as a shadow. But the room was all that could be desired—large, deliciously clean, furnished sparsely but adequately with that shiny yellow pinewood furniture smelling of resin and camphor-polish so common in Austria; walls covered with a white paper sprigged with pink and green daisies, spotless bed linen, and a tiled floor scrubbed till it shone red as the cheeks of Friedl, the brawny yellow-haired *mädchen* who assisted Hans to drag the visitor's luggage upstairs. There was, moreover, an outside balcony built of wood that was almost as large as another room, with a green wicker table and lounge-chair already upon it—beyond it, a group of tall linden-trees nodded beside a hedge that divided the garden from a field of corn, a feathery sea of gold just beginning to turn to silver, for the evening was drawing in, and a few faint stars already pricked the dusky violet of the sky behind the dark line of the hills.

Yes, decided MacIntosh contentedly, as he dismissed the woman and locked his door—to room at the "Rosenhaus" was a good move—definitely good. Luxuriously he undressed, tossing the contents of his rucksack and valise all abroad as he searched for pyjamas, toothbrush, a book to read in case he could not sleep—but of course, he *would* sleep. He was dog-tired. Yet oddly enough, he did not, after all, find sleep come quite as easily as he had imagined. The bed was comfortable, the air cool, yet not too cool; yet he remained curiously restless. At last, after half an hour's desultory reading, he decided to smoke a cigarette upon the balcony, and dragging a pillow and coverlet with him, arranged himself upon the *chaise-longue*—but not even his favourite Craven "A" had their usual soothing effect upon him to-night.

The faint muffled sounds of night rose up to him from all sides, the far tinkle of a cowbell came at intervals from the hills beyond, the cheep and flutter of sleepy birds, the distant murmur of some tiny stream, the whisper of the night-breeze through the leaves of the group of lindens . . . now and then he caught the faint murmur of talk from the kitchen, which was just round the angle of the

house, but except for that he might have been utterly alone upon a mountain top, only that faint recurrent tinkle serving to remind him of human contacts, since it was a human hand that had tied that warning bell about the wandering creature's neck. Curious, how conscious he became of that tiny distant sound. . . . He found himself listening for it, idly, interestedly; wondering about it, weaving pictures—turning to listen more intently, he caught sight of a paper tucked down between the slats of the wooden side of the balcony, and pulled it out.

It was a folded magazine of some sort, and he opened it, moved by a faint curiosity. His book bored him, and this might perhaps, be a stray copy of *Simplicimus* or some such rag, left there by the last occupant of the room—he laughed, surprised and disappointed, as he saw what it was. A six-month-old copy of *Weldon's Journal*, open and pressed back at a page of dress designs. Yet, having nothing better to do, he studied the designs idly, and noted that one was marked with pencil; a girlish little frock in flowered cotton or cretonne, short-sleeved and much flounced. . . . Yawning, he laid the paper down upon the table, and deciding that at last he really felt sleepy, arose and strolled to the balcony rail to fling away his last cigarette stub, mindful of the "house of wood" in which he was sleeping!

The little garden below was dark, but the tufts of marigold flowers, *kuckucksblume*, and huge white daisies shone out dimly against the dusk of the hedges behind them, like little moons. . . . The field beyond now shone all silver in the moonlight, rippling and curling as the breeze brushed the fluid waves of the corn, like some fairy ocean. There seemed to be a figure standing in the shadow of the hedge beside the group of lindens, just where there was a gap into the field. The plump serving maid, Friedl, in all probability, waiting for young Hans, the lint-haired porter from the "Fürstenhaus", decided MacIntosh, indulgently, who had not failed to note the obvious intimacy between the two.

"Friedl!" he called, meaning to tease the girl, but there was no response.

It might, of course, be Frau Hellner, but he rather thought it must be Friedl, since she had sported a light-coloured print dress, and the effect of this figure was light,

mere shadow among shadows as it was. . . . But he was sleepy at last, thank goodness, and crawling thankfully between the sheets, he slept the clock round until the sun was high in the heavens, and his breakfast-coffee cold beside his bed. Yet it struck him, as he rang for a fresh supply, that he had dreamt a good deal. Dreams in which, oddly enough, the dress he had seen in *Weldon's Journal* seemed to have figured—but the substance of the dream had fled. He was only vaguely conscious that in his dream a woman wearing that flowered cotton dress had somehow played a part. . . .

But he had definitely fallen in love with the "Rosenhaus"—which was well, since the *Engländerin* at the "Fürstenhaus" showed, as the days went on, no signs of recovering her health. Although at first his English liking for a hard mattress and light coverings rebelled at sleeping between two giant feather pillows, he rapidly grew used to them, and what with living in the sun, bathing, fishing, tramping, and eating huge meals—for the type of food that is over-rich and greasy in Germany is translated into a perfect and delicious cuisine in Austria—the Tom MacIntosh who had left London a pale-faced City clerk, soon strode about the lanes and fields, bareheaded, sunburnt and gloriously happy.

His rusty German was rapidly becoming fluent again, his untrained feet growing hard and muscular and his shoulders accepted the strain of a laden rucksack without aching. It was inconvenient on a long tramp to go back to the village for a midday meal, so each morning he packed, besides camera, book, and sketching materials, enough food into his rucksack to last until evening and the long and satisfying supper at the "Fürsthenhaus", and set off to lake or mountains, rarely returning to the "Rosenhaus" and his bed until the stars were peering down over the ridge of mountains that ringed the flowery stretch of fields and meadow-land that cradled Pertisau.

It was, therefore, some time before he quite realized that he was growing increasingly reluctant to go back to his sleeping quarters—and when he did discover it, though faintly puzzled, he was ready with half a dozen good reasons why he did not on the whole like the "Rosenhaus" quite as much as he had thought. Certainly he was not sleeping as well as he had done at first. He slept, that is,

but restlessly and dreamily, though the dreams were difficult to remember in detail; yet persistently the woman in the flowered dress seemed to figure in them . . . also Friedl's habit of wandering about the garden below his balcony began to get a little on his nerves.

She was a restless individual, apparently, and did not go to bed, as did most of the villagers, at the respectable hour of ten—often he would wake with a jerk and hear her faint rustling step in the garden below, and once or twice he had risen, irritably, and gone on to the balcony to see what on earth the girl was up to, only to glimpse her pale figure fluttering quickly into the shadow of the linden trees. Rather annoyed at the perpetual disturbances—faint as they were, they spoiled his night's rest, and sleeping was an important part of his holiday—he tackled her point-blank upon the subject one morning when she appeared with his breakfast of coffee, rolls and fragrant sundark honey.

"Have a pleasant time last night, Friedl?" he queried in his stumbling German—the girl frowned and looked at him blankly, so he tried again. "Who were you flirting with down in the garden last night, eh? I heard you, you bad girl!"

It was a laboured attempt at reproof and pleasantry combined, but he was somewhat disconcerted at its effect. Friedl neither tossed her head nor looked abashed, but turned a quite alarming pallor under her healthy pink skin, and stared at him.

"The Herr has heard. . . ." she faltered.

A little annoyed, Tom snapped her up.

"Of course I heard—you were just under my window! I don't mind your meeting your young man in the least, my girl, but I do wish you would not whisper and shuffle about in the garden just underneath my balcony—it wakes me up!"

To his amazement, she caught him up, eagerly, alarmedly.

"*Nein, nein, mein Herr!* It is not me—I meet my Hans nowhere near this house! Never would I stay near this house after sundown . . . *lieber Gott, nein!*"

She was so earnest and emphatic in her denials that MacIntosh had no choice but to accept them, albeit in his secret heart he concluded she was lying to him, afraid of his reporting her to her mistress for using the garden as a

tryst. If she spoke the truth, then it must have been Frau Hellner herself wandering about, although he had never seen her dressed in anything but rusty black, and the figure he had glimpsed in the garden most certainly wore some light-coloured sort of dress. However, the matter was unimportant; he dismissed it from his mind, ate an excellent breakfast, and in the excitement of a long tramp up to a mountain hamlet where he obtained some excellent sketches and snapshots, forgot it altogether.

He came home extra late that night, and as he undressed, footsore and weary, but drowsily content, longing for the embrace of the cool flaxwoven sheets, scented with fragrant *wildsalbei* from their drying in the fields, he remembered the morning's talk, and sent up a whimsical prayer that Friedl or her mistress might for one night at least refrain from disturbing him, and that he might be spared another of these increasingly disquieting dreams. He was tired-out, having tramped eighteen miles, and dropped off into death-like sleep the moment his weary head touched the pillow—but again, like waiting hawks, pounced down the dreams, dreams, confused, bewildered, disturbing! Voices that whispered—a sensation of utter misery and despair—the scent of clover in the sun, a gay young man's voice singing some Tyrolean *Volksliede*, the fluttering glimpse of a flowered cotton frock that was vaguely familiar . . . all these and a thousand other fugitive impressions seemed, as if were, to muster all together to make a concerted attack upon his consciousness.

Even in his sleep he fought confusedly against them, resentful, annoyed, yet they returned to the attack again and again, headed, it seemed, by the vaguely sensed presence of a little woman, grey-faced, faded, instinct, despite her shadowiness, with some imperious urge that brought her, despite his blundering efforts at retreat, nearer and ever nearer to him. . . . What did she want with him? Alarmed yet angry, in his dream he turned at last, trying to pierce through the mists that swirled entanglingly about him . . . turned to face her, have it out once and for all. . . .

The effort was so strongly made that he awoke with a jerk, staring vaguely about him, wondering whether he was yet dreaming—and decided he must be, for there out upon the balcony, faint but distinct in the moonlight, was

the figure of the mysterious little woman, still before him! She stood bending over a magazine that lay upon the wicker table—a thin sad little shadow, pathetically and grotesquely garbed in an ultra-youthful frock of flowered stuff, frilled and girlish—the whole figure was wavering, indefinite as a wisp of cloud, yet it was there, clear against the dark background of the clump of trees beyond.

With a huge shock MacIntosh leaped up in bed, fully awake at last and mortally alarmed—and as he sat up the figure vanished, like a curl of smoke upon the wind, and the balcony was empty, silent, but for a leaf of the paper faintly stirring as if ghostly fingers still played with it. Getting out of bed, MacIntosh padded out upon the balcony—not without a shiver of apprehension—and examined the paper. It was, as with a curious cold foreboding he had known it would be, the old number of *Weldon's* that he had found the first time he sat on the balcony; and open at the page of the flowered frock.

It was a considerably scared young man that went soberly down the village next day and asked for accommodation at the "Fürstenhaus"—for after the night's experience he had taken a very definite dislike to the room with the balcony! But to his dismay he found it still impossible to obtain possession of his room. The *Engländerin* was still ill—and as for the other inns in the valley, it was the height of the season, there was not a room to be had in the place for love or money. Herr Sichel was grovellingly apologetic, but that was little help to MacIntosh, who turned away indecisively, biting his lip, annoyed, yet totally at a loss what to do.

As he turned away he was hailed by a little dark-bearded man, seated in a sunny corner of the porch—the village doctor, with whom he had had an occasional game of cards after supper at the "Fürstenhaus". A pleasant little fellow, Dr. Carl Raff, and the Englishman brightened up as he saw him.

"That you, MacIntosh? Come and have a beer with me—and tell me why you want to leave the 'Rosenhaus'."

Rather to his own astonishment, as he had not definitely realized his own need of a confidant until one was, as it were, thrust upon him, MacIntosh not only accepted the offer of a drink, but found himself within five minutes of sitting down, in full flood of unburdening his soul anent

the "Rosenhaus", his own growing dislike of it, and finally his amazing experience of the night before. Little Doctor Raff listened quietly, smoking a meerschaum as darkly coloured as his own close-cut beard, resting his chin upon a small nervy hand; at the end he nodded, without a trace of the scoffing laughter the Englishman had half nervously expected—enormously relieved, MacIntosh laughed awkwardly as he finished his story.

"You don't mind my telling you all this—it really sounds such awful rot! Yet it seems to have sort of cleared things up a bit, to talk about it—do you think it was all a dream, or am I developing hallucinations, or what?"

Doctor Raff shook his head.

"No," he said deliberately. "I don't think so. I think you actually saw—what you thought you saw. I think you are what they call an unconscious psychic—and that the figure you saw was there with a definite purpose. In sleep she has evidently been trying to get in touch with you for some time. . . ."

"The devil she has!" said MacIntosh, between a laugh and a shiver. "That explains the dreams—I've dreamt some woman was chasing me, trying to tell me something, almost ever since I came here . . . only in the dream I was frightened, and tried to get away."

"I think," said the doctor soberly, "that she is trying to tell you still! Are you plucky enough to *let* her do so, if I back you up?"

"Why, yes—if you think it's the right thing to do," said MacIntosh, a trifle bewildered. "But why should I . . . wouldn't it be the best thing to just leave the place—get away? Sounds funky, but honestly—I'm not keen on another night like the last. Ghosts aren't in my line!" The little German nodded in sympathy.

"I quite understand—you can, of course, go away if you will. Yet I feel if you will be good enough to try and let this poor restless little soul express—whatever she is trying to express—you may succeed, perhaps, in righting some wrong or correcting some injustice. You see, I believe in the possibility of the return of spirits greatly oppressed, and I cannot help thinking that there is some grave reason behind this persistent 'attack' upon you. It is, of course, partly due to your own gift of mediumship that 'senses' things—though I cannot deny that this season the 'Rosen-

haus' has not been popular with visitors here. For the last two months there have been strange stories whispered about it. . . ."

MacIntosh looked up, alert.

"Then it's known as haunted! I say, do tell me what you know about it?"

The doctor hesitated, then shook his head.

"No. I'd rather tell you later on—when we have solved the mystery. You see, anything I may tell you might colour the clearness of your own impressions, and that might spoil things—I'll tell you everything afterwards. Now, if you'll accept a shakedown for to-night in the very small house I share with my sister, just down the road, I propose that to-morrow night we go to the 'Rosenhaus'. And—we shall see what we may see. . . ."

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It was well after eleven o'clock the following night that the two friends stole softly down the dusty lane that ran past the "Rosenhaus". The tall narrow house, with its steep roof and frieze of carved woodwork beneath, was shuttered and silent, standing back among the tangled green of its garden, staring, as it were, with hooded eyes over the silvery waves of the cornfield, towards the silent mountains that etched themselves like a Japanese silhouette in black against the star-patterned violet of the sky.

Despite the fortification of a stiff dose of brandy, to say nothing of companionship, it was with a considerable secret sinking of the heart that MacIntosh ensconced himself beside the little doctor in the shadow of the hedge beneath his own window—the balcony above showed dark and empty, lit only by the errant moonbeams, lightening and darkening as the clouds drifted athwart the face of the moon. In silence they sat there waiting until the distant clang of the tiny *Kirchen Glocke* told the hour of midnight . . . and straight on its dying echo, came the sound of another bell! The distant tinkle, clear from the watching hills beyond, of a cowbell . . . and glancing up, MacIntosh drew in his breath sharply, shakily, for the balcony was no longer empty!

A small thing wavered there, faint as a cloud, yet distinct—a little grey-faced middle-aged woman in a girlish

flowered gown with a flaunting bow of red ribbon at the throat, stood at the wooden railing looking out towards the mountains, from whence came the sound of the cow-bell—even as the two friends stared, she vanished, and MacIntosh drew a breath of relief, but the doctor gripped his hand fiercely as he whispered.

“Keep steady—here she comes again! Now keep your head—and *follow!*”

Round the corner of the house she came, a mere shadow upon the shadow-filled dusk, flitting hurriedly, nervously, glancing backwards as she came as if alarmed, her pale hair and pale gown fluttering as she moved. . . . MacIntosh found his throat dry, found himself pressing back hard against the hedge, shivering, as this strange and terrifying visitation from another world passed them, bringing with it, it seemed, a draught of air cold as the tomb itself; yet he did not lack courage, and as she paused, hesitated, then flitted through the gap in the hedge beneath the linden trees into the cornfield, he scrambled to his feet and followed although his whole soul crept and quivered in terror within him.

Up along the hedge they followed her, up the dusty lane, their footsteps muffled in the deep white dust, before them the flickering little figure hurrying as if to a ghostly tryst. Sometimes they lost her, so faint and elusive was she against the warring light and shade, the moonlight and the shadows . . . but as fast as they lost track of her, she would appear again, far ahead, a pale wisp of a thing no more substantial than a drift of cigarette smoke in a darkened room.

Far and fast she led them, from the lane to a fieldpath, from the fieldpath to untrodden meadows deep in scented grasses—beyond the meadows to rough boggy country, straight towards the foot of the great wooded mountains that, fencelike, ring Pertisau and its valley round—both men were panting and weary when at last, following the pale thing that led them, they crossed a final strip of marshland, thick with reeds and bulrushes, and there before them rose the mountain-side, clothed in virgin forest, dark, impenetrable, a vast green wall rising steeply up to heaven. Then for a moment both halted to take breath. Far ahead of them the little shadow paused, a wavering opalescent thing, filmy yet distinct in her flowered gown, shining like a soap-bubble against the heavy darkness of the trees

beyond—as she paused she turned, as if to look back at the two men, thus facing them fully for the first time, and MacIntosh uttered a shrill cry of horror.

“Oh, my God! *It's not ribbon at all! . . .*”

As he spoke she vanished, as a bubble vanishes, in the blink of an eyelid—with a sudden reckless courage, despite his thumping heart, Raff plunged after her, and began to root about furiously in the dark tangle of undergrowth where she had disappeared, calling at the top of his voice to MacIntosh, who, all unnerved, still hung back shivering like a leaf.

“Come on—bring your flashlight, quickly! Keep a stiff upper lip to the end—she has told us what she wanted. Look here!”

His heart in his mouth, MacIntosh stared down at the parted bushes. There, clear in the narrow shaft of white light from his electric torch, lay the body of a woman, clutching a sheet of paper in one thin hand. A little middle-aged woman, clad in an ultra-girlish gown of flowered cotton stuff, flounced and short-sleeved . . . but where MacIntosh had thought to see a bow of crimson ribbon at the base of the lean little throat, shone out a ghastly blotch of red, where, through a cruel gash, life had bled away among the moss and flowers. And beside her lay a Tyrolean hunting knife, its steel rusted to brown. . . .

Reverently extracting the paper from between the limp fingers, the doctor glanced down the single scribbled sheet, and placing it carefully inside his wallet, nodded soberly.

“As I thought, MacIntosh—she came to right a wrong. Now young Emil Diesenkrantz can go free of the charge of her murder, since this note proves—poor little soul!—her suicide. . . .”

“And now,” said MacIntosh firmly, “now that it's all over—perhaps you'll tell me the whole story from the beginning. Who was she—how did she die—and how did the person called 'Emil' come to be mixed up in it?”

The two friends sat talking in the shadow of the wide porch of the “Fürstenhaus”. It was three days since the tragic discovery in the woods, and the life of the little community resuming its normal course; the poor little body

laid to rest beneath the kindly yews in the lakeside churchyard, a certain young farmer released from Pertisau jail, and the "Rosenhaus" likewise released—for so it proved, to the great relief of Frau Hellner—from the haunting of the pathetic little grey shadow that was once a living, loving woman.

At his friend's question Raff stared before him for a moment before he replied.

"I'll tell you now—the whole story," he said soberly. "It's a tragedy of the Indian summer of a woman's life. I knew her well. She was a Miss Lettice Onnaway—a gentle, shy little middle-aged governess who had never been out of England in her life until this summer, and she came here with two children to look after. Their parents were wealthy idle people, who did not like to be bothered with children, and they put them for the summer at the "Rosenhaus", with her in charge. Yes—they had your rooms, and I often used to see her sitting sewing on the balcony as I passed."

He paused for a moment, and went reflectively on.

"She was about forty-five or fifty, I suppose—the last sort of woman one would have pictured falling crazily in love with a boy, but I suppose it is impossible to say at what age a woman becomes absolutely cold to the lure of sex. And I suppose, too, that to a woman who has never known love it comes with a more terrific force than with women who are more accustomed to handling the emotions . . . anyway I am quite sure that before she came here little Miss Onnaway had not only never had an affair with a man, but not even dreamt of having one. Her very clothes showed it—she wore grey alpaca or dark blue linen, and Plimsoll shoes, and scraped her hair back from her face—mouse-coloured, dusty sort of hair, with a tendency to curl if she would have let it, but she wouldn't, any more than she would put powder on her nose. She wasn't altogether plain, you understand—just insignificant; a nobody; a frumpy little faded woman who did not care what she looked like . . . till all of a sudden I began to notice a change! She took to loosening her hair, doing it less tightly; cut down or left open the high collars of her dresses, shortened her skirts—then one day she went down to Jenback and bought some shoes with high heels, and powder and perfume, and a string of blue beads, and a

length of white cottony stuff, cheap but pretty enough, with sprigs of little coloured flowers all over it. She came up with it to my place, and my sister helped her cut it out from a pattern in *Weldon's Journal*. My sister made rather a friend of her, she seemed so lonely—that's how I know all these details. Then. . . ." he broke off and frowned a little, hesitating.

"Go on," said MacIntosh eagerly. "I want to hear the whole story."

"Well," said the doctor soberly. "Just about that time there started rumours in Pertisau. Whispering and murmurs about little Miss Onnaway and a certain local lad, Emil Diesenkrantz, a farmer's son, less than half her age. He was supposed to be the cause of her sudden outbreak into youthful ways and garments—things that went about as well with her pathetic forty-odd years and greying hair as a boy's blazer would go with my years and waist-measurement! This youth was her lover, they said—when she was supposed to take the children, her charges, out to play or walk, she would leave them all alone, and slip away . . . at first it seemed too silly for words, but then I began to get suspicious in my turn, for this boy Emil, a gay devil-may-care lad of barely twenty, suddenly began to flaunt all manner of presents! A silver engraved cigarette-case and lighter; an English stick, ties, handkerchiefs, a Bond Street scarf—and I began to put two and two together! Mind you, I might not have done so quite so quickly, but I was called in to doctor Emil's father at that time and saw the young man quite often. . . . I snubbed him once, when he was ostentatiously flourishing the cigarette-case to a group of his cronies at the "Fürstenhaus" bar, but it had no effect on him. He was a handsome lad, petted by all the girls, and inordinately vain—yet I am certain he never meant any real harm. He was merely a thoughtless foolish boy, playing with a fire he could in no wise comprehend.

"So it went on, a sordid pathetic liaison that could have but one end—yet it lasted a couple of months. Stimulated, on the boy's side, by gratified vanity at having made a conquest of an Englishwoman, who, like all of her race, governess or no, was reputed rich and was certainly bewilderingly generous—also, it may be that perhaps for a little he was waked to genuine responsiveness of her

obvious adoration for him; and on hers moved by who knows what strange tangle of fierce emotions, desperate yearning love and long-stifled passion—the pathetic eagerness of a sex-starved woman to clutch at the vanishing skirts of Romance before it is too late. She shut her eyes deliberately to the utter absurdity of any lasting association between her fading middle-age and his audacious youth . . . they were seen together daily in the woods, beside the lake, at all hours, but preferably at night. He would signal to her, from the woods beyond, with a cowbell, and she would slip down, go out through the gap in the hedge and up the road to meet him. . . .”

“Then,” said MacIntosh soberly, “it wasn’t a *real* cowbell that I heard—even that first night?”

“I don’t know, but I think not,” said the doctor. “You see, for a time you got, as it were, absolutely ‘into the current’ of what actually happened . . . but to go on. Well, it couldn’t last, of course. The dice were weighted against her—and after all, Emil was only a boy. Cruel, casual, light-hearted, and utterly ignorant of what he was playing with. After a few weeks the end came. A new girl arrived in the village. Hansi Leyden, a pretty pert chambermaid up in Pertisau for the season from one of the hotels in Innsbruck, and Emil instantly lost his head about her—she jeered at him for going about with a woman old enough to be his mother, and that was enough. He turned sullenly away from poor foolish little Lettice Onnaway—when she pleaded with him, aghast, distraught, he grew resentful, uncomfortably sensing, in his bovine way, that he had aroused something he did not understand and certainly did not want . . . and at that very moment, even while her castle in Spain fell in splinters about her ears, Nemesis descended upon her, as it always does in the end. One of her charges, the two children neglected for so long, fell from the balcony, and broke an arm in falling! It was not a severe injury, since fortunately the kid fell on a barrowload of cut clover put out to dry, and that broke its fall, but a wire had to be sent to the parents, who were travelling about near Salzburg, and of course, the poor little governess knew that now the whole thing must come out. Frau Hellner, with whom she had been at odds for weeks owing to her neglect of the children, as likewise for the ridicule and scandal she was bringing upon

the "Rosenhaus", now took possession of the two children entirely, informing Miss Onnaway coldly that she took full responsibility for her action, since she had for long seen that the *Engländerin* was not fit to have charge of children . . . it was, of course, the end, and so the little woman realized. She would be turned out neck and crop—refused a reference, for, like all casual parents, the Fitzgeralds would undoubtedly fly to the very extreme of resentment at any casualness being shown by other people. She was no longer young enough to try and train for a fresh job, and the market was already overstocked with competent college-trained young governesses . . . this had been the most marvellous job ever offered her, and she had flung it overboard through a mad passion for a boy of twenty, to whom she was merely a passing amusement. It must have been bitter, that realization. I remember meeting her once, and once only, after the day of the child's fall, and thinking how, all of a sudden, the brief illusion of youth had fled from that pinched little grey face, above the over-youthful sprigged cotton dress. She was loitering down towards the village, along the lane, picking idly at the dusty flowers in the hedgerows. . . .

"Have you seen Emil?" she asked me, and the piteous absurdity of the question half-irritated, half-roused me to pity. I told her 'no', I did not want to say that I had but just seen him, loitering down beside the hotel where Hansi Leyden was working, waiting for her to come out. She glanced at me, and half-smiled as if she guessed the reason for my brusqueness—nodded, and wandered away towards the village. I heard afterwards that she had met Emil walking with Hansi, and losing her head, had made a piteous and grotesque scene before them and—unfortunately for Emil, as it turned out—before several other villagers lounging in the Fürstenhaus porch. She begged Emil—or so I heard—to come with her for a walk, for the last time—the lad, foolishly, yet understandably, since Hansi was giggling at his side, highly amused, and his fellows within earshot grinning at his expense, lost his temper and swore at her roundly. Bade her go away, or it would be the worse for her—said that he was sick of being plagued, and that unless she left him alone he would not be responsible for his actions . . . all of which was remembered and brought up against him at the trial. . . ."

"There was a trial, then?" interrupted MacIntosh.

"Of course, there was. That night she disappeared, and Emil was arrested for the murder. That is two months ago—and ever since he has languished in gaol, awaiting trial, with the comfortable knowledge that he would probably get sentenced without a dissentient voice, since, curiously enough, since the little governess's disappearance, public sympathy, like the queer irrational thing it is, veered round in her favour, and Emil found himself up against an array of evidence that loomed very threateningly against his chances of acquittal. But now the discovery of her body, with the accompanying letter admitting suicide, obviously releases him at once, although I fancy he may find life in another village pleasanter, for a time, than in Pertisau."

They were silent a moment, while Tom MacIntosh's eyes roved over the exquisite scene of lake, mountain, forest, his nostrils snuffed the champagne-like air of the Tyrolean Alps—that heady wonderful air that had perhaps been responsible for the whole of the piteous tragedy of little Lettice Onnaway. For one brief space of real and vivid living, such as she had never known, she had thrown away all . . . and although she had banked her heart, her future, her very life on an illusion, who shall say that it had not been worth her while? At least for a few weeks she had known love . . . if only an illusionary love. MacIntosh spoke soberly, after a long pause.

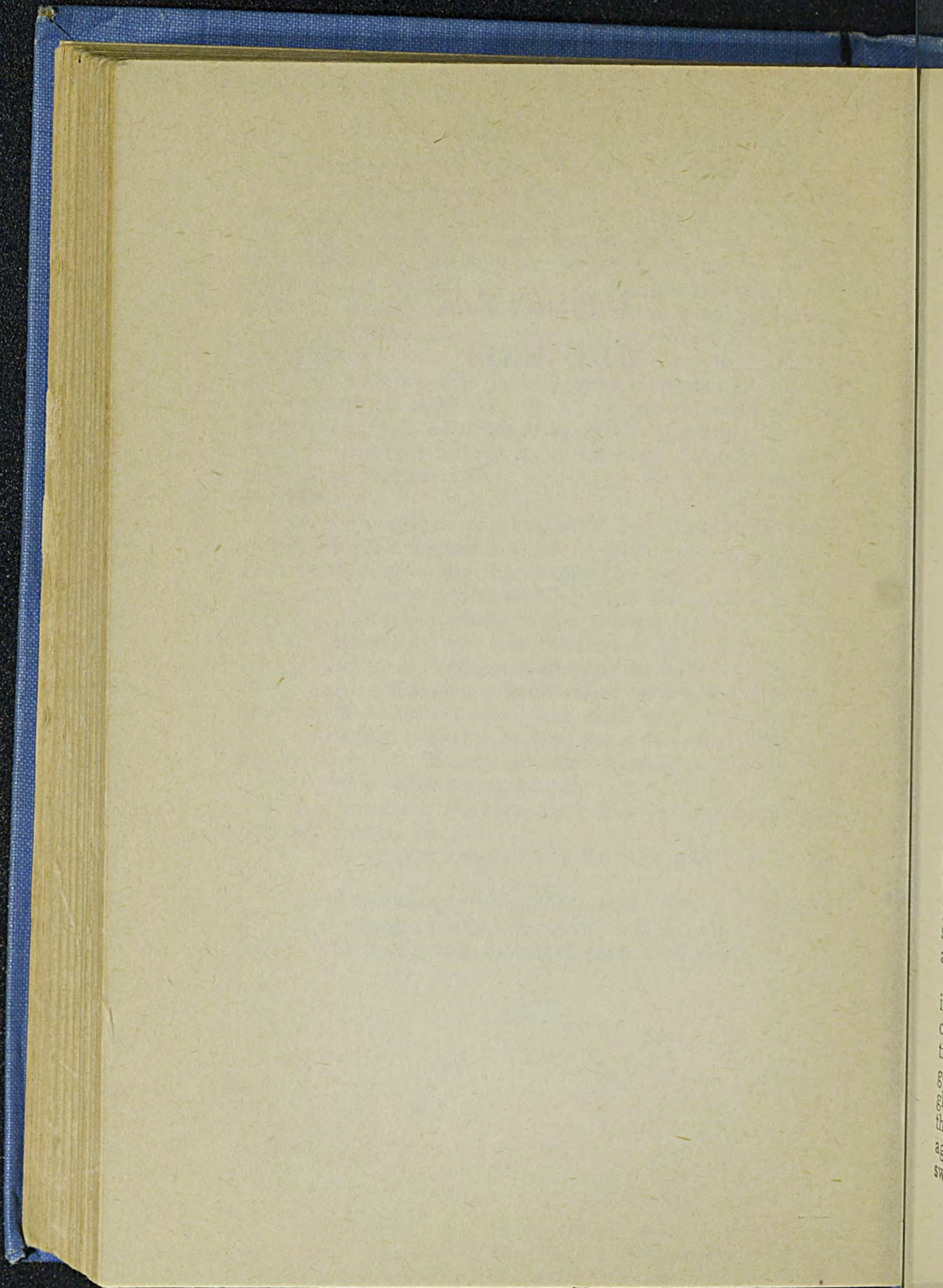
"Then you think she came back to save him, despite the way he treated her?"

The little doctor knocked out his pipe and rose to his feet.

"I don't know—anything, MacIntosh. But I do believe this—that a woman, when she loves, will forgive anything. And I think that love is indeed stronger than death. . . ."

The Priest's Tale

THE IKON



THE IKON

"YE-ES. They are very fine rubies. Certainly very fine."

Young Mr. Felstead, of Felstead & Garth, jewellers, Bury Street, St. James', lifted the ikon to the light to see even more clearly the magnificent stones, shot with crimson and scarlet, that glistened and blinked against the beaten gold of the background. Mrs. Kenworthy, ultra-wealthy wife of Walter Kenworthy (of Kenworthy's Kosy Koverings) newly installed in the Manor House, Bleck's Haugh, Surrey, nodded her crisply marcelled head in satisfaction, and even smiled, in sheer complacency, at the shy, brown-haired girl at her elbow. The girl smiled nervously back, fingering her notebook. Pretty little Miss Smith did not get many smiles; the position of secretary to Mrs. Kenworthy was not an enviable one.

"*That's* all right," the lady rejoined briskly. "I thought so when I bought it in Paris from that impoverished Princess woman—at least she said she was a Princess, but I doubt it. She looked like nothing on earth!"

Mrs. Kenworthy sniffed. It was typical of her mental attitude that a princess in shabby black, wearing an imitation fur that was not even good imitation and carrying a brown paper parcel beneath one thin arm, could not, if a princess at all, be by any possibility a princess worth considering. Mrs. Kenworthy measured life and people according to her only standard—money.

The slim young man with the black jeweller's glass held in one eye put the ikon down, and for a moment stood contemplating it in silence. It was a truly magnificent treasure of Old Russia; against a background of beaten gold a cross of solid jewelwork stood out, a mosaic of small, glittering, many-coloured precious stones, and on it hung the figure of the Saviour carved in ivory, yellowed with age. The head lolled low over one shoulder, the body swung piteously from the nailed palms, and along the fore-

head, on hands and feet, and from the wounded side, gleamed patches of shining, sinister crimson . . . great rubies, red as blood, set deep in the ivory flesh.

It was a perfect thing. The grim reflection struck Mr. Felstead that it seemed tragic that so perfect a thing should be in the possession of this vulgar little woman, over-rich, over-fed, over-dressed, who stood at his elbow gloating over it; gloating, not because it was beautiful and rare, not because she now had the right to keep and care for it, but merely because it was of value, and because she, Rachel Emmeline Kenworthy, had been able to stoop from the height of her triumphant wealth and buy it from an impoverished princess! The cruel triumph of the *parvenu* that is at last able to spit in the face of aristocracy showed in her smile as she looked down on the ikon, lying prone upon the opulent buhl table in her crowded drawing-room, and Mr. Felstead glanced overtly at Miss Smith, to meet her glance of quick, shy understanding . . . it was not the first time they had met, these two, since Mr. Felstead had had dealings with Mrs. Kenworthy before. He knew more or less how to cope with her, or thought he did, for with that type of vulgarian one never *quite* knew . . . he spoke with professional indifference, though his eyes kept wandering back to the lovely, glimmering thing upon the table as he did so.

"Er—yes, Mrs. Kenworthy. It is a fine piece, and the rubies, especially, as you say, magnificent. So large that it seems almost a pity to have wasted them in what one might term only a picture . . ."

Mrs. Kenworthy interrupted him with a sharp laugh of triumph.

"Ah! *Now* you've said it. That's what I want you to do!"

Young Mr. Felstead regarded her with pained surprise.

"I'm afraid I don't quite get your meaning, madam. I understood you wished us to try and dispose of the ikon for you—I can assure you you would realize very handsomely on it."

"Money is nothing to me!" Mrs. Kenworthy spoke arrogantly but incorrectly. She should have said, "Money is everything to me," since she quite sincerely considered it the only thing in the world. She went on, thoroughly enjoying being the centre of attention—for now,

not only Mr. Felstead, but that silly little Smith girl was staring at her in frank amazement.

"I don't want to sell it. I want you to dig out those rubies—right now—and reset them for me to wear."

A faint gasp broke the silence. Miss Smith, frightened at her own temerity, clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes round. Mr. Felstead was far too well bred to gasp, but his eyes were almost as round as Miss Smith's, under their elevated eyebrows.

"But, madam!" he protested.

Mrs. Kenworthy brusquely cut him short.

"Now, don't argue with me, please. They're worth setting aren't they?"

"Oh, certainly!" hastily assented the young man. "They are, as I have said, exceptionally fine . . . but it somehow seems a pity to spoil the ikon, don't you think?"

His glance lingered over the gorgeous fragment of a bygone age, and there was something more than mere professional interest in it. But Mrs. Kenworthy, sensing a hint of criticism, even (possibly) of disapproval, in the smooth voice of the good-looking young man from Felstead & Garth's, frowned, and her voice took on an edge that Grace Smith knew only too well.

"That's *my* business!" she remarked truculently. "If I buy a thing I've a right to spoil if it I want—anyway I can always have red paste put in afterwards, when the rubies are out. But really I only bought it for the sake of the rubies. I've got all but the finest collection of them in the country, as you ought to know, considering I bought most of 'em from you! Unless you cheated me, which is quite possible. . . ."

This was Mrs. Kenworthy's idea of humour. Young Mr. Felstead bowed in silence, but his London pallor was the warmer for a sudden flash of angry colour, and on the other side of the table Miss Smith lowered her eyes, conscious of a vivid hate of her employer even stronger than her usual very definite dislike. But Mrs. Kenworthy, unconscious—or perhaps blandly oblivious—of her dependant's opinion of her and her doings, went on serenely towards the finish of her sentence.

"I'm determined to beat the Countess of Dair's collection, and I have very nearly. Stone for stone I can beat hers,

only she's got those ear-rings made out of some Indian idol's eyes that all the papers rave over. . . ."

"The Eyes of Lahvani," murmured Mr. Felstead almost automatically, but Mrs. Kenworthy did not pause to listen.

". . . And if I can have something really pictorial made out of these, I can get my publicity-man to work up a story about them that will put the Dair woman's ear-rings entirely in the shade."

"And for that," queried Mr. Felstead with a faintly sardonic intonation, "you think it worth while to spoil the ikon?"

This time the inflexion of criticism was too marked for even so obtuse a person as Mr. Kenworthy to miss—after all Mr. Felstead was only thirty-two, and had not, as yet, developed the perfect automatonism that is so necessary to a successful salesman. The Lady of the Manor glared, and Miss Smith caught her breath at the glint of anger in the small black eyes, sunk between two highly rouged cheeks and bordered with badly done rings of mascara . . . despite tuition from half a dozen beauty specialists, Rachel Kenworthy, born in a "kosher" butcher's shop in Hoxton, would never learn to use make-up really successfully.

"Young man," she snapped, "I didn't get you down here to ask your opinion on what I was going to do. I asked you for two things. One was to value those stones, and the second was to dig 'em out for me, here and now!"

Mr. Felstead raised his brows and bit his lips sharply. Times were bad, and he and his partner could not afford to lose so good a customer as the Kenworthy—but, ye gods, how he would have liked to throw the ikon in her fat, horrible face! Only it would have been sheer insult to the lovely thing to bring it so close to her—soulless, greedy, utterly hateful . . . Miss Smith's imploring glance pulled him sharply together, and he bowed, acquiescent. It was as madam wished, of course. He could do it in a matter of minutes . . . accustomed to Mrs. Kenworthy's vagaries, he had taken the precaution of bringing a small case of jeweller's tools down to the Manor in his pocket, and now extracting a small "scorper" from the litter of tiny, shining implements within, he got to work on the gorgeous thing that lay helpless, as it were, under his vandal hands. It took time and care, for many years had passed since the glowing stones were set in their bed of yellowed ivory, yet

one by one they yielded to his practised touch, until at last a group of glorious crimson fragments lay in the millionairess's grasp, and in the ikon a series of dark holes lay staring up at the ceiling like sightless eyes. The man and the girl were silent, but Mrs. Kenworthy chortled with glee, gloating over her handful of beauty, as she moved towards the door.

"I must just see how they match my others," she said over one shoulder. "Then you can take them back to London, and send me some designs for setting them at once. I want 'em as soon as possible."

Her hand was on the latch, when Miss Smith's timid little voice arrested her.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Kenworthy, but what do you want done with the ikon?"

Mrs. Kenworthy laughed, her good humour restored by the feel of the jewels in her grasp.

"I don't want the thing!" she asserted. Then the instinctive cupidity of the East End Jewess asserted itself, and she hastily qualified her first remark. "That is, I don't want it just now. You can take it and hang in up in your room for the moment, I mean. You're fond of churchy things, and so on, aren't you?"

The jibe, again, was typical of the woman. As the door closed behind her Miss Smith, her eyes full of tears, looked up into the sympathetic face of young Mr. Felstead. The spark of romance, already lit between them, flamed at that moment into a lasting fire, and in his heart of hearts, Mr. Felstead knew it; but after the fashion of the Briton, he maintained a perfectly unmoved countenance as he rolled up his little case of professional tools and tucked them into his breast-pocket. But as he did so he remarked with vicious emphasis that he knew nobody he disliked worse than Mrs. Kenworthy, and that he had always thought, and was now entirely sure, that Miss Smith was far too good for her. He wondered whether, perhaps, next time Miss Smith came up to town on an errand, lunch . . . ?

The rubies certainly made a magnificent brooch. Combined with diamonds in an oblong square, and worn conspicuously on the shoulder of a dead white satin gown

trimmed with sable, together with a ruby and diamond pendant, ear-rings and at least five diamond bracelets, Mrs. Kenworthy made a notable entrance into her box at the opera on the opening night, and had the satisfaction of reading in the papers next morning that "Mrs. Kenworthy looked regal in white and sables wearing some of her famous rubies, and notably her new purchase, a magnificent corsage ornament made from rubies found in an old Russian ikon. . . ."

Mrs. Kenworthy enjoyed the phrase "corsage ornament", although she had an uneasy feeling that it was slightly out of date. But it sounded, somehow, much larger and more imposing than the mere word "brooch", which that fool Brinton, her publicity-man, had suggested using. After the performance she went on to supper at the fashionable night-club of the moment, where she had the further exquisite pleasure of being nodded to in the most friendly way by at least three women of title, one of them a Viscountess. The latter crowned her compliment by coming up and shaking hands and leaning over the Kenworthy's table to talk, thus putting poor little Kenworthy, Mrs. Kenworthy's very-much-managed husband, to the exquisite embarrassment of having to jump up and remain standing, uneasily shifting from one foot to the other, until she chose to go . . . but before she went she had admired The Brooch, and compared it favourably with Lady Dair's, so Rachel Kenworthy's cup of satisfaction was full. So full that she even consented to pay a visit next day to the Viscountess's dress shop, though she knew, shrewdly enough, it meant buying a second-class frock at a super-first-class price. She firmly drove away the still, small voice that murmured that *that*, of course, was the only reason that the Viscountess had ever troubled to come up and talk to her, and sat there, eating the most expensive food on the menu, and drinking champagne, though she privately hated it, surveying the crowd through the diamond-rimmed quizzing-glass that Madame Lisette had told her was far smarter than a lorgnette, and feeling for the moment entirely content.

So content that she condescended for once to listen to poor little Kenworthy's humble plea for something more simple to eat than that set before them . . . he detested caviare, thought oysters tasted like wet mackintosh, and

did not know how to dismember a "bird" without shooting it off his plate into some neighbouring lap or other. All right. In the height of her content she was gracious. He *might* have a haddock, if he liked . . . there was a party of people over there eating haddock, now she came to look at them. Funny thing that was! People in a posh place like this, eating haddock! But if they did, there was obviously no reason why Alfred shouldn't eat it too. But he was going to finish his champagne, whether he liked it or not. She wasn't going to leave a good half-bottle for the waiter to drink. . . .

It was, in fine, a successful evening, and therefore it was the more surprising when Mrs. Kenworthy awoke next morning with a headache. A really thunderous headache—and as she was not as a rule given to headaches, possessing the constitution of a horse, Mrs. Kenworthy sat up in bed, considerably alarmed, and reached for her hand-glass. Certainly she did not *look* ill, she discovered—though the sight, above her crumpled pink satin pyjamas, of her round, red face and untidy hair, that refused to keep the "golden glint" the hairdresser had assured her would remain after his patent henna application, always irritated or depressed her, upon greeting it in the morning. Why, she wondered morosely, rolling out of her elaborately gilt and painted Italian bed and padding to the dressing-table to collect some aspirin, should that stupid little thing, Grace Smith, possess a slim figure and a perfect skin, and hair that curled as naturally as a lamb's in spring, when she, Rachel Kenworthy, needed them so much more?

Grumpily she took the aspirin and crawled back to bed, giving orders that she was not to be disturbed—an order, incidentally, that rejoiced the household to an extent that she would have found distinctly unflattering—and refusing the tea that an agitated maid brought her, tried to sleep. But sleep would not come. Instead, her headache grew definitely worse. Her head throbbed and burned, as if a hot bandage were tied round the base of the skull, and this band prickled and ached and burned, refusing to be quietened by any means whatever. Dazed, utterly unused to pain, in desperation she took more aspirin, then tried Faivre cachets, then a nerve-sedative, and when all failed and the pain in her head grew steadily worse instead of better, sent a message instructing her secretary to go up to

London to see her doctor . . . Sir Sydney Pawling of Harley Street, *the* physician of the moment, of course.

Miss Smith's heart rejoiced with a graceless fervour at the order, and she positively sang as she put on her hat; a cheap blue felt as nondescript as her suit, yet its frumpishness merely served to render more pronounced her youthful prettiness, as Mr. Felstead subsequently informed her, as they sat together over lunch in the friendly shelter of the "Florence". Miss Smith blushed and laughed, but reverted again to the subject of her employer.

"You know, she really *did* look too awful, Mr. Felstead. . . ."

"My first name's Tom," said Mr. Felstead firmly, "and I propose you use it—you don't need to tell me yours. Dreadful, does she look, eh? Couldn't look worse than she looks as a habit, anyway!"

"Don't be unkind," murmured Miss Smith, turning the tiny box of capsules—hot from the plump and perspiring hands of Sir Sydney Pawling himself—that were warranted to relieve her employer of her mysteriously born neuralgia. "She truly *did* look as if she was in terrible pain."

"Serve her right," said young Mr. Felstead ruthlessly. "And God bless the headache, since it gave you a little extra off-time! And God knows you needed it. When can you get up again, do you think?"

Miss Smith's only reply was another blush, but it seemed eminently satisfactory. Her *vis-à-vis* escorted her to the station to catch her train, and it was noticeable that Miss Smith retained her blush for quite a long time after the 3.45 had pulled out of the station on its way to Bleck's Haugh.

But after all the new cachets proved unnecessary, for by the time Miss Smith presented them to her employer, the headache had departed as suddenly and mysteriously as it had begun, and Mrs. Kenworthy was in a thoroughly bad temper. She had sent her secretary "careering about London", as she termed it, and wasting her time for nothing—Miss Smith's dinner was as unpleasant as her lunch had been pleasant, and it was as well that she had the memory of the said lunch to sustain her through it. However, thought the girl as she went thankfully to bed at last, it was all in the day's work. . . .

The district was a gay one, and despite her personal

unpopularity, Mrs. Kenworthy had many invitations. Society, in these lean days, could not afford to ignore anybody so colossally wealthy—but it was some time before the Lady of the Manor wore the rubies again. She had plenty of other jewels—as she was wont to aver before those women who had none in particular—and the ruby brooch reposed quietly in its sumptuous crimson leather case for several weeks before it was again requested to face the light. It was at a large dinner-party in the neighbourhood of Bleck's Haugh that the owner of the Manor House sported again the "crimson-studded badge of theft"—as young Mr. Felstead, rising to unwonted heights of poesy, had once described the brooch to Miss Smith—and it was the presence of the Viscountess and several even more highly titled ladies that induced the sporting of it. To meet these women of the aristocratic world she so longed to storm, to meet them and beat them on their own ground, was the desire nearest to the millionairess's heart; therefore all the warpaint went on, and blazing like a chandelier she departed in the Rolls-Royce, with her depressed little husband at her side, and every hair on her ginger-coloured head waved until it fairly bristled with perfection . . . it was very late when she returned, and she was in no good temper when she did.

Her harassed maid informed Grace Smith at nine o'clock next morning, as the latter was descending the stairs, notebook in hand, that "Madam" was "in no end of a stew. Come home feelin' like death, she said . . . some sort of pain come on after dinner, and she had to leave . . . tearing mad she was!" It was with considerable trepidation that Miss Smith entered her employer's bedroom—for Mrs. Kenworthy never arose till midday—and stared, amazed, for the Kenworthy's fat little hands were swathed in bandages. Seeing the wonder in the girl's eyes, the woman in the bed snapped at her like an exasperated cat.

"Don't stand staring like a damned fool! Say something, can't you?"

Miss Smith bit her lip.

"I—don't know what to say," she murmured. "It's all so sudden . . . I only just heard from Minnie that you were ill at all."

"I should say I *am* ill!" said Mrs. Kenworthy furiously.

She thrust out a plump leg clad in a pink satin trouser

from beneath the bedclothes, and lo, the foot attached to the leg was swathed in bandages likewise! A most odd sensation seized Miss Smith as she looked; a curious chill as of unaccountable fear seemed to brush her like a passing wind, linger and be gone, as Mrs. Kenworthy went on, her voice high and aggrieved.

"Rheumatism it must be, I s'pose . . . though why on earth I can't make out. Never had a twinge in me life, as far as I can remember, though Kenworthy's a martyr to it . . ." she checked herself hastily, remembering that only common women alluded to their husbands by their surnames. But in moments of stress Hoxton was apt to take command of the lady in more senses than one. She waved a bundled hand towards the window, and continued.

"Must have sat in some draught, or maybe the beds in that damn' hotel we stayed in in Scotland was damp. That's it! Must be. But *why* it should stick only in me hands and feet—like steel darts going through 'em, it is. . . ."

She discontentedly surveyed her plump little person, and again it seemed to Grace Smith that that little wind of fear circled and sighed about her, making her voice sound oddly breathless as she replied.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Kenworthy. Shall I get Sir Sydney on the telephone for you?"

Sir Sydney, on the 'phone, was mellifluous and comforting. No! He did not think it at *all* necessary to come down to see Mrs. Kenworthy. A little rubbing with such and such an ointment would doubtless relieve the pain; if she could send her secretary up by the next train to town he would see that she got exactly the right thing . . . so many people, these damp days, were suffering in *precisely* the same way! *Good morning!*

So another half-hour saw Miss Smith travelling jubilantly to lunch with her young man once more—for although they would not have phrased the relationship quite so crudely, such, indeed, was now young Mr. Felstead's established position. Yet beneath and beyond all her jubilation lay a curious substratum of quite another feeling . . . and after lunch was over and the coffee-stage was reached, Miss Smith, albeit shyly and hesitatingly, began to try and explain this feeling to the young man sitting opposite to her. But it was not easy to begin.

"You won't laugh at me if I tell you a funny idea of mine?" she began tentatively.

Young Mr. Felstead pressed her slim, ringless hand despite the watching waiter, and shook his smoothly brushed head.

"Not on your life!" he assured her. "Nothing *you* could say would make me laugh, especially when you ask me not to . . ." but although he did not actually laugh, he raised a pair of most incredulous eyebrows when Miss Smith unfolded her idea. She faltered, bit her lip and stopped, and with a quick glance round at the inquisitive waiter—but he was six tables away this time—Mr. Felstead put both hands over hers and held them quite openly and shamelessly.

"Darling," he breathed. "Yes, I *shall* call you that if I want! Don't feel hurt . . . but upon my soul, you know, you mustn't let your imagination run away with you! Fancying things like that. . . ."

"But," whispered Miss Smith obstinately. "It *does* seem funny, doesn't it—somehow? First the pain round the head, just where *It* must have pressed and hurt so dreadfully . . . and now. . . ."

Mr. Felstead stopped her by the quick and efficient device of laying a swift finger across her lips.

"You sweet little soul!" he declared fondly. "I simply won't have you think about this sort of thing any more, do you hear? It's simply coincidence, and coincidence can do all sorts of rummy things. Even make two people who never met till three months ago fall in love with each other. . . ."

With the rest of the conversation we are not concerned. But it must be related with regret that although ultimately the rheumatic pains departed as mysteriously as they had arrived, from the limbs of Mrs. Kenworthy, the ointment prescribed by Sir Sydney had nothing to do with their departure, although it was rubbed in by the patient hands of little Miss Smith until those hands were positively sore.

Life settled down again and for several weeks all went well. The rubies reposed quietly in their safe, along with all the other lovely, sparkling stones, for which, it seemed sometimes to Grace Smith, Mrs. Kenworthy had sold her soul—and most devoutly the little secretary hoped it might be long ere they were taken out again. Each night when

she went to bed she said her prayers before the gleaming golden ikon—for it was true as Mrs. Kenworthy had said, her little secretary was “churchy” to the core—and the dark holes in the lovely thing yawned piteously wide and empty; how she wished that she had enough money to restore, if not the actual rubies, at least some other worthy stones, to those gaping wounds in the gold and ivory! She wondered sometimes, furtively watching her employer as she bustled through her days, serenely sure of herself, complacent, unimaginative, how she *could* forget so easily what she had done—robbed, as it were, the Lord of the World of the jewels that were rightly His? It was fortunate for her job that thought is silent—although to be sure, in her heart of hearts little Miss Smith knew, with a glow of content, that the retention of a job, any job now, was no longer of primary importance to her. In a few months’ time young Mr. Felstead would be made a full partner . . . and then, then came the evening of the Hunt Ball, and the swift climax towards which all these events had been slowly moving.

The Countess of Dair was to be there, and the height of Mrs. Kenworthy’s ambition about to be realized. She would meet Lady Dair face to face, challenge her jewels ruby to ruby—and unless her judgment was hopelessly at fault, beat her finally and hopelessly. Force the Press, Society, the public to admit that her rubies were incomparably finer than the Dair collection, up to now the most wonderful collection in England! In a fever of anticipation she ordered a wonderful new gown, glowing ruby velvet to match the jewels, and a brand new cloak of ermine lined with crimson; had her hair freshly tinted, her nails enamelled scarlet, slept for three nights beforehand with her face enclosed in a mask of honey and crushed almonds, and altogether, in her excitement and anxiety, drove her entire household, including the long-suffering Grace, all but mad with nervous exasperation. It took the combined efforts of Minnie, Grace and Mr. Kenworthy to complete the lady’s toilet on the great night, and as at last the door of the Rolls crashed to and the huge, unwieldy machine lumbered off down the drive into the dour November night, Miss Smith turned to Minnie, an unspoken question in her eyes. To her surprise the maid answered it.

“I wonder, too,” she said grimly. “ ’S funny, miss—

don't think she's tumbled to it yet. But between you and me, it *is* funny, ain't it, how every time she wears those rubies *something* happens to her? Wonder what it'll be this time? Unlucky *I* call 'em . . . dug out of a religious picture they was, wasn't they? Serve her right!"

Minnie went dourly upstairs, and collecting her things together from her desk, Miss Smith went thoughtfully upstairs to her bedroom. Her room was a mere attic, since Mrs. Kenworthy did not see the sense of wasting good rooms on employees, but it overlooked the drive and the gardens, and many a peaceful evening had Grace Smith spent sitting writing on the window-sill, her pad upon her knee, flavouring, as it were, her letters with an occasional appreciative glance over the lovely scene spread so far below her.

It was a cold November night. The sky was high and violet-blue, studded with steel-pointed stars, but far below the country lay swathed in a light ground-mist, so that when she looked down, it was as if she looked upon a swinging, drifting ocean of pale, silvery cloud, through which from time to time the dark mountain-top of a group of trees thrust upwards, only to be instantly obscured again by a fresh wave of mist, stealthily washing over it as the sea washes over and obscures a hump of rock. She took out a closely written letter headed "Bury Street", and sat holding it closely in her hand, smiling a little from sheer happiness, before beginning her answer. Her heart was very full—at the moment too full to write, as she sat staring down at the sea of mist curling and rippling below her, and up to the smooth, dark blue of the serene sky above. Oh, she was lucky! The luckiest of girls, to be writing to say the final "yes"—the "yes" that had lain so long unspoken between them, yet so sweetly known it would in the long run be spoken—how much luckier was she than this poor, sour little rich woman she served. How much luckier she was to be young, strong, happy, to have dreams and ideals and imagination, than to be like that; a creature mentally and spiritually pig-like, grown gross and brutal with the fatness of rich living and spending . . . vaguely she wondered how she was getting on, sighed and smiled, as she glanced at her new wrist-watch—a particularly smart specimen of Felstead & Garth's newest and smartest little platinum articles on a narrow, woven strap. Ten o'clock! Dinner would be over, more or less—they had been invited

to dine at the Penderels to meet Lady Dair, and to go on to the Ball afterwards—and the triumph, if it was to be won at all, well and truly won by this time. The jewels compared—Mrs. Kenworthy would see to that—the superiority of her own acknowledged, and the crown of laurels securely placed upon the head of the victor . . . and for this, the poor, vulgar, soulless little brute had ruined a glorious thing that could never be replaced! Taken the jewels of that Holy Thing to deck her horrible fat body. . . .

A sound came up from below, and Miss Smith, startled, craned forward to look down. Her room was above the front door, and although the mist still swung and shifted in a thick sheet below her, like a lilac tent stretched over garden and drive, lights showed dimly through it; a wide blotch, the lights of the hastily opened front door, and two blots, like eyes, the twin headlamps of the Rolls . . . and with the lights came voices, faint, but hurried.

“Come on there—carefully! Don’t hurt her. . . .”

Miss Smith sprang from her perch and rushed down the stairs like an arrow. There, just being carried into the hall, prone upon a stretcher, covered with her costly ermine cloak as with a shroud, Mrs. Kenworthy lay before her . . . in a dream Grace Smith heard the twittering, agitated voice of the poor little husband at her side, as the chauffeur and the butler bore their silent burden towards the drawing-room.

“Rheumatism again . . . must be! Just got dinner over . . . Lady Dair most kind, admiring rubies, far finer than hers . . . and suddenly, out of the blue, this! She just fell over, curled up shrieking in the most frightful pain. . . .”

“I know!” said Miss Smith sombrely. “With a pain in her side . . .” she broke off, and silently followed the stretcher-bearers into the drawing-room.

It was impossible for hands unused to ambulance work to carry the stretcher up the tortuously winding stairs of the old Manor House, so Mrs. Kenworthy was tenderly laid upon the great couch in the drawing-room—that gracious room, so piteously over-furnished, whose windows overlooked the long stretch of lawn that swept away towards a bank of rhododendron, laurel, laurustinus, now looming dimly through the glimmering mist like the humped out-

line of a distant land seen through a sea-fog. In the flurry of the Kenworthys' departure the butler had forgotten to draw the curtains, and the thick yellow satin folds were still drawn back, hanging straight each side of the wide french windows. Outside, the lilac mist moved like smoke, swinging and drifting and twirling in swathes of silver and blue, mauve and grey, shadowing everything in a curious, unreal glamour; the moon, shining dimly through the haze, showed the lawn gleaming wetly, thick with dew that glimmered like hoar frost, or like the surface of a strange sea that washed silently at their feet. Oddly unreal the whole thing seemed to be to Grace Smith; the suffering form upon the stretcher, the whispering of frightened servants, poor little Kenworthy almost weeping at her elbow, and outside, silence, the night, and the wreathing mist that pressed up against the windowpane as if peering inside the long, shadowed room . . . pulling herself together with a jerk, she spoke kindly to the trembling little man.

"Don't worry, Mr. Kenworthy! Go and ring up Sir Sydney and tell him Mrs. Kenworthy has had another rheumatic attack, and ask his advice. And you . . ." she turned to the shivering servants clustering all together by the door, "you can go to bed. I will stay here with Mrs. Kenworthy to-night, since she obviously can't be moved, and to-morrow we will make permanent arrangements."

Even as she spoke, she knew she did not want to spend the night companioning that white-faced, suffering thing upon the couch, yet something beyond and above herself seemed to enforce it. It was as if she, and only she, could cope with the situation; could do something that must be done, or, perhaps, say something that must be said. It was a most curious and uncanny feeling, yet irresistibly strong, and when the door closed behind the last retreating figure, and the drawing-room, lit only by the amber-shaded reading lamp at the head of the divan, lay wrapped in silence and shadows, without a moment's hesitation, as if compelled by something entirely outside herself, Grace Smith moved to the foot of the sofa, and spoke, at first falteringly, then with gathering assurance.

"Mrs. Kenworthy!" She paused, but the silent figure made no movement, only lay and stared at her, and gathering up her courage, she went on, speaking steadily and

quietly into the stillness. "I felt—queer—when you had those rubies dug out of the ikon, but it wasn't my business to say anything. But I had a feeling then that it wasn't right—that it wouldn't be lucky . . . and now I know I was right." She moistened her lips. "I know you will laugh at me, but do think back a minute. Every time you've worn those rubies you have had an attack of mysterious pain. . . ." her voice fell to an awestricken whisper, "and think—oh, *think* a minute! *Where* have you had those pains? First round your head—where a Crown might have been worn. Then in hands and feet—and to-night in the side, like a knife-thrust . . . or . . . oh, *think*, Mrs. Kenworthy! Like a—a spear. . . ."

The suffused eyes glared into hers, the thick lips moved and set themselves in a thin line of obstinacy, the head moved slowly back and forth upon the satin pillow in stubborn dissent; she would not listen! Wringing her hands, the girl tried again.

"Oh, *can't* you see? I guessed it . . . even Minnie feels something of the truth now! Can't you, *won't* you give them up, let them be reset once more? Let them go back where they belong, and everything will be all right. . . ."

She paused, helpless. She had said it. And now? With a colossal effort the figure on the bed spoke, clutching in its feverish energy at the ermine covering with two small over-jewelled hands. The voice came in a cracked whisper, like the voice of someone half-dead of *thirst* . . . so *that* had come too! The *thirst*. . . . "*I thirst! Give me to drink. . . .*"

"Water—give me some water!"

Quivering in every limb, the girl supported the staring head while the dried lips drank, then let it sink back again. From the pillow Rachel Kenworthy looked up at her secretary, her swollen lips curled in a derisive grin, the racking pain in her side for the moment forgotten.

"Fool!" The word was whispered but venomous. "Think I'd give your young man the chance of taking 'em and replacing 'em with bits of glass?"

Well as she knew the mean suspiciousness of her employer's mind, the girl drew back, shocked and wincing, as the wheezing voice rambled on.

"Don't know what you're hinting at about 'think' and 'beware', and so on, unless you've got the cracked idea

that Christ is afflicting me with His pains because I got those rubies out of a picture of Him!" She laughed hoarsely and writhed upon the couch. "If you are, you're mad—and even if you weren't, do you think I'd be scared or persuaded into doing what I don't want to do, by anything in this world—or the next? No, no, my good girl. I've beaten Lady Dair—she told me to-night I had! Her stones can't hold a candle to these . . . if my immortal soul hung on replacing the rubies in the ikon, I wouldn't do it now. . . ."

The voice died away, and shuddering, Grace Smith stood staring down upon the figure on the couch, now silent once more, but still stubborn, bitter, unrepentant. There had been a note of terror behind the scoffing voice despite its hardihood, but not even terror could kill that brutal greed . . . with a curious sense of weakness, the girl shrank back against the great Chinese screen that had been drawn about the end of the couch, and stood, her hands to her mouth, wondering, quaking. What to do now? She had shot her bolt; said what that strange mysterious force had impelled her to say, and now she felt oddly emptied; weak, helpless as a child—with some value idea of breathing the fresh air she went towards the french windows, and at the same moment Rachel Kenworthy turned her suffering head slowly upon the pillows and looked in the same direction.

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The funeral of the wealthy Mrs. Kenworthy was well attended and the flowers impressive enough to have satisfied even her vain heart, as was likewise the company. Even the Countess of Dair sent condolences to the forlorn widower, wandering blank and dazed about the empty Manor House—unable as yet to appreciate the greatness of his relief at being free at last from the grim dominance that had ruled him so long, and clinging with a pathetic, childlike persistency to little Grace Smith. Young Mr. Felstead, taking possession of his betrothed in a way that both fluttered and impressed her, so new it was and so delicious, took up his abode, *pro tem.* at the Manor House, since the girl would not leave it until, as she put it, her job was properly tied up and put on the shelf. . . .

So it came to pass that it was not until the funeral was well over, the guests departed, and the little master of the

great house, placing a shy hand upon the girl's shoulder, had thanked her in a shaking voice for all that she had done, that young Mr. Felstead had a chance of getting his legitimate curiosity satisfied. Sitting beside the fire the night after the funeral, fortified by a very excellent dinner, some more than excellent port, and a big cigar, he had opened the discussion . . . but found curiously little, apparently, to discuss. All Kenworthy knew, he already knew himself, although the little man was not loth to repeat the story . . . how, in answer to two piercing shrieks from the drawing-room he had rushed in from the telephone, to find his wife dead, and Grace Smith holding on to the curtains and staring out into the mist-filled garden, white and startled, her eyes bulging. Speechless, unable to say a word. . . .

"Except," said little Kenworthy, knocking out the dottle of the pipe he felt himself at last at liberty to use, "you whispered something like, 'it's *Him*, it's *Him*', over and over again. But I couldn't see no 'him' at all, nor could nobody else. Nor I can't see why you should 'a been so scared if one of the gardeners *was* crossing the lawn a bit late. . . ."

He laid a wistful hand upon her knee.

"You been a good girl to my poor Rachel, though she wasn't easy to live with, as I ought to know. You tried to stop her diggin' out those rubies . . . *I* didn't like it, I'll say!" He glanced apologetically towards young Felstead. "But there, Rachel was always one to have her way. But I wouldn't a' had 'em touched if I'd 'a had *my* way. Anyway, kid, I'll have 'em put back and give you the ikon for a wedding present. You'll know how to treat it—the way poor Rachel never did."

He shambled slowly out of the room, a pathetic figure. As the door closed behind him young Felstead slipped a tender arm about the slim shoulders of his betrothed, crouched on a cushion at his feet in the firelight, and dropped a kiss upon her curly hair.

"Darling—what does the funny old buffer mean? And won't you tell me what you really *did* see? A figure in the mist?"

Grace nodded, her hands clasped under her chin.

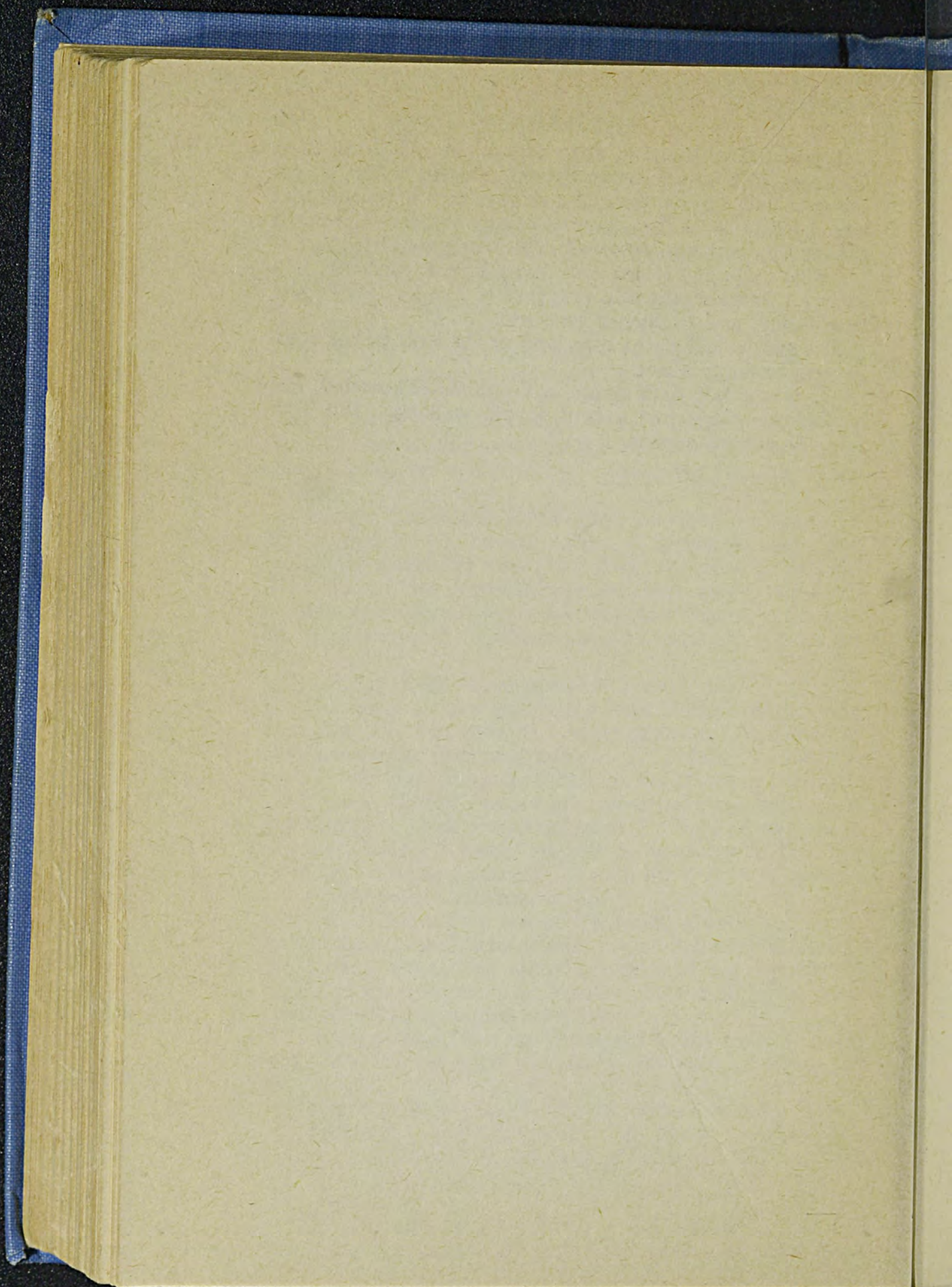
"Just that," she whispered. "A figure . . . in the mist. . . . No wonder she died of heart failure!"

A coal fell with a soft, crisp sound. A red flame filled the room, and for a moment the girl shivered suddenly; yet her eyes held awe—awe, and a strange rapt happiness that would never leave them now. Faintly impressed, against his robustly common-sense will, the young man tried again.

“But, darling! It can only have been a gardener, you know? Probably the mist exaggerated him . . . made him look funny, and frightened you both. . . .”

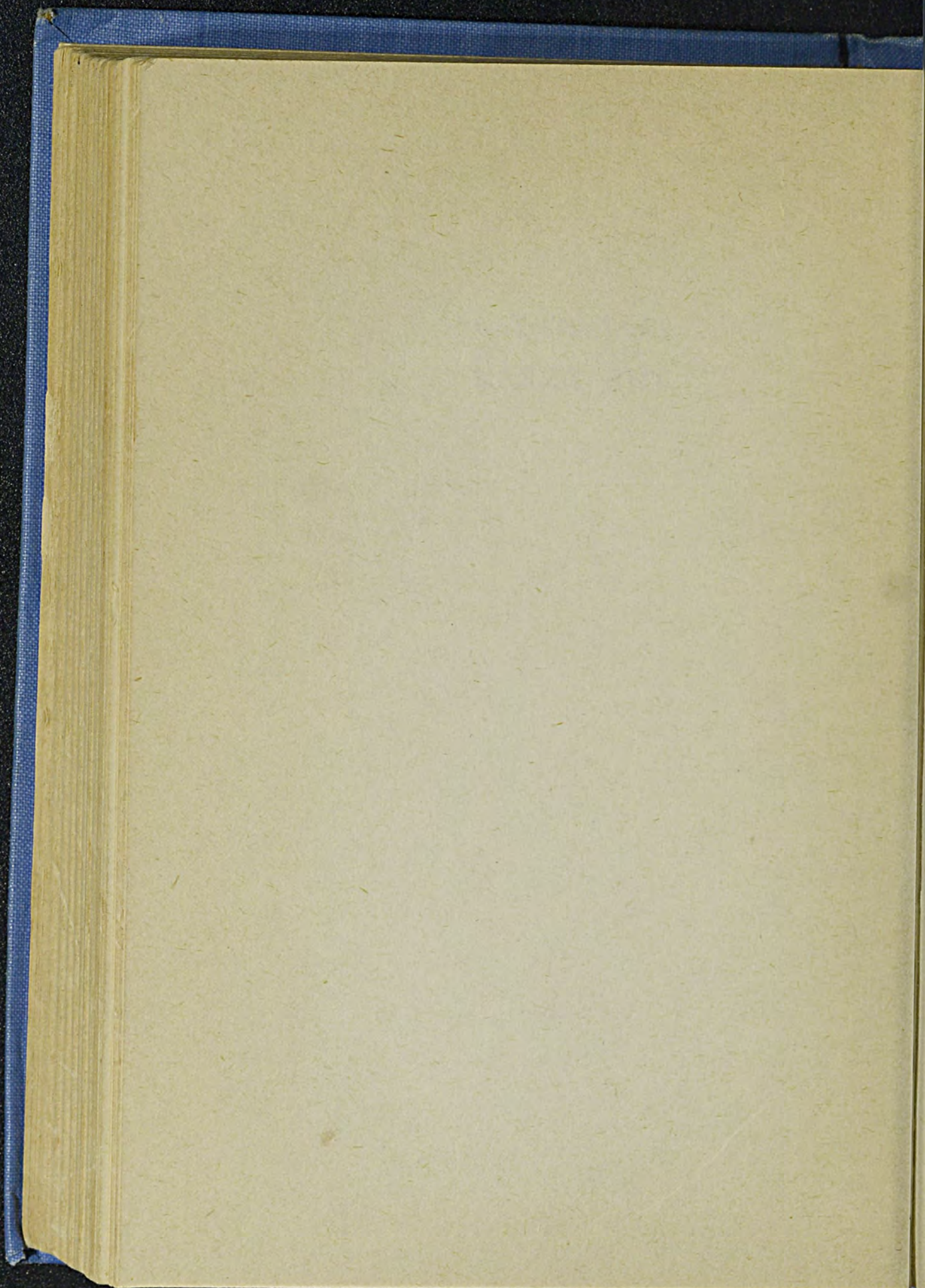
The girl looked up at him, and at the look in her eyes, he was instantly silent.

“It was a tall, dark figure in the mist—silhouetted, like a shadow. Only just a bent shape, walking. But Tom . . . *he carried a cross. . . .*”



The Poet's Tale

THE DREAM



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THE DREAM

It seemed she had always been with him. Ever since he could remember anything, he remembered her face, smiling at him with that wistful, half-shy smile he loved. He knew, of course, that she did not belong to the world of men as he did, but by the time he was of an age to analyse the strangeness of this she had become so much a part of his life that the strangeness did not seem to matter; did not even seem strange at all to him . . . yet quite early in his childish days he learnt that it was useless to try and "explain" her to other people.

She came, he remembered, always in a patch of brilliant light of some kind; in some round, glittering thing that held the eye for a moment, till, staring fixedly into the shining focus, her face would dawn gradually in the centre of the brilliance, like a star emerging clear from an enclouding mist. A face small, pointed, elf-like, set in a cloud of dusky hair, and centred with two great, grey-green eyes, wistful, smiling, elusive. The first time he distinctly remembered seeing her was when he was a baby. It had been the sunlight shining upon the round brass bed-knob at the foot of the great bed on which he lay sprawling, playing with his toes, sucking his fingers, gurgling to himself happily as babies do, that had attracted him, and staring attentively at it, he saw her face slowly form in the very heart of the light, smiling at him as she always smiled. A shy, welcoming smile—at that moment, he vaguely remembered, she had seemed a child but little older than himself, nodding and laughing to him as if, from her own mysterious place, she waved a hand to him in greeting.

Later she came again, and yet again, sometimes daily, sometimes missing a week, but never longer—she had grown with his growth, it seemed, until now, a slim, dark lad of twenty-three, she stood beside him in the spirit, a girl whose youth matched his youth, a girl who was real,

indeed, more real and far more dear than flesh and blood could be, and yet a dream. A dream wonderful, tender, magical beyond words, yet a dream indeed, according to the world of men.

It was, of course, largely owing to this strange and amazing secret that he carried hidden in his breast, that young Tom Harrison lived, from childhood until the year of grace that saw him twenty-three, a singularly isolated, yet contented life. His parents dying while he was still a schoolboy of eleven, a dour old aunt took charge of his further upbringing and education—alien among his school-friends, who, vaguely sensing something odd and unusual about the quiet, dreaming lad, voted him discontentedly “no sport”, and left him severely alone; more alien still to the stern old Scotchwoman, whose narrow, bigoted, religious views hampered and irked every fibre of his being, the lad grew slowly from a freckled boy to a long-legged youth, and so to young manhood, solitary, alone, companioned only by the Girl who grew beside him, growing with his growth, like a graceful flower beside a sturdy sapling.

Night after night he would shut himself up in his tiny attic under the stars, take out the round silver witchball he had long ago discovered to be her favourite “focus”, and, holding it in a shaft of moonlight, or if the moon was coy, beside the humble candleflame that was all the light the rigid economy of Aunt Lilith permitted, would wait in a state of tremulous, delicious expectancy for her face to dawn upon him—and never did he wait in vain! She was faithful as the ideal woman of whom every man dreams in his secret heart—to her he confided every detail of his days.

He told her of his hopes and plans; of his longings for self-expression, his dreams of success as writer, artist, actor—those large, vague dreams of adolescence the world over—to her he confided his few joys, his many youthful sorrows. There was no moment of his life into which she did not enter. The exact method of their communication would have been difficult to define, and, indeed, he himself would have found it impossible to define actually, since he was so accustomed to it as to take it for granted—their speech was silent, yet eloquent and fluent as spoken words. More so, indeed, since words are at best a poor, clumsy

method of translating into concrete form the swift and lovely thought that is real speech.

So she companioned him as he grew to young manhood, friend and mother, playmate and sweetheart, counsellor and sympathizer all in one—when his aunt abruptly informed him, the day after his leaving school for good, that she had found a position for him, albeit a humble one, in a large merchant's office in Gracechurch Street, Tom fled precipitately upstairs, after a mumbled word of thanks, to convey the amazing news to his Companion . . . with, it must be admitted, the secret, panic-stricken wonder as to whether, now he was a man, grown up and going into business, she would stay with him still.

Perhaps she could only live with youth, with the spring-time of life, like the daffodil she so much resembled—but he need have had no fear. Her faint sweet laughter greeted his inner ear even as he picked up the witchball, before her smiling face nodded at him from the centre of the gleaming patch upon it. He went to sleep content, happy—it was utterly sweet and satisfying, this strange companionship, destined, so he happily felt, after this new and profound assurance of it, to last throughout life and into the beyond that is a greater life yet. He was too young, too ignorant of the ways of the world and men, for either to have impinged as yet upon his delicately austere nature, still dreaming in its childhood's purity—yet no man can escape the curse of the flesh to which he is shackled, and the awakening, although late and reluctantly, of young Tom Harrison's long-sleeping manhood was stealing upon him fast.

Rather to his own astonishment, he did not dislike the office-work and atmosphere—there was a certain stimulation about earning a small but regular income, taking his place among his fellows as a man should do. He rapidly learnt the superficial catchwords, the poses, the general attitude of his new friends, and to his further astonishment, found himself rather popular, on the whole, with them. He still retained his boyish habit of blushing and stumbling in his speech when discomfited, and for this, of course, was unmercifully chaffed, but more than all, his colleagues teased him for his physical purity, for his obvious utter and complete ignorance of woman—for Tom

Harrison at twenty-three was a very handsome lad, tall and slender as a faun, with a head of curly, dark-brown hair and a pair of dreaming, hazel eyes that had already drawn the demure interest of several of the young lady typists in the office.

Even Miss Sallie Ryan, the Boss's secretary, and a notable heartbreaker, went out of her haughty way to make eyes at him—but Tom, unconscious, as always, of women and women's ways, totally ignored her, thereby administering a snub unintentional, but very complete. So complete that the young lady flushed and retired in a huff, while the male staff, secretly rejoicing at seeing Miss Sallie for once treated after the manner in which she was given to treating them, opened their arms to the new arrival, and welcomed him as a Rum Chap, Too Young for words, but O.K.!

Bob Darley, the head clerk of the Department in which he worked, having been badly bitten by the fair Sallie, decided that to take up young Harrison under the lady's nose would be a neat revenge—and proceeded accordingly to take him up. Not at first, it must be admitted, greatly to Tom's enthusiasm, since he was both shy and a little afraid of the dashing Darley, hero, so the office said, of a whole string of love affairs. But obviously, it was not for the youngest and newest of the clerks to hang back when the head clerk intimated his inclination to be friendly, and so the acquaintance ripened into an odd, somewhat onesided sort of friendship . . . onesided, for though Tom grew to like Darley at last in a half-reluctant way, it was a liking hedged about with so many reservations that it could scarcely be called a true liking at all. Truth to tell, the man fascinated and repelled him at the same time—entirely innocent of life as he was, Darley's obvious worldly wisdom awed him, made him faintly envious and irritated. To hear the older man's easy talk of girls and their ways, of taking them out, teasing them, making love to them, at first revolted him—yet, as his late-developing manhood grew stronger, more vigorous, the feeling of disgust gave place to a half-ashamed curiosity, a flushed interest, a restless, nervous eagerness at last that he tried hard to repress, dimly sensing, as the new feeling grew and took possession of him, that it brought with it a threat, vague but growing, to this Other Thing that had hitherto ruled supreme in his

life. This Soul Love that until now had been the very core and centre of his tiny world.

She sensed it, too, even more quickly than he did, and although she gave no sign, said no word of warning, of protest, he could tell, from her wistful look in her grey-green eyes, from the sad droop of her mouth, that she did not like the new atmosphere about him. Her silent disapproval was most marked when he had just come from Darley, from listening to some bawdy tale of amorous adventure. Thereafter he tried always to avoid seeing Darley the last thing at night, just before he went home to his own quarters—now a room in a boarding house near the City, to Aunt Lilith's grim disapproval—but he was not always successful. His youth and charm and diffidence had aroused a quite genuine affection in the older man, and he imagined with the greatest sincerity that in trying to "take young Tom out of himself", "bringing him down to earth" as he phrased it, he was doing the boy a service. Making a Man of him, as he proudly declared. Well, well—he is not the first man to think that the gutters of the world are a better place to live in than the hills of dreamland. . . .

Yet Nature fought on his side, as Nature does, being avid of youth and strength and manhood . . . and from her point of view as well as his, Bob Darley was doubtless right when he told young Tom one day, quite bluntly, that he was wasting his life running after a fantasy.

It was late one night, and they had been sitting in Darley's rooms drinking whisky and soda—still strange to the boy's palate, and potent, else he had never, on a sudden impulse of confidence, unburdened his soul of its long-held secret, the secret of his Dream Girl. It was partly the unaccustomed drink that unloosed his usually guarded tongue—but partly also a curious, irritated desire to show Darley, who teased him with increasing frequency about his dislike of women, that he did not avoid girls because he disliked them, but because he held, close to his heart, jealously, preciously, the image of a Girl of Girls, a girl before whom all others paled and shrank away, ashamed . . . to his credit be it said, Darley did not, despite his inner amazement, burst, at the finish of the incredible tale, into either laughter or jeers. He was, indeed, somewhat thrilled—sceptical, yet not entirely, for he was a young

man who read his papers carefully, and knew that "this occult stuff" was not these days to be dismissed with a cackle of laughter, or a superior sniff.

Sipping his third whisky, he regarded Tom with increased interest. Suppose he was what they'd call a Mejum—anyway it was a shame a fine-looking young chap should waste his time like that—good thing he'd made a friend who knew what was what, could give him a straight talk when it was needed! He clapped Tom on the back, assured him that he was vastly interested—which remark relieved the boy not a little, as he had been seized with a sudden panic directly his rash confession had been made, expecting shrieks of derisive laughter. He winced a trifle, however, when Darley, raising his glass on high, proposed a toast.

"My boy-friend's Dream Girl! And may she soon—what d'you call it, o' man—materialize? Here's her damn good health!"

Something within Tom curled up and shivered in sharp distaste as the amiable, raucous voice rang out, but mindful of his newfound manhood, he drank obediently, and settled down to listen, as Darley hitched his chair forward and proceeded—as he subsequently put it to a group of interested colleagues at the office—to "talk sense into the chap".

From his point of view he undoubtedly talked a great deal of sense. He pointed out that whether the Girl were a dream or a reality, by thus shutting himself up in a world of visions and shadows young Tom was doing himself a deal of harm. Preventing himself from becoming a Man—a hard-bitten, experienced, knowledgeable fellar such as Darley himself . . . the lanky boy with the wistful eyes nodded diffidently, half agreeing, yet all the while a faint inner rebellion gnawed at him, murmured "no—no, it's all wrong! He's all wrong . . ." Driven by that vague, undefined instinct to defend something frail, intangible, precious, to hold fast something that was slowly slipping from him, he argued stubbornly, fought for the truth of his Dream, and Darley, despite himself, was secretly amazed at the strength with which the boy stuck to his convictions. She *was* Real—there was no use Darley saying she wasn't! She was a real girl, only it was so difficult to explain . . . he sat forward eagerly, his eyes

alight, his curly hair ruffled, untidy, a lost faun curled in an easy chair in a shoddy back room in Camden Town, a glass of whisky held incongruously in one long hand.

"You see, Bob, you don't understand—and it's so frightfully difficult to explain. She *is* real—but she's existing on a different plane to this one! Prob'ly you're right when you say she's not real as *we* call real, I mean flesh and blood like ours, but I'm sure she's as real as we are, looked at from another way. . . ." He stumbled, fumbling for the right word, and Darley laughed a little scornfully.

"Real—but not flesh and blood? Give me flesh and blood then, any day!" He glanced consciously at the row of girl's photos, splashingly signed, along the dusty mantelpiece, and slanted a knowing eye at the boy. "You're a one, you are, young Tom! A girl you only see in a blob of light—never even seen her whole, you tell me, only her face . . . how d'you know she hasn't got thick ankles?"

Tom winced violently. Of a sudden Darley jarred upon him profoundly, terribly, and he wished desperately to be out of the room, away from the talk, the patronizing laughter, the raw sting of spirit on his tongue.

"It's no use talking," he said a trifle sullenly. "You make everything cheap and nasty, Bob! I tell you, she's my girl, the only one I want. Somehow she's managed, because she loves me, to find a chink between our worlds through which we can meet sometimes. . . ."

"Then if she loves you as much as all that, she ought to be able to come through altogether to your world, as you call it!" said Darley a trifle sardonically. He was getting a little tired of the pertinacity with which the boy stuck to his point. "Come, there's a bargain—*ask* her to do it. 'S all very well, you know, her expecting you to spend the rest of your life, a good-looking lad like you, sitting moping night after night staring at a damn great witchball like you do!"

The boy's eyes widened, amazed, and leaning forward, Darley proceeded to elaborate his impulsive suggestion. He was rather pleased with it. If, he considered, he could pin Tom down to trying some tangible experiment, and it failed, as of course, it *must* fail, that would obviously do more than anything towards clearing his mind of the illusion that had clouded it for so long.

"You see, it's a proof, eh? Test her, my boy—tell her you can't live like this any longer—and, I tell you straight, you won't be able to! It isn't natural to go around alone as you do, never take a girl out, or go on the loose a bit—why, you've never even kissed a girl yet! Tell her if she don't do it you'll go off after another girl who isn't so darned stand-offish. . . ."

It was late when Tom got home, and his entrance to his shabby bedroom not so steady as usual. He kept his eyes sullenly averted from the great silver witchball, which the landlady, greatly admiring, kept poised on a yellow ware saucer, upon the centre table—but the habit of years is not easily broken. He could not keep his gaze away for long, and the first glance he stole he saw that she was there, gazing at him in silence from the bright patch of light reflected from the gas-fire, her grey-green eyes filled with mournful tears, her sweet mouth drooping. . . . She regarded him in silence, as abjectly he rushed into blundering defences, knowing that she knew, trying to justify himself, yet conscious all the while of a miserable sense of guilt.

Darley's advice, Darley's stories of life, women, the Time one might have, clung to him like a bunch of dirty, clinging leeches that would not be shaken off. . . . he was vaguely conscious of the row of girl's photographs above Darley's mantelpiece, smiling, alluring, challenging, vaguely aware of a blind instinct never before aroused, slowly stretching and turning in its long sleep before awakening, an instinct that made him at once shamed and hotly curious, defiant and shy. He tried blunderingly to explain, but she stopped him half-way with a little wistful cry, utterly piteous—the tears brimmed and ran down her cheeks, and he felt that, unseen, she stretched tiny appealing hands to him for pity.

"Oh, Boy, Boy—so it has come! I have been so afraid! I have tried so hard to make you happy without—that. But now. . . ."

The imperious male awaking within him answered, more harshly than he knew.

"It's too late, Girl! I've grown up—I'm a man. And Darley says it's quite right. I can't go on living my life like this, living on a dream, a shadow—it's terrible. All the way here I've been thinking and thinking. . . ."

"I know. I was with you. I watched your thoughts." There was a tiny flavour of contempt, of bitterness in her voice. "Thoughts set going by that man—vulgar, coarse—you should never have told him, Boy."

"Well, I did, so it's no use regretting it." Guilt made him brusquely defiant. "And even though in some ways I don't like him, Darley's a darn sensible fellow. He's right about this—it's true I can't go on with it, Girl—unless . . ." He paused a minute and plunged. "Unless you do what, of course, he doesn't believe you *can* do. Come through—to me!"

Though her gaze was steady on his in the mirror of the witchball, it seemed oddly as if she flinched and retreated—stood away a little. He hurried on, ashamed yet urgent—dimly he felt the shame, yet the urge was the more imperious impulse.

"You see, Girl—oh, perhaps on your side it's difficult to understand, when a man grows up, how lonely he is without a woman! Oh, it sounds beastly, but it's true—after all, we *are* flesh and blood, and we want flesh and blood, to love, and kiss, and . . . all that. Don't you see? I adore you, Girl, I shall never love anyone else, but I'm grown up now. I'm a man with a man's instincts, a man's needs. . . ."

She shivered faintly, as he caught the great ball close to him, and it seemed, as she slowly answered, that her very voice was faint and desperate with sadness—with a sadness that went far deeper than the little sorrows of the world in which he dwelt.

"Oh, love, my love! I feared this—I have feared it so long, warded it off so long—fought with all my strength to content you with the things of the soul and spirit, so that the sex-need of woman might not wake within you. But now. . . ."

She ceased, voiceless—he caught her up urgently, passionate.

"Oh, Girl, is it so impossible? Darley said it was—he said you could never do it—that if you could it would be a proof. . . ."

"And because a vulgar worldly fool says that, you are prepared to forgo this wonderful companionship that has meant so much to us?" Her tone was bitter, and, hurt in his turn, he responded brusquely, sullenly:

"That doesn't matter—he doesn't matter. But this does—I want you, Girl, I want you on my side somehow! I can't do without you—I can't. Is it—for my sake—so utterly impossible?"

She hesitated, her wide sorrowful eyes searching his—then slowly shook her lovely dark head.

"No," she whispered. "Not utterly impossible, my beloved! Yet intolerably difficult. . . . Oh, my own, can you not forget this madness, and go back to where we were before, just Boy and Girl together, in our little world?"

"No," he said harshly. "Because I am a man now, Girl, and I want you as a man wants a woman. If you love me—will you, at all costs, try?"

There was a long and dreadful pause, then, with big tears pouring down her face, she nodded—and he knew suddenly that he had forced something that seemed bitter as death upon the creature dearest to him in life. In a voice shaken with fear, with love and sorrow, she bade him good night—yet to his dying day he never forgot her last words, faint and laden with foreboding, in his ears.

"Because I love you—I will try. But I don't know—I can't tell you, if I shall succeed. . . . I *may* succeed, but, ah, my dear, not quite, perhaps, in the way you want! The gods give, truly, but they give in their own grim way. . . ."

The chill autumn passed on, the year gave place to winter, and the sun might strike a dazzling light from the great silver witchball, standing in the window, the moon, the firelight might dance upon it, but no small pointed face dawned within the brightness, no steady grey-green eyes looked out with laughter, love, understanding in their depths . . . for the first time in his life Tom Harrison knew loneliness bitter and profound, and many an hour he spent poring frantically into the depths of the great ball, trying to call her back from the strange distant world into which she had vanished since that tragic night, that night for which he cursed himself now so wholeheartedly. For days afterwards he had avoided Darley, hurrying away from the office a few minutes earlier than usual in order to get back to his humble "digs" and try again, and yet

again, to bring her back to him—but a week passed, ten days, a month, three months, and still she gave no sign, and his utter misery gave place to a defiant recklessness. Since she did not care, it seemed, neither would he—and when Darley, at last, running him to earth at his desk, tendered an invitation to dine at the Waldorf and “meet a coupla nice girls”, Tom accepted it with alacrity, with a grim determination to show his friend that he had at last emerged from the chrysalis of boyhood.

Maudie and Doris, the two chorus girls, voted him a “scream”, especially when wine and cocktails had completed their fell work, and when Darley, with a wink at Maudie, the more enterprising of the two, ushered Tom into a taxi with her at the finish, and whisked the demure Doris off in another, the young lady was not slow to take the initiative in a flirtation with “quite the nicest-looking boy she had seen in a month of Sundays”. Finding a curly dark head on his shoulder and a pair of rouged but pretty lips pursed beneath his own, for a fleeting moment Tom paused, seeing, despite the fumes of drink that were clouding his brain, a sorrowful pair of grey-green eyes beneath a cloud of dusky hair—but he winced away from the memory, and with a sudden savage movement, pressed his lips down on the mouth so close to his. It was Her fault. She had not come. She had left him lonely until he was half mad with misery . . . all right, she could take the consequences! Was he not a man as other men?

It was dawn—indeed, the sun was peeping above the house-tops—before he left the fair Maudie’s flat, and then it was with heavy eyes and an unaccountable sick, shamed feeling gnawing at him. So must Esau have felt when he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage . . . yet Darley, to whom he confided his mood, slapped him on the back and assured him he was being too squeamish by far. Got to take the plunge some time, eh? It’ll come easier next time—why, what did young Tom think girls were for, eh? And so on and so forth. . . . Yet the memory of the moment when feeling sick, uncleanly, ashamed, he lifted his face to the coolness of the dawn, standing there in the small mean street outside the house where she lodged, sickened the boy for the moment of women, and for some time he avoided the sex, and Miss Maudie Simpson in particular. Refusing further invitations, he set himself

diligently to his work and tried to forget—to forget both his lost Dream Girl and his more sadly lost innocence.

Yet to eat of the Tree of Knowledge is to hunger again—and women are not easily put off. Also the uneasy memory, shamed yet fascinated, of that one night nagged at the boy's just-awakened manhood shrewdly, and it inevitably came to pass that at last they met again—and this time Miss Simpson, having gleaned in the meantime a good deal of knowledge about the young man from Darley, adopted different tactics, realizing that her first attack-direct had rather alarmed her quarry. She was quite frank about her intentions—that is, to her chum Doris, and to herself. She meant to marry him. Certainly he was not, as the cynical Doris put it, much of a catch, but marriage of any kind was better than none—and this diffident charming boy, several years her junior, obviously utterly and abysmally ignorant of women, was easy prey, once she had corrected her first false step. This she speedily did by adopting an air of wistful shyness, as if she dared not meet his eyes after their mutual folly—the “madness of youth” as she later called it, culling the phrase from the title of a recently seen moving-picture. Put this way, the episode of that first night somehow sounded less degrading—deftly she drew the picture of a girl suddenly swept off her feet by an audaciously attractive lover, and this picture of himself was so new and flattering to Tom that he swallowed it whole—and the thing was done; thereafter he spent his evenings, his week-ends, his every spare moment, sitting, metaphorically or actually, at Miss Simpson's feet.

To his amazed delight, conscious as he was of the limited entertainment possible on his slender income, Tom Harrison found Miss Maudie surprisingly easy to please. Being excessively humble, it did not occur to him that he might be worth cultivating, and he rejoiced quite frankly in the discovery of a companion who, apparently, shared his simple tastes, preferred an afternoon on the Heath to sitting in a crowded cinema, and agreed that it was waste of money to buy silk stockings when one could wear cotton and spend the balance on a book of poetry.

It must be admitted that there was considerable acting art, to say nothing of patience, shown by the young lady, when night after night, her feet itching to take her to the nearest cheap night-club, she sat concealing her yawns

upon a seat in the Temple Gardens while her infatuated escort read Keats to her! In obediently putting on her hat and "going for a blow" on the top of a jolting omnibus, while her entire soul was secretly longing for a copy of *Home Chat* and a box of chocolates on the sofa in her dinky flat—in refusing cocktails and cigarettes, discovering that Tom's ideal girl (humorously described to her by Darley) neither drank nor smoked—in listening and sweetly assenting to views and ideals that, as she vigorously expressed it to her chum Doris, "fairly turned me up! Sappy ass—wait till I've snitched him!"

And so Tom Harrison's evil fate came upon him—and the New Year saw them irrevocably wed.

Gracechurch Street found Tom Harrison curiously changed after a month of marriage. Puzzled, his colleagues tried by ragging, inquiry, bluff, to awaken his old shy gaiety, to banish the odd, stunned look in his eyes, but after a while, losing interest, they desisted, and life resumed its normal course. Only the blank, bewildered look in the boy's eyes remained, and glancing at him from time to time, seated at the desk near his own to which he had recently been promoted, Bob Darley frowned, faintly disturbed. Dimly he sensed something wrong, a certain quality, appealing, youthful, vanished from the grave young face . . . the faun was still there, gleaming from the great eyes under the tumbled thatch of curly hair, but it was a faun no longer merely shyly, amusedly interested in a strange world, ready to laugh and be friends. Something peeped out that had learnt what it was to be afraid . . . it was that "hurt" look, like something happy, trusting, smitten brutally between the eyes, that worried Bob Darley. Shrewdly, despite his hardened shell of cynicism—but Briton-like, he pooh-poohed it, and shrugging his large shoulders, told himself not to be a fool, and asked Tom out to lunch. Yet not even lunch, a good lunch, with beer and steak-pie, which last Tom loved, cured that hurt, puzzled look, loosened that oddly silent tongue, so after a while Darley, a little huffed, relinquished his well-meant efforts, and Tom was left indeed alone.

Terribly alone. Now, at last, he knew what loneliness

meant, that ghastly soul-searing loneliness that can assail a man married to a woman utterly and entirely uncongenial. Maudie, once well and truly married, dropped her sweet-little woman pose like a hot cake, and the dumbfounded Tom found himself faced with an acid-tongued shrew. A trivial vulgar minx whose only idea of life was chocolates, "movies", as many clothes as she could squeeze out of him or anybody else (for she made no bones, once married, about what her previous life had been), irritated by his stunned stare of amazement, she even went to the length, at last, of jeering at him for a "mug", a "softy", not to have guessed what she was by trade. She even twitted him with the number of her lovers, hoping to rouse him to some crude masculine outbreak of jealousy, some display of the physical brutality that was her only criterion of manhood; she called him "coward" for his lack of the fighting instinct, and scoffed loudly and contemptuously at his love of poetry, music, art, resenting bitterly the very qualities in him that had made him so piteously easy a prey. She was a hopeless failure as housekeeper, spending his small weekly pittance on sweets, cheap papers, silk stockings, and visits to the cinema. Before his brief honeymoon was over, Tom learnt enough about the girl he had married to know that his castle in Spain was built upon sand, and in three months' time he had bidden even his dream of it good-bye for ever.

The months that ensued were sheer hell to Tom Harrison. Doggedly and in silence he endured them, feeling dimly that by so doing he was, perhaps, paying for the prime sin he had committed (for so he felt it) in driving away from his side the Dream Girl he loved, the lovely intangible creature who had filled his life and his heart and his soul with a happiness so utterly beyond and above anything he had ever dreamed of since, that even to remember it made him wince with pain, in the light of these other days. When he thought of the way in which he had driven her from him, he could have scourged himself with rods of steel. At the call of sex, urged by an earthly-minded fool, he had bartered a whole world of dreams, a universe compounded of beauty, faith, affection, companionship! Because the world told him jeeringly it was but a glass bubble he held, he had let it fall, and lo, it lay broken at his feet, and with it his heart and his hopes . . . it was no wonder the office

commented in some wonder on the change in young Tom's looks these days, even though the Boss, pleased with his progress, had given him yet another rise of salary. Yet even that did nothing to stem the tide of Maudie's discontent.

It may be that a rougher, more brutal type of man might have made something out of Maudie Simpson, with all her faults; but Tom was the wrong type to handle her with any hope of success. She had married him simply for want of a better offer, knowing that her market both on the stage and off, was waning, but she had frankly despised him from the first, and as time went on, her bitterness and rancour waxed greater and more great, and found vent in sour whining grumbles, peevish tears or shrill reproaches; indeed, in less than six months' time after her marriage she had developed into a first-class specimen of the persistent nagger, and when she discovered herself to be with child, her poor young husband's lot was indeed one to arouse compassion.

Glancing at her dispassionately, a year after his marriage as she lay in bed in the chilly grey autumn morning, watching him dress to go to the office, Tom felt a vague stirring of compunction. After all, the blame was partially his. He had married her—she was bearing his child, sharing his bed, and wretched as he was, assuredly she was but little less wretched. There she lay, sullen, withdrawn into herself, hating him for his failure to be the sort of husband she wanted, hating herself for being tied to him, hating the child that was so soon to be born more bitterly than all. Pitying her for the ordeal that lay before her, sorrowful for her disappointment in him, as for his own in her, he came wistfully up to the bed just before he left, holding out his hand.

"I'm sorry, Maudie. I know I'm not the sort of chap you wanted—but we're married after all, and we got to make the best of it. Be friends, won't you . . . because of the kid. . . ."

The word boggled, he was still shy of it, but she flounced over in the bed, pulling the dirty quilt about her ears and snapped at him like an angry cat.

"Oh, get out, for goodness sake! You and your kid . . . faugh!"

Darley, knowing young Mrs. Harrison was "in the

family way', and guessing from his young colleague's gravity that matters were imminent, greeted Tom kindly enough in his bluff casual way, clapping him on the back and bidding him "cheer up, wait until it's the fourth"—which remark brought a momentary gleam of grim amusement to the boy's sombre eyes. He startled his friend a trifle by rejoicing grimly.

"Fourth? Not on your life, Bob! I've learnt something—I'll never let Maudie have another kid!"

The force and bitterness of his tone startled the head clerk into silence, and in silence Tom turned to his desk—but not for long. It was barely half an hour before the telephone rang, and after a hasty word Darley put down the receiver and nodded brusquely to Tom.

"Kid's on the way—cut along. I'll see it's all right with the Boss."

As he sat in the rattling Tube, staring unseeing at the dark flashing windows, Tom remembered Darley's remark again, and grinned sardonically. Fourth? Never again should a child of his be born to a mother who so bitterly hated the bearing of it . . . poor little devil! Never again. . . .

His heart thumping, he let himself softly into the tall dingy apartment house where they had their humble quarters, and was met by the landlady on the stairs, finger on lip. The child had been born, somewhat prematurely, the doctor and nurse were still there, but everything was going on fine. Wouldn't Mr. 'Arrison take a nice 'ot cupper tea to brice 'im up—she'd got the kettle on naow? Vaguely Tom assented, and wandering into the tiny stuffy sitting-room, crowded with the dolls, cushions, paper fans that Maudie loved, and heavy with the smell of stale scent and cigarettes, listened with a beating heart to the sounds of movement from the bedroom beyond. The rustle of a nurse's starched skirts, the clink of china or glass, the low murmur of voices talking. Presently the outer door of the bedroom opened and shut, and a man's step ran quickly downstairs.

Dimly Tom realized that the doctor had gone, and without seeing him, and moved vaguely forward with some half-formed idea of catching him; but the door below banged, and it was too late. Sighing, he moved over to the window, where still stood his treasure, the great silver

witchball, gleaming in the sullen light of the winter sun. He took it up gently, gazing into its depths with a yearning ache at his heart that brought tears smarting, salt to his eyes.

"Oh, Dream Girl, Dream Girl! Where have you gone to, where?"

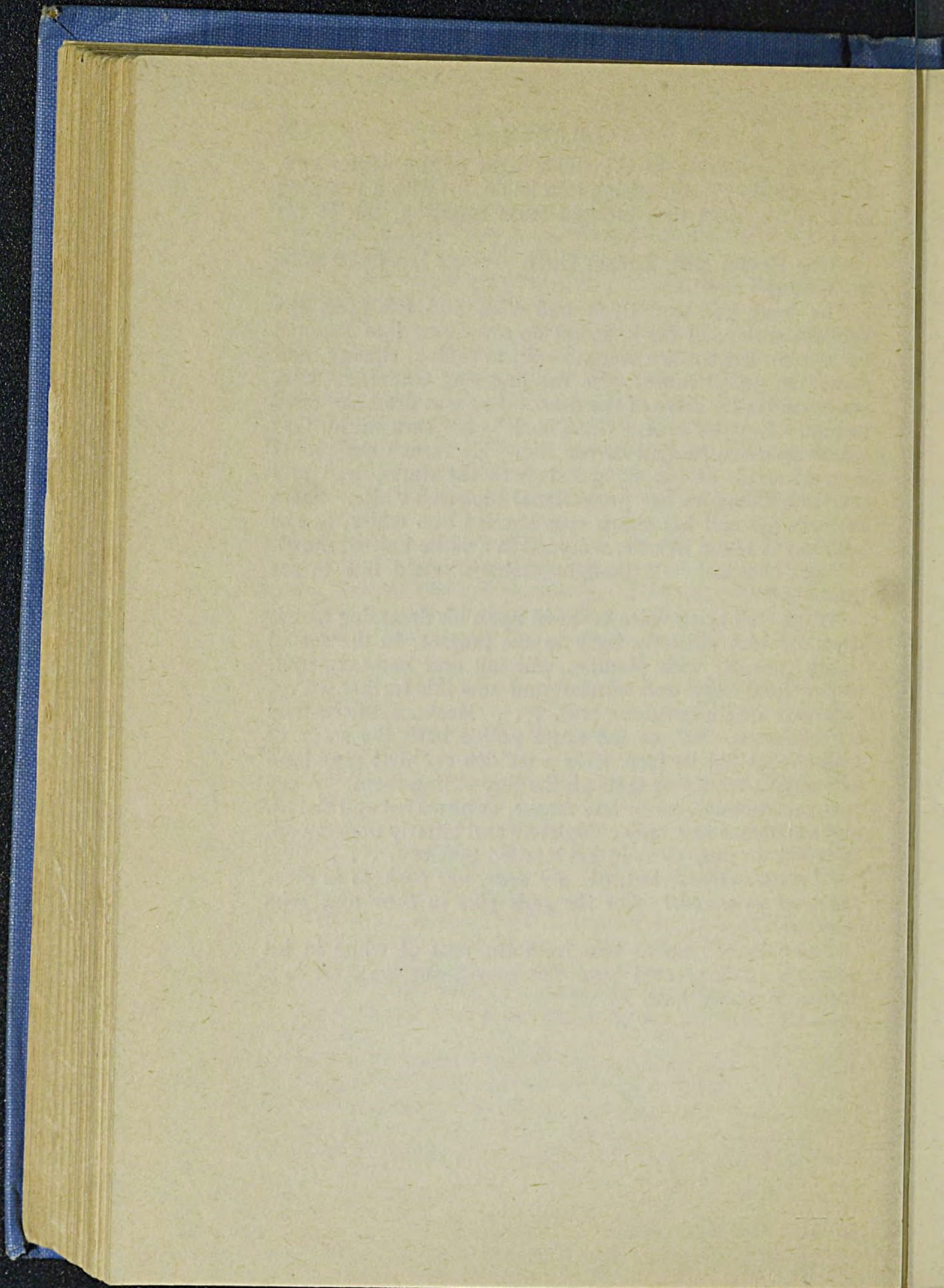
The tears gathered thick and fast, and fell upon the brilliant surface of the ball; but no answering face gleamed up at him, the surface was smooth, unruffled, shining, and slowly he put it down, with the lingering tenderness with which one takes leave of the dead. She was dead—or dead to him. Lost for ever. Gone back to her own world, that world to which he had driven her. He turned sharply as a voice spoke at his elbow. It was the nurse, lean and stiff as a board in her professional blue-and-white. From beneath her coif her sharp eyes studied him oddly, as she held out to him a bundle, wrapped in a white knitted shawl.

"Mr. Harrison? I thought perhaps you'd like to see the baby?"

As the cool brisk voice broke in upon his dreaming mood, it jerked him abruptly back to the present, to the sordid weary present, with Maudie, whining and bad-tempered, to perpetual debts and worries, and now this further worry, this poor little unwelcome brat. . . . Mechanically he held out his arms, and, as the nurse pulled back the scrap of veiling that hid its face, gave a sudden cry that rang loud and almost terrifying through the tiny sitting-room. A cry that held wonder, terror and amaze, as he stared and stared, and a sentence now only completely and bitterly understood, beat like a gong, clear in his startled memory. . . .

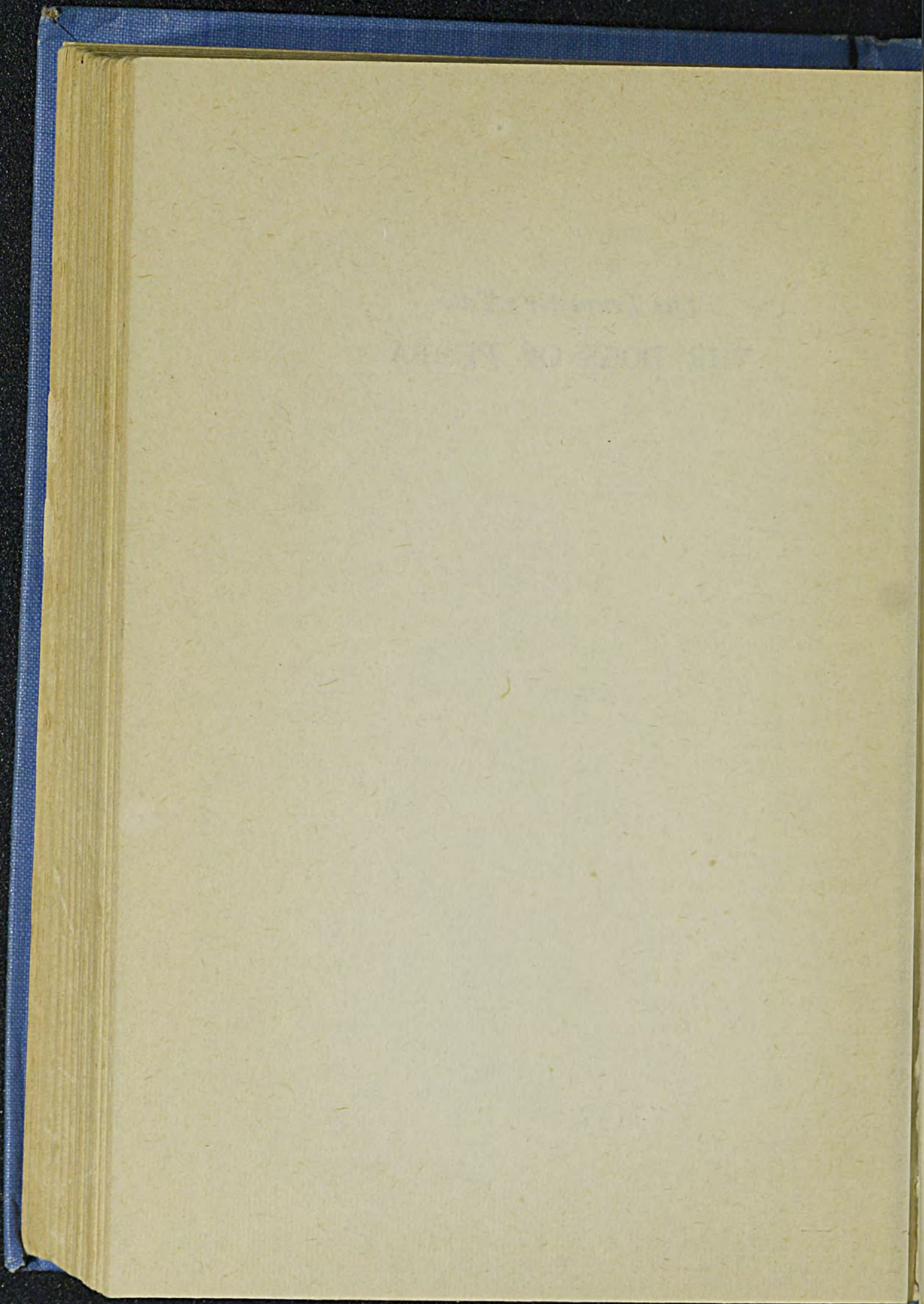
"I may succeed, but, oh, my dear, not perhaps in quite the way you want! For the gods give in their own grim way. . . ."

There looked up at him from the nest of white in his arms, a small pointed face with grey-green eyes, set in a frame of dusky hair.



The Traveller's Tale

THE DOGS OF PEMBA



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THE DOGS OF PEMBA

"DON'T you be so darn cocksure, my lad!" Thus Garnett, dried-up little planter, to pinkly healthy young Colefax, just going East for the first time, and bucking about it a good deal to his cronies at the Club. Garnett had said little for some time, but his first remark, the opening of this story, was trenchantly snubbing. "I tell you, *no* white man really understands the native, nor what he can do—and far from the stories you hear of his capacity for mysterious and unpleasant vengeance and so on, being exaggerated—well, there, you'll learn not to laugh at 'em soon, as I did in my young days!"

Colefax, though a trifle bumptious, was not a bad lad at heart, and we all liked old Garnett.

"Sorry, sir; I know I was swanking rather," he said. "But these tales you know—some of 'em seem too idiotic! Fellows bein' wished to death and so on—d'you really know of a case like that?"

"I do," said Garnett, grinding out the stump of his cigar. "I see you want the yarn; shut the door, one of you lads, and sit down, then. I'll tell you the story of the 'Dogs of Pemba'."

"I was a youngster like you, setting out to take up my first real job: assistant to a fellow called Hugh Kinnersley, Commissioner of Pemba. I was full of myself, and bucked about it no end to the admiring girls on board the boat going out; there were quite a lot of 'em did admire me, too. I was a decent-looking youngster, and in common with most youngsters had spent more than I could afford on nice white ducks, smart buckskin shoes, and so on."

We all glanced at Colefax, who was grinning shamefacedly.

"Well, I left the boat at Zanzibar, and spent a couple of days there before taking the little steamer on to Pemba. While in Zanzibar I heard a little about my future boss,

Hugh Kinnersley—nothing very good, to my secret dismay, as I had pictured a bluff, jolly fellow awaiting me, who might be a real pal. There was a wife too, apparently—came out only last year, so one of the men at the English Club said.

“ ‘Poor little woman!’ said somebody else, and I asked why.

“Glances were exchanged, shoulders shrugged, but very little actually said, till the fellow who had said ‘poor little woman’ fathomed that I was joining Kinnersley in Pemba, and the club became curiously interested in me. Interested in a guarded, rather pitying way—rather the same sort of interest, I felt, that might be taken by a kindly crowd in a young man on his way to the scaffold. . . . I resented it, and asked Innes, the long man who had pitied Mrs. Kinnersley, the reason.

“He looked at me oddly and, patting me on the shoulder, told me not to be a young ass. Kinnersley wasn’t very popular, that was all, and they were rather sorry for any young chap boxed up with him morning, noon and night. Of course that was all. What did he do? Oh, he drank a bit, and there were various rather odd stories about him—but probably a lot of it was native talk and didn’t matter. . . . He was soothing my ruffled feelings quite nicely, when somebody a little tight suddenly broke in with a giggle.

“ ‘Fellow goin’ to Pemba?’ He thrust an inane face over Innes’ shoulder. ‘Give my love to the famous Dogs!’

“He fell, or was pulled back, amidst an angry murmur, and Innes, slipping a friendly arm round my shoulders, guided me out of the crowded room before I could utter the question that was rising to my astonished lips—though he answered it himself outside.

“ ‘Dogs? My dear lad, Fuller’s tight, and talking rot; don’t take any notice of him! Good night, and good luck to you!’

“After this rather disquieting evening it may be imagined that it was with no very pleasant anticipations that I landed at Pemba next day, from the crazy little steamer that plied about the coast.

“I felt singularly raw and ignorant and lonely as I watched the steamer chuff slowly away over the gleaming blue water into the eye of the sinking sun. It was six

o'clock when I landed and the dusky veils of the approaching night were already misting the brilliance of the sunshine, darkening the vivid blueness of sky and sea to an amazing opalescent glory of lilac, violet and petunia, streaked with tender green.

"I stood on the tiny jetty wondering what to do next, as there was no sign of Kinnersley, and trying to muster sufficient courage to speak to one of the silent group of lounging natives watching me with a listless interest but making no move to assist me with my baggage.

"A little way back from the miniature landing-stage, under the lee of the immense towering trees, outposts of the forest I was later to know so well, lay a huddled collection of huts, mainly of wattle and daub, a red mud, dried hard as brick in the sun. A little apart, one whitewashed building of a slightly better class indicated the Customs House, but even here no one seemed to be stirring, and the door was inhospitably closed.

"My sense of forlornness increased. Two of the natives, tired of contemplating me and my traps, turned and stalked away towards the forest. I watched them disappear like slim shadows into the welcoming dusk of the trees, and realized afresh how utterly alien is the white man in the tropics, those dark, strange lands that only know and love their own dark people. I tried a few words of my new-learned Swahili on the nearest native, but he shook his head, eyeing me from head to foot. He muttered a word to his neighbour, a splendid bronze statuette of youth, and they laughed in concert. . . . I was just feeling at my wits' end to know what to do, when there was a clatter of approaching hoofs, and two donkeys trotted into view from the track that wound away into the forest behind the bunched huts.

"The foremost donkey was ridden by a brawny native, the second by a big, loose-built fellow in dirty khaki shirt and shorts and a sun helmet, who, dismounting from his 'moke', an absurdly small beast for so big a man, seized my hand and poured forth apologies. He was obviously, or so I thought, delighted to see me: had a genial, bluff manner, though he talked erratically, jumping from one thing to another in a bewildering way, never pausing for a reply. He dragged me into the Customs bungalow, and ordering drinks, tossed off several whiskies in succession,

the strength of which—the colour of strong tea—made me stare.

“He was, or rather had been—for he had palpably gone to seed, a good-looking fellow enough; heavy-jowled, and with blue pouches under his eyes; his cheeks streaked with the red of broken veins; but still, at first sight, a fine specimen of a man. It was only when he sat down, which he didn't often do, as he was most curiously, maddeningly restless, that one noticed the hint of a paunch, a flabbiness about the great thighs and shoulders, a shakiness of the hand that implied that the hints I had heard in Zanzibar as to his drinking might be founded on fact. . . . However, he was very nice to me, and in a short time, mounted on the second of the two donkeys, my luggage following behind on the shoulders of Kinnersley's boy, Tugi, we were on our way.

“It was not very far, he said; built in a clearing near the shore; but one had to cut through the forest to reach it; the shore was too rocky to go round, there was no road. Indeed, the 'road' we were on, I privately thought, did not deserve that description; it was a track rather, only just wide enough to travel single file, and rough and stony beyond words.

“One's first experience of the utter hush of the primeval bush is always awe-inspiring. My word, I felt eerie, jogging along in the warm, moist, green-filled dusk, the only sound the clink and shuffle of our mounts' little pointed hoofs on the track, the creak of the leather saddles and Kinnersley's occasional muttered curses at the heat. Now and again we splashed through a tiny stream crossing the path, or a curious monkey chattered overhead; but for the most part the ride was dull to monotony, and as my host said, not very long. It was, indeed, barely half or three-quarters of an hour before the serried dark regiments of trees began to thin out into lower, more feathery bush, and in a few minutes we ran out into a clearing and Kinnersley, dismounting heavily, called loudly to his wife.

“He certainly had a charming house; built of green painted corrugated iron, peeling with the heat, but veiled with the crimson and magenta glory of bougainvillea that sprawled over the red tin roof and dropped like rainbow mist round the veranda that ringed the upper story. There was a short flight of wooden steps from the veranda to the ground; the ground floor was obviously merely store-rooms,

and so on, as in most houses in that part of the world. Through the thin filming of mosquito netting that made the veranda almost like an outdoor room, I could see the amber gleam of a lamp, and a small moving shadow approaching the head of the steps. . . .

“ ‘What a delightful little place!’ I said with genuine admiration. ‘I’d no idea. . . .’

“Kinnersley cut me short with something like a snarl.

“ ‘Pretty? My God! If ever there was a hell-hole . . . Well, well, don’t gawp at me like that, I’m tired and snappy—but if you’d spent four years on this blasted island you’d hate it as I do! Here, Tugi, take those bags up. Don’t drop ’em. Good lord, of all the bloody one-eyed niggers . . . *unafania nini, pumbafu. . . .*’

“As Tugi dropped my bag, Kinnersley, losing his temper like a child, suddenly rushed off into a sickening torrent of abuse, finishing by striking at the fellow’s bare legs with his rattan riding switch. As the man quivered under the blow he said something in Swahili, perfectly unintelligible to me, except that I fancied that it was an allusion to ‘dog’ or ‘dogs’, but it seemed to throw Kinnersley into a perfect frenzy. Throwing aside his stick, he made for the sullen native and I am perfectly certain would have, if not actually killed him, at least mauled him very severely—but this was more than I could stand, and I stepped between.

“ ‘Kinnersley—good heavens, man, are you mad?’

“My strange voice seemed to sting the man to sanity. He stopped, and though the sweat of fury was still wet on his face, he managed a faint apologetic smile.

“ ‘By Jove, yes—sorry, Garnett!’ He wiped his forehead and panted a little, regaining his self-control. ‘I’ve got a filthy temper—seems to have got worse lately somehow. I’m sleeping badly, and it makes one deuced edgy. Overlook it, there’s a good chap. Hullo, there’s Joan. Come on up and meet her.’

“To my surprise, Mrs. Kinnersley was quite a girl, not more than twenty-four or five at most. She had, I gathered later, been engaged to Kinnersley when a mere kid of twenty, and only came out to marry him in Zanzibar a year previously. She was small and slight and pale, but her eyes were a lovely hazel, her voice low and pretty; altogether she was pretty—very pretty—in a fragile way, with curling hair that lay in damp rings on her white fore-

head. Although she must have seen from the top of the steps her husband's scene with his 'boy', she made no allusion to it, but greeted me gravely, after a quick, worried glance at Kinnersley; and in half an hour, after a tub and a change, I found myself sitting opposite to her at an attractively English-looking dinner-table laid in the pretty low-ceiled dining-room leading off the veranda near the head of the steps.

"The huge stars were out in the deep night sky, and the dark bush fenced us in with an impenetrable blackness—but within all was bright and homelike. The little night winds blew softly through the fine mosquito-curtains, and certainly I for one began to revise my first impressions of Pemba and enjoyed my dinner thoroughly. We had an excellent meal: the usual sardines served with limes; onion soup, as good as one could wish; chicken curried with red chillies and grated fresh coconut; and pawpaw fruit to finish, its delicately orange-tinted pulp deliciously cool and refreshing.

"It was all strange and fascinating to me, and I'm afraid I ate a huge meal. I noticed that Kinnersley merely picked and pushed his food about, only eating a little fruit, but drank heavily, first whisky-and-soda, then stinging peppermint liqueur—a horrible mixture, I thought privately; but my boss's taste in drink was no business of mine, so naturally I said nothing. After dinner we sat out on the veranda smoking and talking in a desultory sort of way. The house-boy, another tall, silent Swahili, whom Mrs. Kinnersley called Joma, brought out the eternal whisky-bottle, siphons and glasses, and I had a peg to keep Kinnersley company. Mrs. Kinnersley produced a guitar—they were fashionable in the days of my youth—and played a little. Quite well she played, but it was obvious she was not concentrating on it, merely playing, or so I thought, to fill in the gaps in the talk, and prevent awkward pauses—or subjects.

"She glanced at me from time to time as I tried to make conversation with my new chief, but it was uphill work—such a restless, erratic devil I never met. He was up and about, sitting down a moment, jumping up the next, for no reason; beginning stories but never completing them; interrupting, breaking off at a tangent to start some other subject. . . . It was really exasperating, yet he gave me

the impression of a man talking fast, hurriedly, at random—against time, as it were, to try and stave off something. . . . He began telling me some triviality, some way in which he'd 'put one of these niggers in his place', when his wife looked at him quickly, and broke in in her quiet little voice.

" 'You know, Hugh, you shouldn't anger them! They . . . we . . . well, we can't afford to.'

"He opened his mouth to protest, but she went quietly on, striking an idle chord from time to time on her guitar that chimed oddly with her small voice.

" 'Mr. Garnett, don't think I'm trying to raise bogies, but I think you might as well know now that we—aren't popular with the natives on the island.' Her voice quavered a little, and the sternly held fear that spoke in the quaver stung me oddly, while I admired the dauntlessness of it. 'I've tried my best, but it's no use. They just do what we pay them for, but nothing further, and I feel sometimes. . . .' She changed her sentence hastily, but swept on. 'I tell you so that you may be able to help my husband a little, for I know he is often in danger, and this danger is—increasing.'

"Kinnorsley hung his head. However he had treated her once, it was quite obvious that she had the whip hand of him now. He winced and was cowed if she looked at him.

" 'Don't, Joan. Garnett saw me go mad at Tugi this evening; he won't be surprised these black devils hate me. Don't blame 'em either. . . .' His blood-shot eyes looked at me with a curious despair in their depths. 'I'm not myself these days; they've got me down till I can't sleep, and my nerves go all to shreds if I'm crossed.'

"I disliked the man, but somehow I couldn't help being sorry for him. I muttered something vaguely sympathetic, but inwardly I felt all the embarrassment of the healthy young male before a confidence. I was still fumbling for words when a shattering thing happened: from the silent forest that on three sides surrounded the tiny house arose a cry! How can I describe it? Ever heard a pariah dog wail to the moon? A jackal prowling beside a new-made grave? Think of these and add to them a ghastly, quite indescribably *human* element, and you will get a faint idea of that terrible howl that, rising to a crescendo that tore

like a lightning streak through the peace of the lovely evening, and shrilling tremulous, piercing, till our very eardrums rang, died away into eerie quivering echoes that trailed and hovered away into the silent trees, reluctantly, like a lingering evil thing loth to leave go its hold!

"Mrs. Kinnersley had sprung to her feet, her hand on her husband's shoulder. I admit that I was sitting gripping the arms of my chair, shivering, in a perfect sweat of fear. Oh, I know you'll say it must have been a wandering, wild thing of some sort, but I tell you you never heard a sound quite like that . . . and I hope you never may. For beast-like as it was, it was yet quite horribly—human!

"I stared at Kinnersley. He was shaking, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the dusk like a dog's; it did not occur to me till afterwards that this in itself was odd, for it was not the lamplight that caught them and made them shine; a little trickle of saliva drooled from his thick hanging under-lip. It was quite horrible to see a man reduced to so ghastly a state of fright, and though it startled me, it was in a sense a relief when suddenly he sprang to his feet with a sort of hysterical bravado, throwing off his wife's hand and calling out at the top of his voice as he shook his fist towards the forest:

"*'Sikie! Mbwana wanalia sana usiku!* Don't think you've got me yet. I tell you I'll stick it out—you and your damned witch-stuff! . . .'" He rushed off into a string of Swahili obscenities that I could not follow. Mrs. Kinnersley, her face white in the gloom as a peeled almond, was trying to soothe him. I felt somehow acutely sorry for the little woman as I watched the two. She was very quiet, perfectly self-contained, but the terrible dead pallor of her face told plainly enough her inner dread, and I wondered as I listened, slowly regaining my own balance, what particular sort of horrors this little woman had had to face with Hugh Kinnersley gibbering, distraught, at her side; and for how long.

"Seeing Kinnersley quietened, drinking a fresh peg, I ventured a question.

"What—of course, it *must* be a beast of some sort—but what in the world, Mrs. Kinnersley, makes that horrible cry?"

"She shivered suddenly as her eyes met mine over the table.

" 'We—don't know!' she said slowly. 'It comes—like that. Sometimes, not for several nights; sometimes two or three times in succession. . . .'

"Kinnersley, restless as ever, rose to his feet, and with shaking hands chose a cheroot from the open tin box and lighted it. There was a faint but obvious defiance in the gesture.

" 'There's a lovely mystery for you, Garnett!' There was a sneer in his voice that stung me. 'One of the "mysteries of the Bush" these damn' journalists are so fond of! You can take it from me is *isn't* a dog—dogs are village beasts, and no dog will ever go into the Bush. Yet from the Bush it comes, nobody knows how. . . .' His voice trailed away, and for a minute we all sat silent. Then he turned, as if he had a fresh idea and broke out into defiance again, his tone hard, truculent. 'I know it's just some joke of those damn' niggers. I swear it—some of their infernal stunts, tryin' to frighten me; but I won't be frightened; they can't get me, however hard they try . . .'

"He was off again. Little Mrs. Kinnersley took his hand quietly, firmly, and led him towards the wide french windows.

" 'Don't work yourself up, Hugh—it's no good. Come and try to get some sleep. I'll give you some aspirin. Come.' She led him indoors, and for a long time I sat staring into the dense impenetrable blackness that was the forest crowding about the little house, wondering, speculating—secretly more disquieted than I liked to admit. London seemed very far away; the Mysterious loomed very near—and now with the primitive world and its people at our door-sills, all my glib self-confidence fell away from me and left me feeling unspeakably naked and shivering and frightened, face to face with the Unknown . . . darkest Africa and her people. A shadow moved at my side, and I jumped like a shot rabbit; but it was only Mrs. Kinnersley, a black shawl thrown over her light frock, her face whiter than ever above the dark folds. She poured out a glass of soda-water and drank it with a steady hand. Amazing, the pluck of that little woman! I thought so then, and I think so still; but to resume. She accepted the cigarette I offered, and for a moment we smoked in silence; then she spoke.

“ ‘Mr. Garnett, I’ve got to talk to you! I’m sorry, your first night, it’s too bad, and if that cry—hadn’t come, I would have left it. But it came, and . . .’

“Her voice shook. I bent forward eagerly.

“ ‘Mrs. Kinnersley, please let me help! I don’t know what is wrong, but you can depend on me. . . . Please go on.’

“She continued, her voice toneless, dry.

“ ‘I believe it started just a little while before I came out. Not so badly—oh, no! My husband merely thought some wild thing had taken to howling about the house at first . . . but now? I’m not so sure! I’m not so sure. Mr. Garnett, these people of Pemba are the most strange and mysterious in the world. Aloof, secretive, unfriendly—not exactly hostile; at least, I understand they were not so at first; but they keep themselves utterly apart from everybody, even from other natives. They have their own customs, their own rigid caste rules, their own secret ceremonies . . . and I feel—no, I’m quite sure—that for something he has done, though he will not tell me what it is, they have ‘put’ something on my husband—called down one of their horrible curses on him. Oh, I know it sounds rubbish, but I’m serious! Do you know, since I came out, eight months ago, that ghastly howling has grown slowly, steadily more frequent, nearer to the house?’

“ ‘At first it was merely a far distant wailing in the night, and it came only at long intervals; sometimes we would be free for several weeks from it. You see, I came out here in absolute ignorance of the East. . . . I was engaged to my husband very young; in fact, I had not seen him since we became engaged five years ago; when he felt he wanted me, I came out here to him. He was a good deal altered, and I hadn’t a very easy time at first. . . .’ She paused, biting her lip, then continued hurriedly, as the pause grew eloquent. ‘Anyway, that has nothing to do with the present situation. Tell me, did you—notice anything odd about my husband?’

“The abrupt question sent a curious chill up my spine.

“ ‘I don’t know!’ I found my voice coming rather stickily. ‘He seems frightfully restless, if that’s anything . . . can’t sit still . . . and of course he’s rather snappy.’

“She caught me up.

“ ‘Snappy—like an irritated animal snarling! I know! But didn’t you notice that he ate scarcely anything at dinner? Just sat and—and drank—but never ate a scrap to speak of. And he used to be a man with a big healthy appetite.’

“ ‘Yes,’ I admitted. ‘Now I remember—I *did* notice how little he ate. But . . .’

“ ‘Oh, he *does* eat—at times. But he’s grown oddly secretive about it—won’t eat when I’m there. But he eats—sometimes. . . .’ Her voice sank, and she shivered. ‘That I know. I’ve caught him once or twice bent over something in his room, chewing and tearing it with his teeth! But he always hastily smuggles it away, and I can only surmise . . . and fear. . . .’

“She shuddered violently, and against my will I felt myself shuddering too. What horrible mania could the man be suffering from?

“She rushed on, as if impelled by her hunger for sympathy, to tell all, all, and share a little of the terror, the anxiety.

“ ‘The extraordinary part is that—this oddness of Hugh’s—has slowly but steadily increased as the howling increased—as if that *brought* these awful manifestations with it! And again, he is so odd about sleeping! Most men get tired out at night after a day’s work in this climate, but it’s at night he gets most restless. We . . . we have different rooms now; he wanted it.’ There was a telling little pause, and she frowned away a faint sigh. ‘But Joma tells me that Hugh’s bed is never slept in! Does he sleep on the floor or go out to roam this horrible sinister forest at night? I’m getting so utterly unnerved that when I heard you were coming I could have cried with thankfulness—at least I felt, I should not feel quite so terribly alone and afraid. . . .’

“I stretched out a hand to her trembling one, and we smiled at each other; she smiled at me tremulously but confidently.

“ ‘Look here, Mrs. Kinnersley,’ I said, ‘I’m awfully glad you’ve told me. I think you’re simply amazingly plucky to have stuck things as you have done. But now I want you to let me share things—and first of all, take my advice and go straight to bed now. Get a good night, and in the morning we’ll have another talk. Believe me,

I'm here to help if the smallest thing goes wrong; you can sleep in peace. You'll trust me, and go?'

"She stood up like an obedient child, and smiling up at me, slipped away into the shadowy house like another shadow. I heard the faint click of her door. Somehow I felt—already—glad that her husband's oddness had taken the form of separating them at night. . . . Yes, I had got as far as that.

"I sat for a few minutes thinking over her extraordinary story, and at last, stepping very softly to avoid creaks, made my way round the angle of the veranda to Hugh Kinnersley's room. I paused outside the open window. Inside, the narrow white bed, with its protecting mosquito curtains, lay full in the moonlight, but she was right—it was unoccupied. Then a sound of deep and heavy breathing directed my attention to a corner, and—I saw him, with a quick catch of the breath. There lay Kinnersley, curled up on the bare floor, stripped to the waist, his great torso hairy as a beast's, most curiously hairy, his head tucked down towards his knees as a dog lies—as a dog lies!

"The phrase danced ominously through my mind as I watched the unconscious man—watched him breathe heavily and settle down again into his coiled position; watched him raise a hand and flick away a stray mosquito with precisely the action of a sleepy dog—fingers and thumb close-pressed together, the whole action like the use of a great clumsy paw. . . . It was horrible to see! And if more horror were needed, as I moved slightly, my shadow moved with me and revealed, stark in the moonlight, the cause of the man's lack of appetite at dinner—a half-gnawed lump of raw meat, scarred and torn with the savaging of the teeth that, still in a human face, were rapidly becoming animal!

"As I stared, dumbfounded at this instant confirmation of Mrs. Kinnersley's story, something—perhaps a faint echo of my Celtic ancestry whispering in my modern blood—made me start, holding my breath, and listen—then like a flash draw back from the opening and, flattening myself against the outer wall, wait, my heart hammering in my throat, my eyes wandering from the moonlit veranda to the silent darkness of the bush outside, that black mouth that lay so close to the little lonely house, waiting, it seemed to my excited fancy, to engulf it. That bush! That dark,

sinister stretch of giant tree and stream and swampland, of strangling creeper and poison thorn, of beast and snake and reptile terrible and unknown; of people still more terrible, more unknown! My heart thumping queerly, strangely, in my throat, I saw the feathery head of a tall acacia wave and shiver against the clear violet sky, as something passed beneath it; and out into the white-lit clearing stepped a group of five figures. They were mere black silhouettes in the moonlight—tall, finely built men, all but one, a tiny dwarfed creature decked with wildly waving feathers and strings of beads and shells that swung and rattled in the breathless silence. . . .

“In silence they faced the house, in dead and awful silence they squatted in a semicircle opposite Kinnersley’s window; in the middle, the only one upright, the horrible hunched figure of the medicine-man stood, his arms folded across his wizened chest, his eyes gleaming uncannily in his shadowed face. For a moment they were still, motionless as so many statues, while the night wind blew softly, surprisedly, about them, and the moonlight, brilliant as day, picked out each grass-blade at their feet—then, with a suddenness that made me jump, the leader flung both arms upwards to the skies, and as if in response to a signal, there shrilled, aloud and startlingly, horribly near, that dreadful Cry!

“Let me make this quite plain—it was *not* done by the natives themselves. From where I was I could distinctly see each man, and he was squatting, rigid immovable, head bent towards the ground. It would have taken a dozen men, shouting at the full force of their lungs, to have raised that appalling yell, and these were most obviously breathing evenly, lips closed. Wild, menacing as an avenging spirit, the Cry arose, piercing and quivering, a howl whose agony wrung your heartstrings while its horror chilled your blood! The howl of a dog with the soul of a man, a beast hunting, blood-mad, savage, yet shrill with anguish and fury and despair the while it hunted . . . oh, there are no words for that ghastly hell-born sound!

“I clutched the lintel of the window to steady myself as it wailed echoing round the house—then, as a shuffling noise aroused me, turned, to face something almost as ghastly as the Cry. From the window Kinnersley was crawling, beastwise, on his hands and knees, towards the

veranda steps! As he crawled he made dreadful whimpering noises in his throat, and his eyes—well, I can't describe them. But they were phosphorescent as a wolf's in the dark, and the look in them was not that of a man. The manhood had gone from him, and I shrank away from him as he dragged himself past me, with a shudder that shook me to the very soul. As he passed I caught a whiff of a curious odour that I remembered now had struck me when I met him first, but now it was intensified, unmistakable. The rank, harsh smell of a pariah dog.

"Knowing what I do now of the man's life, I realize this probably more than anything else must have been the very expression of his innermost self—brute beast as he must have been, yet I could not but feel pity for him as I watched—watched and shivered, yet knew some power outside myself forbade me to move a muscle to save him. As the Cry wailed, rising and falling in horrible piercing cadences about the house, painfully, one by one, like a lame crawling animal, he shuffled down the steps to the ground, and with, it seemed, some vague shamed remembrance of the man he had once been, made a feeble effort at rising and facing the silent group—but vainly!

"The Cry had stilled now, yet the deathly silence that followed it seemed to my straining ears almost more terrifying, as, craning from my hiding-place, I watched the central figure, the witch-doctor, slowly stretching out a skinny arm, swing something from it in the crouching man's face—a long string of beads, it seemed, with a tiny shining thing weighting one end, a shiny something that glittered in the moonlight as it swung! It hit Kinnersley full in the face—and lo, with a broken, dreadful cry, he cowered upon the ground, scrabbling in the dirt with imploring hands, gibbering horrible incoherencies that even while I listened, ran into more horrible guttural sounds that were not words at all—he had gone already too far back for human speech! As he crouched, abject, quivering before the inexorable dark figures, I moved suddenly forward, driven by some vague impulse to do *something*.

"Whatever the man had done, it stuck in my gorge to see a white man cringing before these jungle savages; but as I moved into sight at the head of the moonlit steps, in my horror and pity for their broken victim for a moment I took my eyes from the group, and when I looked again

they were gone, vanished into the dark fastnesses of the bush like the wild things that they were—only on the ground still grovelled and whimpered That which had been a man!

“Shuddering with repulsion, yet driven by sheer pity, I leapt down to the ground and hurried towards him . . . when from the bush near by there rose again that horrible Cry, and with it, like a flash, Kinnersley rose too, and faced me, crouched upon his haunches like a dog about to spring, his eyes gleaming like red lamps, savage, horrible! I don't know why the danger of approaching him somehow never struck me, but I could not quite grasp even yet that the soul of the man was now finally withdrawn from him, and that which faced me was something for which, thank God, we have no name.

“I ran towards him, calling his name hoarsely, urgently.

“ ‘Kinnersley, Kinnersley!’

“He came—but not as comes a man to a friend. He came at me with one spring, snorting, red eyes ablaze, and before I knew it I was fighting for my life on the ground, with Kinnersley's hot breath in my face, his jaws champing and slavering, blood-mad and strong as a lion!

“As I fought I dimly realized that that infernal Cry was still howling about us, louder, more piercing than ever, with a ghastly ringing triumph in it . . . with a gasping groan I collapsed as Kinnersley's teeth met in my upraised hand—met, and bit down to the bone. . . . But with the shock of agonizing pain came a sharp report, and I knew no more.

. . . .

“There isn't much more to tell. It was Mrs. Kinnersley who, awakened by the Cry, had stolen after us, a hastily seized revolver in her hand. She had seen the end of the scene I had witnessed, and tells me she shrieked to me not to go down to meet Kinnersley—her quick woman's mind had leapt to the horrible truth before my blundering intuition had grasped it. She had shot to save me—and shot to kill, knowing instantly that for his own sake now it was better to kill quickly and kindly the raging wild thing that had once been Kinnersley, a man like other men.

“She cauterized my wound at once, and so, I am convinced, saved my life a second time. . . .

“We found the strange thing that had been flung in

Kinnersley's face twined about his wrist afterwards, and it gave a hint of what had set the men of Pemba so terribly against him. It was a native woman's bead necklace—but hung on one end was Kinnersley's signet-ring, tied there with a piece of office twine. . . . Mrs. Kinnersley told me afterwards that she had suspected for long that he had had a native mistress before she came out. He used to let little things fall, talk in his sleep, and she found one or two native ornaments, a woman's embroidered *sari* and so on, hidden in various corners of the little house. Evidently, putting two and two together, Kinnersley had sent his native mistress packing when he got tired of her, and she had gone back to her own people vowing vengeance—for she loved Kinnersley, after the manner of women, despite his drunken brutalities.

"Unfortunately for Kinnersley, he did not see fit to accompany her dismissal with a handsome present, and her father, being the head-man of his tribe, chose to take this slighting as an insult . . . and set in motion their pet charm, spell—whatever you like to call it. Anyway, there it is—and you'll find, anywhere you go, if you mention Pemba to any fellow who's been there he'll dodge the subject of the Dogs. . . . They are a sore point with a good many people. You see, Hugh Kinnersley's not the only man who got—caught—by the Dogs of Pemba. Ugh, it's a horrible thought! Let's forget it—hand out another peg, Colefax."

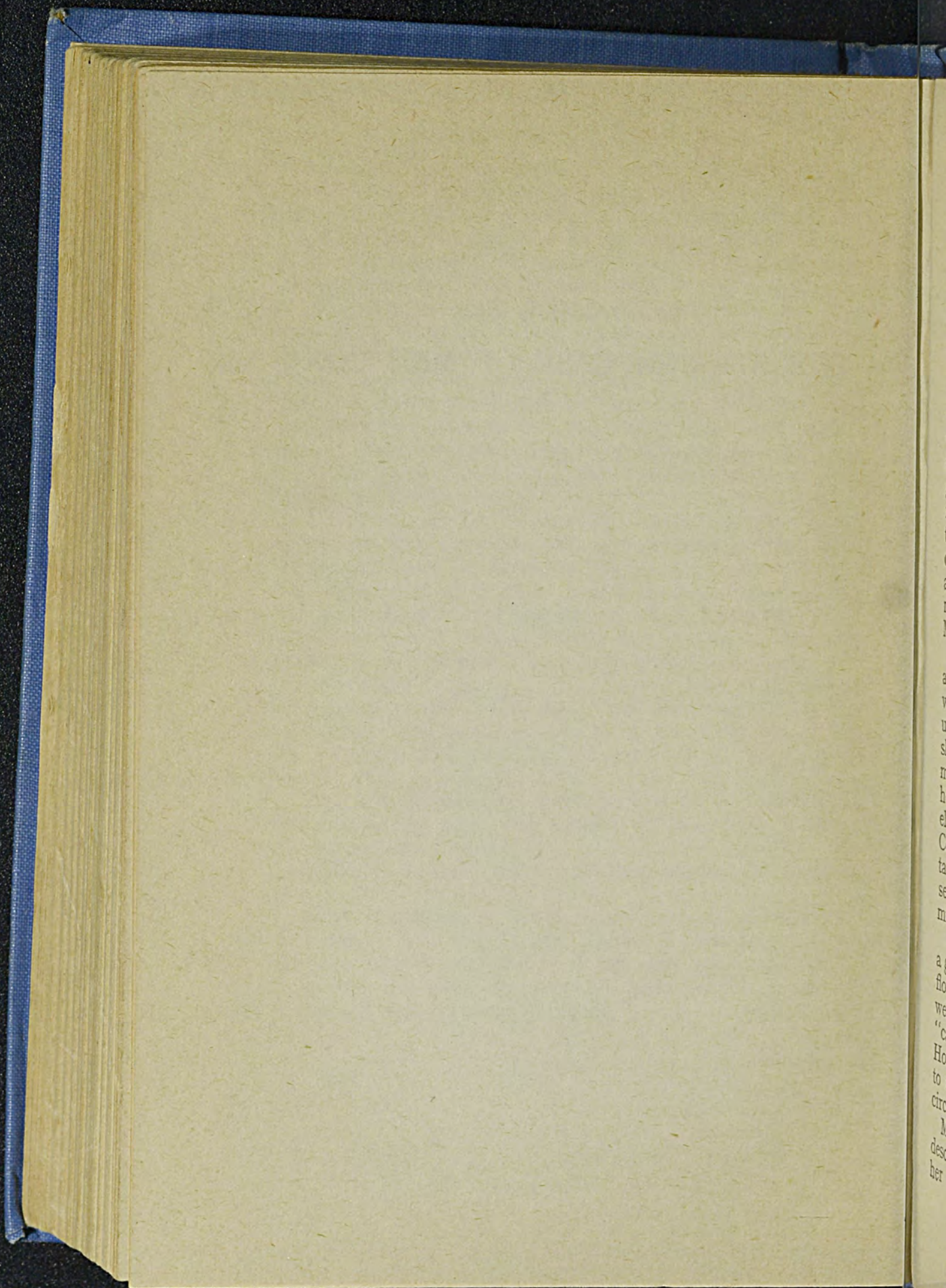
"But Mrs. Kinnersley—poor little soul?" Colefax, at the sentimental age, was always interested in women. "What became of her?"

Old Garnett's face crinkled into half-amused, half-tender lines.

"Mrs. Kinnersley? Well, well—come to dinner one night before you sail, Colefax, and I'll introduce you to her—the biggest compliment I can pay you—since Mrs. Kinnersley has been Mrs. Garnett, bless her, since we left Pemba to find a parson together."

The Dreamer's Tale

THE STRANGE CASE OF MISS COX



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The Dreamer's Tale

THE STRANGE CASE OF MISS COX

MISS CATHERINE COX sat on a bench in the sunshine in Kensington Gardens, and stared before her. The afternoon was bright and sunny, the first after a long spell of rainy weather, and Miss Cox basked thankfully in the unaccustomed luxury of warmth; albeit her incurable instincts of gentility warned her that the welcome sunshine that was making it possible to sit thus in comfort was at the selfsame time showing up with cruel clarity the patches and darns on her black serge skirt, the piteous thinness of her jacket, and the fact that her carefully washed grey gloves were not even cheap kid, but cotton, blatant and unmistakable. Miss Cox eyed them wistfully.

Things would not, she felt, be so bad if she could only afford a new hat and a pair of real suède gloves—nice gloves were the hallmark of a lady, or so her dear mother always used to say! But even then, her clothes were lamentably shabby. True, Cousin Harriet had intimated that she might shortly be sending a bundle of cast-off garments to her poor relation, but alas, the prospect did nothing to elevate Miss Cox's spirits; depressed them rather, since Cousin Harriet was a large and bouncing widow whose taste in clothes was flamboyant rather than ladylike, and sensitive little Miss Cox winced as she wondered what might emerge from the bundle this time.

Last time it had been that dreadful magenta-satin coat, a green georgette *négligé*, and a hat of gold tissue with paste flowers. Garments that had provided Miss Cox with a welcome opportunity of showing the charwoman who "came in to 'elp as a favour" at Ramsay House Private Hotel, Lancaster Gate, that a true gentlewoman knows how to recognize good service, no matter how straitened her circumstances may be.

Miss Cox would have shuddered at the thought of describing herself as "poor". In common with most of her pathetic sisterhood, when the unrefined subject of

money cropped up in conversation, she alluded gracefully to her "means not being what they might", or to "having, alas, to manage on a very small income, owing to family misfortunes". To describe oneself, *tout court*, as "poor" would have made Miss Cox shudder to the very backbone of her half-starved little body. But disguise it never so gracefully, Miss Cox *was* poor—poor with that most tragic poverty of all, the helpless, defenceless poverty of the shabby-genteel—the piteous poverty of the gentlewoman never brought up to soil her white hands with honest labour.

Not that Miss Cox would not have worked most willingly, had she only known how; but a capacity for arranging flowers, doing a little trivial painting and embroidery, playing the piano, again trivially, and with the "piece" carefully propped up before her, does not warrant one's applying for any situation that Miss Cox had ever heard of; even if she had had the temerity to walk into a Labour Exchange, which she certainly had not. Therefore, like others of her calibre, tragic survivals of the cruel Victorian age that educated women for one profession only—that of marriage—she painfully filled her empty existence with foolish little tasks: the cleaning and tidying of her gloomy, low-roofed bed-sitting-room; the mending of garments almost beyond the magic of her industrious needle and thread; the reading and re-reading of her tiny hoard of old-fashioned books. These things, with church twice o' Sundays, a walk taken "for the benefit of her health" once a day, and occasionally—oh, so occasionally!—the festivity of tea with kindly, vulgar Cousin Harriet at Lyons' Corner House, or, more rarely, with one of her few women friends, poor and lonely and courageous as herself, made up her life—a life of loneliness so grim and terrifying that the mind shudders even to think of it. A life common enough, God knows, since their numbers are legion, these poor ladies—yet harder on Miss Cox than on most, for Miss Cox was a woman made for love.

Once—it seemed long ago, when one looked at the faded, wistful little face under the prim black velvet hat, pinched and dusty as its owner—but once, Miss Cox had been as young as the best, and prettier than most. Fair and pink-and-white and laughing, a dimpled girl-thing made for kissing—at least so one young man had thought, so sincerely that when he was killed in an ambush laid for his landing-

party in the Andamans, they found a photograph signed "Kitty" tucked inside his waistcoat pocket. . . .

It had been with many a secret qualm that eighteen-year-old Kitty Cox had stolen that same photograph from the family album in response to young Lieutenant Wilson's pleadings, as it was with many a secret tear that she heard of his death; but in those days for a declaration of love between man and maid to be made before Papa's sanction had been obtained or even requested, was an unthinkable thing, a piece of immodesty on one side and of effrontery on the other that would have raised a fine storm in the Cox household. Besides, "A penniless officer, my dear—ridiculous! Impossible!" So little Kitty Cox held her tongue and said nothing, and ultimately, since Time heals all sorrows, forgot—or nearly . . . but, it seemed, not quite.

For it was odd that this afternoon, for the first time for many years, Miss Cox stared before her and thought of her long-dead lover, of his youth and gaiety and good looks; of her own dreams and hopes, long forgotten. . . . She awoke from her reverie with a jerk as a whining voice spoke at her side. A shabby, shambling old man holding a bunch of balloons was standing before her, his black shadow blotting out the yellow glory of the sunshine. An incredibly dirty old man, in a long coat green with age and a battered brown trilby hat—yet the tangle of balloons he held shone like floating jewels against the blue. Ruddy orange, green clear as a piece of priceless jade, crocus-purple, crimson, blood-scarlet, lemon-yellow and silvery mauve . . . like delicate live things they jostled and bobbed against each other in the stirring of the soft spring wind, straining at the strings, all impatient to be gone, a fleet of fairy airships unwillingly held to anchor! Miss Cox caught her breath on a sudden little gasp of wondering delight, and the old man smiled at her, his eyes two blue sparks in his brown and wrinkled face.

"Buy a balloon, lidy? On'y sixpence each!"

His voice was the whining voice of the professional beggar. Miss Cox hesitated, on the verge of eager assent, but common sense spoke in time, and her thin little hands closed together tightly upon her shabby black leather purse. Sixpence? To-morrow her meagre weekly allowance was due, but for to-night she only had these six pennies, having

rashly spent twopence for the green iron chair she sat upon. Sixpence, however, would just buy a dinner of sorts—it was not the first time Miss Cox had had to dine off sixpence.

There was a little shop she knew. . . . Threepence bought a plate of good thick soup with a dumpling in it; twopence more, bread and an infinitesimal portion of cheese; and a penny, a cup of coffee—bad coffee, but plenty of it; and Miss Cox would rather not dine at all than forgo her coffee. She drank coffee after dinner from the same instinct that leads a man to continue to dress for dinner out in the Bush—from a vague feeling that it helped her self-respect as a gentlewoman. She shook her head and glanced resolutely away from the vendor of balloons and his glorious freight of temptation, now pulling hard at their moorings, yearning to be up and away into the waiting blue.

“No. I don’t want to buy—go away.”

Her tone was firm, but inwardly she was faltering, desperate with a sudden insane desire for a balloon—the topmost, she rather thought, the huge gleaming, silvery-green beauty that swam against the sky like a fantastic fish afloat in a fairy sea . . . but she drove back the impulse fiercely, horrified at herself. She was crazy! Waste precious pennies on a child’s toy? The sudden heat must have affected her head! Terrible; she must be very careful . . . she shook her head again energetically, but the man still lingered, playing idly with his balloons whilst he watched her.

“No? They’re new—beauties. Big ’uns—watch ’em in the sun, eh? Fairy boats, I call ’em. . . . Watch!”

He dandled them temptingly up and down in the sunlight. Miss Cox turned away, biting her lip. How she wanted one! Somehow it seemed that more than anything in the world she wanted a coloured balloon, to see it float up, up and away into the watching sky till it melted and became one with it, fading away like a delicately coloured dream. . . . She shook her head again, and shut her eyes as she heard the man’s reply—an odd reply, rather, or so she thought afterwards.

“No? You’d better! Better while you’ve the chance; ’t isn’t every day you get it. . . .”

His feet crunched on the gravel path as he sauntered away. Miss Cox shut her eyes against the temptation to

call him back, then opened them quickly at a sound, a quick patter of running feet coming down the path. As Miss Cox opened her eyes she saw a child come flying past, trip on a loose stone and fall flat, with a sudden wail of pain and fear. Miss Cox sprang from her seat and caught up the small creature. It was evidently one of those parties of slum-bred children that occasionally, in the charge of a few older brothers or sisters, leave their native courts and alleys for an afternoon among the blessed green of one of London's myriad great gardens miscalled "the Parks". Not a pretty child—a sharp-featured London *gamin*, with a freckled nose and wild elflocks of bright red hair above a dirty green-plaid flannel frock, with dusty brown cotton socks and cracked shoes. . . . Yet it was a child, and hurt and sobbing; and love-hungry little Miss Cox hushed and comforted and petted till the weeping stopped and the mite stared up at her, puzzled, suspicious, but consoled.

"There, there!" purred Miss Cox, wiping the scraped little red knee with her carefully washed cambric handkerchief. "Now it's all right, darling . . . but tell me, how did you come to run so fast?"

The imp jerked a grubby thumb after the balloon-seller, now strolling some distance away down the Broad Walk, his wares bobbing and gleaming over his shoulder.

"Wan'ed a ball!" he mumbled. "Never see a boo'ful ball like that—an' I fallled and hurt meself!"

The piteous underlip began to roll outwards again, but Miss Cox sprang to her feet with a sudden resolve. "Never see a ball like that!" Ah, but that was too piteous. A gleam of enchantment, of happiness for this poor little beauty-starved shadow who for one day had escaped from the City's murk and squalor—what did it matter if she went without dinner for once? The doctors all advised fasting at times. . . . And besides, she had a few Osborne biscuits still in a tin at home. . . . At least, she hoped so! In any case. . . . The vendor of balloons turned with a jerk as a breathless voice called to him.

"Hi! . . . Wait a moment, please! I have changed my mind! Will you give me one of your best balloons?"

The grubby little figure raced away in the sunshine clinging fast to the string of his chosen glory, its ruddy

globe soaring and dancing just above his equally ruddy head. Watching, little Miss Cox smiled happily to herself, relieved, content, then turned and caught her breath in surprise, to find the balloon-seller still at her side—the balloon-seller whom she had imagined shambling away five minutes ago in search of another customer! Behind his battered hat and streaming wild hair the magical fleet still strained at anchor, but he was holding out a long brown hand on which lay a huge and marvellous globe of sunny yellow . . . in the sun his eyes looked blue as stars, amazingly, marvellously blue, as they stared straight into hers.

“Take your balloon! You’ve bought it!” What did he mean, and why did she feel, suddenly and oddly, that there was something altogether curious and unusual about him? She drew back a little, but his voice was soothing, charming, the professional beggar’s whine strangely vanished—and oh, how the yellow balloon gleamed, dancing and quivering, in the sunshine!

“You’ve bought it, I say. Take it. You won’t find such another!” He laughed suddenly. Was it the light dazzling her eyes, or the heat affecting her again, Miss Cox wondered, for he sounded at once near and far away; and she could not see him quite clearly, the light seemed to dance and dazzle so!

“Freight it with your soul and let go, little lady . . . but watch. Be careful! It’s the coming back that’s the difficulty. Unless, of course, you don’t *want* to come back. . . .”

The voice died away. It seemed to Miss Cox afterwards that she must have been standing in the Broad Walk for a long time staring at the balloon in her hand—golden, glittering, resplendent, its smooth, shining sphere clear as a piece of sun-kissed amber. A long time, it must have been, since the Balloon Man had totally disappeared. Afar off, the crimson balloon fluttered above the heads of a group of slum-children, as Nicky of Bethnal Green displayed his treasure, and, seeing it, Miss Cox heaved a sigh of relief. It was all right—it *was* real!

She had really seen the Balloon Man, and—she supposed—bought two balloons instead of one, driven by that mad impulse. . . . She supposed he had agreed to take threepence each instead of sixpence, though she could not

remember the transaction at all clearly. Anyway, it didn't matter. The main thing was she had her balloon, if she *had* gone without dinner for it; and strangely enough, she no longer cared about dinner very much. She felt as if no food would ever interest her any more . . . walking weakly back to her seat in the sunshine, Miss Cox wondered vaguely why, not knowing that there comes a stage in semi-starvation, when, a little lightheaded with lack of nourishment, the mere thought of food either nauseates or else becomes utterly dull and uninteresting.

Sitting down, she examined her treasure tenderly, lovingly, and discovered an odd thing—that just below the neck of the balloon hung a tiny paper boat! A flimsy, ridiculous little fragment of paper, yet palpably a boat, shaped like an airship's "cabin" and securely fastened to the rubber neck of the balloon with fine white thread. Smiling, Miss Cox eyed it and wondered. That was odd—a real balloon, complete with passenger accommodation! Ready to float to Fairyland, or wherever good balloons travel to; she laughed aloud at her own fantasy, and let the great yellow globe float gently up into the air as she held its string tight in one grey-gloved hand.

A new idea. She had never heard of it, but people were always bringing out new things, and this looked charming, the stately golden galleon of the skies bearing aloft its little boat, freighted with dreams . . . a vague recollection drifted through Miss Cox's mind as the yellow ball soared high and higher, tugging gently at her restraining hand.

"Freight it with your soul . . . and let go." Why, that was what she wanted to do so much, so much! To "let go"—to float away—away over the earth; away from petty anxieties; from worries and pains and fears. To leave behind the stuffiness and discomforts of Ramsay House Private Hotel, to rise so far that there was nothing but sunshine, sunshine and blue skies, and at night the twinkling far-away stars and the prim-faced moon, the moon that always somehow reminded Miss Cox of pictures of old Queen Victoria. If she was only in the little paper boat of that balloon!—if she could only creep inside and let go and float away, carried by the soft winds over the whispering, startled trees, nodding together as she rose above them! Dear God, to rise above it all, to forget

everything in life but the few dear and sweet and kindly things that lingered, thank heaven, in one's memory and saved one from utter bitterness and despair. . . .

To forget everything but thoughts of the old home! The bark of sweet-tempered Mick, the spaniel, dead these forty years; the laughter of the village children at play upon the green; the pink-and-white glory of the blossoming pear-trees in the vicarage garden; the pungent crispness of the ginger-nuts that Mamma made on high days and holidays, and her laughter as she scolded you for tasting. The sight and smell of the fields at home, yellow-carpeted, thick with cowslips . . . why, it was in a field of cowslips that she had first met Jack Wilson, of course!

When she was a girl of sixteen, in a stiff white muslin frock and blue hair-ribbon, and he was a naval cadet. How the sun had shone and sparkled on his curly fair hair as he had stood, cap in hand, beside her; a little shy, a little tongue-tied, as she too had been, but with his blue eyes seeking hers, downcast, afraid . . . ah, how long, how long ago, and yet how sweet, how strong, the cowslips smelt. How warm the sun was. . . . Why, how extraordinary! Indeed, this was a most curious dream . . . for it seemed that she was, actually, looking down upon a wide carpet of yellow cowslips, just beneath the drifting balloon, dragging its cord among them with a soft shurring noise!

It was, of course, an absurd dream—but how wonderful, how real it seemed. The sky was blue and calm above, and very far off lay a belt of purple hills, with white clouds drifting softly like cotton-wool along their wrinkled sides, and at their feet, dark sleeping forests that ran down to a distant line of glittering blue that could only mean the Sea! And as far as hills and forests and distant sea there stretched the glorious carpet of cowslips, fluttering tiny golden banners in the soft and scanted breeze like flags of greeting, with an eager little sound like the clapping of a million fairy hands. . . .

Dazed and speechless, Miss Cox glanced down at her own hands, gripping the boat's paper rim, and saw that they were small and white and dimpled, with black velvet bracelets below the puffed white muslin sleeves, the hands of a girl! She touched her cheeks gently, unbelieving, and knew them soft and round; touched her hair, thick-curling under its blue ribbon snood—knew, and sobbed

aloud for joy and amazement as a voice called her, a voice dear and welcome above all others in this world or any other!

"Come down, Kitty, my darling—Kitty, sweetheart, come down to me!"

Of course . . . he would be there. Had she not known it? Just as she remembered him, standing bareheaded, knee-deep among the cowslips, the light turning his tousled fair head to a halo of glory; his eyes blue as hyacinths; laughing intent on hers as she drifted above him in her fairy boat?

Just for a brief second the wing of fear brushed against her soul as she looked down. Something . . . there was something . . . she could not remember now. But there was something familiar in those eyes, in darling Jack's eyes, that reminded her of someone she had seen long ago—of someone who sold balloons . . . someone who had warned her of something? She could not remember who, nor what he looked like, but he had had blue eyes, most oddly like Jack's own. Blue eyes, bright blue—eyes that were somehow not quite—real . . . and he had said something, warned her . . . something stupid about "not getting back". But pshaw, this was foolish! Why was she wasting time trying to remember a mere fantastic dream when Jack—her own, her darling Jack—stood and called to her from among the cowslips, stood stretching his arms out, begging her to leap into them?

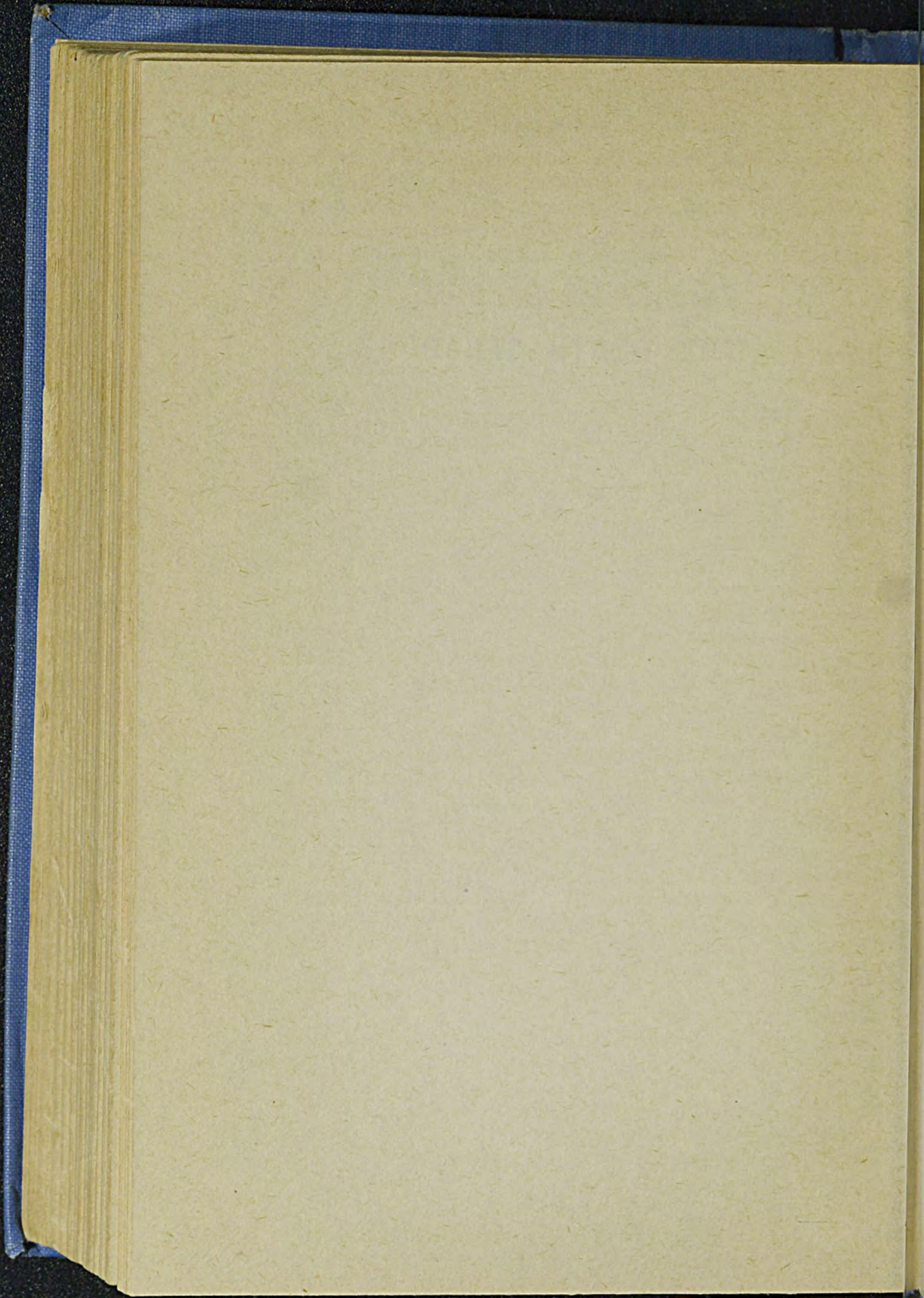
She was, somehow, a little afraid, she did not know why . . . but it was not far, and Jack would catch her. She could not understand quite how all this came to happen; things were curiously vague and dim, but in any case she did not care. She must choose—she must decide quickly, for the balloon was rising, it seemed; she must jump quickly or be carried away, perhaps for always, back into . . . into what? She did not know, she could not remember, but it was something dark and lonely and terrible . . . somewhere where she had been imprisoned for ages and ages, it seemed. . . . Oh, God, no! Wait, Jack, wait! I am coming to you! Hold out your arms, my darling, my love. . . .

The verdict, after some little discussion, was "Found

dead", and the strange case of Miss Catherine Cox soon forgotten. But it was for long a puzzle to the Coroner, who was a conscientious man, as to the doctor—with whom he frequently discussed the affair afterwards—how it came to pass that a woman, sitting peacefully upon a seat in a public park, could possibly come to die of a broken neck.

The Schoolmaster's Tale

THE DEATH STRAP



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The Schoolmaster's Tale

THE DEATH STRAP

MR. SAMUEL BENDIGO was a dealer in antiques. In *real* antiques, may I hasten to declare, although the dark, beetle-browed entrance of his tiny shop in Yeld Passage, Camden Town, did not, to the casual observer, hold out any very great promise of treasure trove within. It was a dark, ugly little shop-front, clumsily built into a dark, ugly little house; yet Mr. Bendigo and his timid little wife had lived and thrived there happily and successfully for at least twenty-seven years, and looked forward to handing on, in due time, a flourishing business to their only son, David Bendigo, who at thirteen already showed a taste and aptitude for judging old china, glass, pictures and furniture that was encouraging in the extreme.

David Bendigo was small, pale and plumpish, like his father; a solemn little boy with glasses; diligent at his books and almost unbelievably good and obedient at home. There *are* such boys, strange as it may sound! Mrs. Bendigo, as has been stated, was a timid woman, devoted to her husband and son, as to her home; an admirable cook and manager, and no mean assistant to her husband when times were busy. Mr. Bendigo, on the contrary, was as sharp as his wife was timid. Thin-haired, paunchy, and spectacled; fifty years of age, and attached permanently to a rusty brown velveteen jacket. The rest of the family consisted of a small maid, who regarded the Bendigo family as semi-Olympians; a large yellow cat, who regarded them as no such thing; and an enormous family of mice, whose periodic attacks on her well-stocked larder drove Mrs. Bendigo at times almost to madness.

In a word, it was a comfortable, happy, humdrum little household, contented in its monotonous existence and no wise anxious to change it. But after the way of things, a change was imminent—a change drastic and terrible in the extreme—though certainly there was nothing about the tall and shabby stranger who stooped his way beneath the low

browed lintel one gusty noon in March, to inquire the price of a certain piece of carved ivory in the window, to indicate that he brought with him Tragedy, lean and threatening!

Mr. Bendigo rose, hastily bolting a lump of bread-and-butter well smeared with anchovy paste. He was eating his frugal lunch at the time, in the shelter of a gorgeous red, black and gold Coromandel screen that fenced away the desk from the rest of the shop; and the stranger's advent disconcerted him a trifle, as the arrival of a customer during the hours of one and two was distinctly unusual. The little dealer advanced into the shop murmuring vague excuses, conscious of crumbs on his waistcoat and a general air of moist greasiness; but the stranger was obviously heedless of anything so unimportant as the appearance of the owner of the shop. Cutting brusquely through Mr. Bendigo's murmured apologies, he nodded in the direction of the crowded window.

"The price of that carved tusk in the corner? I collect ivories, and it seems a good bit. I suppose it's a genuine antique?"

Mr. Bendigo flushed with wounded pride as he fumbled about among the dusty treasures in the little window after the long curved slip of ivory.

"Everything 'ere's genuwine, sir—unless I get took in, and that don't orten happen. This is a pertickerly good piece. I bought it from Sir George Waltham when he broke up 'is collection of Chinese stuff a month or so ago."

The stranger dumped a collection of odd parcels, books, papers, upon the counter as he took the lovely parchment-tinted thing in his hands, studying the delicate lace-like carving, the tiny figures, with an appreciation that brought a gleam of sympathy to the little dealer's eyes.

"Ah! Of course I know his reputation as a collector. This is a good piece; what d'you want for it?"

Ensued the usual polite fencing that invariably takes place during such transactions, but Mr. Bendigo was no shark, albeit an astute little man enough; and in a few moments the stranger, well content, deposited the precious tusk, carefully wrapped in soft paper, in one of the capacious pockets of his ulster, and sweeping up his varied parcels, departed, while an equally contented Mr. Bendigo, rubbing his hands, turned once more to his interrupted feast.

Passing the counter, after shutting the door on his customer's heels he struck his foot against something, and, glancing down, saw a small brown-paper packet roughly tied with string, reposing against the leg of a Sheraton chair. Remembering the array of bundles that had been hung about the stranger, Mr. Bendigo picked it up and hurried to the door; but the long lean man had already disappeared into the greyness of the dull March day. After standing a moment looking up and down the street, the dealer shrugged his shoulders and, shutting the shop door, returned to his solitary meal, throwing the package carelessly into the drawer of his desk. If it was of any value, the stranger would return to claim it anon. . . . Meantime it would be safe there.

Mr. Bendigo dismissed the matter, yawning, from his mind, and by the morrow, engrossed in business interests, the stranger and his parcel were forgotten. For a time at least, life went on for the little household much as usual. Business was flourishing; the weather, turning mild, gave Mrs. Bendigo's rheumatism a chance to, as she phrased it, "let up on her for a while"; David's school reports came back with almost boring regularity and excellence as he progressed in grace and learning . . . when suddenly a bombshell burst, and in a flash the peaceful atmosphere of the shop in Yeld Passage was shattered like a pane of glass in a thunderstorm!

Long afterwards, Mrs. Bendigo realized that the oncoming of the Terror was not entirely unheralded—but the shadow it cast before it as it stole upon them was so vague and impalpable, so faint, that for all, on looking back, one could see its darkness overshadowing life, yet at the time one dismissed it as "nerves", "imagination", "being run down", that useful explanation of all human ills.

It was less than a month after the advent of the stranger, in truth, that David began to have Dreams. He did not mention them for a time; merely appeared at breakfast heavy-eyed and rather silent, disinclined for the excellent porridge and bacon on which his busy little mother insisted on his starting the day. Even when, casually, he mentioned the fact that he was Having Dreams—disquieting Dreams—his parents were inclined to pooh-pooh them as mere tokens of boyish ill-health. Mrs. Bendigo promptly

instituted a course of saline medicine, to cool the blood, and Mr. Bendigo administered some herbal pills, warranted to ensure sound sleep—yet the boy remained obstinately white, depressed and spiritless.

Questioned subsequently, in private, by a secretly worried mother, he said rather fretfully that he couldn't say precisely of what the said dreams consisted! They were just—dreams; rather alarming dreams, certainly, for he invariably woke with a jerk, sweating, cold with some vague indefinite fright. He had a cloudy impression that a sudden terrible fall, the sensation of stepping off solid ground into thin air, as one might step sheer over the edge of a cliff, was invariably the forerunner of this awakening. He also had the memory of a curiously constricted feeling about wrists, ankles and throat, for which he could not account at all . . . also, oddest thing of all, he had developed a definite yet unaccountable fear of heights!

This having been discovered by some of his schoolmates, he endured tortures during recess by being forced, if they could get him into a corner away from the master in charge, to walk along the top of the twelve-foot brick wall that ringed the playground. This, the boy declared, now gave him a sensation of sheer naked terror—yet, although he had been at no time a boy given to sports, he had shown no especial terror of heights before; once, indeed, he had walked along that very playground wall from end to end for some boyish bet.

Puzzled, alarmed with a faint yet growing alarm, Mrs. Bendigo listened and comforted, yet said no word to her husband, after the manner of wives. But all these vague, unformed fears in her motherly heart culminated in a sudden and unpleasant shock one day, about two months after the day on which this story opens. Busily pottering about her warm little kitchen, making shepherd's pie, savoury with rings of onion and cloaked with browned potatoes, in the old-fashioned way Mr. Bendigo loved, Mrs. Bendigo's attention was abruptly diverted from her housewifely task by a sudden call in her husband's voice from the shop—a call sharp with tensed anxiety.

"Katie . . . come quick!"

Wiping her hands on her apron, the little woman ran up the few dark steps that led from the kitchen to the level of parlour and shop; ran through the cosy parlour to the

crowded little shop, and caught her breath in sudden mortal terror—for David lay flat along the counter, his head supported on his father's arm, while Mr. Towser, the headmaster of St. Enoch's School, the great Mr. Towser himself in person, stooped anxiously over his pupil, administering brandy and sal volatile!

As his mother rushed forward the boy's eyes opened, and he smiled, a faint, scared smile that culminated in an outburst of half-hysterical tears of relief as her comforting arms closed about him. . . . Ten minutes later, the patient safely tucked into bed with a hot-water bottle, a drink of warm milk, and a new number of the *Boy's Own* to distract his obviously overstrung mind, the anxious little parents faced the schoolmaster in a state of distress quite pitiable. What had happened—what in the world? . . . yet Mr. Towser's explanation merely landed them in a fresh fog of bewilderment.

It seemed that one of the boys had come rushing in, when the rest of the school trooped back to class from the eleven o'clock recess, with a white, scared face, and the information that he had found "Bendy", as Dave was known to his fellows, lying in a heap in a corner of the playground, having evidently fallen off a carefully erected pile of stones and flower-pots. Not that there was anything vastly odd about this; the boy might have been piling up a stack of things simply in order to mount them and peer into the road. Yet there were one or two things, Mr. Towser admitted, that struck him, on reaching the spot, as somewhat unusual.

Firstly, the boy had chosen a corner where the wall joined the main building, where there was no road and consequently nothing to see; secondly, there was a short iron hook lying on the ground beside him, a hook that was newly wrenched from its position just under the coping of the twelve-foot wall, an old hook that had been there so long in the wall that its original purpose was long forgotten, unless it had once served to swing a lantern to light the old school-yard. This hook had evidently been wrenched from the wall by some weight swung upon it for a moment, some weight which it had proved too frail, being eaten deep with rust, to bear.

It seemed that the boy, for some obscure reason, must have climbed up on the heap of stones, reached for the

hook and swung himself off into space, when, thank heaven, the hook giving way, he had fallen unhurt . . . but although Mr. Towser made as light as possible of the whole affair when describing it to the harassed little father and mother, treating it as a mere boyish prank, it could not be denied that the prank bore a strange and sinister air. Closely questioned, the schoolmaster reluctantly admitted the ominous fact that he had found noosed about the boy's throat a broken length of window cord . . . and the further still more ominous fact that the lad had strapped both his ankles firmly together, as if to prevent himself struggling, with a worn piece of greyish webbing! It almost seemed as if he had deliberately attempted to hang himself. . . .

Mrs. Bendigo shuddered wildly away from the hideous thought, and Mr. Towser hastened to reassure her—endeavouring, in truth, to reassure his own considerably agitated mind at the same time. He was, not unnaturally, anxious to avoid even a hint of possible scandal, and if—as was, of course, possible—young Bendigo, who was admittedly a studious boy, had been working too hard, and in some overwrought moment attempted to commit suicide by hanging, the story would be anything but good for the school if it once got out. Therefore Mr. Towser soothed and smiled and made light of the matter as far as possible, despite Mrs. Bendigo's anxious inquisition, advised (with the utmost sincerity, this last) a complete rest from books and school for a while, talked airily about "foolhardiness", "venturesome lads", and so on, and departed, leaving Mr. Bendigo more or less satisfied—but not so Mrs. Bendigo.

Firstly, she knew that "venturesome" or "foolhardy" were the last words truly descriptive of the shy, bespectacled David, and as soon as she deemed it wise, she set to work to interrogate her son cautiously, tactfully, on the story of his mysterious collapse. But here she found herself up against a curious and unexpected difficulty. While David admitted at once that he remembered making up his mind to build a pile of stones at that particular corner of the playground, wait until his schoolmates trooped back into class, and then mount the pile, he could not explain the presence of the wrenched-out iron hook beside him, except that he "supposed he must have caught hold of it to steady himself", but further than this he would not go, and

indeed, quite obviously could not, since his memory of the incident seemed oddly blurred and muddled.

The boy himself was both puzzled, frightened and angry at thus finding himself in a position he could neither understand, justify nor explain, owing to some odd clouding of memory. Mr. Towser, on being appealed to, instantly explained that this was obviously due to his having received a knock on the head in falling, which had blurred all memories of what took place a few seconds before . . . for want of another, at last both David and his mother accepted this explanation, and weary with fruitless discussion and speculation, proceeded to endeavour to forget the episode.

Overjoyed, as David got back his colour and energy again, Mrs. Bendigo showered her ewe-lamb with "treats", with little gifts of all sorts, while Mr. Bendigo, filled with the same shamefaced desire to make much of his son, discovering that the satchel hitherto used by David to carry his school books was now so inadequate for his needs that it was supplemented perforce by an extra strapful of books, went down to the City one day and returned bearing a huge and magnificent satchel of shining brown leather. The discarded satchel and strap were promptly bestowed upon the grateful little servant, Daisy, the recipient of all the Bendigo cast-offs, and peace resumed its old sway at the little shop in Yeld Passage—but, alas, only for a time.

It was less than two weeks afterwards that Mrs. Bendigo had occasion to reprimand Daisy for listlessness, for idling over her work—the girl burst suddenly into tears half-way through the lecture, and startled, her kindhearted mistress stopped at once.

"Daisy—aren't you well, my girl? What's the matter?"

Daisy sniffed dismally, mopping her streaming eyes. Between her sobs Mrs. Bendigo managed to elicit the murmur that she "felt so bad—so tired. Couldn't sleep, she dreamed so bad. . . ." A curious cold chill ran down the listening woman's back. Dreams—*again*? But this was, *must* be, a mere coincidence! Yet it was odd and somehow sinister, that David had, only a little while ago, talked so much of dreams, though since his accident he had said nothing about them, seemed quite normal again in every way. . . . What sort of dreams was Daisy having? With a curious sense of foreboding she heard the girl's hesitating reply.

Difficult to say, but dreams that made 'er feel cold and frightened—dreams as if someone was after 'er with a rope, or else as if she was goin' to walk straight orf something! Straight orf-like, into nothing . . . and a funny feeling as if 'er 'ands and feet was tied fast, so's she couldn't move. With a sinking heart Mrs. Bendigo put another question.

"Have you got to dislike being on a height, Daisy? Cleaning the attic windows, for instance?"

Daisy's eyes widened in amaze.

"Why, yes, that I 'ave, mum! Can't abide cleaning them windows naow, and as for standing out on the leads to feed the sparrers like I used to do, I simply daren't now—feel something's going to take and push me orf. It's nerves, I guess. . . ."

Mrs. Bendigo hastily agreed that it was nerves, and, promising to buy Daisy a bottle of the most nauseating nerve-tonic to be got, dismissed a rather gratified maid-servant to her duties—but it was a very sober little matron who resumed her own. She remained preoccupied and worried even when Mr. Bendigo returned at eventide, from an expedition to Dorking, with an undoubted Early-Victorian whatnot triumphantly in tow. Indeed, her lack of interest in the bargain surprised and annoyed the little man not a little, and he ate his favourite supper of soused herrings, cheese and cold apple-pie in a haughty silence that, to his further surprise, passed almost unnoticed by his absent mate.

Supper over, the table was cleared, the "things" washed up by David and his mother together—a time-honoured custom on Daisy's nights-out; but to-night their customary laughter and joking was lacking; the atmosphere was curiously oppressive, heavy and chill as a Quaker Meeting House, despite the crackling fire and cheerful lamplight. For once in a while Mr. Bendigo welcomed the raucous shrieks of the home-made wireless that was David's passion, and they listened in solemn silence to a lecture on the habits of the ant, a series of gloomy part-songs and a would-be comic duologue that was even gloomier than the part-songs. Altogether, when ten o'clock struck, time for Daisy's return and bed for all, the master of the house put down his paper and, glancing at the clock, announced in a tone of palpable relief that it was "time all good folk was in their cots!"

Obediently, as always, Mrs. Bendigo stuck her needles exactly together through the ball of scarlet and green wool out of which she was making a muffler for David—who, being fortunately colour-blind, cheerfully wore any and everything his devoted mother knitted for him—and rolling her work into a neat bundle, rose to her feet.

"I'll just make sure Daisy's come in—she's probably in the kitchen makin' herself some cocoa as usual," she said. "She's a good girl—generally in a little before time."

Glad, in some obscure way, to assure herself of the girl's safety, she slipped from the room and ran down the few steps to the kitchen—but it was dark and silent, unoccupied. Mrs. Bendigo hesitated a moment, chilled by a curious nameless fear—then, shaking herself mentally for a silly fool, retraced her steps to the parlour to announce the non-return of the faithful Daisy. Mr. Bendigo frowned, surprised as his wife. Daisy was rarely known to outstay her time, being so exceeding plain of feature and homely of form as to have failed entirely in attracting to herself a swain. Picking up his paper, he settled himself once more in his chair.

"You go to bed, Katie, and I'll wait for Daisy—'t isn't likely the girl 'ull be really late! You run along, young Dave, and don't stay up reading—d'ye hear?"

The door closed after the obedient wife and son, and with a little sigh of comfortable satisfaction Mr. Bendigo poured himself a fresh "nightcap" of whisky and soda and settled down to a fresh perusal of his beloved *News*. Although it was late spring, the evenings were still so chilly that a fire was necessary, and it glowed peacefully, tranquilly on the little brick hearth, warming the tips of the dealer's scuffed red leather slippers; shone on the smooth yellow fur of Tibbles, the cat, purring sleepily upon the black rag rug, and was reflected in the gleaming sides of sideboard and bookcase—and Mr. Bendigo had travelled a long way and was tired. It was not surprising, therefore, that in a very short space of time the paper slipped from his hand to the carpet, and another sound mingled with the purring of Tibbles—the heavy breathing of a man deeply and comfortably asleep.

Mr. Bendigo awoke at last with a jerk and that faint sense of guilt that always accompanies one who falls asleep in a chair instead of in his respectable couch. Staring at

the clock, he rose to his feet, startled. Twelve o'clock, and no Daisy! What in the world— Treading softly so as not to awake his sleeping wife, he went down to the kitchen, to find it still dark, still empty! Puzzled, he retraced his steps through into the shop—though not in all her long association with the Bendigo family had Daisy even been known to enter the shop, Mr. Bendigo rightly distrusting her ruthless wielding of broom and duster among antique glass, priceless Chelsea china and delicate chairs and tables. But the shop was empty as the kitchen, and Mr. Bendigo scratched his chin, confounded. Twelve o'clock—unless she had a dam' good explanation there was a rod in pickle for Miss Daisy Higgins to-morrow morning! Could there have been an accident, or the girl been took ill? Vaguely Mr. Bendigo remembered some recent comment of his wife's on the girl's paleness and listlessness . . . but, anyway, there was no use wasting time waiting up any longer. In fact, Mr. Bendigo was hanged if he did—she could wait till the morning now, and *he'd* talk to her. Firmly locking and bolting the outer doors, Mr. Bendigo raked out the last red embers of the parlour fire, and yawning, stumped his way up to bed.

Pausing, with his hand on the doorknob of the little first-floor room that had known his entire married life, he glanced up the narrow breakneck stairs that led to the second floor—"the attics", indeed, where the hope of the house of Bendigo, young David, lay sleeping in the little room next to that which should these two hours have been sheltering the recalcitrant Daisy. Dave would be sleeping now, unless he was lying reading by the light of a candle one of those books that were his passion—a passion outwardly railed at and secretly admired by his parent. But the boy had not been well—his eyes were none too strong, even with the thick-lensed glasses he habitually wore, and this reading in bed was a pernicious habit for the young. On the whole, it might be as well to assure oneself that things were quite as they should be. Mr. Bendigo, treading with even greater caution than usual, aware that the attic stairs creaked like protesting axle-pins, ascended the steep flight and, finding his son's door ajar, peeper cautiously in.

Through the dimness he could see the boy lying peacefully sleeping, a stray shaft of moonlight from the uncurtained window lying across the coverlet. Mr. Bendigo had

an old-fashioned dread of sleeping in the moonlight, and he glanced longingly at the window, wondering whether he dared risk waking the boy by crossing the creaking floor to draw the blind. But as he looked, all thought of drawing curtains, creaking floors—all but sheer astonishment—fled from his mind! Opposite the back of the Bendigo house rose the sheer wall of an old tenement building, unbroken by window or grating, and against this dull red background stood out a bright patch of colour—the reflection of the window of Daisy's lighted room, a brilliant square of orange flung upon the blank wall as a moving picture is flung upon the screen. Staring, Mr. Bendigo caught his breath in sudden incredulous amazement—then the baggage had been in all the time! But how? She must have come in and gone upstairs while he was sleeping, though that argued a stealthy type of entrance that did not appeal to Mr. Bendigo's imagination at all. As he stared at the patch of light, puzzled, indignant, something moved against it—and at the sight Mr. Bendigo gasped aloud and stood still, rooted to the spot.

Something—a long black shadow—swung across the square of orange light! Swung and swung again, to and fro, like a giant pendulum, a shadow like a grotesque puppet of stuffed rag, hanging doll-like by the neck, its tousled head lolling horribly. To and fro it swung, gently, lazily, as if moving in some devilish breeze. Realization struck, cold and sudden, at the very roots of Mr. Bendigo's soul, and forgetting David, his wife, all but the immediate and ghastly truth, he rushed wildly down the stairs . . . and in a moment the silence of Yeld Passage was rudely broken by a frantic voice that yelled, the clatter of running feet.

“Police, police—our Daisy's 'anged 'erself!”

The coroner declared, somewhat discontentedly, that it was a curious case. Here was a young woman living in a nice home with kindly people—apparently quite contented, since she had been with them four years or more. Not engaged or anything of that sort, so presumably no love-troubles—an orphan, so without a family to worry her! Yet on this particular evening, instead of taking her night off as usual, she shuts herself up in her own room, and is

subsequently found hanging from a hook in the ceiling—one of those hooks presumably originally intended to support a birdcage—having apparently jumped off the seat of a chair, after having made a noose of the belt of one of her own cotton frocks! A determined suicide too, since she had strapped her ankles together with a piece of webbing before jumping off the chair. The act must have taken place just before Mr.—er—Bendigo entered his son's room, since he states the body was still swinging when he saw it. The police confirm this, their report being that the body, when cut down, was still warm. Verdict, "temporarily insane".

It was a very subdued little family that trailed sadly back to Yeld Passage after the inquest was over—but true to her motherly instinct, on arrival home to the familiar parlour, with its cosy fire and waiting arm-chairs, Mrs. Bendigo made a valiant effort to throw off the air of depression that the tragic death of poor Daisy had inevitably cast over the house, and hurried to set out the most tempting meal she could think of, to try and cheer her two silent and oppressed companions.

Under the influence of fried fish and chips, bottled beer, and a Welsh rabbit made with Worcester sauce—a speciality of Mrs. Bendigo's own—the gloom about the table lightened gradually, and towards the end of the meal the little group, albeit still somewhat subdued, found themselves talking much after their usual fashion. Inevitably the conversation turned upon the recent tragedy, the inquest, the coroner's remarks upon the case; although Mrs. Bendigo, fearing its effects upon her beloved boy's nerves, tried in vain to divert it—but despite her endeavours David returned again and again to the subject.

Awakened by his father's shouts, the boy had huddled on a dressing-gown and followed him downstairs, not thinking, in his hurry, of looking out of the window, so that the memory of that gruesome swinging shadow on the wall was spared him . . . thank heaven, thought Mr. Bendigo with a shudder at the recollection.

David had not been allowed—greatly to his annoyance—to assist his father and the two policemen who speedily arrived, to force the lock of the attic door, nor to see the body. Mrs. Bendigo, shivering with fright, had locked the door of her bedroom, with the chafing David inside it with

her, as the body was carried downstairs; and subsequently, with the usual desire of keeping, as far as possible, all horrors and tragedies from their ewe-lamb's ears, both parents subsequently refused to discuss the tragedy with him, despite his eager questions; therefore, until the inquest, the boy really knew nothing beyond the bare fact of the tragedy, and now he pounced upon one point, the point Mr. Bendigo had desperately hoped might escape him, with the instant astuteness of youth.

"Father! What was that about Daisy strappin' her ankles together before she did it?"

It was useless to lie. Mr. Bendigo nodded soberly.

"Yes, they was strapped. With that bit of webbing you used to carry your books with, too. . . ."

Mrs. Bendigo's nudge came too late. David sat up, alert, his eyes staring at his father through their thick-lensed glasses.

"That strap? Now what do I sort of remember about that strap? It's coming back to me, in bits." His eyes lit up with sudden excitement. "That strap—why, I done it too, father. Tried to hang myself, I mean. I remember now, perfectly! *Didn't* I do it—that time I come over queer at school, and old Towser brought me back?"

"Oh, David, darling, don't talk about it—it's all too dreadful to speak of!" wailed Mrs. Bendigo desperately, but David was too hot on the track of memory to heed her.

"Of course I did—I remember now perfectly well! I had a sort of feeling—remember the dreams I used to get, dreams about stepping off a high place into the air? They kept on coming, till I got to wondering and wondering what it *would* feel like—to step clear off into nothing, to feel oneself swing loose, free!—till it fascinated me, and then one day, all of a sudden, something seemed to whisper to me: '*Try it!*' I waited till the other chaps went in, and then I piled up stones and things, and undid me collar and tie, and wound that piece of webbing round my ankles so's I couldn't save myself . . . dad, where's that bit of webbing?"

"It's still 'ere, as far as I know," said Mr. Bendigo doubtfully. "Towser brought it back round your books that day. You give it to Daisy with your old satchel—remember? It's prob'ly chucked daown in the pore girl's room."

"Oh, let the 'ole thing alone, can't you both?" wailed Mrs. Bendigo, on the verge of tears, but David was already clattering up the stairs.

Held in a tense silence, the two in the parlour heard the steps slow down, tread half-fearfully across the floor of the fatal room, pause, and descend again. As the boy entered the room, a strap of greyish webbing, weighted with a metal buckle, hanging from one hand, Mrs. Bendigo shuddered away with a weak little cry, and even Mr. Bendigo felt a cold chill creep down his spine as he surveyed the strap that had bound the ankles of one actual and one attempted suicide. A coincidence . . . and yet. . . .

"It is the same!" said David, in a tone faintly awe-stricken. "The strap I took out of your drawer downstairs, Dad, when my old one broke—I was rummaging about for something, and this thing fell out of a bit of brown paper. I used to use it to carry my extra school-books—then when you gave me that new satchel I give it to Daisy."

"Brown-paper parcel—lord!" Mr. Bendigo stared, his eyes as round as his son's. "That must be the little parcel that long feller dropped when he come in to buy something—you remember, mother, the chap that bought the ivory tusk, that awful rainy day about two months ago? I chucked the parcel into the drawer and clean forgot it, and he never come back. . . ."

A bell rang sharply below, and Mr. Bendigo started, frowning. It was long after shop hours, yet he hated to forgo a sale, and sometimes it did happen that a valuable customer happened along latish. With an irritable sigh he rose, and shuffled through the door into the shop, where a dark figure, dimly seen through the glass street door, was hammering impatiently upon the pane. Opening it, Mr. Bendigo's jaw dropped and his eyes all but bolted from his head—for it was the lean stranger who had dropped the mysterious parcel, the stranger of the ivory tusk returned as unexpectedly as he had come. The long ulstered apparition spoke as he stepped into the shop somewhat impatiently, seeing the open-mouthed amazement of the little man.

"What's the matter? For heaven's sake don't gape, my good man! I've just rediscovered you—lost your card, of course, and couldn't remember your name—been hunting you for ages, to try and find something I think I left here. A small parcel——"

"A small parcel containin' a strap?" faltered Mr. Bendigo. The stranger threw him a sharp glance and laughed ironically.

"Suppose it was beyond you not to peep inside! Yes, it *did* contain a strap, if you want to know; but no ordinary strap, believe me!"

"I got it. Oh, I got it safe enough," stammered Mr. Bendigo, torn beneath a wild desire to thrust both strap and stranger at once from his badly frightened house, and a still wilder curiosity tinged with horror. He hesitated, but curiosity won the day.

"D'you mind telling me, sir, just what sort of a strap that is? My boy, he found it one day in the drawer, and he's curious like."

The stranger laughed again, and this time his laughter seemed, to the little dealer's excited imagination, to hold a quite definitely sinister note.

"That strap, Mr. Bendigo? I am a collector, but not only of old and beautiful things! Oh, no; all's fish that comes to my net! I collect anything unusual, odd, anything with a curious history, any relic I can pick up that holds some secret association, the stranger and more terrible the better. . . ."

Mr. Bendigo became aware that David, the strap still in his hands, had ventured cautiously into the shop behind him, but he was too desperately curious to risk interrupting the stranger to bid him go, and the lean man was hurrying on.

"I've got stored away, not only carved ivories, jade, jewels and china that would make your mouth water, Mr. Bendigo, but far, far stranger things than those! I've the knife with which Mrs. Thorpe, the baby-farmer, cut up the bodies of the children she killed; I've the chair in which old Peter Godden was sitting when he was shot by his daughter; I've a Thug's cord that has strangled God knows how many men, a poison-ring of the Borgias, a Chinese executioner's axe. . . ."

His eyes glittered with an almost insane enthusiasm, and Mr. Bendigo, his heart quaking, put the final question that was trembling on his lips.

"Sir, for Gawd's sake tell us . . . what is the story of the strap?"

Snatching the strap from Dave's nerveless hands and

tucking it into his pocket, the stranger turned towards the door with a raucous laugh.

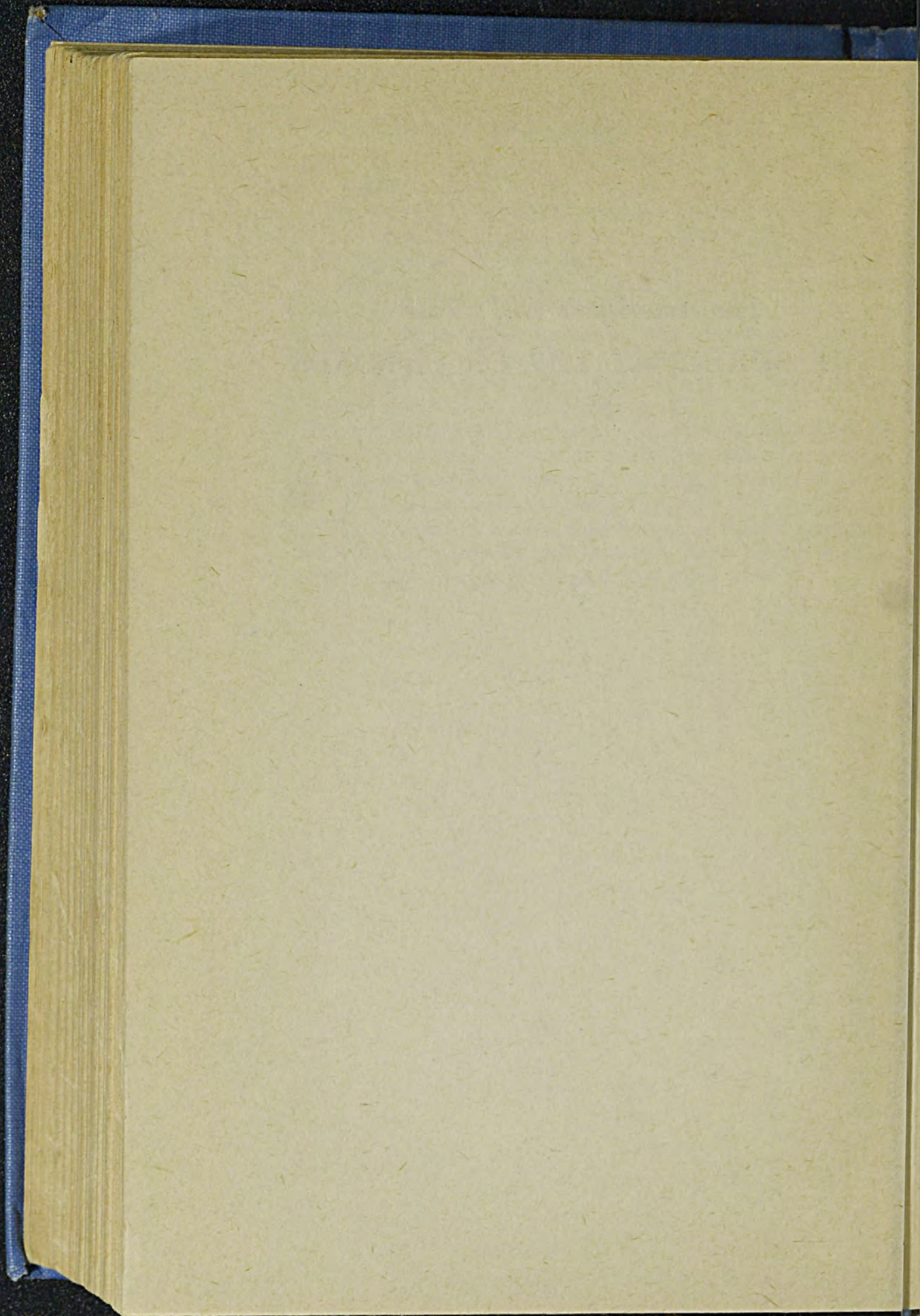
"The strap? Oh, that is the strap that has been used for years at Bagshaw Gaol to shackle the ankles of those about to be hanged, so that they can't kick, or save themselves in any way from the drop! I bought it from the retired hangman, Weekes, a month or two ago. He had it as a souvenir, but for some reason he was glad to part with it. Said it brought him bad luck or something. Curious, too. . . . I heard he lost his son by suicide, a few weeks before I bought the thing. Good night, all!"

He was gone into the night, and drawing a long breath of relief as he went thankfully back to the warm cosiness of the little parlour, Mr. Bendigo voiced the opinion of No. 8 Yeld Passage in no uncertain tones.

"Thank Gawd 'e's gone, and that orful thing's gone with 'im. And I'm sure I don't care if 'e 'angs 'imself with 'is 'orrible strap . . . I don't, and that's the truth!"

The American's Girl's Tale

THE SHRINE AT THE CROSS-ROADS



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THE SHRINE AT THE CROSS-ROADS

I WAS just travelling around Europe with Pop and Mamma. It was really all because of Bud. Bud and I wanted to get married, but the folks laughed and said we were too young and must wait awhile.

His father send Bud to Chicago, to a post there for a year, and Pop and Mom decided that a dose of Europe would do me a lot of good and make the year pass quicker. They all said if after a year we still felt the same we *could* get married, though even then it was taking a risk, we were such kids.

Certainly, I suppose nineteen and twenty-one is a bit young in a way—but *we* knew our minds all right, though it was awfully hard to say good-bye, and I cried and got so peaked when Bud left, that Mom hurried the trip up a month to get me away. I liked Europe well enough when I got there, specially Paris, with those cute little traffic cops with their moustaches and peaked hats, and the cafés where you can sit and drink all sorts of pink and green fizzy drinks on the sidewalk, and the women with their bright, made-up eyes and their marvellous feet. I could talk to Bud sometimes on the long-distance 'phone, too, so when Mom planned to meet Mrs. Allie Widdemer and her husband at Nice, and said we'd go down by car and see a bit of the country on the way, I was rather peevish at leaving. But Mom's been to Europe several times, and she was all for me "seeing the French in their natural surroundings", so we started out; but I was still cross at leaving Paris, and when, a few days afterwards, the car conked out on the road, I was mean enough to feel a little bit glad.

I climbed out and sat on the bank. It was about twelve o'clock and a baking day, Midsummer Day in fact, and the short hot grass smelt too lovely, all sweet and spicy. I ate Page and Shaw maple fudge with cherries in it, while Pop tinkered with the car and Mom scolded him for refusing to have a chauffeur. It was a wide green rolling sort

of country, rather monotonous but somehow restful, with little white clouds dotting the huge sweep of blue sky above, like the crowds of sheep that were dotting the distant hills. One could see the road we'd come by lying behind us like a piece of apple-peeling against the green, curling and curling away into the hazy distance, and there was a village of sorts tucked away in the fold of the hills a mile or two ahead. A little white village sunk deep into a green belt of woodland, asleep in the sunshine like all the world seemed to be. Mom, with her nose in the map, presently announced that this must be Arquières, and that there was sure to be a garage there where they could put the car to rights, if we could only trundle the old 'bus down to it. I said I betted there wouldn't be a man in *that* one-horse place that could mend a mousetrap, let alone a car; but I was wrong, and I felt rather a fool when we lumbered like a lame duck at last into the place, our smart crimson Minerva powdered as white with dust as a raddled old night-club lady—and there *was* a garage, actually, with a yellow petrol-pump beside it, about half-way down the village street!

The place was just two rows of pink and white and cinnamon and lemon-coloured houses strung along each side of the road; shuttered little houses with creepers and vines trailing over the uneven roofs, with a few fat babies playing with equally fat cats in the clean white dust, and a few women knitting in the shadow of the doorways. But for these, and a group of brown-faced men playing cards over their wine at one of the tables outside the one inn, the "Fleur d'Or", the place was deserted, as it was after one o'clock, and most people were having a "siesta", as Mom called it.

The "Fleur d'Or" was washed a crude sort of pink, and the doors and shutters were bright blue—there was a sort of veranda-roof jutting out from the house over a few iron tables in the roadway, and the vines had spread themselves over it like a foam of green water. The garage was alongside, and the vines ran riot over that too, scrambled over the low roof and hung down round the entrance till the Minerva crunched in over fallen green grapes and leaves and stalks that smelt a lovely sharp smell when they were crushed beneath the wheels. You never saw such an adorable, absurd, fairybook, tumbledown sort of place! It

looked like the place the Enchanted Princess lived in before the King found her; and when the old Witch herself came out, wrapped in a purple shawl, with bright black eyes and white hair, and started spinning—*spinning!* Can you beat it?—on a real wheel, while we ate lunch under the green leafy roof, I all but pinched myself to see if I was dreaming. We had wild strawberries and cream, chicken and salad, crusty rolls and the loveliest cheese and butter I ever ate—that Princess would have needed the Hollywood reducing diet if she'd lived there six months! I leant back and blew my cheeks out, I felt so full, and the old Witch looked over to us and laughed and said something to Mom. It appeared that the old lady's daughter cooked the food, so the old girl was pleased we were so pleased; the inn belonged to her, but her daughter and her daughter's husband ran it and the garage too, and it was the husband who was mending our car that very moment. Mom went on talking for some time to the old lady and at last turned to Pop and laughed.

"Wonders will never cease, Fred; you can apparently have your after-luncheon nap here as well, while they finish the car! It won't be ready for another two hours, they say. Madame Leclerc says there's a room unlet, with two beds, and we can sleep there till it gets cooler . . . what do you say?"

"I say, lead me to it!" said Pop. "But what about Mamie. Ask the old lady if there's another room, and then we can *all* go sleep off this stunning lunch, hey?"

But I didn't want to go and snooze, though it was so hot. I said I'd stay around and practise my French on the old girl, or write to Bud. So Pop and Mom disappeared into the inn, and I settled down to scribble on one of the "letterettes" I always carry, while the old woman went on spinning, the noise of her wheel making a soft sort of hum in the warm delicious silence, that almost made me feel sleepy in spite of myself.

Purr, purr, purr, the wheel flew, and the fleecy tuft of wool drew out into a long shining thread, and the sunlight shone through the network of jade-green leaves on the white wool and the white head bending over it. I found myself staring at the picture she made in a sort of fascinated way, and all of a sudden she looked up and saw me—and snapped

out the most astonishing question. (I don't speak French like Mom, but I can understand all right.)

"Mam'selle is young and pretty; has Mademoiselle a sweetheart?"

I stammered out, "Why, yes. Why do you ask such a thing?"

I was scarlet, and yet I didn't feel offended . . . queer! The quaint old soul went on.

"A lover . . . and you love him truly? What age has mademoiselle? Eighteen . . . nineteen? Yes?"

"Nineteen," I said, wondering why on earth she was so interested.

The old lady nodded sharply, taking me in swiftly from head to foot, from my flat-heeled American sandals up my nice Parisian beige *crêpe* frock, to my thatch of cropped light hair; then nodded again and laughed oddly, contentedly.

"A maid, nineteen, and in love! Eh, *grand Dieu!* Listen, mademoiselle. You love to see old things, curious things—yes?"

"Indeed I do!" I spoke breathlessly, for her tone sounded most enticingly mysterious. She bent forward, one brown, gnarled hand pointing.

"Mademoiselle, a little way from here, beyond the village, the road breaks into two, and at the parting of the ways is a spring, with a little old shrine beside it. They say hereabouts that if a maid who truly loves goes and drinks of the spring, and says a prayer for the repose of the soul of the saint in whose honour the shrine was built, she will bring great good luck to herself and her lover. While her parents sleep, will not mademoiselle go, as go the village girls, and drink from the shrine at the cross-roads?"

Her strange eyes bored intently into mine. I felt awkward, odd, yet thrilled. It was absurd, of course, and yet . . . the old woman laughed with triumph and turned again to her spinning as, picking up my hat from the seat beside me, on a sudden impulse I walked out into the sunshine to hunt for the Shrine at the Cross-roads.

It was hotter even than I had thought. The white dust rose in clouds as I plodded along, and the darting insects, playing in the shining air, made a sort of glittering veil before my eyes; but the trees along the roadside grew more plentiful as I went on, leaving the village behind, and the

road sloped bit by bit downhill as it grew more wooded, and, thank goodness cooler.

The scent of the trees was lovely, they seemed mostly pines and firs and nice aromatic-smelling mountain things, with a sparse undergrowth of bushes. It was dead quiet, the stillest day I ever remember, and walking in the soft muffling dust as I was, not even my footsteps made the least sound. I saw no tyre-marks in the road, only a few cart-tracks—just one old cart passed me, the driver asleep among his load of logs—the trees stood rigidly upright like lean, dark soldiers, not a leaf of their tufted heads stirred in the hot air. The birds seemed hidden, not even a rabbit skittered through the undergrowth, the very insects had stopped humming in the lovely enchanted stillness, like the stillness of a great, green Cathedral—it felt, do you know, just like that—and then I saw the Shrine! The road forked sharply into two, as she had said, and the right-hand bend went wandering onwards among the trees, the other downwards towards the valley—and just at the parting of the ways there was a little pool, bubbling up at the feet of a dumpy stone figure, battered, solitary. I had vaguely expected something more imposing, and felt, for the moment, disappointed, but the sight of the fresh cool water was welcome enough, and I ran forward thankfully—I hadn't realized till I saw the water how dreadfully thirsty I was after that walk in the heat. I knelt down and drank and drank—lovely cold water it was, with a taste of fresh greenness and things of earth in it. The place must have been a natural spring that had been clumsily walled round with a low kerb of stones, now furred thick with mosses and rock-plants.

The statue, such as it was, stood at the back of the spring under the shadows of a group of trees. A great elder-bush swept white tufts of blossom over the head of the figure, and a syringa mingled its pink blossoms down one side—masses of the two floated on the surface of the pool like fat tufts of pink and white ice-cream, and more drifted down upon my head as I sat curled beside the kerb of the spring, staring up at the statue.

As I said, it was disappointing. It was only about three-quarters life-size, and might have been either the figure of a man or a woman. It had a stiff, straight sort of frock on, under which showed lumps that I suppose were

meant to be feet. The head ran down into the shoulders in a sort of shapeless mass that might have been hair, or a head-dress, or some sort of veil. One arm was broken off, but it seemed, from the fragment that was left, to have been stretched out holding a staff or a sceptre; the other arm and hand had gone, crumbled away like the face, and that was a mere lump of stone, the features impossible to distinguish except that one gathered, from the vague conformation of the head, that it had been someone with a square chin and shortish nose—a man, I decided, since woman-saints always seem to have oval faces and long chins. Anyway, it couldn't even have been anything but a clumsy village-made sort of thing, and I really didn't see why the old girl at the inn had been so anxious for me to see it. . . . I yawned. My goodness, I was tired!

The moss had grown up round the base of the statue till it formed the nicest possible sort of cushion. I looked at my watch. I'd only been gone half an hour, and Pop and Mom were good to sleep for another hour at least. I thought I'd have a snooze here in the lovely coolness, and wander back later, so I snuggled down without more ado against the spongy green pillow and tucking my handkerchief under my ear for fear of "creepies", drifted off into dreamland on the instant.

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So far, so good. Yes, I admit it looks as if I dreamt the rest but I don't know. Anyway, I'll go on.

The next thing I remember is a voice, a young, happy voice, singing:

*"Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrrot
Prêtez-moi ta plume, pour écrire un mot!
Ma chandelle est morte, je n'ai plus de feu;
Ouvrez-moi ta porte, pour l'amour de Dieu!"*

I blinked, rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and sat up. It must have been a good while later, for the sun was slanting through the trees at a different angle, and lay in a long shining streak across the head and shoulders of—such a funny little peasant girl!

She sat on the farther side of the pool, gravely eyeing

me from under the fringe of a heavy shock of tow-coloured hair, hair bleached almost white with sun and rain—as white as her skin was brown. She couldn't have been more than fourteen, and had on a faded blue frock, all torn and dusty, and clumsily long in the skirt, and her feet were bare—her clogs hung around her neck on a string, and a long, crooked branch lay beside her in the dust.

I blinked at her, still half-asleep, and she smiled at me in the friendliest way.

“So—mam'selle awakes!” Her eyes were extraordinarily bright, a pale, clear blue, and she had the steady stare of a boy. “Mademoiselle was weary?”

She spoke with an odd throaty accent, in a curious sort of French, quite different to any of the peasant *patois* I'd heard before. I supposed it was the Vosges dialect, but still, I understood her quite well.

“Yes,” I said vaguely, still staring at her. “I was dreadfully tired.”

She laughed, and tossed a tiny stone into the pool, watching its circling rings disappear.

“Tired . . . but yes, I know—who should know better—what it is to be tired. Oh, but so tired, so dreadfully tired—to long for peace, and rest, and a long, long sleep. . . .”

The brown face was grave, and I laughed too, seized with a sudden liking for this queer little peasant lass with the tow hair blowing in the warm wind, and white teeth shining in her brown, round face.

“Eh, well, it passes. Like all other things, it passes, in the good God's time!” She threw in another pebble as she went on, eyeing me obliquely, like a child grown suddenly cunning. “But, say, why did mademoiselle come to the Shrine at the Cross Roads?”

“I—just to see it, I suppose,” I said rather lamely.

She made a gesture towards the statue, and I looked round—to gasp in astonishment, for the little stone figure had gone. I gasped and sat bolt upright, feeling somehow affronted. What on earth! . . . The little girl grinned at me across the water. Her smile was elfish.

“It is Midsummer Day, m'selle, and the villagers——”

I interrupted.

“You don't mean to say the villagers take that old chunk

of stone away to clean or to make a fête about, or something, on Midsummer Day?"

She nodded, nodding her head till the thick hair danced like thistledown, her blue eyes intent on mine.

"Why not? While you slept they must have taken it. They are simple people, mam'selle, and it pleases them to make a feast every Midsummer Day for the saint."

I grunted unbelievably. The figure had looked too solidly built on to the pedestal that held her to be shifted with that casual sort of ease. But I had not examined the structure closely, and after all she must know. She belonged, obviously, to the district.

"Who is it—what saint is it?" I asked idly, stretching back against my mossy pillow, my hands beneath my head.

The girl stared past me into the dusk of the forest with a curious expression in her eyes, an odd sort of strained look. I noticed then the squareness of her tilted chin, sharp-cut against the green. She was ugly, this child of the people, this solidly built little peasant with her strong brown hands, her thick wrists and sturdy ankles coarsened by hard work in field and byre, but she had a character. Character and a curious charm that grew on you. With an idle interest I studied her, and opened my mouth on a question, but before I could speak she answered, and the moment had passed.

"They say—but they are poor ignorant people, mam'selle, and perchance they lie—that it is the statue of a maid who, because those greater than she commanded her, said good-bye to all she held dear. Said good-bye to all that womanhood may mean to a woman—and died. And when she died, one who loved her truly built her this poor shrine with his hands, untaught, unskilled, that had once held hers in true love. . . ."

There was a minute's silence. I couldn't speak. For some reason, I felt, all of a sudden, very cold and frightened, and I stared at the brown-faced girl with the piercing blue eyes . . . stared and stared, and knew that I couldn't look away as she went on, quietly, intensely, looking deep into my eyes as if she could read through them everything in my very innermost soul.

"Mademoiselle! It is Midsummer Day, and on Midsummer Day strange things may happen, and even a saint

may long for an hour's freedom; yet think what it would mean to the poor souls who come here to see their shrine empty, their Goddess fled? Mademoiselle, you are a maid as she was—will you, in your kindness, step into the place of the statue, for one little hour, in memory of the girl to whom the shrine was raised?"

This part of the recollection is very vague. I can only remember, and that very indistinctly, that intent blue gaze, that voice in my ears, and myself without any thought but utter blind obedience to that strangely changed and dominant voice. I shall try and tell the rest as coherently as possible, but forgive me if it's not very lucid. Even to myself it all still remains a curious cloudy haze of tangled memories, impossible to string together with any real clarity. I only know that I found myself immovable, without desire to move, yet perfectly, although dimly, conscious, standing alone in the vacant niche under the pink and white veiling of blossoms, watching the reflections of the tall trees in the clear surface of the pool, the blue and purple glint of darting flies across it, the sharp-cut shadows on the undisturbed dust of the white road.

It seemed to me, in the dimness in which my mind was wandering, as though I had stood there for centuries. Would stand there for further untold years, feeling the rain beat on my unmoving head, the snow and sun alike upon it, season after season, facing the quiet road beside the tiny pool. As I stared before me, there came a rustle through the ferns, and an old woman, red-shawled and brown as a winter nut, holding a tiny child by the hand, stopped beside the pool. Stooping, she scooped up water in the palm of her hand and drank, then gave the child to drink, and looking up at me, crossed herself and murmured a prayer, then turning, shambled away down the road toward the village.

It did not seem odd that she noticed no difference—that it was I, Mamie Van Doon, of New York, who stood there beneath the drifting elder-blossom. . . . Yet, *was* it I after all? I tried to glance down at myself, but I could not move—yet I did not feel frightened, somehow it all seemed right, and anyway I did not care. All my old firm hold on life seemed to have loosened, and I seemed to have become simply a vague half-asleep mind imprisoned in an immovable body; a body that might be mine or might

not . . . it did not seem to matter any more. Even my mind seemed to be gradually becoming less my own, even. I was faintly conscious of thoughts, feelings, impressions certainly not my own, conscious of memories of tragedy, of wonder and glory beyond anything in my brisk, common-sense American life. I felt, with dawning awe and terror, yet with no real desire to escape, as if a great, wild sea of knowledge was creeping nearer and nearer, washing close to my soul till it swamped me utterly, entirely . . . instinctively I closed my eyes as it rose about me, and the world of to-day sank away swiftly as the dark sea of an older soul and its memories closed over and absorbed me in its depths!

I seemed to sink into complete unconsciousness for a time—to wake, gradually, so gradually, to a vague shadow world; a huge darkness, dark yet pricked with lights, little wandering lights that grew clearer by degrees—lights that merged at last into a deep blueness spattered with stars, and I felt a cool wind run like ghostly fingers through my hair. I stood beside a little wooded copse on a hillside, under the moon, in a wide rolling country rising like black waves against the inky blue. As I blinked and stared, I seemed to hear a voice singing, a voice joyous and young. Where *had* I heard that before? . . .

“*Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot* . . . *André, André!*”

Oh, the shrilling sweetness of that call! The quick answer from the shadow of the trees, as a lad's lithe figure emerged, stood for a second in the moonlight, then ran to meet the singer, a squarely built, sturdy little maiden whose wild hair stood up like a dandelion-clock, silhouetted against the star-dusted sky.

Held close in each other's arms they stood a moment, two young shadows backed by the watching yellow moon, two shadows that kissed and clung together. Then the picture faded, and I drifted again into the darkness. When the darkness cleared I saw, as in a vignette, small but quite clear, the same peasant child—I knew her by her shock of hair—at work among the cows in a stable. She was clearing out the straw with a fork, and her little strong hands were dirty, her forehead wet with sweat,

while the cows munched and breathed contentedly around her. Of a sudden she stopped, and seemed to listen intently—and listening, fell upon her knees, her face rapt, her soiled hands clasped upon the bosom of her coarse blue stuff frock. I had the impression, faint yet awe-inspiring, for I shivered as I listened, of a far-off delicate sound of voices chanting . . . as the picture faded I saw a rough-looking peasant, entering, cuff the child soundly on the head for idleness and waste of time. . . .

Then for a long time all was dark, and then I saw that across the outer wall of a tiny farm, a ramshackle pile of old wooden buildings guarding a few poor fields, the boy and girl leant urgently, the boy pleading, the girl silent, sorrowful.

The boy was urging something that was plain, yet it did not seem that the girl refused him for lack of love—on the contrary, as I watched I saw her suddenly bend and press her lips passionately, wildly, to the strong young hand that clasped hers, and her rejoinder was shaken, tremulous.

“André, André . . . ah, *mon ange, mon chéri*. I am chosen—on me rests the burden. I must renounce thee, renounce all that lies between me and my duty! I know. I have spoken face to face with Those that have lain upon me this heavy task, and I know I must not fail Them.”

The boy's voice was thick and husky with shamed emotion as he replied, his curly head bowed over their clasped hands.

“I love thee—what thou askest is hard, my own. Yet I do believe. . . . I will plague thee no more, my saint! From to-night I speak no word of love. But if only, only I may follow thee!”

The desolation in the young voice wrung my heart, and when the tears cleared from my eyes the picture had faded. But thick and fast the pictures came now, so fast that it was difficult to follow at times, and my impressions of this part of my strange dream are sadly confused. I seem to remember long winding roads, the yellow dazzle of sun on hill and valley and springing cornfields, of riding many weary hours upon a great white horse, athirst and dazed with lack of sleep, yet pressing on, with an ever-gathering horde of eager people following, faster and ever faster. At last the clang of hoofs on the cobbles of a

great town, its grey walls lined with balconies laden with curious faces, its streets a rainbow sea of banners, of tossing coloured pennons and lanceheads gold and steel and silver, of cloaks of vair and velvet and helmets that dazzled in the sunshine . . . then, a sudden hush, and a great vaulted hall filled with people! A hall where the tall columned dimness fell like a cool hand on the brow after the long heat and dust and weariness. . . .

There was a daïs covered with purple and crimson damask at the farthest end of the hall, and a red carpet leading to it, and behind the daïs stood serried rows of men, prelates and nobles and officers in many-coloured robes and gleaming armour, all whispering together behind their hands and looking down the hall.

On the daïs was a chair of velvet under a tasselled canopy with great gold fleur-de-lys on it, and on the chair a weak faced, pallid man who picked nervously at his chin with a lean white hand bearing a priceless ruby. As I gazed there was a stir and murmur in the glittering crowd that lined the great room, and a solitary figure marched up the wide crimson carpet towards the daïs. A young girl, square-jawed and steady-eyed, in a torn and ragged gown of faded blue—and with a sudden shock, with a woe and dread and awe unspeakable, I knew whose life's memories I was privileged to sense in this strange way! As I stared, shaken and afraid, I saw the girl halt, stare for a moment at the figure upon the throne, then her voice came sharp with contempt as she spoke to the watching nobles about the throne.

"Do not trifle with me, my lords! Dismiss this play-actor . . . and lead me to the Dauphin who hides yonder in the crowd!"

The scene clouded over, to the sound of amazed acclamations. Again a welter of scenes succeeded, too many to remember now, however hard I try—but the next distinct recollection I have is the wide dark emptiness of a great church at midnight, where a single row of tall pale candles flared like ghostly lilies in the gloom about the High Altar, and a little figure knelt before the altar.

A little lonely figure—how lonely and how young and small she looked! Her thick lint-white mop of hair was cut short as a boy's above the high collar of her corselet, she knelt stiffly, awkwardly in the shining many-jointed

steel that burdened her, and the painted saints, gleaming like jewelled shadows from the purple dusk of their high niches, looked gravely down as she prayed beside a lean cross-hilted sword that lay athwart the step before her. Long and fervently she prayed, and I—perhaps because I am a woman too—I heard the unspoken prayer behind the spoken words.

“Sweet Saints, I do your will and have no other will. Yet I cannot altogether tear away all thoughts of earth. Forgive me, my Saints! Only, only, let *him* be happy always. . . .”

And it seemed that as the vision faded I caught a glimpse of a lonely camp-fire on the hills outside the city, and beside it a solitary figure, a rough-haired lad, sitting with his chin on his hands, brooding over the red firelight, and ever and anon raising a haggard gaze towards the far lights of the city. It faded again . . . and the scene changed to horror unspeakable. Horrors such as I had never dreamt of, till I cried out and wanted to turn away, and could not, held with a dreadful fascination!

It was a high-walled city, and thousands of soldiers besieged it: like bees they swarmed, their helms gleaming as they massed to the attack, heaving huge and awful engines against the walls, with great cannons that flung chained balls and lumps of raw iron and stones, amidst a welter of smoke and noise. I saw a man cut clean in two by a flying chain, saw another drop, with a sudden choke that sounded like a dreadful laugh as a lancehead pinned him through the throat—and I could not look away!

The defenders fought like maniacs. I shrieked aloud as I saw them pour boiling tar and oil and pitch upon the heads of the attackers! Saw the scaling ladders dragged down by sheer weight of thousands, saw those that fell tramped into the mud and slime by their fellows till they choked and died, saw humanity run mad till they fought like beasts, screaming, fighting, killing . . . and in the very midst of the horror I saw a shining figure, white-horsed, beneath a great white banner, and as she went victory followed her as certainly as the needle follows the magnet! Yet I saw her stern young face blanch as she heard the groans of the wounded and dying, and her jaw set hard as she went on doing her bitter duty . . . then, it seemed, a great and dreadful wail rose as the picture faded,

a wail that rang in my ears like the call of doom.

"The Maid—the Maid is taken!" And with it a great dread seized me till I shuddered and grew sick—for a moment, I knew, I felt the Maid's own blank horror as the English seized her and she knew her fate sealed, knew the merry world, sunshine and idle days and happy dreams gone by for ever. . . .

My next recollection is a small bare room with high barred windows. A room, grey, stone-walled, and furnished with but a deal table and a chair or two, and a group of grave men interrogating a girl in coarse grey prison clothes, with chains upon her hands and feet. I cannot remember, even if I heard, the actual conversation, but I was aware of a great and utter weariness, as if this inquisition had gone on for many hours, or perhaps even days. . . . I am conscious that with a quick gesture of impatience the questioned girl retorted at last with some brusque reply, and the men exchanged a quick satisfied glance. Trapped. . . .

"You realize what you are saying, Mademoiselle?"

"I know—I care not. Read into my sayings what you please—and now make an end of this, for I am weary."

Shadows again, shifting and clouding and lightening, and through the shadows a girl's voice that wept for bitter fear and called to the Saints for strength to bear her cross until the end—shadows lightening at last into a sinister redness, a thunderous and dreadful glow that made the very soul of me shiver, chilled to the heart!

A crowded market-place—the tall gabled houses, shrouded like grim relentless nuns in veils of drizzling rain, their windows and balconies, their very roofs, packed to suffocation with watching humanity. . . . The streets leading into the square filled with carts on which were mounted more people, peasants, townsfolk, beggars, nobles, their reds and blue and browns making a strangely fantastic patchwork against the grey walls. There were soldiers in steel helmets and leather jerkins forming a ring round the square as one set a light to a great pyre of faggots piled high and steeply at the foot of a stake—oh, they burnt you high, for all the world to gaze at, Jeanne d'Arc!

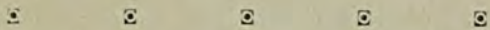
There was an acrid stench that caught me by the throat, the stink of sweating bodies and frowsy garments, the harsh biting scent of leather and horses, from the mounted

soldiers pressing the crowd back, slipping and stumbling in the mire—but sharp above all rose the smell of burning wood, stinging, horrible!

The flames had caught already and burnt bravely, as the mists cleared from before my horrified eyes—in the awed hush that held the crowded square their mocking crackle rose high, like the laughter of demons at the proud smiling face of the waiting girl, strapped waist and ankle to her stake above their snapping, beckoning fingers—a year's imprisonment had whitened the sunburnt country lass, and she was piteously thin beneath the coarse white linen shift that was all her clothing. Gone the old blue stuff frock, gone the pale bright armour, the embroidered tabard, the satin tunic with the golden lilies of France upon it; yet the firm chin was set as of old, and the bright blue eyes faced outwards, dauntless, courageous, the lips were parted in a little triumphant smile. . . . Furious, the crowd shook their fists, spat, hurled ugly names at her as she stood there; but she was already far away, and did not hear. Yet she was not so far from earth that one beloved voice out of all those could not reach her . . . as the flames, flaring high, flung their red and yellow tentacles upwards towards her, a wild cry came from beyond the barrier, where a ragged handsome youth fought wildly in the grip of the guards.

“Jeanne, Jeanne—at last I come! At last!”

I saw her turn her head swiftly. Saw her smile a moment with those bright brave eyes across the heads of the howling mob—then with a red gust of fury the flames rose high, and a thin cry with them, to the Heaven whose gates were already opening to let her in . . . and as I fell swiftly into oblivion I dimly heard a young gay voice singing, and saw in the distance a great and wonderful light. . . .



I didn't go back to the inn. Mom and Pop came on in the car and found me asleep beside the spring. The old Witch told them where I'd gone. . . . Mom said I was crying out terribly in my sleep, but I couldn't tell her anything. I felt all in—I couldn't say a word, I just let Mom talk; only one thing she said interested me rather—why, I didn't tell her, of course.

It seems that Arquières is only a few miles from Domrémy, where Joan of Arc was born . . . and the Shrine at the cross-roads is said to have been built by a boy-lover of hers whom she left in the village when she went to save France.

He followed her and tried to save her. . . . But of course, he couldn't. Then he came back and spent the rest of his life carving this statue of her as he knew her, just a sturdy little peasant girl, with her loose hair and her staff.

That was why it was so clumsy, because he wasn't an artist. He only loved her so much that he wanted to do something for her. I didn't know that, when I called it clumsy . . . but she would understand, of course.

The Witch told Mom another thing—Mom said she couldn't make head nor tail of this, but I understood all right. The old lady said that "André" died, and was buried in the little old churchyard in the valley—and that they say in the village, that if a girl can be found to drink from Jeanne's Well on Midsummer Day, the little saint herself will appear and beg her to take her place for an hour at the shrine, so that she may go to place flowers upon her faithful lover's grave. This her Saints granted to her and to André in reward of their faithful love and courage. Only a young girl, and a girl who loves truly, can work the spell, and the girl who does it must for that hour face the endurance of Jeanne's memories—those terrible memories that I passed through, that I shall never forget if I live to be a hundred. The village girls know this and fear it, so the little grave goes flowerless most Midsummer Days . . . the old Witch told Mom that she herself endured it once, for the sake of love and of Jeanne, and that, I know now, was why she sent me. And I'm glad I went, because I know it will bring luck to Bud and me. . . . And for another reason: for the little saint's sake, who loved a boy like Bud. You see, as we swept down through the valley en route for Nice once more, we passed a tiny deserted churchyard; and in the corner next the road, laid tenderly upon an ancient grave almost one with the mossy ground, I saw a mass of pink syringa and white elder-flowers.

THE END

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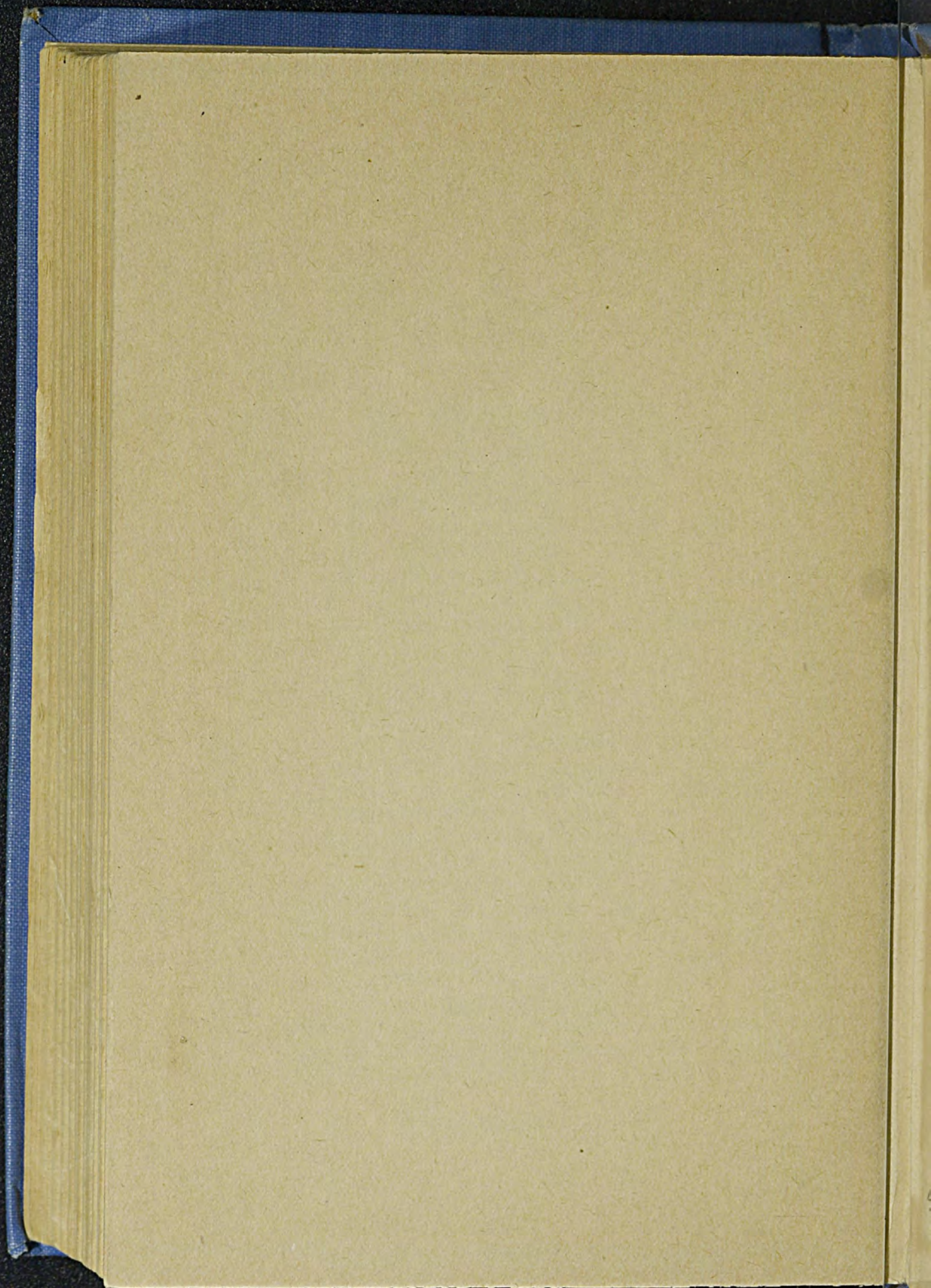
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