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THE WIND BLOWS OVER

by the same author

*

Memoirs of a Midget

The Return

Henry Brocken

The Riddle and Other Stories

The Connoisseur

Broomsticks

On the Edge

The Lord Fish

THE WIND BLOWS OVER

by

Walter de la Mare



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**To
COLIN**

Of the stories included in this volume 'In the Forest' appeared in *Black and White* in 1904, 'The Talisman' in *The Lady's Realm* in 1908. Both have been revised. 'A Revenant', 'Physic' and 'The Trumpet' have not been published serially in England. My thanks are due to the editors of *The Times*, *The Observer*, *John o'London's Weekly*, *The Story Teller*, *The Yale Review*, *Nashs Magazine*, *Lovat Dickson's Magazine*, *Harper's Magazine* and of *The Virginia Quarterly*, in which the remainder of the stories first appeared.

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'WHAT DREAMS MAY COME'

*

Emmeline did not know what had happened to her, but at once supposed she had been asleep. Her body gently swaying and rocking in passive obedience to the almost soundless motion of the coach, she gazed out blankly into the window glass, cold and lustrous as a frozen pool in some outlandish and benighted valley. Vaguely reflected there, she scanned her pale and solemn face—'a nice tidy race', as a friend had once summarized it—wide brows, high-boned oval cheeks, a firm, quiet mouth, and these now darkly questing, searching, startled eyes. No answer to any question there. She turned towards the hunched-up shape of the driver seated in his glass cab; and continued awhile to survey the great hump of his shoulders and sprawling arms as if through a faint inward mist. He sat crouched together, his hands seemingly clasped on the steering wheel, his high-angled coat-collar helmeting a motionless head.

No wonder he was cold! A jagged hole gaped in his glass screen like a huge black star. This was no surprise,

*'What Dreams may come'*³

yet it filled her with perplexity. What was wrojjig? Surely the blazing light had dimly dimmed in the bulbs over her head? And how came it that she was *alone* now in the strange vacancy of the coach—a vacancy faint with fumes to which she herself could give no name? Fumes familiar enough, but not of petrol—sweeter, more nebulous, dangerous, affrighting. Alone! Why, but an instant before, that feint image of herself had been smiling at another reflection beside it in this very glass! Her glance came to rest at last on the angle of the seat on which she was sitting, and there it stayed. What inconceivable, sudden and violent wrench could have twisted sidelong like that its heavy metal framework?

It must have been raining, too, while she slept—and slept through this! Raining heavily, if so; the dark stain on the thick grey fabric of the seat had soaked it through. She put out a tentative finger but refrained from touching it; then craned round her head in search of the conductor. The wreathing mist which dimmed her eyes obscured him too a little; but there he was, huddled and stooping forward on the backmost seat of all, elbows on knees, his face cupped in his hands, his eyes, it appeared, fixed on the floor. He might so have sat for ages, like a wax image immured in a museum, like Rodin's *Le Ten SCUT*. Nevertheless of the immediate past the sight of him had recalled not a vestige.

Where had she come from? Where was she going to?

' *What Dreams may come* '

Her mind was in a terrifying confusion. Apart from **tin** deadly lethargy as of a profound and leaden slumber, she felt no pain, no discomfort even. The grey suede hand-bag beneath her clasped, gloved hands still lay in her lap. This she had instantly recognized. It was brand new; it had been a gift. But when? From whom? Tears, it seemed, had begun forlornly rolling down her cheeks from out of her eyes. She opened the bag, fumbling hastily through its familiar contents, and found among them a scrap of paper—the remains of a broken envelope, scribbled over with what appeared to be a singularly eccentric handwriting.

This object, surely, she had *never* seen before, and yet in its dinginess, in its extreme familiarity, it seemed now far more actual than the rest. She stooped, gazing at it, then lifting it into the dingy light endeavoured in vain to read what it said. The divisions between the words, the words themselves, arranged like those of an address, even the ridiculously prolonged loops of the letters—all this was clear enough, and yet she could decipher not a single syllable. A misery of misgiving swept over her; what dreadful fate had overtaken her? What next?

The cumbrous vehicle swayed stolidly on, its hidden engine throbbing hardly more audibly than if it were within her own breast. It was country here—bare, high, tangled trees to the left, skirting the road which glimmered on in front of her into the faint vague starlight;

' What Dreams may come

fields fading out obscurely on the right. She was lost—all memory gone. What next? And yet again those dark reflected panic-stricken eyes in the glass encountered her own; vividly, senselessly pleading for an answer.

Clutching in panic at the bar in front of her, she raised herself to her feet, turned, and, stumbling unsteadily along from seat to seat, leaned close over the man, the conductor, where he sat by the yawning door. 'Where am I?' she called at him. 'Where are we going to? What is wrong?'

He did not stir. Only his eyes, cold and blue as turquoises in his face, quietly lifted themselves and confronted her own, as if in some long-postponed and secret assignation. She thrust out her scrap of paper. He stared at it, but still said nothing. And she in turn continued to watch him, appalled yet not astonished.

'I want to stop,' she called at last. 'I want to get out. There was someone . . .' It was as if the driver had himself been expecting the summons. The pace of the coach had instantly slackened, the wheels drew to a standstill.

'All I want to know is where we are—what has happened?' she called. 'But there/ her voice had softened as if she were addressing a child, 'I am sorry—sorry. I see you are ill. You, too, have suffered!' But *had* she spoken, or merely supposed that she had spoken? As if in unspeakable relief, his eyelids gently obscured again

' *What Dreams may come* '

the bright blue eyes. He had resumed, it seemed, an inexhaustible reverie.

Her handbag clutched under her ellie, she descended from the coach. But before she could advance even a pace or two towards the driver, she heard the grinding of the gears; and the low, stertorous throbbing of the engine—so near and inward that it seemed yet again within her own body rather than a movement from the outer world—had become audible once more. He mustn't let *that* stop for long, she muttered cajolingly to herself; and smiled as if amused at the notion. And already, in utter silence now, the coach had vanished round the turn of the road.

It was odd that she should be less horrified, and even less confused now that she was alone, as completely alone, indeed, as a derelict ship at sea—a ship abandoned by her crew. She hesitated an instant, her eyes fixed on the constellation of the Great Bear. 'North'—an inward voice reminded her. At which, as if bidden, she at once began to walk in its direction, while she tried her utmost to restrain that voice from making any further comment, from asking any further questions.

Instead, she kept her inward eyes fixed on the reflected image of the face, of her own face, as she had seen it in the coach window glass. After all, she argued, so long as she kept *that* steadily in view she was sure of all that mattered most. She couldn't be utterly helpless, utterly

' What Dreams may come

astray, with her own inward eyes for guidance. You will always have *someone* with you, surely, so long as you have yourself, a self, she meant, still in some degree triumphant however dreadfully cowed, at—well, at *this* kind of experience!

The death-still, leafless woods to her left hand had begun to thin a little, and presently high iron gates, shielded, it appeared, with coats of arms, revealed themselves, glistening faintly in the gloom. But not with dew. She had realized this instantly. They were coated with the winter night's first faint hoarfrost. She could detect the tiny, delicate crunch of the crystals even beneath her gloved fingers as sheStodd pondering, her hand clasping the iron bar. And at its cold, she had become suddenly as completely detached from her surroundings as a character who has escaped from a story.

A dense avenue of evergreen trees—ilex? holly? yew?—lay beyond the iron bars, a cave of impenetrable darkness. Still, this, too, was quite simple. She would go in. It seemed indeed that her dreams in the coach from which she had been so rudely awakened had prepared her for this—and even for what might lie in wait.

The hinges made no sound at all as she pushed the gate open. It was as if they had been carefully oiled for her coming. There must be a well-kept and an old house beyond this, she thought to herself. Her foot fell silently on the gravel, owing, she supposed, to the moss beneath

' What Dreams may come

her shoe; since there were no weeds, and the turf fell gently away to its neatly trimmed edges under the dark prodigious branches. It occurred to her that ages, ages ago, she had once looked down into a place as full as this of stones. She could have counted them, although the place itself was past recollection; and very cold.

She fancied, too, she could discern wheel-marks; and even these dim rounded pebbles glimmered with the stars. So she went on, one urgent question on her lips. Apart from the diffused and dusky starshine, there was no light at all under the porch. To take breath she had paused again, her eyes on the iron bell-pull.

' "Emmeline",' she whispered to herself. "Emmeline", I must remember that!

And then the door had swung gently open, as if into a softly glowing cavern of light, dazzling at first after the dark, like Ali Baba's. At which she secretly smiled to herself, for she had been on the very point of saying to the man who had so immediately answered her summons, *Sesame!* when but an instant before she had been steadily reminding herself to say, Emmeline.

Although not a single feature of it was perceptible, somewhere, somewhere, she had seen this dark lean meditative face before—these clothes even, the dove-grey waistcoat, the funereal morning coat. And, while she strove in vain to place this memory, she heard herself explaining, while he quietly listened—a face, however

*What Dreams may come*⁹

vigilant, that one could never suspect of eavesdropping!—that there had been an accident, a dreadful accident, and that the coach had gone on. You see, I'm really not sure, not at all sure, where I am; and—and what I am. Would, do you think, *this* be of any help?'

It was absurdly unconventional, she knew that well enough, talking to this butler-man as though he were her father confessor; but then what does one expect in such crises as these? She might have read of it all in a book.

The man had solemnly nodded over the scrap of paper—much too solemnly to be really convincing. He might have come out of one of the *Alices*! 'Yes, madam/ he said. And now she had been *definitely* reminded of something real—of an hotel, of a busy entrance hall, and of someone actually with her there whom she knew very well indeed, but who was out of sight, behind her.

'Yes, madam; this is right. This is the house. Have you any luggage?'

It seemed so preposterously meaningless a question that she had been quite unable to inquire *what* 'house'—how could it possibly be *the* house—before she had found herself following her guide's sinister coat-tails as he moved on swiftly and silently in front of her, as if on wheels, over the paving stones. Paving stones! Emmeline watched them closely, as she followed him, trying, like a child, with the utmost care to avoid stepping on the cracks between them. A strange house indeed, and yet

' What Dreams may come'

again one not wholly unfamiliar. The hall, the succession of rooms, the corridors through which she followed on, were all of stone, nothing but frigid lifeless echoing stone. It was as if a pyramid had engulfed her. Her guide then must be Cheops. She knew *that* name well enough—Cheops. And yet the air, while thin and stifling, was laden with the delicious odour of flowers—of spring flowers, too, beneath which, none the less, hung and haunted the nameless fumes of the motor-coach.

'He seems to know *his* way/ she thought to herself, 'and soon . . .' But the man had stopped, had opened a door, allowing her to pass on in front of him. 'This is the room' he said. 'My master will be here directly.'

His 'master'! 'But I wanted . . .' she began; 'I shouldn't have come if . . .' Her heart was throbbing now so thickly yet flutteringly—and faster far than any engine-r—that she could hardly utter the words. And then it was too late. The man had gone, had shut-to the door behind him. 'My paper! My paper!' she cried after him, in consternation.

But though she listened intently, not an echo of a footfall on the flagstones outside had answered her. She was alone again—abandoned. And this room also was of stone—floors, walls, and ceiling! and lit solely by two candles, flanking a wide chimneypiece—a chimneypiece far more closely resembling an altar stone than any she

'What Dreams may come

had ever seen before. And beyond it, that doorless vacancy—could that be another way out?

Out, and without an instant's delay, and before that other, the master, came, Emmeline *knew* she must get. But when, after listening again, she attempted to move, it was as if she were pushing her way through a deepening sea of heavy water, which threatened every instant to rise and engulf her. The faint light of the two candles scarcely blurred the gloom of the room beyond. But she could see there what appeared to be a bed, a bed which had no footboard and was draped with the dimly luminous whiteness of a vast sheet that hung in heavy vertical folds on either side of it down to the floor. And beneath it she knew there lay concealed what she dared not look at, and yet what also she knew with her whole soul now depended upon her. For what?

A dreadful terror seized her. She was shuddering from head to foot, as if in an unearthly cold, as though every slender bone in her body were made of ice. Well, she must wait a moment. That might be all that was needed. Then she would perhaps have life and strength to face this fresh ordeal. Yet all that her *own* heart now thirsted for was an infinite peace and silence—nothingness—wherein to be at rest.

Besides, the Master of the House, as the man had said, might be stealing in upon her at any moment; and what kind of personage would this be, if his own servant

'What Dreams may come

had a face so featureless, so cold, and so indifferent?

She turned instinctively towards the light of the candles. They stood as if in mute collusion on either side of a picture, of what appeared to be a portrait—obscure and sombre. Of a more intense blackness indeed even than the star in the broken window of the coach. Whose portrait? She drew near, and, as it seemed to her, these walls, of an unendurable frigidity, heightened, as if in a dream, as she did so; so that in order to see the picture fully she had to mount the stone that stood in front of this altar-like chimneypiece, with its fireless and yawning cavity.

With extreme stealth she gently pushed one of the candlesticks a little nearer and gazed up at the picture. And, as with a sheep that has scented the slaughter-house, a sudden paroxysm of misgiving swept over her mind; and then as swiftly, in an instant, was utterly gone. This, she realized, and as plainly as if the man himself had told her so—this must be the portrait of the Master of the House. And she musn't stay too long to examine it because there was this other thing to do that she so much dreaded. Besides he himself would soon be here.

Nevertheless—and although the face in the portrait was as familiar to her as her own, and had been so even from her early childhood, it seemed that a complete lifetime's scrutiny could not exhaust its mysteries, its promises. She was terrified no longer, but consoled. Indeed it was against this very consolation that, utterly

'What 'Dreams may come

weak and weary, she knew she must strive. Yet still she gazed and hungered on, her glance roving insatiably over the arch of the bare bone above the brows, the fretted exquisite zigzag sutures, like brook in a wilderness, traversing it north and south, and east and west. Once, however familiar, she could not have endured for long the fleshlessness of this countenance, the dark double vacancy where its nostrils should have been. But to say it 'grinned'—those even teeth set in that narrow arc in their regular sockets—why, even Yorick, Emmeline almost smiled to herself, would have scoffed at such an insult!

And the vacant orbits gazed back at her, tonguelessly declaring their inexhaustible resources. If you peer down into a grave, it is nothing but a black shallow four-cornered cavity dugout of the passive surface of the earth. But these inscrutable hollows, surely, brought only promise of the immortal mind that had its dwelling behind them, even though all memory there (at which irony she again smiled softly to herself) appeared to have vanished.

'This, Emmeline,' she was repeating to herself, '*this*, Emmeline, is the Master of the House. This, Emmeline, is the Master of the House.' The childish syllables sounded on in consciousness like a tiny runlet of water threading a dried-up bed of pebbles.

So engrossed had she become that, although her inward attention had for many moments been aware of the

'What Dreams may come'

inscription beneath the portrait, she had not yet attempted to read it. And now when she endeavoured to do so, the task proved all but as difficult as had been the deciphering of the scrap of paper which she had found in her bag. And yet again like a child she was compelled to spell out the letters. The candles bathed her eyelids with their beams as she stood there, almost *become* a child again. *'AH hope abandonee who enter here!'*⁹

What? *What?* There must be some mistake! This couldn't be so—not after the serene silence of the blue-eyed conductor, his chin cupped in his hands. She leaned the candle closer till it guttered. No, no, not *'all'* It was she herself who had made the mistake. It was not *'all hope'*; it was *'no hope'*. Why, then, if so, she promised the all-promising but unpromising sockets whence radiant eyes must once have shone, she need do nothing more than merely wait.

And at this, yet again the frenzied fear seized her that she must—that there was still that other ordeal to be faced, that on this depended her everlasting peace, and that in but another moment she would be too late. She seized one of the candlesticks and hastened into the further room, the stones beneath her feet seeming to withdraw themselves as she did so, so that this brief journey left her almost completely exhausted.

Come to the bed, she paused and listened, steadily surveying the shape that was now outlined there beneath

'What Dreams may come

her eyes. Sleeping Prince Charming, and she the Beauty! Again she smiled, but in a languid, self-pitying, wistful fashion, as if under the influence of a dense narcotic. 'What dreams may come . . .' she was whispering to herself. That was because of Yorick, of course. How cold these lips must be—*would* be! And did she really *want* to waken the sleeper? Even for his own sake?—when the Master of the House might . . .

Hsst! What was that? *Had* a door opened? A chill breath as of jonquils and of that detestable, that odious other sweetness had rilled into the room. A sickening moment of agony followed. Why *try*? And then suddenly she had stooped and had lifted the uppermost corner of the sheet. . . .

And now it was not Emmeline who was the child, but this Naughty One whom she had found hiding under the sheet in the Master's house, pretending, shamming. Cold lips, indeed! Emmeline in all her dreams had never seen a face so youthful or more lovely. It was drawing nearer to her, too, the lips a little parted as if in astonished welcome of her kiss. . . .

And now she had really opened her eyes, to find herself gazing intently into the similitude of this very face, not a dream-face, but a real face, that of a fair young woman, her young head surmounted by a nurse's cap, her downcast gaze fixed on the hands of a watch which she

'What Dreams may come

held in her right hand, the fingers of the other hand gently but firmly encircling Emmeline's wrist. For a while Emmeline never so much as stirred. Hardly even her eyes moved, except first to survey the strange spotless whiteness of the ceiling above her head, and then to slide tardily downwards and sideways until they rested on a glass, full of jonquils, that stood in the scintillating rays of a little electric lamp beside her bed. Theirs, then, was this delicious fragrance in the air. Motionless, their green stalks piercing the bright and vivid water, they refreshed her thirsty eyes—a miracle of beauty. For centuries, as it seemed—though it can but have been seconds, since the nurse herself was counting them—Emmeline then struggled to make her lips say but one word. They faltered, just like an infant's when it is about to cry, but at last the three syllables managed to escape from them.

'*Sesame!*' she whispered, solemnly. No less solemnly the young nurse had lifted her eyelids—eyes blue as the flower of the chicory.

'That's better!' she said. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. That's *all* you need say.'

'But I must,' began Emmeline, groping with hovering fingers over the bandage on her head, 'I must tell you just one thing. . . . I have been dreaming of you and—and . . . Who was that?' she broke off to exclaim, as if in a momentary panic.

What Dreams may come

'Ssh now! You must keep very, very quiet/ said the nurse. 'That was only the doctor.'

'Ah, yes Emmeline tremblingly drew her hand down from her head, and in so doing caught the glimmer of the sapphires on her ring finger. The faintest frown of perplexity masking the clear pallor of her brow, she continued for a while steadily scrutinizing them. And then—as if a curtain had soundlessly lifted in the little theatre of her mind—recognition came.

'Look,' she said, holding the finger up to the nurse's inspection. 'Is—is he . . . *safe*?'

The blue eyes hadn't faltered. 'Waiting,' she replied.

'Well—in that case,' murmured an ever drowsier voice, 'I am . . . '—there was a long pause—'glad.'

And with that" Emmeline had already escaped from actuality again, had fallen asleep; and not even the most vigilant and skilful of nurses can keep a chart of her patient's dreams.

CAPE RACE

*

It was still early—marvellously sharp and clear and early; and the tang of the open sea simply swept over Lettie from head to foot as she stepped over the brass-bound coaming of the doorway on to the water-darkened deck. Cooped up in her cabin, it seemed that she had been listening to the sailors swabbing down that deck for hours. 'All through the night', in fact. The muffled swish and thump of their mops had sounded faintly on even in her dreams as she lay, rocked in her narrow berth, between sleeping and waking. But now the deck was not only swept and garnished, it was deserted. It just dipped with its slow gentle lurch and then swam back again. And along the whole length of it there was nothing but empty chairs to be seen—chairs in a long gaping wooden row, naked and vacant, that had themselves watched out life together the whole dark through.

Just now, however, chairs as empty as possible were all the company Lettie needed, and she pushed off into the full glare of the bright windy morning. Like a guinea

Cape Race

embedded in black sealing-wax her gold-sleeked head stood out sharply against the diamond-clear deep darkness of the sea—which, having recovered from its childish fit of rage and petulance overnight, was now with its scattering crystal foam-beads rocking itself to sleep. Even if the brine-laden breezes were not actually bragging about it, it was plain how early the morning was, for the globe of the burning sun was still low in the east, immense and refulgent, and Lettie was alone.

George shut up in his stateroom, and George's mamma in hers, were still blind leagues away from this vast welcoming scene that had now burst in with all its radiance upon her senses. Poor George, you couldn't blame *him* for clinging to his blankets. It was indeed bad luck not only to have been so forlornly and stubbornly sea-sick, but for such a humiliatingly long spell. And to be worried to death with forebodings, too—such unnecessary shapeless, vaporous forebodings. And all these horrors all at the same time! No, indeed; as much as possible of that dreamless slumber which knits up the ravelled sleeve of care for George, poor dear!

As for George's mamma, since like a drowsy mouse-wearied pussy-cat she was always miles and miles away from the Here-and-Now, it was a joy to think of her not bothered with it at all. You can't lose *real* things in your sleep, that's one blessing. And after all she *had* in some degree lost even her beloved George. So Lettie was posi-

Cape Race

tively exulting in having the North Atlantic entirely to herself. Her own little secret bout *oimal de mer* had lasted only a few hours. She felt as fresh as a linnet in an April copse. She gloried in the fatuous but lovely motions of the great ship—its faint murk of smoke thinning up from its yawning funnels—as it wallowed like some vast imperturbable monster along its watery pathway to New York.

They that go down to the sea in ships and have their business in great waters—Lettie pushed and dipped and danced her way along the slippery deck, and lo and behold, as she came forging on towards the bows of the ship, *there*, as sharp as a tiny picture across the tumbling sea, lay land. Land! As astonishing, as unexpected and welcome as it was lovely: a flattish land mounding beyond into low bluish hills. And on its coast a huddle of coloured shingle-roofed houses, a red and a red and a green, and what she was morally certain must be a wireless station—its exquisite antennae tapering up into the crystalline blue.

A man in an old blue jersey, and with bits of the sky for eyes—a seaman too, and not one of these mere urban and obsequious deck stewards—was coming along.

'What's that?'¹ said Lettie, pointing her finger.

'That?' said the seaman. 'That's Cape Race. Newfoundland, miss. We don't sight this coast like that once in a blue moon. Not usually. Fog.'

Cape Race

'So that's Cape Race—Newfoundland!' echoed Lettie, her small head poised on her shoulders like a young she-kestrel's as she gazed across at it. 'Cape Race. How far to go now, then?'

'A bit over a thousand miles, miss, I should reckon.'

How romantic and how amazing! Newfoundland indeed! And that it should have been there for centuries upon centuries continually in sound of its perpetual breakers beneath its low moulded hill, and that she had never seen it before! What completely commonplace things could sometimes almost suffocate you, not of course with any *novelty*, but with some hidden meaning. And if she herself could count those mute dark windows beneath those smokeless chimneys—obviously there might be eyes behind them even at this moment steadfastly scanning this great painted stranger on the deep, as it forged its stealthy course from east to west—eyes of people half asleep, in their night clothes, peering at the ship from beneath those low roofs.

'And what', asked Lettie, exceedingly loth to let the sailor go, 'what is the name of that bit of land jutting out to the left there?'

'That, miss? That's Mistaken Point,' he said.

'Why was it mistaken?'

He shook his head, and smiled out of his sea-clear eyes at her. 'That's got me, miss,' he replied.

'Anyhow', cried Lettie with decision, 'we are not

Cape Race

mistaking it now.' At which little witticism the young sailor laughed and went on his way.

So this was land! and the journey which was to end in two wonderful beginnings, George's new career, and, if everything went well, her own marriage, would soon be over. Another day or two and the vast bronze face of Liberty, with her spiked headdress and uplifted torch, would heave into view and stand sightlessly gazing at her from the harbour mouth. And beyond Liberty the serried austerities of poor George's abhorred and inexorable skyscrapers. But sufficient unto the morrow are the perils thereof. Why is it that what may seem absolutely unendurable to think of before it comes, can swim up so easily and predestinedly on the day?

Anyhow, she wasn't going to bother about the future. Not now; and no; never more. Indeed she couldn't possibly have told anybody how every electric particle of her was exulting in the buffeting wind, in the flecked light-bright beads of spray, in the glitter and the splendour and motion of it all, and not least in that queer huddled little nest of humans over there, tucked away beyond its surf on this remote coast line. And all as natural and like a picture as a village in the Cotswolds!

Should she, or should she *not*, tap on George's little round thick glass port? No daisy of the sea, no marine heartsease flowered in those smooth dark hollows of water, else Ophelia-wise she might have put the ques-

Cape Race

tion to the test. So doubtful she herself remained that she had actually stepped in from off the open deck on her way below long before she had decided that she would. But here she was; and the long wide glass-walled saloon—that too was perfectly empty.

But no, yet another marvel. It was not empty. For even as she came stooping in on its light and solitude some winged thing flashed before her eyes, and had dashed with a sullen tiny thump against the plate-glass window. It was only a bird, a very slender bird with coloured feathers, as small as one of her own English warblers; but now it was fluttering in frenzy against the crystal walls of its strange prison-house in vain exhausting efforts to escape this human stranger and to reach the sun.

'You poor *poor* little creature,' Lettie was whispering to herself as she watched it. 'It's silly to do that. Just stay still awhile and wait!' Why, it must have come dipping in over-night or possibly at daybreak from the very hills she had just been contemplating across the few severing miles of the sea. And alas, how could she hope to free the mite unharmed? If she ran out for help, it might beat itself to death while she was gone. What an omen!

She would have to remain completely still, then seize her opportunity. In this inner hush she could hear the fluttering of its wings and the tapping of its small horny beak against the glass even above the vast wash and soughings of

Cape Race

the ocean. Grief and dismay filled her heart; she stood tautly stooping, utterly at a loss how to save it from its own wild fears. And perhaps because she had meanwhile never stirred by so much as an inch, head or foot, perhaps, also, because compassion may make itself felt even between things so alien to one another as wild bird and Man, it had now, wearied out for the while, pushed its small bony framework into a corner and crevice of the window, its head crooked on its ruffled neck, its sun-diamonded round eye fixed, it seemed, on herself, its primrose-tinted wing forlornly drooping.

With infinite caution Lettie pushed a chair the least bit nearer. Then poising herself, as stealthily as a weasel, on feet and ankles almost as slender in proportion as the bird's own legs and claws, she gradually raised herself towards its lair. And still this panting little atom of life in its damp-darkened feathers just eyed her glassily back.

'There now, she whispered seductively with pursed-up lips, 'it's only me, , 'I'll take care of you. Just—yes, there!—just trust yourself for one—sigh of—an instant—and . . .'

It was almost as if she had hypnotized the wild and tiny creature. It had neither struggled any longer, nor pecked at her fingers; it had scarcely stirred; and Lettie with extreme caution had climbed inch by inch down from her rocking perch again, and now held her throbbing, warm-downed, living prey clasped safely in her

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hand. Its flat and pointed head lay gently couched on the knuckle of one of her fore-fingers, while with the tip of the other she smoothed its exquisite feathers from crown to tail. She smiled, whistling softly, but the bright black-ringed fierce grey unspeculating eyes paid no heed,

Lettie's heart was beating under her young ribs as violently as its own. It was an omen; she was desperately reluctant to let it go, and yet confident that, given its liberty, it would find its way back to safety and home. So bidding it be of good courage and fear nothing—as if she were talking to a child—she hooded it softly over with her scrap of a handkerchief and went out again on to the deck. There she gingerly picked her way foot by foot and yard by yard—though she had long since found her sea-legs—sternwards.

A rather pallid and heavy young man wearing shell-rimmed spectacles, whom she had more than once noticed during the voyage, had also decided to savour the morning breezes. Perhaps he was anxious to take the taste of something overnight from out of his mouth. He had come lurching round the corner like a bear after honey. And as he cocked a discreetly interrogative eye in her direction, Lettie openly smiled at him. She would have smiled at Beelzebub. It was as if she had seen him thousands and thousands of times before, and she said 'Good morning', as if she really did desperately hope it

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would be a very good morning for him. Then, still with her weightless burden in her hand, she hastened on, and down the narrow steps of the companion ladder to the deck below.

At the further end of this, past the tight-wedged hatches and the bollards and the cook-house, was a niche now familiar to her. She and George had spent many a dark stolen moment there, gazing—he mournfully, she comfortingly—away back out over the yeasty wake of the great vessel towards home. There with the fumes of bacon and coffee in her nostrils she now stayed a while, completely screened from sight, to give her prize as long a respite as it might need before she committed it to its fate.

The sky was as blue as a hedge-sparrow's egg—bluer. Its vast empty vault, where still the stars in their invisible constellations must be shining, though not even the Ancient Mariner's eye could now have picked them out, arched itself over her head. And the unfathomable and inexplorable sea, which she and the ship were abandoning to its own eyeless solitude again, stretched out in its measureless leagues beyond and beyond and beyond her. None the less even Lettie realized—had not George himself pointed it out to her?—how narrow a circle of its waters was actually scannable from where she stood; a small horizon which was, too, continually changing as the ship plunged on.

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And now, on her left hand, the silent shores, the squat vigilant lighthouse, the smokeless shack roofs, the uplands of Cape Race were wheeling more clearly into view. Soon they would have drifted by, be gone, have vanished—and, so far as she was concerned, probably for ever. There was not a moment to lose. She raised her hand to her lips, and imprinted a kiss light as thistledown on the snakelike feathery head, showering on it a host of blessings as multitudinous as the morning dew. Her very life for the moment seemed to be bound up with its destiny. She had saved it from ship's cat or ship's boy, perhaps, or from one of those odious little tallow-faced gentilities she had seen scuttling in and out of the most expensive 'suite of staterooms on the upper deck. How dreadful then if, in spite of it all, it should come to grief! Why, during the last voyage of this very ship, in the latening dusk, had not a mad miserable and heartbroken woman attempted to fling herself overboard from this very rail on which Lettie was now leaning? 'Not the ghost of a chance for her *there*,' George had declared, almost as if with satisfaction at *something* definite in a universe of flux. 'Not a ghost!' and he had gone on staring down into the pale green seething pit of water under the keel.

Lettie sighed. And at length she lifted her hand high above her head, and with breath held tight in her bosom, relaxed the four fingers and the thumb. The bird fell a few inches like a stone, and dipped, fluttering a moment,

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helplessly. But with the next, its wings had gained the mastery they needed over the quiet air in the shelter of the ship. It soared up into the wind, was drifted a few yards in its great sweeping sightless flood like weed on the sea, and then,, the gay colours of its plumage still discernible in the sunbeams, it had sped off away towards the shore.

Lettie watched it till it had become a drifting speck—until her eyes were overflowing from the dark dazzle of the sea. She turned away. 'Safe!' She had actually uttered the word aloud, and was so elated at her morning's act of mercy that she very nearly repeated the prayers which she had hurried through only a few minutes before.

How absurd, how silly people were! What ridiculous little webs of mere coincidences they kept on spinning round themselves! Talk about horizons! Good heavens, it was lucky she hadn't shared her little burst of fireworks with her future mother-in-law.

Not that George's 'mumsie' wouldn't have sympathized with 'the darling little bird'. She would have sent one of the stewards for some canary seed, or would have had a special bowl of bread and milk brought up, and would probably have suffocated her little protégé. She might even have asked the captain—'so very approachable a man, my dear'—to back in and land the tiny creature on the nearest beach.

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For you can kill, as well as save, all sorts of things by kindness. For this very reason Lettie had made up her mind long ago that she would scrutinize at once all kindnesses to herself when they came her way. So many were showered on her that she was apt to shower them back, without really thinking much about them. And it was absolutely essential not to be merely sympathetic but to be reasonable with George. Not to give way too much to his absurd fits of depression. Not to pamper him. Pampered husbands become perfectly horrible: indolent, cumbrous, oily and otiose, yes and cynical. Creases appear and deepen beneath their several chins, and they always go bald early—lose every scrap of hair!

A sudden revulsion of feeling had settled over Lettie's mind. How very queer: the sea, the sky, the morning were only a few moments older and couldn't by any possibility have faded since she had bent her steps this way. And the light sparkling breezes from the twelve corners of the heavens still sang briskly about her ears, as she turned away towards breakfast. And yet, merely because she had caught a glimpse in her mind's eye of being stout and forty-four and as used to your excellent domesticated job as a cat is to cream, everything seemed to have darkened and tarnished a little. Why, only death itself can free that kind of 'bird'!

It was the same old story: she was always being silly and wrought-up and impulsive like this. And by no

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means always with success. And invariably the reaction came; then life went flat and spiritless, and the future loomed as ghostly and ghastly before her as a London wrapt in a pea-soup November fog. And now there wasn't any captive aboard at all that could be given its freedom—a sudden headlong gust of sea-sprayed wind had slapped her blue skirts tight against her legs as she pushed on towards its bows—except, possibly, herself.

Wasn't she engaged to be married, good heavens, and wasn't there a most beautiful sapphire ring welded two joints under the third claw of her left hand? Why, even her hair was as yellow as the bird's wing. They shared the very same badge. She'd a jolly good mind to throw *herself* overboard and trust to Providence to give his angels charge over her, to fan her up and waft her away towards that cosy little cluster of houses over there, which was so very like England—never, never, perhaps, to be seen again. And then, when the fogs had drifted down once more, perhaps George could come too. She could see them both in sea-sodden old clothes and rubber boots, hunting for their morning cockles along the beach. Why all these forebodings, this confusion and anxiety merely about salary and *prospects*? Who ever recognized the very handsomest of prospects—when it came? Why *not* the simple life, with mamma-in-law in an Early Victorian rocking-chair of colonial manufacture beside the kettled hob!

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'Good morning,' she cried suddenly, and this time entirely by mistake, to the sleek heavy young man in the tortoise-shell spectacles, and this time he cocked an enquiring eye indeed. How absurd! *That* belarded hee-haw! And yet just *this* silly little mistake had almost restored her good spirits again. If George wasn't up by now, she would make the devil of a fuss about it. It was all very well to be ranging round like a roaring young lioness in the wild bright jungle of the morning, but, after all, you did sometimes want a glimpse of your solemn shag-necked lord and master too.

Wonder of wonders, there he was! Balancing himself gingerly along the deck exactly like a reanimated flounder in a fish shop. She had never noticed before what a charmingly genteel and pacifying effect gold-rimmed spectacles have on a quiet, round, and even slightly owlsh face—compared, that is, with those goggling tortoise-shell things.

'George,' she said, 'I found a bird just now in the concert room, a bird from the land, a land-bird—Cape Race, over *there*, never seen before—a tiny thing, as light as a postage stamp and almost dead with exhaustion and terror. Oh, such a lovely helpless little thing, and it never stirred a hair's breadth when it saw I was coming. Fancy *daring* to start off at evening or dawn just because you saw something like a faint lighted palace far out to sea. What *kind* do you suppose it was: dark head, very

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slim, a crest, golden yellow on its wings, and a sharp narrow bill?'

She led him in, without the least intention of waiting for an answer, and down the stairs and into the dining-saloon. Dining-saloon! They were the very first passengers to come and eat. How frigid and insecure, how select and horribly discreet it all looked. It would have been far, far better fun to have gone steerage. And they sat down at the table, the little silver vase of iced flowers right in the middle of it, and the crisp rolls and the enormous breakfast menu in front of them—steak and sturgeon and kedgerree, fifteen kinds of meats and five-and- twenty jams, not to mention 'Vigorbrits, 'Drenergy and exploded rice! . . .

And there was George, just because they had sighted land, looking glummer even than twenty flounders, his cheeks no longer sea-green, but positively putty-like with anxiety, and even his silly freckled and sunburned hand trembling a little as it lay with its thumb sticking out on the damask tablecloth.

'You really are,' whispered Lettie, with a swift glance round in quest of trespassing stewards, 'you really *are* rather a dear, you poor thing, and I believe I love you best when you are most like a fat little boy that couldn't SQ Bo to a cockroach. George dear, *look* at me. Do try and be a little confident. You know—and wouldn't you just rap it out at anybody who denied it I—you know

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perfectly well that you could take on even that old President's job to-morrow morning without a moment's hesitation—as soon, that is, as you had recovered from dying of fright overnight. And yet! . . .'

She slid her slender cold hand under the tablecloth and clasped his right one that lay flaccid and inert upon his knee.

'Besides, haven't you *me*, you old silly? Would I have said, Go, or rather Come, all this marvellous long way across the sea, if I hadn't been absolutely certain it was Set Fair? Would I? Would I be unendurably pining to kiss you *now*—if only we weren't *here*—*would I*

George—his fingers still trembling a little, for three solid days of queasy seasickness does take it out of a man even with the stubbornest of constitutions—removed his gold glasses, and turned his placid anxious faithful affectionate hazel eyes on Lettie's, as she sat there, their hands clasped under the tablecloth. But out of the corner of one of them he had at that very moment spotted a steward, nimbly stepping on his way in their direction, and what he huskily *said* was, 'Any cereal, Lettie?'

PHYSIC

*

Emilia and William had been keeping one another company in the kitchen. Mary, her trusty substantial cook-general, was 'out', and would not be knocking at the door until half-past ten. After that there might be another hour to wait. But then Emilia would be alone. Meanwhile, just like man and wife, William and she would soon be having supper together at two corners of the kitchen table, and William would have an egg—with nine bread-and-butter fingers.

This, once fortnightly, now weekly, Wednesday-night feast had become a kind of ritual, a little secret institution. They called it their covey night. Not even Daddie ever shared it with them; and it was astonishing what mature grown-up company William became on these occasions. It was as if, entirely unknown to himself, he had swallowed one of Jack's bean-seeds and had turned inside into a sort of sagacious second-husband. All that Emilia had to do, then, was merely to become again the child she used to be. And that of course needs only a happy heart.

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He was a little dark-skinned boy, William—small for his age, A fringe of gilt-edged fair hair thatched a narrow forehead over his small, restless eyes. His sister Sallie—poor gaunt Aunt Sarah whom she had'been called after, having departed this life when less than a month had passed since the gay little christening party—after a restless and peevish afternoon and a wailful bath, was asleep now, upstairs, in her crib. You could tell that almost without having to creep out every now and again to listen at the foot of the stairs.

William had been even more lively and hoppity than usual. He and Emilia had been playing Beggar-my-Neighbour, and he had become steadily more excited, when, with something very like sheer magic, every sly knave in the pack had rapidly abandoned poor Emilia and managed to sidle into his hand. And when—after an excited argument as to where the Queen of Hearts had best be hidden—they changed the game, he laughed and laughed till the tears came into his eyes to see her utter confusion at finding herself for the third time an abject Old Maid! And when supper-time came—plates, spoons, forks—he had all but danced from dresser to table, from table to dresser again. They had borrowed Mary's best blue-check kitchen tablecloth; he had said it looked cooler. 'Don't you *think* so, Mummie?' And every now and again he had ejaculated crisp shrill remarks and directions at Emilia, who was looking after the cooking in the outer

Physic

room, a room she had steadfastly refused to call **the** 'scullery'. Merely because she disliked the word! Though one day in a sudden moment of inspiration she had defended this priggishness by exclaiming, 'Well, spell it with a *k* and then see what you think of it I'

It was a little way Emilia had. As tenaciously as she could she always put off until to-morrow even what it was merely difficult to put up with to-day. Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you, was her motto when driven into a corner. She hated problems, crises, the least shadow of any horror, though they would sometimes peer up at her out of her mind—and from elsewhere—when she wasn't looking, like animals at evening in the darkening hills. But when they actually neared, and had to be faced; well, that was quite another matter.

For some minutes now, busied over her sizzling pan at the gas stove, she hadn't noticed that William's galvanic sprightly conversation piped up from the kitchen had been steadily dwindling, had almost ceased. He had decided to have his supper egg fried, though 'lightly boiled' was the institution. And Emilia had laughed when, after long debate, he had declared that he had chosen it fried because then it was more indigestible. She was dishing it up from the smoke and splutter—a setting sun on a field of snow, and with a most delicate edging of scorch.

When she came back into the kitchen William was standing by the table, gazing across it at the window. He

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couldn't be looking *out* of the window, for although there was a crevice a few inches wide between the flowered chintz curtains that had been drawn over it and where the blue linen blind had not been pulled down to the very bottom, it was already pitch dark outside. Yet even at this distance she saw that he couldn't also be staring solely at his own reflection.

He stood motionless, his eyes fixed on this dark glassy patch of window, his head well above the table now. He had not even turned at sound of her footstep. So far as Emilia's birdlike heart was concerned it was as if a jay had screeched in a spinney. But best not notice too much. Don't put things into people's heads. 'There!' she exclaimed, 'Well now, you *have* cut the bread and butter thick, Mr. Stoic! I'm going to have that scrap of cold fish. Eat this while it's hot, my precious!'

But William had continued to wait.

'I don't think, Mummie,' he said slowly, as if he were reciting something he had been learning by heart, 'I don't *think* I'll have my egg after all. I don't think I feel very hungry just now.'

All his eagerness and excitement seemed to have died down into this solemn and stagnant reverie; and for a child to have the air and appearance of a sorrowful old dwarf is unutterably far away from its deliciously pretending to be a sedate grown-up.

'Not have it!' said Emilia. 'Why, look, blessing, it's

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cooked! Look I Lovely. You wouldn't know it wasn't a tiny half of a peach in cream. Let's pretend.'

'I couldn't like even that, Mummie,' he said, glancing at it, a slight shudder ending in a decisive shake of the head as he hastily looked away again. 'I don't think, you know, I want *any* supper.'

Emilia's eyes widened. She stood perfectly still a moment, the hot plate in her hand, staring at him. Then she hurriedly put it down on the table, knelt with incredible quickness beside him, and seized his hand.

'That's what it is,' she said. 'You don't feel very well, William. You don't feel very well? Your hands are hot. Not sick? Not sore throat? Tell Mummie.'

'I'm *not* ill,' wailed William obstinately. 'Just because I don't want the egg! You *can't* like that horrid cold fish, and if I did feel sick, wouldn't I say so? That's only what *von* say.' He paused as if the utmost caution and precision were imperative, then added, nodding his head mournfully and sympathetically in time to the whispered words, 'I *have* got a teeny tiny headache, but I didn't notice it until just now.' His mouth opened in a prodigious yawn, leaving tears in his eyes. 'Isn't it funny, Mummie—you can't really see anything out of the window when it's black like that, yet you needn't look at *yourself* in the glass. It's just as if...'

His eyes came round from examining the window, and fixed themselves on her face.

Physic

mat s what it is,' said Emilia, raising herself abruptly ta the floor. 'That's what it is.' She kept squeezing the thin, unresponsive fingers of his hand between her own. 'You're feverish. And I knew it. *All* the time. Yes —*how* stupid of me.' And instantly her voice had changed, all vain self-recriminations gone. T i l tell you what we'll *do*, William. First, I'll fill a hot-water bottle. Then I'll nm up and get the thermometer. And ou shall be the doctor. That's much the best thing.' And she did not even pause for his consent.

'I expect you know, Dr. Wilson,' she had begun at once, 'it's something that's disagreed with my little boy. I expect so. Oh, yes, I expect so.'

William, pale and attentive, was faltering. 'Well, yes, Mrs. Hadleigh, p'raps,' he said at last, as if his mouth were cram-full of plums. 'You *may* be right. And that depends, you know, on what he has been *eating*.'

'Yes, yes, I quite understand, doctor. Then would you perhaps wait here just for one moment, while I see if my little boy is ready for you. I think, you know, he might like to wash his hands first and brush his hair. And *pray* keep on your overcoat in case you should feel cold.' She took a large dry Turkey towel that was airing on a horse near by, and draped it over William's shoulders. 'I won't be a moment,' she assured him. 'Not a moment.'

Yet she paused to glance again at his shawled-in pale face and fever-bright eyes, as if by mere looking she

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could bore clean through his body; and stooping more, she pressed her cheek against his, and then hand to her lips.

'You said', half tearfully chanted the little boy, 'that I was the doctor; and now you are kissing me, Mummie!'

'Well, I could often and often kiss lots of doctors,' said his mother, and in a flash she was gone, leaving him alone. She raced up the dark staircase as if she were pursued by twenty demons, not even waiting to switch on the light. And when she came to her bedroom it was as if everything in it were doing its utmost to reassure her. The shining of the street lamp was quietly dappling its walls with shadow. The whole room lay oceans deep in silence; the duskily-mounded bed, the glass over the chimney-piece, the glass on the dressing-table. They may until that very moment have been conferring together, but now had, as usual, instantly fallen mute, their profound confabulations for the time being over. But she did not pause even so much as to sip of this refreshing stillness. Her finger touched the electric switch, and in an instant the harmless velvety shadows—frail quivering leaf-shadows—the peace, the serenity, had clean evaporated. It was as if the silence had been stricken with leprosy, so instantaneous was the unnatural glare—even in spite of the rose-pink lamp-shades. For now Emilia was staring indeed.

How, she was asking herself, how by any possibility

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could that striped school tie of her husband's have escaped from its upper drawer on to the bedspread? How by an utter miracle had she failed to see it when she had carried Sallie into the room only an Kour or two ago? Ties don't wriggle out of top-drawers across carpets and climb up valances like serpents in the tropics. Husbands miles away cannot charm such things into antics like *these!*

Mary had been out all the afternoon. She herself had been out for most of it with the children, and she could have vowed, taken her oath, *knew*, that *that* couldn't have been there when she had come up to put on her hat. In the instant that followed, before even she could insist on raising her eyes from this queer scrap of 'evidence', her mind suddenly discovered that it was dazed and in the utmost confusion. It was as if, like visitors to a gaudy Soho restaurant, a jostling crowd of thoughts and images, recollections, doubts, memories, clues, forebodings, apprehensions and reiterated stubborn reassurances had thronged noisy and jostling into consciousness—and then were gone again. And at that, at once, as if by instinct and as unforeseeably as a night moth alights on one out of a multitude of flowers, her stricken glance had encountered her husband's note.

At sight of it her heart had leapt in her body, and then cowered down like a thing smitten with palsy. Novels told you of things like these, but surely not just ordin-

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ary life! The note had been scribbled on a half-sheet of her own note-paper, and hastily folded into a cocked hat—perhaps the only old-fashioned device she had ever known that husband to be capable of. It seemed that she had learned by heart the message it contained before even she had unfolded the paper and read it. Indeed, it did not matter what it had to say. It hardly even mattered *how* it had said it. So considerately, yet so clumsily, so blastingly. 'She'—that alone was enough. When shells explode why be concerned with fuse or packing? Edward was gone. That was all that mattered. She had been abandoned—she and the children.

So far, so inevitably. You can in vile moments of suspicion, incredulity and terror foresee things like that. Just that he was gone—and for good. But to have come stealing back in the afternoon into a vacant house, merely for a few clothes or a little money, and she out, and Mary out, and the children out—and everything else out; well, that seemed a funny, an unnecessary thing to do!

'I wouldn't have so much minded . . .' she began to mutter to herself, and then realised that her body was minding far too much. A thin acid water had come into her mouth. Unlike William, she felt sick and dizzy. She had gone stiff and cold and goose-flesh all over. It was as if some fiendish hand were clutching her back hair and dragging the scalp from her forehead taut as the parchment of a drum over her eyes. It was as if she had swal-

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lowed unwittingly a dose of some filthy physic. Her knees trembled. Her hands hung down from her arms as though they were useless. And the only thing she could see at this instant was the other woman's face. But it wasn't looking at her—on purpose. It was turned three-quarters away—at a very becoming angle to the long, fair cheekbone, the drooping eyelashes, the feline line of the jaw. Clara. And then, suddenly, she saw them both together, stooping a little, at a railway station, it seemed; talking close. Or was it that they had just got out of a cab?

Emilia might as well have been dreaming all this, since although these picturings, this misery, this revulsion of jealousy, and the horror of what was to come persisted in a hideous activity somewhere in her mind, she herself had refused for the time being to have anything to do with it. There was something infinitely more important that must be done at once, without a moment's delay. Husbands may go, love *turn*, the future slip into ruin as silently and irretrievably as a house of cards. But children must not be kept waiting; not sick children. She was already clumsily tugging at the tiny middle drawer of the old mirror, one of their first bargains, on the dressing-table, and she caught at the same instant a glimpse of the face reflected in its glass; but so instantaneously that the eyes of the image appeared to be darkened and shut, and therefore blind.

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What a boon a little methodicalness may be. What a mercy that in this world *things* stay where they are put; do not hide, deceive, play false, forsake and abandon us. Where she always kept it, *there* lay the slim, metal, sharp-edged case of the thermometer. It was as if it had been faithfully awaiting this very reunion—ever since she had seen it last. In the old days, before she was married and had children, even if she had possessed such a thing, she might have looked for it for hours before discovering it. She had despised thermometers. Now, such a search would have resembled insanity.

She hesitated for scarcely the breadth of a sigh at the door, and then with decision switched off the light. Stuffing her husband's scribbled note into her apron pocket, she flew into the next room, put a match to the fire laid in the grate, pushed the hot-water bottle between the sheets of the bed, and hastened downstairs. Her legs, her body, her hand flitting over the banisters, were as light and sure again as if she had never experienced so much as an hour even of mere disappointment in her life. Besides, for some little time now, that body had been habitually told what it had to do. And so long as her orders came promptly and concisely, it could be trusted to continue to act in the same fashion, to be instantly obedient. That was what being a mother taught you to become, and even taught you to try within limits to teach a young child to become—an animated automaton.

Physic

Dr. Wilson stood where she had left him beside the table and in precisely the same attitude. He had not even troubled to sit down. He had, apparently, not even so much as moved his eyes.

'Now, Doctor, said Emilia.

At this, those eyes first settled on her fingers, then quietly shifted to her face.

'You were a long time gone, Mrs. Hadleigh,' he remonstrated in a drawling voice, as if his tongue were sticking to the roof of his mouth. 'A very long time. He took the thermometer and pushed it gingerly between his lips, shutting them firmly over the thin glass stem. Then his blue and solemn eyes became fixed again, and, without the faintest stir, he continued to watch his mother, while she in turn watched him. When half a minute had gone by, he lifted his eyebrows. She shook her head. In another half-minute he himself took the thermometer out of his mouth, and, holding it between finger and thumb, gravely scrutinized it under the light. 'A hundred and forty-seven, he announced solemnly. 'H'm.' Then he smiled, a half-secret, half-deprecatory smile. 'That's nothing to worry about, Mrs. Hadleigh. Nothing at all. It looks to me as if all you did was to worry. Put him to bed; I will send him round a bottle of very nice medicine—very nice medicine. And . . .' his voice fell a little fainter, 'I'll look in again in the morning.'

Physic

His eyes had become fixed once more, focused, it seemed, on the far-away. 'Mummie, I do wish when Mary pulls down the blinds she would do it to the very bottom. I *hate* seeing—seeing myself in the glass.'

But Emilia had not really attended to this fretful and unreasonable complaint. She herself was now examining the thermometer. She was frowning, adjusting it, frowning again. Then she had said something—half-muttered, half-whispered—which Dr. Wilson had failed to catch.

Td give him,' he again began wearily, 'some rice pudding and lemonade, and——' But before the rest of his counsel could be uttered she had wrapped him tighter in his bath towel, had stooped down to him back to front so that he could clasp his hands round her neck, pick-a-back; and next moment he was being whisked up the dark staircase to the blue and white nursery. There she slid him gently down beside the fender, took off his shoes, smoothed his fringe, and tenderly kissed him.

'You have very bright eyes, Dr. Wilson. You mustn't let them get too bright—just for my sake.'

'Not at all. Mrs. Hadleigh,' he parroted, and then suddenly his whole body began to shiver.

'There, she said, 'now just begin to take off your clothes, my own precious, while I see to the fire—though *that*, Dr. Wilson, should have been *done jlrst*. Look, the silly paper has just flared up and gone out. But it won't

Physic

be a minute. The sticks are as dry as Guy Fawkes' Day
Soon cosy in bed now,

William with unusually stupid fingers was endeavouring to undo his buttons. He was already tired of being the doctor. 'Why', he said, 'do your teeth chatter, Mummie, when you are very hot? That seems funny. And why do faces come in the window, horrid faces? Is *that* blind right down to the very bottom? Because I would like it to be. Oh dear, my head does ache, Mummie,

It was extraordinary with what cleverness and dexterity Emilia's hands, unlike her son's, were now doing as they were bidden. The fire, coaxed by a little puffing in lieu of bellows, in a wondrous sheet of yellow, like crocuses, was now sweeping up the chimney as if to devour the universe. A loose under-blanket had been thrust into the bed, the hot bottle wrapped up in a fleecy old shawl, the coal scuttle had been filled, a second pair of small pyjamas had been hung over the fender to air, a saucepan of milk had been stood on the stove with its gas turned low—like a circlet of little blue wavering beads; and William himself, half-naked for less than the fraction of a second, had been tucked up in his bed, one of her own tiny embroidered handkerchiefs sprinkled with lavender water for company. There, he had instantly fallen asleep, though spasmodic jerks of foot and hand, and flickering eyelids showed that his small troubles had not wholly been left behind him.

Vhysic

So swiftly and mechanically had her activities followed one upon the other that Emilia had only just realized that she was still unable to make up her mind whether to telephone at once to the doctor or to venture—to dare—to look in on Sallie.

Blind fool! *Blind* fool!—foreseeing plainly every open or half-hidden hint and threat of to-night's event, smelling it, tasting it, hearing it again and again knocking at the door of her mind, she had yet continually deferred the dreadful moment when she must meet it face to face, challenge and be done with it, and accept its consequences. The mere image in her mind of her husband's school tie left abandoned on the bed had made the foreboding of looking at Sallie a last and all but insupportable straw. The futility, the cowardice! What needs most daring must be done instantly. There had not been the least need to debate such a question. You can't do twenty-one things at once!

Having stolen another prolonged scrutiny of William's pale dream-distorted face and dilating nostrils, she hastened into her own bedroom again, groped for the tiny switch-pull that dangled by the bed-rail, stooped over the cot beside it, and, screening its inmate's face as much as possible from the glare, looked down and in. The small blonde creature, lovelier and even more delicate to the eye than any flower, had kicked off all its bedclothes, the bright lips were ajar, the cheeks flushed

Physic

—an exquisite coral red. And the body was breathing almost as fast and shallowly as a cat's. That children under three years old should talk in their sleep, yes; but with so minute a vocabulary! Still, all vocabularies are minute for what they are sometimes needed to express—or to keep silent about.

No sickness, no sore throat; but headache, lassitude, pains all over the body, shivering attacks and fever—you just added up the Yes's and subtracted the Nots; and influenza, or worse, was the obvious answer. Should she or should she not wheel the cot into William's room? Sallie might wake, and wake William. Whereas if she remained here and she herself lay down in the night even for so much as an hour—and began to think, she wouldn't be alone, not hopelessly alone. It was the fear of waking either patient that decided the question. She very gently drew blanket and counterpane over Sallie's nakedness, draped a silk handkerchief over the rose-coloured shade, switched on the electric stove in the fireplace, and ran downstairs. There for a few moments, eyes restlessly glancing, she faced the stark dumbness and blindness of the mouthpiece of the telephone.

Dr. Wilson was in. Thank Heaven for that. Incredible, that was his voice! There might have been a maternity case—hours and hours. He might have had a horde of dispensary patients. But no, he would be round in a few minutes. Thank Heaven for that. She put back the

Physic

receiver with a shuddering sigh of gratitude. All that was now needed—superhuman ordeal—was just to wait.

But this Emilia was to be spared. For midway up the staircase, whose treads now seemed at least twice their usual height, she had suddenly paused. Fingers clutching the banister rail, she stood arrested, stock still, icy, constricted. The garden gate had faintly clicked. There could be only one explanation of that—at least on a Wednesday. Edward's few friends and cronies, every one of them, must have discovered long ago that Wednesdays were now *his* 'evenings out'. And she—she hadn't much fancied friends or company recently. It was he himself, then. He had come back. What to do now? A ghastly revulsion took possession of her, a gnawing ache in the pit of her stomach, another kind of nausea, another *hind*, even, of palpitation.

If only she could snatch a few minutes to regain her balance, to prepare herself, to be alone. Consciousness was like the scene of a fair—a dream-fair, all distortion, glare, noise, diablerie and confusion. And before she was even aware of her decision—to make use of a deceit, a blind, a mere best-thing-for-the-time-being—she had found herself in her bedroom again, had somehow with cold and fumbling fingers folded the note into its pretty cocked-hat shape again, and replaced it where she had first set eyes on it, beside the charming little travelling clock, the gift of Aunt Sarah, in the middle of the mantelpiece.

Physic

What light remained in the room behind the blinded and curtained windows could not possibly have been detectable outside. That was certain. In an instant she was in William's room once more—listening, her heart beating against her ribs like the menacing thumping of a drum. She had not long to wait. The latch of the front door had faintly squeaked, the lower edge of the door itself had scraped very gently across the coarse mat within, had as softly and furtively shut.

'Is that you, Edward?' she heard herself very gently and insidiously calling over the banisters from the landing. 'How lovely! You *are* home early. I didn't expect you for—for hours and hours!'

And now she had met and kissed him, full in the light of the hall-lamp. 'Why, what's the matter, darling . . .? You are ill!' She was peering as if out of an enormous fog at the narrow, beloved, pallid countenance, the pale lips, the hunted, haunted, misery-stricken light-brown eyes in those pits of dark entreaty and despair.

'Is it *that's* brought you home?'

He continued to stare at her as if, spectacles lost, he were endeavouring to read a little book in very small print and in an unfamiliar language. His mouth opened, as if to yawn; he began to tremble a little, and said, 'Oh, no; nothing much. A headache; I'm tired. Where *were* you?'

'Me?' But her lips remained faintly, mournfully, sym-

Physic

pathetically smiling; her dark eyes were as clear and guileless and empty of reflections as pools of water under the windless blue of the sky. 'I was in William's room. It's hateful to say it now, Edward—now that you are so tired yourself—but—but I'm rather afraid, poor mite, he's in for another cold—a little chill—and I shouldn't be surprised if Sallie . . . But don't worry about that—because, because there's nothing of course at all yet to worry about. It's you I'm thinking of. You look so dreadfully fagged and—what a welcome! . . . There's nothing . . . ?'

Her vocabulary had at last begun to get a little obstinate and inadequate, 'You don't mean, Edward, there's anything *seriously* wrong? I fancy, you know'—she deliberately laid her hand for an instant on his, 'I fancy you may be the least little bit feverish yourself—you too. Well . . . ' She turned away, flung up a hand as if to flag off a railway train, 'I'll get you something hot at once.

'And Edward'—she turned her head over her shoulder, to find him as motionless as she had left him, in almost as stolid and meaningless an attitude as 'Dr. Wilson's' had been in the kitchen, as he stood brooding on the nightmare faces in the darkness of the glass. 'There is just one thing, if you could manage it. Just in *case*, would you in a moment or two first wheel Sallie's cot into William's room. I've lit the fire—and I *had* to ask

Physic

Dr. Wilson to come. I'm so dreadfully stupid and anxious, when—even when there's no reason to be,

The two faces had starkly confronted one another again, but neither could decipher with any absolute certainty the hitherto unrevealed characters now inscribed on them. Each of them was investigating the map of a familiar country, but the cartographer must now have sketched it from an unprecedentedly eccentric angle. The next moment she had turned away, had whisked upstairs and down again, leaving him free, at liberty, to dispose of himself—and of anything else he might be inclined to. In every family life there are surely potential keepsakes that would be far better destroyed; and perhaps a moment *some time* might come. But now . . .

When she returned with her tray and its contents—a steaming tumbler of milk, a few biscuits and a decanter containing a little whisky—she found him standing beside William's bedroom fire. He watched her, as with the utmost care she put down her burden on the little wicker table.

'Millie,' he said. 'I'm not sure. . . . But, well—it was, I suppose, because of William's being ill that you haven't yet been into—into the other room, our bedroom. And so'—he had gulped, as if there was some little danger of producing his very heart for her inspection—you have not seen *this*?' He was holding towards her the unfolded note, and with trembling fingers she

Physic

found herself actually pretending to read its scribbled lines again.

Her face had whitened; she had begun to despair of herself, conscious beyond everything else—the tumult in her mind, the ravaging of her heart—that she could hardly endure the mingled miseries, remorse, humiliation in his eyes, in the very tones of his voice, yet listening at the same time to a message of ineffable reassurance. He has not then deceived me again! At last she had contrived to nod, her chin shaking so stupidly for a while that she could scarcely utter a word. 'Yes. I *have* read it. I put it back . . . couldn't face it when I heard you. The children—I had to have time. I'm *sorry*, Edward.'

"*Sorry!*" ' he echoed.

'I mean—it *was* an awful, well, revelation; but I was stupid; I ought to have seen . . . I did see. But we won't—I *cant* go into that now. You are tired, ill; but you are back . . . for the present.'

Her eyes had managed at last to glance at him, and then to break away, and to keep from weeping. And, as if even in his sleep his usual small tact and wisdom had not deserted him, William had suddenly flung back his scorching sheet and in a gasping voice was muttering to an unseen listener in some broken, unintelligible lingo that yet ended with a sound resembling the word *faces*.

There, darling,' she answered him, smoothing back his fair fringe from his forehead, 'I know. They are gone;

Physic

all gone now; and the blind is down—to its very last inch,

She stayed watching him, couldn't look back just yet.

'You see, Millie . . . She—her husband was trying to explain—'that is, we had arranged to meet. It's hopeless to attempt to say anything more just now. . . . I waited. She sent _____ She didn't come.'

'I see. And so?'

'Millie, Millie. It wasn't, it wasn't,ou. Oh, I can't bear it any longer. If I had dreamed—the children 1' He had flung himself into a pretty round basket chair and sat shuddering, his face hidden in his lean, bloodless hands.

The few minute sounds in the room, the peevish creakings of the chair, William's rapid, snoring breathing, the fluttering of the fire, were interrupted by the noise of brakes and wheels rasping to a standstill in the street below. A brisk yet cautious knocking had followed, awakening an echo, it seemed, in the very hollow of her breast bone.

'Look,' she said, 'that's where *that* goes. There's no *time* now.' The scrap of paper, more swiftly than a vanishing card in a conjuring trick, had been instantly devoured by the voracious flames, had thinned to an exquisitely delicate fluttering ash, and then, as if with a sudden impulse, wafted itself out of sight like a tiny toy balloon into the sooty vacancy of the chimney.

Physic

'Listen. Must *yon* see the doctor, to-night? Unless it's not—you know—well *bad* 'flu? Wouldn't it be better not? I'll tell him; I could find out; I could say you had gone to bed. Quick, I must go.' Every nerve in her body was clamouring for motion, action, something to face, something to do.

He nodded. 'And you'll come back?'

'Yes. . . . I'll try. Oh, Edward, I'm sorry, sorry. If only there were words to say it. It must have been awful—awful!' She hesitated, gazing at his bent head, the familiar hands. . . .

And now the doctor, having deftly packed up Sallie again, burning hot but seemingly resigned to whatever fate might bring, and having carefully wiped his thermometer on the clean huckaback towel Emilia had handed him, was stuffing his stethoscope back into his little brown case. An almost passionate admiration filled her breast at his assured, unhurried movements, and with it a sort of mute, all-reconciling amusement to see how closely, deep within, behind these gestures, and the careful choice of words, he resembled his small and solemn understudy, William.

She was returning earnestly glance for glance, intently observant of every least change of expression in his dark decisive face, of timbre in his voice. Practically every one of the hungered-for, familiar, foreseen, all-satisfying assurances—like a tiny flock of innocent sheep

Thysic

pattering through a gateway—had been uttered and sagaciously nodded to: 'It may be just a feverish attack; it might, it *might* be 'flu.' 'Don't forget, Mrs. Hadleigh, they are down one moment and up the next!' 'I'll send round a bottle of medicine to-night, almost at once, and some powders.' 'I'll look in again first thing in the morning.' Then he had paused, little leather case in hand, his eyes fixed on the fire.

Some day, she told herself, she *must* retaliate in kind: 'You must understand, Dr. Wilson, that at this hour of the night it would be utterly stupid of you to breathe the word *pneumonia*, which takes weeks and weeks and weeks; may easily be fatal; and one has just to wait for the crisis!' Or, 'Don't be mistaken, Dr. Wilson, even if you were at death's door yourself I shouldn't hesitate to ring you up if their temperatures go over 103'—that kind of thing.

'You know, Mrs. Hadleigh,' he was beginning again, 'it justs beats me why you mothers—quite rational, sensible, almost cynically practical creatures some of you, simply wear yourselves out with worry and anxiety when there's scarcely a shred of justification for it. Quite uselessly. Getting thin and haggard, wasting away, losing all that precious youth and beauty. I say I often *think* these things—wish I could express them. You simply refuse to heed *the* lesson in life: that really great Englishman's, Mr. Asquith's—"Wait and See". *Condensing*, don't you

Physic

see, and not squandering all energy, impulse and reserves. "Never trouble trouble until trouble troubles you." Isn't *that* good sense? It's what's called an old wives' saying, of course——not a mother's. But I could have saved dozens of precious lives and bodies and all but souls, if only . . . well, literally saved them, I mean, a deuce of a lot of wear and tear.'

She was drinking in his words, this delicious lecture, these scoldings; devouring them, as if they were manna dipped in honey, the waters of life. They were a rest and peace beyond expression. A ready help in time of trouble. He shall lead his flock like a shepherd. Yea, though I walk . . . Why all this Bible? Dr. Wilson was not a parson; he was just a doctor. And then another Dr. Wilson had piped up in memory again, "You *said* that I was the doctor; and now you are kissing me, Mummie!" . . . ^a"I could often kiss lots of doctors!"'

'I know, I know,' she heard herself meekly assuring him. 'I'm utterly stupid about these things. And of course if we were all sensible savages or gipsies there wouldn't be . . . Even—oh, but you can't think what a comfort it is to—to be reassured.'

He was eyeing her now more closely, totting up and subtracting yes's and nots, it seemed, on his own account, and on hers. It was with difficulty she met the straight clear scrutiny. 'Well, there we are,' he decided. Just look what lovely babies you have. Everything a

Vhysic

woman could wish for! Gipsies be dashed. There are, I assure you, my dear Mrs. Hadleigh, spinsters galore in this parish who . . . How's your husband?

Her dark shining eyes had now at last quivered in their sockets, if only for the fraction of a second.

'It sounds very silly,' the words were squeezing out like cooing turtle doves through too narrow an exit, 'but *hes* not very well either! It's, it's almost funny, ridiculous—all three at once. Isn't it? He came home rather late from—from the office, and he's gone to bed.' It seemed a pity that one's cheeks should flatly refuse not to flame up, when one's eyes were hard as brass. 'The fact is, Dr. Wilson, he refused to see you. You know what men are. But could it be, do you think', a little nod towards William's bed had helped her out, 'that too?'

'I think,' Dr. Wilson had replied dryly, a scarcely perceptible forking frown between his eyebrows, 'it might very well be that too. But listen, Mrs. Hadleigh. Husbands, of course, are not really of much importance in life—not really. Necessities perhaps; but here to-day and gone to-morrow. *Children* are what the kernel is to the nut; the innermost part of it. And so must be taken great care of. *Therefore*—and this is not advice; this is *orders*: I forbid you to worry; forbid it. I shall throw up the case! If you *must* stay up—you have a maid, a good solid, stolid one too. Wake her up and chance it; she'll love you all the better. And you can share the night be-

Physic

tween you. Otherwise—unless of course you need me again, and you won't, though I should be *easily* handy—you are not only not to worry (more than you can help) but you are on no account to get up more than twice until the morning to look at your patients—at *our* patients, mind you. It's bad for them, worse for you. When they've had their dose, they'll soon quieten down—unless I'm *wrong*. And—imagine it!—I sometimes am.' He was holding out his hand, a look of unadulterated, generous, wholly masculine admiration on his vigilant, assured features.

'By gad!' he said. ⁱ All three! But then,ou know , know what you can manage when hard pressed. So that's all right.' He was plunging downstairs into the night, and Emilia was trying in vain to keep up with him.

'And after the first dose and the powders, Dr. Wilson, I shouldn't, I suppose, wake either of them up to give them any *more* medicine—not until the morning?'

'As a general rule, Mrs. Hadleigh,' replied the doctor, carefully putting on his hat and glancing as he did so into the strip of looking-glass on the wall, 'it's wiser never to wake *anybody* up, merely to give them physic—even mere doctor's physic'

THE TALISMAN



In the little town of Weissehauser there are—or at any rate there used to be—three bridges, two cold and beautiful spires, innumerable gables, and at least one old curiosity shop. Of these charming things I confess I liked the shop best. It was my own discovery—made during the first evening walk I took through the wind-swept starlit streets. I was young, had never before been out of England, knew little German. Nevertheless the queer old dealer in 'antiques', Adolph Gessen, whose shop it was, not only tolerated my idling there at every opportunity, but, I verily believe, had taken a fancy to me; and I became his constant visitor.

It was an obscure and poky shop as seen from its stone-silled many-paned window, but it ran far back into the twilight of green trees, and it was packed from end to end with his fantastic merchandise. In a gloomy recess no bigger than a cupboard, Gessen used to sit all day beneath a lamp, mending clocks and watches. From here, in a tarnished tilted mirror framed with Cupids, he could

The Talisman

scan his customers, of whom the jangling bell above his door had already given him warning. He was an angular, lean old man, his absurd skull on scraggy neck bulging from fleecy fluffs of silvery hair behind it. But his profile was aquiline, his expression keen and whimsical, and he had the biggest hands that can ever have been capable of doing such deft and delicate work.

What trade he enjoyed I cannot surmise. Nor can I recall ever having missed any article on which I had cast a covetous glance. It seemed as likely as not indeed that the clock which I usually found him nodding and glaring over he had himself many times put together and taken to pieces again! He knew, perhaps, a little more English than I German. And so we managed to converse very happily together, since neither of us had words enough ever to become wearisome. For though we talked little we told much. His eyes beneath his thick eyebrows could reveal a whole world of human experience, and its effects; his hands scarcely less. Perhaps, too, it was the common secret bond between us that lightened all difficulties. For the poor old fellow loved, and loved in vain. And so then did I—with my hopeless, sorrowful, youthful passion for Pauline Dussenaine.

In those few sad rapturous days I used to loaf off on long solitary walks. My father had his own concerns and found little pleasure in so raw a companionship as mine. Thus I got to know well all that I cared about in the town,

The Talisman

in the valleys, beside the rivers. Moonlight I knew, and the melancholy beauty of the rain. But rarely a day passed without at least one visit brief or prolonged to my friend Gessen.

There I would sit and talk, or pry, or watch him over his little wheels. Sometimes he would frown and nod and whisper—or sigh of his ancient *affaire*. And I, too, would make my mournful confidences. Occasionally, out of my scanty pocket-money, and prompted, I suppose, by English instincts, I bought some trifling thing—'to pay my way'. But it angered him inwardly, for he guessed my motive, and immensely overcharged me, I fancy, for what I would not accept as a gift. 'Frents,' he would say, 'vat then?'

He used to eat his vegetable dinner in a sort of cob-webby cupboard, pushing back his tools and gewgaws to make room for his plate when it was brought in, hot in its napkin, by the little white-haired child from the baker's with the serious blue-eyed smile. He ate with a spoon, in extraordinary haste, with immense gusto, and it was not until after this very audible display, one afternoon, that I first perceived the sound of ticking in his latest acquisition—a dark and battered old rosewood bureau.

It was one of those rare pieces of furniture which are of no conspicuous grace or beauty and on which one either turns a cold indifferent eye or—well, falls in

The Talisman

love with at first sight. Having then a tendency that way, I fell in love with it. I could not discover where it had come from, although Gessen was spluttering guttural explanations between the aftermaths of his dinner. Nodding and pointing, I asked him if he had explored it yet. He had; and busied his great hands and dangling eyebrows in describing its inward charms. But it was this faint, all but imperceptible ticking that had arrested my quickened ear. When he was silent I listened. And at last I managed to make him understand, and he listened too, his old fallen lantern-jawed cheek pressed tight against the wood. He disembowelled the beautiful chest once more; but in vain; the ticking continued.

A death-watch', I thought to myself; for my old friend Miss Barlow and I had listened together to *that* ticking but just before I had sailed from England. But whether he understood me, agreed with me, or not, Gessen made no sign. Like a doctor engrossed with his first wealthy patient, he again stooped bonily over his prize, and again laid his hairy ear against the smooth dark wood. He then took his smallest hammer and tapped very gently, very heedfully all over the precious thing, that was certainly not less black than any coffin ever made. And then I knew it could not be the death-watch beetle, for that abstruse morsel of life desists from telling tales the moment it detects even the vestige of an answer.

The Talisman

The ticking went steadily on, a little louder if anything now that the drawers were removed, and the bureau was reduced to a shell. I had to leave Gessen, tapping, scratching, ruminating, in order to dine with my father. But I sat and sipped without appetite, gazing dreamily out on the gold and blue and beauty, that far-away yet ever-present pulsation—that summons—in my head, like the sound of the heart of a child, and only a very little more rapid. My father raised his eyebrows at me once or twice; scrutinized his elegant fingers; offered me, very politely, more. But that evening I was in a sour humour, I remember. Had he not that very morning presented roses to Pauline, and caught my jealous eyes fixed on them both? If, indeed, I laugh now to think, I could then be jealous of my own father, what must my jealousy have been of Arthur, a second cousin of hers, a dandy neatly moustached, and, I acknowledge, no fool; always laughing, boasting, and at ease, and who is now the father of Pauline's four charming children, Pauline I I, Harry, Antoinette and John!

I hastened out, leaving my father faintly smiling over his walnuts, and there before me, as if rapt but an instant before clean out of Paradise, stood Pauline herself, in her beloved blue dress. I bowed distantly. She smiled.

'I hope', I muttered with a ridiculous attempt at irony, 'that the flowers are as fresh as ever,

Her brows gathered into a tiny frown of perplexity.

The Talisman

Then she remembered. 'Oh those,' she said. 'I was immensely flattered. But if . . .'

But I much preferred to nurse my gnawing little grievance than to ponder her smiling 'if'. I cast her a tragic glance of upbraiding and entreaty, coldly and loftily bowed again to her gentle sparkling eyes, and passed on.

There was a solitary candle burning in a rusty old candelabrum when I once more entered the little shop. Gessen was sitting in a chair beside the open window, gazing vacantly out into the green evening solitude of his garden. Silence lay as deep in it as the waters of a well. He did not stir when I entered. He seemed to be lost in thought. But I was accustomed to his moods, knew of whom he was thinking, and my whole attention had at once centred on the curious object which lay on the top of the old black bureau. In shape it was a delicate oval and seemed to be of a very pale gold. Beneath its thick crystal glass, and above a markless face there moved a single slender hand, telling no hours, no minutes, no seconds even; only Time. Despite that faint ticking, I could not detect the least 'check' in its stealthy yet rapid movement. One slender hand only—and a motto, in minute German characters, beyond my wits to decipher, engraved around its margin.

Why, I know not—I hesitated to pick it up. It was so quiet in the centuries-old shop. Bells were ringing

The Talisman

across Weissehauser's waters. And here, among these fantastic relics of Man—Man the curious, the engrossed, the eager, the infatuated, the transitory—ticked on this hourless, beautiful timepiece; sat the gaunt old lovesick dealer, whose treasure-trove it was, lost in reverie. I caught a glimpse of my own face in a grimy mirror as I turned at last from examining it—and saw, as it seemed, another reflection, a phantom face, Pauline's. '*She* never told her love'—but then Viola *could* have done so, and in the loveliest verse, let only the moment come and the loved one, together; whereas I myself, in those greenhorn days, really needed some kind of sorcery to enable me to utter a fraction of what mine meant to me. But Gessen had turned with a sigh in his chair, snfeezed, and looked up at me. Then he rose—still sighing— and came and stood beside me.

'It is strange—it is very strange, this,' he said, touching my sleeve. 'Take it, my goot boy, and tell me dreams. It is a wonder. It goes here!' He laid his enormous hand upon his heart. 'And this'—he pointed with his long black finger-nail to the motto on the dial—'this too is a—a . . .' He opened wide his pale-blue innocent eyes, shut them, frowned, opened them again, and shook his head; and I understood that *this* was a mystery.

He gave me a little washleather bag to keep the watch in, and a steel chain to secure it. And I slipped it into a pocket inside my waistcoat, not far from some dead

The Talisman

gentians, and buttoned it over twice. Gessen stood watching me from over his spectacles. It seemed he had something further to say. He opened his mouth more than once, but at length, shaking his head, said nothing, sighed loudly, blew out the candle, letting the moonlight steal in across the dry and dusty floor, and, muting its dangling bell for me, opened the door.

I pined to buy the watch, even to borrow money from my father, to pay for it; but I knew, had realized instantly at one look into the old man's face that it was not for sale—never would be for sale. It was a thing Fate sends, and Fate alone; and Fate was the one other revered mistress of my forlorn old friend.

I went out into the town. I knew not why then, but never had night shone with such exalted beauty as this. The moon hung low in the sky above the hueless snows of the mountains. The stars: it seemed that the faint multitudes which confuse the eye and imagination were scarcely visible—with so much splendour burned the constellations. There was an air across the darkened town cold as hill-water and clear as valleys seen in dream. And as I mounted the narrow cobbled street which led over a bridge to our inn, I saw with a kind of wild and sweet assurance Pauline standing there looking down into the water.

Forgotten every grievance then—every poisonous fang of that cur named Jealousy! I called to her. She

The Talisman

started and turned; and we looked into each other's faces in the dim heavenly light.

'Why, Harry, she said, 'what's the matter? You've fallen in love!'

'No,' I said, 'not fallen—mounted!'

'Dear me!' she said, opening her eyes a little. 'But really, now, tell me! Tell me! What is it? *Who* is it? When?'

'Ah,' I said. 'I will. But now come a little down. It is so much—it would take eternity; and all life is only an instant, Pauline. Listen! The waters mean only that. They roar, they come from the hills, and go down to the sea, as we, poor wandering ghosts, go too. We *are* ghosts, you know, you and I. How could you else be so beautiful and—and mock me so?'

I listened, amazed, to this harangue—I who hitherto never had a syllable to say, who even at a simple 'Good morning' flushed and stammered. And yet I could not be silent. All my fishlike dumbness had vanished. My thoughts were sparkling in my mind like bubbles in wine.

'Come, at once,' I said, touching her hand. 'The moon will soon be down. It is late.'

She drew back, smiling. 'You mad boy,' she said.. 'I am waiting for someone. , am early. He will be here at any moment.'

'Let him, then, wait for Thee!' I mocked.

'But who said "him"?' she cried, laughing.

The Talisman

'Ssh! now,' I said, 'we will soon be back, and *he* could not grow much colder; creep down behind me; we'll see the moon make rainbows,

Half silly with delight, scarcely able to breathe, I led the way down the steep, slippery old stone steps; and with a kind of incredulous amusement and astonishment Pauline was following me. I drew her back, her heart beating, into the shadow of the arch. Above the unpausing clamour of the water we had caught faintly a footstep, and her own name.called softly. I pressed her hand in mine—it seemed, indeed, that such slender fingers must be unreal, unreal the pale smiling face so close to mine in the shadow of the cold arch echoing with the Lorelei.

'But, Harry, you know, how dare you do this? Where are you taking me, you mad, ridiculous boy?'

'Ah, you call me a boy,' I said, 'but still you had to come—you had to come, Pauline. Even now, if fifty Arthurs called you, you still would stay here. This way; the shadows lengthen as the moon sinks lower, and a little further down where that moth is fluttering, is the path that leads to the rainbows. And then—*then*, Pauline, I'll tell you how much I love you.'

'Oh!' she cried softly; 'but then, mustn't listen—not even to you.'

'*He* hasn't told you,' I called triumphantly above the clamour.

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She smiled gravely. 'No, my friend, but he's going to.'

'Why, yes,' I said, 'and I will teach you what to say in answer.'

The path fell ever nearer and nearer to the snowy swirl and tumult of the river. Above our heads the trees hung motionless festoons beneath their silvered boughs. There seemed to be voices calling, birds, music, laughter, and enchantment. And on, on, like some restless conscience, I felt, as if against my heart, the unhastening beat of Gessen's curious timepiece.

We walked hand in hand. And as I gazed at the pale profile of that beloved and beautiful face, it was transfigured even in my young ardent eyes; like that of one entranced, a face seen in a dream. The dark beauty of the night was in her eyes. Frowning, smiling, wistful, meditative, she listened to my unconscionable babble. We sat under a tree whose heights touched heaven and shut out half the stars. And, looking on the changing moon-bows of the fall, I told her my dreams. My heart was full. It seemed I was entrusting into her hands all that my childhood had so long been hoarding. No deed too noble could there be, no glory too remote, no bravery too forlorn, but *that* I would choose for her service! Here was my very self revealed. Here was the meaning of life—the goal of its strange journey! She heard me out—unable to do otherwise.

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'No, no, you mustn't!' she kept repeating, searching half in wonder, half in amusement and mockery my poor haggard, beatified countenance! She promised she would think of me, even that she would dream of me. To love me, *that* she could not promise. 'Oh, but I love someone else!' she kept repeating, almost as if in doubt of her own words, and still with my fingers clasping hers. 'But what, dear friend, *makes* you? You look so—well, I suppose one may say it—so beautiful, Harry. Your eyes! What have you been doing? Are you bewitched?'

'No,' I said, with happy sadness; 'it is only that I love you.'

'Love me!' she frowned. 'But then, *can* you, and you only a boy?'

'I am eighteen,' I said truthfully.

'Well, can one *then*?' she answered gently. 'I am twenty-four, but oh, centuries and centuries older than you, dear friend!'

'Please not, "dear friend",' I said. 'If you knew how I—oh! Pauline, there's nothing here, nothing that can ever be hoped for, dreamed of, which I could not give you, *have* given you. The water—listen! How it cries above its music. The stillness, the shadows—all, all they mean: dearest Pauline, I love, because you only are they, and they are you.'

'Yes, yes,' she said, 'I do, indeed, believe you. But then, when you come to know how many things there

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are in this world that won't—can never match. . . . But there, forgive me. I am not so true, not so good as you are. How sad you have made me! I *will* think of you. I do—often. I *like* you, oh, very, very much; who could help it? But. . . . But now, tell me,' she leaned forward, looking into my face, 'where have you *been*? What has made you—suddenly—so—different?'

I told her of my day's adventure; never dreamed of keeping it secret. It never occurred to me then that there was any mystery in this wild hour of freedom from a tortured and stupid timidity. I never suspected *what* had been my mentor, the source of all my madness. If indeed it had!

She listened eagerly, and I took out my curious treasure and in a beam of moonlight laid it in her hand. We stooped together over its oval face, its one pale delicate finger following the unrecorded hours. And there, beneath the tree, the moonlight glinting on the crystal, she read out the German inscription in a slow faltering voice, and put it into English for me:

*For him who bears me I of Love and Death tell out Eternity:
While Life tells only Moments.*

The face she now turned to me had become grave and absent. Some sudden resolve seemed to have arrested and darkened her eyes. Her breast rose like a dove's to a sigh, yet no sigh came. 'What does it mean? Who said

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that? Do you believe it?' she said. 'It's wildly romantic—sentimental!'

'I don't know what it means.' Weariness and revulsion had come over me. I shivered. My good angel had left me. I felt how much was gone from me, lost, betrayed—my secret self. Could anyone have ever imagined it worth even a pinch of dust—the hoard of one of Gessen's cobwebs?

But she seemed to be completely indifferent to what was passing in my mind, merely pelted me with questions about Gessen, about the shop, the bureau, the 'charming curio'. Did I believe in it? And might she wear it—for only one night, one day? Just to *see*?

'To see what?' I asked dully.

'Oh, to *see*. Do let me, dear, dear friend! I do think of you. Who knows?—why love *might* come. One day only—I will give it back to-morrow, here—here in this very moonlight. Fancy, all your kindness, and I not a single word in reply!'

She stooped her head at the foot of the narrow steps, and kissed my hand! I drew back awkwardly, on fire, loving her so much in my heart that—yet again!—all words seemed blasphemous, and the fool's voice I had been listening to, as if in a dream, insane.

She ran up in front of me, and waved me good night. . .

From over Weissehauser the moon had long de-

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scended. Its cataracts roared faintly. A few of its upper windows still showed lights behind their blinds—one by one they went out. As had mine! All dark—but empty. What had been said—had it not now been irrevocably lost and wasted? I might still love; but could I ever love so truly? The nightingale having sung, falls silent. How different are the two silences—before the song and after!

I went to bed; slept soundly, without dream; and woke unhappy.

All that morning I haunted Pauline's doorstep, not daring to enquire, nor daring to return to Gessen again without his treasure. At last, a little after two, I saw her descending the hill from the pine woods; and Arthur was her companion. I turned back, burning tears pricking my eyes; remorse, anger, vanity, envy, despair and faithful love battling for mastery in my irrational foolish heart.

She left him and ran to me, her face a little anxious, her every movement one of rapture.

'There!' she said, putting the watch into my hand. 'My promise. It is a mystery. What does it mean?—what *does* it mean? Don't tell Arthur. Not a word—oh, no. And congratulate me, Harry. You will? You do? And forgive. You have never never been angry with me, not for a single moment. And you see I cannot *help* being happy, can I now?'

I took the watch, staring vaguely into her eyes.

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Gloom and resentment seemed to vanish as if by enchantment. Why! after all, I was alive, I could still live on. There never was such sunshine as this upon her hair; never such shadows in unfathomable" wells of water as these within her eyes.

'Forgive you!' I cried. 'Oh, may you be always happy! I love you. I shall never never forget you. Good-bye, Pauline.'

I turned from her and hastened away. My thoughts were so many, and they raced so fast through my mind that I hardly seemed to think at all. Beauty was left—the beauty of remembrance; and could there be despair where there had never been hope? It is difficult to recall the mazy meanderings of one's youth. Still, one must at least attempt to be just—even to a past self—for who knows what future self may not some day be upon us! I loved her foolishly, guilelessly; but it was my love that was my riches; her peace—that was its hope. Yes, I verily believe that that bemused and obsessed young man was as insufferably unselfish as all that!

Gessen met me at his shop door. I poured out in broken jargon all my doings into that long, bristling ear. We seemed to be lifelong friends, old comrades. He understood me. It was, after all, but his own heart's confusion made articulate. He patted my shoulder; he purred; he glared; asking no questions. And when I had finished, as best I could, tears were running down his

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cheeks. He stooped, and putting his hands tenderly on my shoulders, kissed my cheek.

It was childish, fatuous, infamously un-English. At the back of my mind I realized, even while my heart seemed to have swollen too big for my body, that he was a sentimental old fool, who might much better be preparing for his winding-sheet than doting on a dark, taciturn, sensual woman who—as I guessed—had never perhaps looked twice at him, unless in the hope of extorting something really worth her while. But he and I now shared a sovereign secret. He had not been a magician in vain—the craftsman who had set these wheels revolving, and who had graved his cryptic wisdom on the dial!

'Ah, it was prave, prove, the old man kept repeating. 'You vlowed out, my goot boy. Luff, luff, luff! Haf courage! It vill be veil. It vill be very veil.'

He stretched out his great hands, head on one side, and beamed on me through his tears. But his was the delusion now. His own vaporous, futile sentiment prompted him. Hope like a pyramid of blossom had sprung up in his heart. Here was his fate at last. I left him as twilight gathered, sitting in the gloom of his narrow shop, the watch in his hand, his face like some old children's book of Marchen.

Yet somehow, I knew not why, all that evening I continued to think of him, as well as of Pauline—of his

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love, and of hers, and of mine. Was there ever such a trio! Would his be as disastrous too, his hour of many hours? Would it be better to hold his peace? make no mad venture? Better the plateau than the abyss. What would *his* to-morrow be—rejected?

I ran out late, and through deserted streets. No need to knock—his door stood unlatched. A candle burned beneath his wooden mirror, with its vacantly smiling shadowy Cupids. He sat in his workaday chair, in his beautiful best clothes, polished, starched, and shaven. His astonished face was grey, and smiling in its stillness; his mouth queerly ajar. His body was slightly bent, his head stooping, his eyes looking down. And pale beneath the candles, in his great seamed open palm, lay the beautiful and mysterious object that seemed in some fantastic fashion to have been the cause of our common undoing. And though my poor old friend's heart in *that* mortal body would never stir again, I could still hear—thin, ecstatic, unhastening, through, above and beneath the babble of the pendulums around us—the infinite small summons of its tick.

But when in panic haste I had run off to the baker's—and in spite of the gleam above the fanlight, showing that he was busy at his job, I knocked for ten solid minutes on his too too solid door before he appeared—and then returned with him; there sat Gessen precisely as I had left him, but his open hand was empty; the watch was gone.

IN THE FOREST

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While my father was away at the war, I marked off each day with my knife on a piece of wood. He had started when it was scarcely light beneath the trees. I was very sleepy so early in the morning while he ate his breakfast, and as I watched him on the other side of the lighted candle drinking his steaming tea in his saucer, my eyes kept rolling back of themselves because I was so tired. And everything in the room was plain one moment and the next all blurred and wavering. The baby was asleep in the cradle. The wind was still roaring in the tops of the trees, but the candle burned clear, because the wind did not come down into the house.

When my father opened the door I saw that the grass was strewn with green leaves, and falling leaves were in the air, and the wind overhead sounded like water, though the tree trunks hardly swayed even, down here. But it was not raining when he started, only the leaves were wet with rain and the bark of the trees was darkened with wet. I asked him to bring me back a long

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rifle. He kept rubbing his hands over his face and blinking his eyes and listening to the wind as if he heard the guns. Two or three times he came back to say good-bye to my mother. And even when at last he didn't come back he kept turning his face, looking over his shoulder at us. There was no sun shining yet that morning, but the bright light of the sky gleamed on the wet leaves. I asked mother if father was glad to be going to the war. But she was crying over the baby, so I went out into the forest till dinner.

My mother was more cheerful at dinner, and we had some hot soup. After dinner I chopped up some wood in the shed. It made me very hot and excited chopping up the wood. It was getting dark when I came back, carrying the logs. It seemed that the wind grew more angry in the twilight, and although it still roared like the mill-water in the village, yet it whistled too, and the leaves kept dropping, heavy with rain. And now it was not clear, but cold and misty round the hut. I went in with the logs.

Mother was sitting in the wooden chair with the baby in her arms. She looked as if she was pretending. I went close and stared at her, and found that she was fast asleep. The baby was asleep too, but it scarcely seemed to be really breathing—it was like a moth fluttering on a pin; its face was quite pale and still in its sleep, but its cheeks were very red. I thought I would make a fire

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again without asking mother's leave, so as to be *mof* cheerful; besides, I could feel the cold air oozing through the crannies of the timbers, and it was getting so dark I could see only the white things in the room. The rushing sound of the wind never ceased at all.

As soon as the flames began to spring up, and the sparks to crack out of the wood, my mother woke up. She looked at me with a curious face; but soon she remembered that she had been asleep, and she enjoyed the warmth of the fire.

On the next day I woke up where I had fallen asleep by the hearth, and it was a very quiet morning. I looked out of the window, and saw the sun shining yellow between the branches; and many of the boughs were now all but bare. But the fallen leaves lay thick on the ground as far as I could see, and some of them were still quite large and green. I was glad my father was gone away, because now I could do just as I pleased. I did not want the trouble of lighting the fire, so I went out into the forest, and down to visit the snares. There was a young hare caught by the leg in one, and the leaves were all round him. His eyes were bleeding, and not very bright. I killed him with a crack on the neck as I had seen father kill the hares, and carried him back by his hind legs. The leaves made an incessant rustling as I walked through them. I could see the blue sky above the trees; it was very pale, like a ribbon. I stood still a minute, carrying

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the hare, and listening to find if I could hear the guns. But I heard only a bird singing and a rushing sound, as if a snake were going away under the leaves. Sometimes I came to branches blown down to the ground, and even now, here and there, a leaf would fall slowly through the air, twirling, to be with all the rest. I enjoyed my broth for dinner very much, and the hare lasted for three days, with some turnips.

I asked mother how long father would be away. She said she could not tell. And I wondered how they would carry back his body if he was killed in the war.

I stayed out in the forest nearly all that day because the baby kept on crying. It was dark, and the window was lit up when I came home, and still the baby was fretting. Its eyes were gone dull, and it would not go to sleep in the night, though mother kept walking up and down, crooning and mumbling to it, and rocking it in her arms. She said it was very ill, and she held it pressed close to her. I asked her if it was going to die, but she only walked a little faster, and, as I was very sleepy, we did not talk much that night. The baby was still crying when I woke up, but not so loud. It was bleating small and shrill; like a young lamb, I told mother. I felt very refreshed after my sleep, and very hungry. I lit the fire and boiled the kettle, and put the plates on the table, and the loaf.

After breakfast I told mother I was going down to

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the old pool to fish, and that I would bring her some fish for dinner. But she looked at me and called me to her.

'The baby is dreadfully ill, she said, 'and we must go without the fish. Feel its poor thin hot hands. That's the fever. Do you love it? Then take it in your arms.'

But I shook my head. It looked very ugly because its face was all puckered up, and it just wailed and wailed like a gnat in the air.

'I think I would *like* to go fishing, mother,' I said, 'and I promise you shall have the biggest I catch.'

But she kept on persisting that the baby was too ill to wait, that it was very queer, and that I must go for the doctor in the village. It wasn't so very far, she said, and I could fish to-morrow.

'But it is far,' I told her; 'and it doesn't look so very bad; and it might be windy and cold to-morrow. It's only crying,' I said. And I ran out before she could catch me.

But I did not catch any fish. I suppose they would not bite because I had been wicked. So I tied up my lines and came home about three in the afternoon. As I stood at the door waiting before going in, I heard a sound far away, and then, in a while, again, through the forest. And I knew it was the guns and cannons on the other side of the forest. The baby was not crying now, when I went in. But my mother did not turn her head to speak to me.

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She was kneeling beside its old rocking-cradle, some of her hair hanging down on her shoulders.

'I'll go for the Doctor now, mother; but the guns are firing; you can hear them now if you come and listen at the door.'

But when I told her about the guns, she began to cry out loud, and hid her face in the coverlet on the cradle. I watched her a little while, and I could hear the cannons going off quite plainly now; only far away, like a drum when you put your hand on it.

I got very hot standing still, so I put my tackle on the hook and sat down by the hearth.

'Shall I go for the doctor now, mother? It'll be dark before I get back.'

Mother turned on me very wild. 'Oh, you coward, you coward,' she said. 'Dark—it's dark enough for me!'

She startled me very much by saying this and I felt very uncomfortable. I went nearer and looked. The baby's face was white, and its eyelids were like white wax. Its lips were the colour of its hands, almost blue.

'Is it dead, mother?' I asked. But she did not answer me, only shook her shoulders. I walked away and looked out of the door. First I felt hot and then my back shivered. And I began to cry too, because I had not gone in the morning for the Doctor. I did not dry my eyes because the tears ran quite hot down my cheeks, and I could hear them dripping off my chin upon my jacket.

in the Forest

I liked to have the door open, although it was cold and grey in the afternoon.

My mother came to the doorway and drew me close to her as if she were sorry, with her hand clutching my head. I could not cry any more now, but stood still; and even then the guns and cannons went on firing. And sometimes birds silently flew between the trees away from the sound. I wondered if father was fighting near the cannons.

The next day it was so cold again my mother made me a jacket out of an old coat of father's. It was just hemmed up, and I wore it instead of my other jacket when I went out. She had drawn the coverlet over the baby's face, so that it now lay in a kind of little house in its cradle. I thought I would please mother, so found the place and read out of the Bible about Herod; but the candle burned very sooty and smoky, so that I could not read very well, and left out the long words.

The next morning mother told me to go down to the village and tell the sexton that the baby was dead so that it could be buried in the churchyard.

I started out with my switch, about ten o'clock. It was a warm day; so I was wearing my old jacket again, and the air smelled of the leaves, which were withered and yellow and brown. I went on, whistling; but it was more than five miles to the village. The robins were singing on the twigs, and I saw some crows flying in the sky.

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It was so quiet in the forest, that the cannons seemed to shake the air with their sound.

And while I was walking along, not very fast, and looking out for wild berries, I heard a noise in the distance of men running, and then the sound of a rifle quite near, and a scream like a rabbit, but much more loud and awful. I hid behind a tree, and when the forest was quiet again I ran home as quick as I could. But I did not like to tell mother that I had been frightened of the soldiers, because she had called me a coward already. So I said instead that the sexton was nowhere to be found in the village, that he must have gone to the war himself, and that no one would come for fear of the soldiers.

She looked me full in the face with her eyes. She looked so earnestly and so hard at me that I could not help moving my shoulder a little. And at that she turned away, and I felt very wretched because I knew that she had seen it was a lie. But I did not say anything.

All the while I sat there my eyes would not keep from looking at the cradle. I was very hungry. But since mother was putting on her shawl I knew that she was going out presently. Then, I thought, when she is gone, I will eat as much as ever I can. There were some bones in the cupboard well worth picking, I knew. When mother had put on her shawl and her bonnet, she lifted the baby out of the cradle.

'I must carry it to the churchyard myself,' she said,

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but more to herself than to me. There were no tears in her eyes; they were dark all round.

Won't you kiss your little brother, Robbie?' It was wrapped up in her wedding shawl, which she had sometimes shown me of an evening, out of the chest. I began to cry when I kissed its forehead. It was as cold as a stone, as a piece of dough, and looked very heavy, yet thin, and its face was quite still now.

'Take care of the house, Rob,' she said. 'Don't go out; and bolt the door after me.'

I watched her hasten off along the narrow path between the trees. There was a light like crimson in the forest, and I knew that the sun would soon be setting. It was silly of her not to have gone earlier. It was very quiet now; and I was afraid it would soon be dark.

Soon she was out of sight, and only the trees seemed to come a little nearer and stand still. I left the door open, went into the room and put the candlestick on the table. I kicked the log till it began to flame. Then I went to the cupboard and took out the loaf and the bones, and a few puckered old apples. I ate from the dish, sitting by the hearth, looking out of the door. When I had finished I fell asleep for a little while.

By and by I opened my eyes. It was darker, and I saw some animal looking in at the door. I jumped up, and the animal ran away. Then I shut and barred the door and put some more wood on the fire until it was blazing

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high up the chimney. But I did not like to look over my shoulder towards the square window; it was so dark and silent and watchful out there. I could not hear the cannons now, either because they weren't sounding or because the flames made a loud bubbling noise as they ran up and waved. I did not dare to let them fall quiet, to only the red embers, so I kept on putting wood on the fire as fast as it burned away.

Mother did not come back, and it seemed I was sitting in front of the warm hearth in a dream that would never come to an end. All was still and motionless, and there was no ordinary sound at all that I could hear in the forest, and even the cannons were more muffled now and further away. I could not cry, though I felt very angry at being left alone, and I was afraid. Besides, I didn't know what I would say to mother when she came back—about the food. Yet I longed for her too, and got a pain with it, and felt that I loved her, and was very sorry for my wickedness.

I fell asleep unawares. When I awoke it was broad daylight. I felt very glad and relieved to see the light, even though mother had not come back. It seemed to me that some noise had awakened me. Presently there came a groan at the doorway. Kneeling down and peeping through a crevice between the planks, I saw my father lying there on the doorstep. I took down the bar and opened the door. He was lying on his stomach; his

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clothes were filthy and torn, and at the back of his shoulder was a small hole pushed in in the cloth. There was dark, thick blood on the withered leaves. I tried to see his face, but couldn't very well. It was all muddy, bleared and white, and he groaned and swore when I touched him. But he didn't know who I was, and some of what he said didn't seem to me to have any sense.

He asked for some water, but I could not turn him over so that he could drink it. And it was all spilt. I told him about the baby dying, but he didn't show that he could hear anything; and just as I finished I heard mother coming back from the churchyard. So I ran out and told her that it was father.

'A FROWARD CHILD'



WHEN ALL IS DONE . . .

Lavinia lay in bed, on her back. She was thinking. The **hard** vibrant light of the delicate pink-shaded reading lamp—held up at arm's length by a charming little small-winged china boy—flooded the room. Flooded its rose silk damask curtains, its 'decorative' water-colours, the plaster walls (left by Charles's architect when renovating the old house discreetly unimproved), the ponderous beam of oak across the ceiling above her eyes. Not exactly elegant this, but strong enough for any conceivable purpose to which it could be put. Indeed Lavinia was finding it more friendly just now than anything else in the room, much friendlier at any rate than the other 'antiques'. And she continued to gaze at it, steadily, as she continued to think.

After London—and a bustling, happy, excited London off on its holidays, too—what a silence! It was a silence that seemed to have no limits, infinitely flat and placid, on which the electric light resembled a brilliantly thin glaze. It was Charles's silence, too, of course. It *be-

'A Froward Child'

longed' to him. So did this room; it was *Charles's* room—and his mother's. And until a few hours ago it might have been hers, Lavinia's. Not her bedroom, that is, but her guest room. What odd transmogrifications life is capable of, and one's self with it. A touch, a scarcely perceptible jar, and the complete pattern changes.

And so it had suddenly changed for Lavinia—her whole future—which until yesterday afternoon had seemed as inevitable as that the church clock out there in the frozen dark should have just tolled two. Exhausted, mind and body, she had long since fallen asleep, but had almost instantly awakened again, alert in every nerve. Yet driven into a corner though she was, and in a way which it horrified her to think of arguing about, she was more certain than ever of her decision. Not that once and for all she had yet said No—the worst kind of No, since it would betray a Yes. She had merely made up her mind; and that as suddenly as at times the sun seems to set—goes down, and out.

But though, in this, her mind was made up, it was still in the most ghastly disorder. How unlike that stolid little bow-fronted walnut chest of drawers over there, containing everything she had brought with her, neatly and nicely disposed of by Charles's mother's miraculous parlour-maid, as stiff and old-fashioned as a black-and-white ribanded maypole—and no May! Charles would have seen to that. He insisted on efficiency—his the

'A Froward Child'

mould. He was so like his mother that now he didn't need maternal help, only maternal corroboration: those solid well-cut features, that downrightness; and she so completely Victorian, silvery, serene and—immovable.

And because Lavinia was so near the brink of dreams, though still wide awake, violent quarrelling voices had begun to talk again in some blind alley of half-consciousness: two stunted old men in a hideous blackened street—dismal windows, shuttered cellars. Oh, but of course, *this was a dream*: since there had actually been only one old man. She shut her eyes tight, and tried hard not to think; first, because this helpless repetition of words and images was hideously fatiguing, and she must do her utmost not to give way to them, and next, because as soon as in the slightest degree she lost grip of herself, *all that last journey came back*—more horrifying in memory even than it had been in fact—and brought. . . . She clenched her fingers under the sheet, so hard that the old emeralds in her ring nipped the skin like a tiny ferret.

And then she deliberately turned her fair head to one side, opened her eyelids and through its pinkish overwhelming brilliance looked straight out across the room. Nothing. And the wall was of a clear neutral grey, too, on which any shadow might show up, any obstruction, even though it were only of the workmanship of the mind. What *arc* these images that may so beset us? And even though no terror she might be betrayed into would

A Froward Child'

induce her to press the ivory bell-nipple in the wall behind her, she might begin to shiver again, or even to talk to herself. And to lose, in the very least, control over one's body—why, even when she had begun to laugh on and on at some remark of Charles's the evening before, she hadn't enjoyed doing so! But how was it that no story she had ever read had told her that these shapes of the mind, these fantasies, can come at one so rapidly; and, unless she was very, very careful, might come to stay?

All the haunted fields, houses, rooms, human creatures she had ever read of or heard of had become accustomed to their state. That's what the word meant—'haunted'. Spectres, shapes of the mind, *didn't*, she had supposed, suddenly pounce, without warning, take possession, uninvited and undeserved. And yet, was anything in life quite undeserved? Her No to Charles, say, and the old lady's shattering regret, profound chagrin? She could actually hear the gentle protesting tones, on and on: 'But I so thought, my dear child—was so *happy* to think that everything—everything. . . . And dear Charles, too; oh, I know these strange impulses, but you will. . . .' And Lavinia would be able to utter to neither of them one word of her real explanation. She would still have to prevaricate—lie; unless that hard-faced police inspector came inquiring here.

'Real life is here our portion: Real sorrow, short-

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lived care, No, no, of course, not *real*; •brief. And when Lavinia saw herself for an instant returning, an unattached spinster, to her London duties again, her Christmas over, she hardly regretted the 'brief. Still, this question was settled, whatever the enormous difficulty might be of persuading Charles that it was. And rather than think of it any more it seemed better to be as clear as she possibly could about—well, about what had led up to it. Besides, the ugliest of things are best faced out, and sheer matter-of-fact, however ugly, keeps fancies from settling. So as she leadenly lay there as if in swans-down on her bed, staring up at that time-blackened beam against the virgin white of the ceiling, and with not the faintest hope of sleep yet, she went step by step over her journey again.

HUMAN LIFE. . . .

After the hurry-scurry of getting away, the packing, the locking up of her flat, the hasty lunch, the wild scramble in search of the last Christmas gift, the farewells, the congratulations, what bliss it had been to find herself—the porter tipped, her turquoise-blue dressing-case on the seat in front of her (Charles's choice and how exquisitely feminine), her two books beside her on the seat—actually in the train, and that train about to start! Marvel of marvels, too, with not a soul in her compart-

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ment beside herself. This, of course, was wholly a stroke of luck—tinged with sagacity, the porter's. Taking his advice, she had watched the first irradiated trainload of holiday passengers glide out of the station before her very eyes. Hers was a relief train, an extra. Lavinia was a slow settler-in, but when in a few minutes she had arranged her many small belongings in the far left-hand corner, her back to the engine, she had resigned herself to the luxury of realizing how deliciously she was enjoying herself. Her mind at this moment had been as gay and radiant and hung about with pretty-pretties, past and to come, as a child's Christmas tree, with, just possibly, Charles for Santa Claus on its topmost twig. That of course, anyhow, was where he ought to be. And in this scintillating inward scene—'beaded bubbles winking at the brim'—she had sat idly looking clean across the carriage and out of its window.

What a queer sort of animals human beings look in railway stations; more like automata, even, than animals. Could indeed anyone, even really nice, look *really* nice forging along a wooden platform in that predatory fashion in search of a corner seat? But then railway travelling—all gregarious functions—are rather dehumanizing. They evoke enterprise and selfishness, even at the 'festive season'. She herself had become only a kind of animated luggage, though only she herself knew what delicious gew-gaws it concealed. That perhaps was why

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Charles was so excellent a traveller. He knew what he meant to have—to the last cleeck! As for the other kind of people, the not-quite-nice, railway influences hardly improved them either!

Her heart was beating a little faster than usual, her lips ajar, her eyes darting rapidly to and fro—suspense, expectation. In another moment solitude would be assured—that furred-up first-class young lady with the Pekinese had positively thawed into a scamper. Only one last human was for the moment now in sight, or rather just in sight—there, a pace or two within the doorway of the passage or corridor opposite, something to do with foods'. He had been standing there for minutes together, alone. She had noticed him at once, small and old, keeping guard over his luggage, a dingy shapeless bag, clipped between his ankles. But could anything so motionless be real—alive? He looked like some glass-eyed dressed-up figure in wax, for show; although in that case his proprietors could hardly have chosen him a worse pitch. Indeed, in that shadowy obscurity he looked even more like an obscure shadow himself!

Yes, the trickle of humanity had now dried up. A faint high whistle from the barrier pierced the air, as if from far out of the past. It was followed by another nearer the engine—as if from out of the future. Then the platform, the wheeled tea-stand, the fruit-booth, and the tubby benign little station master in his glossy topper

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began almost imperceptibly to glide away. Quite safe now! But no! There had followed a vaguely-seen sudden sort of lurching animal-rush across the platform; and the next moment, with a dying shout of 'Sfand away tfeere!' the outer door had been dragged open and, bag clutched in hand, the little man from out of his gloomy refuge had edged, wrestled, hauled himself in, had slammed the door, and was now sitting opposite to her in the further corner.

Above the remote voluminous puffing of the engine and the gentle, accelerating *thump-thumpity-thump* of the wheels, she could hear him breathing—a squat man, rather than merely a small, with a head too big for his long thick body and short legs, and a face that looked at the same time cold and shockingly pale. But Lavinia had glanced away the very instant after he had come in, and was now at the same time watching the wheeling departure of the last outworks of the railway terminus, and listening. The stertorous gaspings were now less violent. Her new companion must have edged round in his seat towards his window; yes, tod now he had stood up, and, after a pause, had lifted his bag, and, as if with a supreme effort, had managed to deposit it on the rack. There, it appeared, he had watched it for a moment before sitting down.

Lavinia, after another prolonged pause, turned again too, and with a flicker of a glance in his direction with-

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drew the smaller and slimmer of her two books from under its fellow. She opened it at random. The few lines of dainty print she had thus chanced on had a complete page to thfihaselves:

'When all is done (they were trying to tell her), human life is, at the greatest and the best, but like a froward child, that must be played with and humoured a little to keep it quiet till it falls asleep, and then the care is over,

But although Lavinia's clear intent eyes were doing their best for her, she was merely reading—not marking, learning or digesting. Instead, she was wishing she were alone. She was wishing for other company. She had begun to wonder what kind hers actually was; if it mattered; who was next door; if she could possibly make a change; where first the train stopped—and had suddenly thought of Charles Dickens.

LIKE A FROWARD CHILD . . .

Surely all nondescript carpet bags with leather handles must long ago have followed that Magician into the shades except this one—this dingy green and red one on the rack. It was Christmas Eve, too, though not one of *his* conjuration—grey air, grey sky, and the stark grey London scene beyond her window, smitten with cold, and only the last sullen red of a December sunset fading

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behind her back, and night pursuing it down. Why hadn't they put on the lights? After the coruscations of the platform, the parcels, the poultry, the holly, the bustle, it was stupid to damp down one's passenger in such a gloom. And at this of all seasons of the year!—one which the newspapers were shouting for joy to predict as a white one. *What* a hideous phrase, 'a white Christmas', like something screened and huddled up under a sheet, and a sheet that has never been to the wash either.

'A froward child. . . .'—Lavinia had yet again read over Sir William Temple's lines. They were lovely—but false. For isn't it when the froward child *has* fallen asleep—in *that* final fashion—that the keenest of the 'care' begins? Or was this being hypercritical? 'The greatest and the best', too; what is that? Anyhow, though Lavinia herself had been unhappy pretty often, she had never been wretched. Her young days over, she too had been tethered up like most humans to a peg on the common. But her grazing usually had been fresh and green, abundant enough for the day, and with a rather pleasant view. This view, her inward view, that is, was exceedingly pleasant in some ways at this very moment. It would be, possibly, even more pleasant in the future. Charles would see to that. At least he must see to a good deal of it, and for that very reason it was only common sense to keep the 'in some ways'.

For, though he might not admit it now, she had

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needed a good deal of persuasion! What kind of froward child would Charles prove to be? There was little of the vixen or tomboy in him—wrong sex!—and still less of the waif and stray. Yet in some respects he might have sat for Humphrey in *Misunderstood*. And oh, how absurdly obstinate, how sure he was of himself. And it wasn't disloyal, at least she hoped not, to realize that he was not always too anxious as to what kind of self was being so obstructionary. Pig iron: she smiled to herself in the most charming and charitable of fashions. But anyhow Charles was no Scrooge. Whatever he clamped about his middle, it wasn't his cash-box. Not at least when she was concerned.

Far from it; he was generous—her charming little dressing-case, for example, with its silver-gilt fittings. But as for bustling out with *The First Nowell* and turkey and plum pudding and mince pies for every tramp who called at his country mansion—well, no. But then again, even 'mansion' wasn't quite fair. To judge from the photographs he had sent her, the architect and Charles together, though they had been a little harsh and cold to its antiquity, had done their work admirably. It would be just the kind of house she loved and had always longed for; she was sure of that. And who would have supposed Charles or his mother could have had so perfectly sweet an intuition as to leave two or three of the rooms unfurnished—waiting? *Perfectly* sweet. And at this her reverie had come to an end.

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'Do you read *many* of those kind of books?' a voice had suddenly broken in from out of the dusk of its owner's corner. 'I shouldn't have supposed myself there was much to find in them.'

It was an unusual voice, the timbre of which she would certainly never forget, if you could call anything so flat and monotonous *timbre*. At sound of it she had turned abruptly in the opposite direction, and in that instant became aware that lights were beginning to gleam in streets and at windows in the gliding scene beyond. She was glad of that; glad, too, that a scatter of languid and minute snowflakes were twirling past the glass; that footfalls were approaching from the engine end of the train; and that her fellow-passenger, interested in literature, had decided to change over to the other corner. But soon the footfalls had died away, and he was once more back opposite to her and no doubt still awaiting an answer to his question. She took a deep breath, held it a second, raised her chin a fraction of an inch, and looked at him.

How silly such apprehensions! Even if this had not been a luxurious corridor train, but one of the Victorian sort, mere wooden boxes—and not even a bit of string for poor old half-asleep Mr. Gold with his watch-chain to tug at when the fair, slender, silly-looking young Mr. Lefroy rose out of his corner!—there couldn't be *danger* in a grey, ageing face, pitted with shadows around its

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gloomy eyes, and so desperately packed with misery. And even a face expressive of an active misery is not so tragic as one on which an habitual misery has become little more than a permanent mask.

She continued to scrutinize him from under her pale vermilion hat, in her long new charmingly cut fur-collar-and-cuffed winter coat, and nothing would ever recall what she was thinking about as she did so. And then she hastily glanced down at the red book.

'It's a detective story, she said.

'That's what I thought,' uttered the mouth in the dark face, but without the faintest hint of an 'I told you so' in its tones. 'From what I've seen of them, they don't entertain me much. No more than so much chaff. And I shouldn't have supposed ladies, or anybody else either, could be bothered with them—after the newspapers.'

Lavinia's eyelids descended a little, and she glanced again at her open page. No, she couldn't very well attempt to placate him with her anthology. 'Why, newspapers?' she retorted, but kept the question that had immediately followed it to herself: *That's not why he is talking, what is he leading up to ?*

The clumsy head, so thickly thatched with iron-grey hair, had tumbled aside a little, as if its owner were listening to sounds in the distance. 'Whatever they say, it's facts *they* are about,' he answered. 'And I shouldn't have supposed that anyone could wish for worse.'

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'No,' said Lavinia brightly, 'but then you see fiction is not facts; and this is fiction.' And seldom in her life had she said anything so facilely that she had so instantly wished to recall. When things really matter as little as that it is almost beyond stupidity to put them into words. 'I mean,' she said, 'of course, there are just *awful* things in the newspapers. And, what in some ways is worse I suppose, one doesn't believe them.'

The squat figure in the corner at this stared moodily on. ' "Believe"! Between you and me, he said, I've had my dose too.' An extraordinary smotheration of messages had spread over his countenance and vanished, and it was with a gulp like that of a barn owl discharging a whole dark night's hunting relics that he added: 'There's *2L friend* of mine on this train. At least there may be. But you'll understand me'—and, what Lavinia liked far less than misery, a gleam of fear and cunning had shown in his eyes—'I don't much care to go and see.'

Lavinia listened. 'Why not?' she said, and at this instant the sad neutral winter landscape, already scarcely perceptible beneath a thin grey skin of frozen snow and a steadily descending veil of tiny flakes from the heavens above it, was suddenly blotted out. The train lights had come on; and the small cabin in which the two of them sat together had become a cage of radiance. How Lavinia hated too much light. So, too, seemingly did her fellow-passenger. His whole face, not merely his eyes,

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had shut up—as if he had been electrocuted, as indeed in a mild fashion Lavinia had too. Still, she herself had been wishing for more light.

'Why not?' she almost whispered now. 'If he is a *friend*?⁹ And she had not said it, oddly enough, as though the question implied that she herself was not one.

'Ay,' said her new acquaintance, 'I said a friend. You can't find words sometimes. . . .'

'Not a friend?' hinted Lavinia.

The head shook slowly. The eyes lifted a little towards the electric bulb and the furious white of the carriage roof over the racks. 'No. Not.' In infinite weariness he drew a thick fudgy hand over his face. 'I'm afraid of him. And that, my God's,' he had muttered almost to himself, 'the solemn truth.'

PLAYED WITH AND HUMOURED A LITTLE . . .

How many miles, Lavinia wondered, had they gone ravening on into the night by now? They must be in open English country at any rate—peaceful woods and hills and water, perhaps, and an occasional homestead huddled under the mantling snow. He stirred uneasily, moved his mouth, and spoke again.

'What I'd ask you to *do*, young lady, is to go and see.

'Go and see!' Lavinia repeated blankly, incredulously. The abjectness of it all! 'Me? But . . . Well, I'm

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alone, of course. Though *that*⁹, she added quickly, 'doesn't really matter. Besides, I don't know in the least what—what your friend is like.'

'What he's like? what he's *like*?⁹ The grubby fingers fumbled steadily down from button to button of the thick great-coat. 'Yes, of course; what he's like. Why', and again the old and pallid face had seemed to contract into a look as stupid as it was cunning, 'he's like—just as usual.'

At which for some obscure reason Lavinia felt even less inclined for the expedition. 'He's a *littlcish* man,' continued the other as if he were actually measuring him with his eye and relieved at being on ground so safe; 'about my size, but thin and skimpy; with a long nose and red—reddish—hair. But gone bald, you must understand. And though a bit younger than I am, getting on. You needn't be afraid of that.'

Lavinia took another deep breath, glancing up at the heat indicator. The very outrageousness of the invitation seemed to have put it, now, at any rate, past refusal. 'Well,' she said at last, 'it's very hot in here.' As though that might help I 'But supposing I do find him, what then? Shall I ask him to come in to you? Speak to him? It would be very awkward.'

'Not awkward a bit,' he assured her. 'Far from it. So long as I know where he is. No, I don't want him in here. Oh no I' A trace of suspicion that *she* might showed in

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his small, restless, burnt-out eyes. 'All I'm wanting to know is if he is—well, *about*. You say you read all there is to read in the newspapers. Mind you, I'm talking to you as a friend; no reason not; as you wouldn't repeat anything to anybody. Why should you? But going back to the newspapers. . . .' He listened. Blackmail?'

'You mean', said Lavinia, 'have I read about that? Blackmail?' The gutted miserable eyes merely continued to hold her own. 'Why yes,' she went on, 'I have—now and then. And I think', a fiery furnace of indignation had suddenly shot open its iron doors in her very soul, like the flare from a railway engine—'I think it's an utterly filthy thing! Almost worse than murder.'

This was scarcely ladylike language, and yet not quite extreme enough apparently for the situation. The stranger in the corner had been not in the least moved by it. The effect on him had merely become little more than a dark concentrated stare. Then he nodded. 'You're right there; even if you don't know what you are talking about. Not likely. Besides, I don't see why "*almost*",' he added, almost peevishly. 'And who's to believe you? Eh?'

Lavinia gave up attempting to find her way through this muddled harangue. 'You mean—*he* was? Blackmail? You are afraid of him?' All seemed much easier now. 'You think he may be on this train—to pursue you, persecute you, come in here? Well, even at that'—and in

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this bold moment she had really felt her company might make all the difference—'I should be here too. Yes. Yes, Til go: r il go now—if it can be of any real help,

But even as she had leaned forward to rise, her hand resting on the seat, she had added, groping slowly on through the shadowy misgivings that had flocked into her mind, 'I can't imagine *anything* one could have done, almost, that would have justified——' But she had failed to finish this rash generalization. Thus stooping, she could see more clearly the colourless exhausted face—the face as of a corpse but for its horror and woe. And she had said no more.

And now she had risen, yet none the less had paused another instant before plunging beyond him out at the open door. This accomplished, she glanced back over her shoulder with yet another nod of reassurance. But even in this instant he too had risen, and, on tiptoe, was clumsily groping with his hand to draw the green lampshade for night-travellers over the carriage light. Well, she could pull it back again when she returned. 'A little thin man; your height, but thin,' she whispered over her shoulder, her left hand on the cold brass rail protecting the glass beyond; 'going bald, with a long nose and what was red hair: is that it?' How utterly lifeless the description seemed!

'Ay,' he said. 'That's it; like a weasel.' With shoulders humped, he was blankly surveying her. 'But you'll have to look pretty close for all that.'

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What *that* meant Lavinia was not to realize for the time being, and already she was on her way. How many carriages? she wondered, as, shaken and clutching, she groped steadily on. And what would she say to the guard or ticket-man if she met him? Oh, yes, of course—she was looking for the restaurant car. The attendant himself would be round later. It was lucky—for both of them—herself and her new acquaintance—that their train was an extra. Five passengers packed in on each side of a compartment, and possibly two or three standing in it would have been a rather too richly diversified assortment for her errand! On she went, covertly glancing. An old lady, a pale young man with a velvet collar to his coat, and what looked like a brewer, asleep; two sailors with bundles and a bunch of mistletoe, and a man in spectacles, reading; three assorted school-girls with hard black straw hats and pigtails, jawing like monkeys, and an aunt, possibly, with the *Spectator*. And so on and on, from compartment to compartment, and, over the swaying little metal bridges between them from carriage on to carriage, Lavinia forged her way—and without reward. There was not a vestige of a fellow-creature who was not merely skimpy or ageing or long-nosed or rufous or semi-hairless or vulturous—(how vividly now she could see the 'filthy' phantom!)—but all these together. Such unifications, please Heaven, must be pretty rare even in this densely populated world.

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It had not been quite so easy to venture through the restaurant car, even though it was already dotted with would-be eaters. But Lavinia, as her partner in their little business would have agreed, and even Charles, too, though he much preferred feminine qualities in his womenkind—Lavinia was rather pestered at times by her sense of duty. She had *said* she would search the train, and search it she did, omitting only the guard's van, of whose inmate she caught but one intimidating glimpse, as he stood surveying his miscellaneous holiday freight—from dead hares and turkeys to wooden horses, from wads of newspapers to a weeping Sealyham and what appeared to be a cage of love-birds. Blackmailers there might be, whirling along with her over these wheels this Christmas Eve, but the one she was after was not apparent.

TILL IT FALLS ASLEEP . . .

And so she returned at last to her compartment again, shaken, but safe and triumphant, bringing tidings of comfort and joy, and yet somehow astonished to find her patron still there in his corner. Was it mere fancy, or did he actually look less raddled and anxious, smoother, more his own man? She had hardly time to tell, for at sight of her he had at once all but jumped in his seat, and had shouted up at her in a whisper as it were, 'Oh, it's you? And *did* you?'

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The sheer intensity of the question, when it was nothing after all but a horrible something between two human beings, however extreme, that was at issue, was appalling. Still, he had not exaggerated. If Newspaper facts' give you only the faintest hint of the signification of certain words, writers of detective stories give you even less. She knew now—as if the retching flavour of the hot black draught was all over her mouth—what black-mail actually meant. And with a gesture not in the least intended to resemble that of a tombstone angel in Parian marble, she had flung up her hand, withdrawn the green silk shade from the lamp, and had given her answer: 'I *did*. So far as *he* is concerned, you are safe. There's not a sign of him. Not at least in the front part of the train; and the back?—well, I gathered from you, that *isnt* so. Anyhow, he's not there. Unless, of course, he has hidden himself under the turkeys in the guard's van!' With this she had almost beamed on her Levite; but the little jest fell flat. Good Samaritans apparently should keep only to wine and oil. He merely blinked at her.

'Hiding,' he echoed, in a muffled, peevish voice. 'And who's to tell, I'd like to know, that he isn't? He *can*!'

At this she was refreshed by a positive jet of righteous indignation. 'Well,' she said, as she sat down again, 'if I had asked,ou to do the same thing for me, to search, as I have, for—for a disagreeable acquaintance, because I was . . . , Well, I might at least have said, Thwk you,'

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He stared stupidly on as if now incapable of following her. 'What I mean is, he said, 'you can't tell; not with that kind. And the closer you wait and watch, the more. . . . It's snowing now, isn't it—hard?'

Good heavens, would the creature never be satisfied? Why couldn't he have looked for himself? She petulantly flung down her window and peered out through the cold rushing air into the night. At first it was impossible to see anything through the whirling flakes and the blaze of the train, but in a moment a stealthy hand behind her had drawn the sage-green shade over the lamp again. And presently with the aid of a faint gibbous moon above the clouds of the night, Lavinia discerned a landscape as still and miraculous as that of a dream—vague undulations, wooded hollows, smooth-scooped fallowland and meadow, utterly calm, numbing, swooning to its cold Christmas slumbers beneath the multitudinous bewildering whispered lully of the snow. 'Yes, she called back to him over her shoulder, 'Hard.' She drew up the window again. 'We shall have a white Christmas.'

But the old man in the corner made no reply. He was merely shuddering in his thick coat at the cold of the air, had drawn up its wide collar, and seemed to be composing himself to sleep. And whether or not it was due perhaps to this glimpse of the flying night or to some inward misgiving that had hitherto been only lurking in

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the back of her mind, a vague gnawing anxiety had taken possession of her. Misery, fear, blackmail, yes. But what else? She too was shivering a little. She drew her chin closer into the fur of her coat, pulled down the pretty narrow veil from her hat, and opened her book again.

'When all is done, human life is, at the greatest and the best, but like a froward child. . . .'

No, it was impossible to concentrate. Her eyes roved to and fro over the print, but with no result. As for her detective story, she had never seen a book that looked less inviting. So for a few moments she closed her eyes; partly because it was soothing to do so, and partly because it is hardly fair to scrutinize even happy faces when their owners are taking no care of them—are asleep. But the lids continued to flicker; she was confused; and presently she opened them again—to shut them no more. Her neighbour was *not* asleep. Even in this dim light it was plain that he was merely pretending to be. Eyes of themselves shut not so tightly as that. Nor was he even at rest. Far from it; again and again there came an involuntary jerk of head or hand, as of a puppet gifted with life; or his whole body swayed suddenly to one side, even against the gentle swing of the carriage on its wheels. Once in a low, thick, whining voice he began talking as if he were hotly pleading or arguing with someone—or with himself, and then sank again into silence.

And as she covertly watched him, fascinated as if by

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the contortions of some animal unaware of human company, there came into her mind the recollection that on her coming back into the compartment again, something had been wrong with it—different. There are layers of observation, and on occasion some trophy of a lower one may rise to the surface of consciousness, long after, as if unnoticed, it has sunk out of sight. Something was changed. What? Her eyes roved in vain over floor, seat, walls and roof. What—what—what? Why, yes, of course—of course. The rack over the old man's head was empty now. The dank-looking shapeless roped-up carpet-bag was gone. She craned round, peered up into the other corner: nothing there either. Her lips closed firmly, almost primly for one comparatively young. She was clenching her teeth, too, for the merest intuition had assured her that the bag was not under either seat. Anything in, or even beyond, reason; but she hated being deceived. If this poor horrible terrified creature had wanted to dispose of his bag, and of its contents, what necessity had there been with such stupid cunning to send her off on a wild goose chase in search of someone who he knew perfectly well was *not* on the train? What gratitude *there*, might she ask! And why . . . ?

And as she sat emptily looking, vainly pondering, there sounded from a distance a clangour of opening and shutting doors, and a voice calling, though she could detect no individual words. It was the ticket-collector, no

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doubt, or, better still, the dining-car attendant. *His* invitation would be like manna in the wilderness, though at sound of it her fellow-passenger, as motionless as a cat, had merely opened his eyes to stare—as if staring could be of any help.

A plaintive wailing, as of some lost banshee, from the engine followed. The rhythm of sound and motion of which she had become almost oblivious was now changing its pattern. The train was slackening up, though there was no sign of any station. The signal must be against them. The distant slamming ceased. Motionlessly she continued to gaze out through her obscuring veil at her fellow-passenger, who in exquisite deliberation had now turned to look at her, with a long, peering, intent scrutiny. Whereupon, as if satisfied, his eyes had wandered up to the rack above his head, and then—for there was an inch or two between the soles of his shoes and the floor of the carriage—he had slid down, and with turned head still in watch of her, was by noiseless fractions of an inch drawing further and further open the carriage door.

The train had jarred to a standstill; and a dead silence had followed. Not a sound—not even the crowing of Gabriel's cock from the country fields. An intolerable foreboding and something little short of terror had taken possession of Lavinia, a terror perhaps not wholly her own. The last anguished look on that engrossed awful face had filled her also with an overwhelming compas-

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sion. In life's journey, she knew a little where *she* was going to. But what fate was awaiting this old man in the dark solitudes of the snow beyond the window? He too had once been a child, and, like herself, had come to this moment pace by pace. Who—what—might he be meeting out there—and without one word of farewell? She, *too*, an enemy?—who had at least tried to be a friend.

And even as, having succeeded in soundlessly opening and shutting the outer door behind him, he vanished, she realized that it was no creature of flesh and blood, foulest of all pursuers, whom she had been sent out in search of, but one who had 'gone on'—as she would herself, some day; and, for purposes of his own, it seemed, or, the mere creation of terrified fantasy, had come back. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing, left behind of pursuer or pursued except a dingy scrap of cardboard, which by mischance must have fallen out of the old man's great-coat pocket, and now lay on the further seat. She watched it awhile; then stole across, and lifting it into the hard white light of the lamp, read its ornate inscription: 'Mr. James Glyde, Wardrobe Dealer, 91 8B, Old Kent Road'. She continued to read the words, and with far more concentration than she had given to Sir William Temple. Then she stuffed the smudged little card into her bag and sat down again. Life may admit of many pregnant pauses, though only of one conclusion.

M Ihowaid Child'

With a brief reassuring blast from the engine, the train had begun to move again. A dark, smooth-faced young man in a blue Eton jacket looked in, shouted his summons and withdrew. And still she sat on, unable to stir.

It was stupid of her. Had she dined *then*, and dined boldly, with half a bottle of wine for company, she might have faced the guard and the stranger—who appeared at her carriage door immediately after the train had left its first stopping place—with cooler brains and a nimbler tongue.

AND THEN . . .

She might have. But in any case, quite apart from any question of decency, of public morals, even of common sense, had it been discreet or even helpful to deny flatly that she had had any company at all in her carriage, and certainly not that of a squat little ageing man, whom her interrogator, straight-nosed, heavy-chinned, and cold-blue-eyed under his bowler hat, had described from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, button by button, as if he were reading the particulars from the pocket-book in his hand? Yes, and while the guard, with lean cheekbones and a trace of paternal whisker, watched steadily on. The 'individual'⁹ in question had been seen to enter the train in that last frantic scramble—this end of the train, too. 'But surely,' she expostulated, 'I should

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have noticed such a man, even if he hadn't come in here ? Still', she raised her gentle eyelids, 'I was reading, and perhaps——' she shrugged a narrow shoulder towards the books on the seat, and the other two had followed her gesture, as if in prophetic mimicry of one of their titles—*Faint but Pursuing*. Indeed, yes, *there* it was, in black on red—proof positive! And a curious drop of the underlip of the man in the hard hat showed that he had taken it in. But he hadn't stayed to ask the name of its author. He was explaining that the individual he had mentioned was wanted, wanted very badly, and was carrying a carpet bag. And she had realized perfectly well, and even perfectly calmly, that neither of her questioners was being in the least convinced by her replies.

I'm sorry to trouble you, miss,' the spokesman had assured her again, 'but this is a serious business, you see; a very serious business, as you'd realize'—he had glanced an instant with lifted eyebrow at the guard—'if you had the full particulars.' At this her tongue had moved gently in her closed mouth.

'Yes, I suppose so,' she had answered. 'But, of course! Still, what—what has he *done*? Why?'

Not that she was pining for any *exact* answer to these questions. So that, if anything, it was a relief to be assured that her *what* was neither here nor there. And at last with a slight frown of impatience she had been asked to oblige her questioner with her own name and address.

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'Oh, yes—my address.' She had at once opened her bag, and, still looking at the speaker and not at her fumbling fingers, had presented him forthwith with a card. The fair-skinned face had not only frowned then, but hardened, as even the austerest can.

'What's this, miss?' he said. 'I asked you for *your* name and address.' At which it seemed as though her whole body had evaporated; that it had become nothing but a vacancy with eyes whereby to look out of it. It was all over. The Fiend had betrayed her. *Traditore*, unhappy! She had rendered up the old man's card. Still, even in this predicament, thank God, she had merely stayed looking, and waiting.

Then, ' "Mr. Charles AshbyV the other had begun reciting throatily, ' "The Old Mill, Mieklesham" '—though he refrained from adding the pencilled scribble on it: *So very sorry—and disappointed—dearest, I couldnt wait. Business.*

'That's Devon,' said the guard, 'Mieklesham'—the only words he had uttered. 'There's another in Wiltshire.' And Lavinia's heart, it seemed, had begun to beat again, though it was not exactly a love-bird's, even if in a cage.

'Mr. Ashby, oh yes.' She held out her fingers. 'How very silly of me! That's where I'm going to. You', and her face positively lit up with intelligence, 'you want where I have come from.' And now she all but buried her

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small nose inside her gaping bag. 'There, she said, 'that's not *another* friend of mine, I hope?'

The inspector had accepted her card; indeed, had tucked it into the flap of his pocket-book as if for a prize keepsake. And then, having firmly closed the book again, he bestowed on her a last full quiet glance.

'Well, miss, he said I'm sorry to have disturbed you. If you haven't, you haven't. And', he glanced sidelong again at the fatherly guard, 'p'raps it's just as well. There are them it's best to keep your distance from. And', he raised his face a little, almost as if, houndlike, he had snuffed up the imperceptible, 'this one has gone as far as most!'

'I'm sure it's very, very kind of you,' Lavinia had assured him, 'I wish . . . And if . . . , And then she had drawn down her pretty narrow veil again, and was alone.

THE CARE IS OVER.

The highly competent, even if they are also, which is unusual, impulsive in disposition, when vexed or put out, though only for trivial reasons, are apt to be unobservant. Charles was competent, but not impulsive, and far from subtle. Yet even the reception of his first greeting to her on the black, oil-lit, snow-encrusted platform might have warned him to tread cautiously. Women are so temperamental. His hurried bearish embrace from out

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of that long thick country ulster of his had been as little of a comfort as a tonic. The train was late, he was complaining—ridiculously, fatuously, late; his damn fool of a chauffeur had run out of petrol, and they would have to wait for the village fly, 'My gad, these people!' he kept repeating. And then suddenly, but much too late, 'What's wrong, Lavinia? You look as white as a sheet, and, by gad, shivering! Come into this miserable little hole for a moment. What's wrong? I actually *told* the feller_____'

The train had by now abandoned the tiny country station to darkness and to them, and the porter on the opposite platform was extinguishing the last of its lamps. Indeed, he left them only one, and that out of sight, for their few minutes' talk, in the magic starry moon-dusk of winter snow.

'Now', Charles had remarked yet again, 'tell me all about it.' Why then hadn't she done as he suggested? Why hadn't she reposed her fair head on his manly shoulder and—wept her heart out? Why had she managed to confide in him no more than a colourless fraction of her story? Why had she left out the least mention of that absurd yet valiant search of the train, the carpet bag, the furtive exit? Surely it couldn't merely have been because Charles had said, 'My damn fool of a chauffeur!' so early? Anyhow, that couldn't be the only reason. And it was nothing but nice of him to assure her again and

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again that, if he had shared her journey, he would have knocked the inspector's silly head off. 'It was monstrous; simply monstrous! If only I! . . . I should have refused to say anything—anything,' he repeated for the ninth time, and Lavinia, chilled to the bone, her heart thumping under her ribs, and her teeth chattering to such a degree that she stuttered and almost hiccupped with every word she said, had asked, 'To which?'

'What do you mean?' Charles had inquired angrily.

' "To which?" '

'I mean,' she said, 'to the poor old man or to the nice inspector?'

' "Poor old man!" You mean you *talked*—to *him*?⁹

'Of course I mean I talked to him.'

'My gad,' Charles had begun, and then the cabman had interrupted them, and they had sat together side by side in the ancient vehicle, noiselessly wheeling and jogging on like marionettes together along the frosted country lane, while the sinking moon obliquely stared in on them from across fields made desolate with snow. But by now they were almost quarrelling.

'You mean,' she was saying, 'that if you had been me—I—you would never in any circumstances have had a single word to say to *any* utterly miserable old man if you were alone with him—anywhere? You mean *that*?'

'But, my dear *child*, I'm *not* you; I didn't say "a single word"; and it wasn't *any* old man. You said so. Some

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sniffing sneak-thief, or worse. Why, the police were after him! You said so.' He made a gesture with his gloved right hand—clean across the starry winter night. 'You don't seem to be able to see the solid facts of the situation.'

'*Don't I?*' she heard herself calling to him, as if out of the year before last. 'I — I see you!' But no, her feeble little sally had passed unheeded. 'Besides, isn't it harder and even more valuable to see *through* things—especially solid facts, as you call them. *We aren't.*' And at that very instant Charles himself had become almost as transparent as glass—plate glass.

'For Heaven's sake, Lavinia, let us try to keep to the point. I am speaking of a whining old blackguard who molests a lonely woman on a railway journey—and you say, "*We aren't*".'

'No, Charles. Perhaps you are right. It's easy not to think if you don't feel—to know, I mean. You *are* right. You always are.' Her teeth had stopped chattering for a moment, and she was colloquing feverishly with the moon while her hand, visible almost to a blind man in that glare, lay idle, nerveless, and homeless on her knee. 'I think it is just possible he was even worse than that. And though I know perfectly well——' and then suddenly she turned. 'But supposing, just for example, you were being hunted. *Hunted*, do you *hear?*' and her eyes ranged like a March hare the untrodden wilds beneath

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the winter stars, 'Oh, no, you needn't snigger. *Not* the police. Hunted, I said; *haunted*, threatened, tracked down, and you couldn't even wait to . . . BLACKMAIL. Is there nothing in this miserable world can make us realize—*others?*'

But Charles would not listen this time either, 'Don't be silly, Lavinia. Control yourself. You need not shout at me. You are utterly unhinged, hysterical. *No*, I say; you are not to utter another word till we are home. Mother will see to all that.' She seemed at this to have shut her mouth and her soul at the same moment—which, with that exclamatory *blackmail* of hers still echoing on in consciousness, now somehow resembled an eavesdropper in the midst of phantoms looking in on the contents of a *morgue*. And the small chamber they were sharing, smaller even than a railway compartment, though they sat there leagues asunder, jogged silently on into time and space.

And 'Mother', of course, had done her very best to see to all that; so understanding, so managing, so silkily and exquisitely tactful.

Even after these retrospective nocturnal ruminations had come to an end, Lavinia had continued to stare up from her bed into the ceiling at that ponderous old beam—though what connexion, in the pink and white room so seductively prepared for her, this unassuming object had

'A Froward Child'

with the train of her thoughts, she hadn't any actualized notion. And the worst of it was that though, safe but not secure under the roof of the Old Mill, she had at last, however late, dined boldly—and possibly had a little shocked the hovering, insistent old lady by preferring brandy to 'this nice light wine, *not* very dry, my dear'—she had none the less utterly failed to satisfy Charles as to why she had not at any rate ordered something on the train.

'Good Lord, you have only to push the bell. Besides, you get better food then sometimes than—that filthy soup, that odious piecrust—all out of the same tin.'

'*Gourmet ! Fie!*' she had smiled at him, with an infantile display of irony, and then had dipped again at her brandy.

'And you really mean to say you sat on and on with that verminous old . . . until—where *did* he get out, by the way?'

But with Heaven's help the village Waits had then suddenly chimed in with, *The Lord at first did Adam make Out of the dust and clay. . . .* And Charles, being a new arrival in these parts, in spite of fuming at their 'hideous din', had gone out. And—his best new *grand seigneur* voice still resounding in the porch—she had managed to shiver to her feet and insist that very moment on going to her room. There, with a last good-night kiss as of faded rose-leaves on her cheek, she had sat down—as

A Froward Child'

if she were pretending to be insane—on her bed. . .

And now she was calm again: though one, alas, may be calm but still horrified. So she continued to watch, her hot-water bottle no longer much of a companion between the sheets, just in case her fellow-passenger or his old friend should decide—well, to come out into the open. *Her* open, that is; for they had enjoyed, of course, their own also. And it was thus the maypole parlour-maid, a little shocked, found her in the morning—fast, fast asleep; but with the lamp, held rigidly on tip-toe by the small china Cupid on her bedside table, still burning on, in faint conflict with the reflected splendour of the Christmas snow.

MISS MILLER

Because she had very little breath left, and because it must be far from easy to sob and run at the same time, the little girl with the square-bobbed flaxen hair dropped into a walk as she came in under the shade of the wide-spreading chestnut tree. And there, at sight of the figure that sat bolt upright in the middle of the seat, she at once stopped dead. So complete was her surprise that she had even forgotten to sob any more. She simply opened her tear-washed eyes and stared. And Miss Miller, in her tight soldierlike jacket and peculiar hat, seemed to be taking no more notice of her than a lighted lamp-post takes of a moth.

But Miss Miller had seen her right enough. Miss Miller had kept a weather-eye open, had watched her come tumbling across the gentle green grass slopes and under the trees and into the sunshine and into the shade again. It was only her funny little way to pretend not to have seen, though she could no more have explained *why* than she could explain why these whole long summer

Miss Miller

mornings she always sat bolt upright on a seat that had clearly been constructed with such beautiful scroll-like curves at the back of it on purpose to make those who had time thus to idle the day away uncomfortable.

Not that this little creature had ever seen Miss Miller before, had even so much as suspected she was there. That was certain. Though, since they frequently shared the amenities of the park, she very well might have done so. The park-keepers knew Miss Miller all right, and there wasn't one that wouldn't nod her a jocular if slightly ironical good morning. So would the elephantine policeman at the gates—and then perhaps solemnly wink at the man who was piling up the dead leaves in his three-wheeled handcart. Hardly a day went by but Miss Miller was to be seen wandering about in these particular parts, observing the observable with a quick bird-like turn of the head, or sitting just as she was now, with her sharp black eyes and her long sharp nose, one cotton-gloved hand resting on the long-beaked stork's head of her umbrella, her gaze fixed on the sun-sheened waters of the ornamental pond, almost as though she were eternally on the point of being lost in some fantastically quizzical day-dream.

Only 'almost', though; for Miss Miller had very little ultimate respect for day-dreams. She preferred, or rather she restricted herself to, the actual—but with no excessive respect for that either. And however motionless her

Miss Miller

pose might be, however absent-looking the expression on her long, odd, sallow face, and in her coal-black cavernous eyes, she noticed positively everything that was going on around her—striding, gluttonous starlings, clumsy, strutting, burnished wood-pigeons, fashionable nursemaids, smartly stepping soldier boys with their paper-squill puttees and funny little metal-headed swagger canes, ladies and gentlemen politely conversing on the gravel paths, or less politely colloquing under the trees, the swans for ever amorous of their own snowy images on the lustrous pale-blue water, and the wing-sailed toy-boats braving the breezes, their small round-behinded owners stooping like Chinese dummies at the edge of the pond as they launched them out upon the deep. She even heard and heeded the changeable talk of the sparrows in the branches overhead, while their cousins of every degree dumpily hopped about her long feet with no more fear of casualties than if she were a dust-bin. And all the while some other Miss Miller sat tristfully hearkening to the distant murmur of a fall of water feeding the shallow pond.

In the soft sweet air of that hot St. Martin's Summer morning her small tear-stained visitor must by now have stood staring at her under the tent of the chestnut tree for at least two whole minutes. And then softly and suddenly Miss Miller turned her sharp, black, coal-box eyes, and the long drooping nose that hung between them, straight at the child.

Miss Miller

'Well, Rosie,' she said, 'and what's for you?'¹

But the question was neither sharp, tart, tradesman-like nor grown-up-ish. It merely asked for valuable information.

'Nothing at all, thank you, said her visitor, 'I was only looking.'

'And so was I, said Miss Miller. 'What's the harm in that?'

The bobbed head under the blue bonnet stooped a little forward. 'My name', she all but whispered, as though she didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, 'is not Rosie; it's Nella.'

'And that's an odd thing too,' cried Miss Miller from in under her high hat, 'for mine is Miller—*Miss Miller*. At least that's what they call me:

*Though only one had an umberella,
There sat Miss Miller and there stood Nella.'*

'Can you make up *much*?'⁹ asked the little girl.

'It depends on who *for*, on the vocabulary, and the *rhymes*,' said Miss Miller. 'Some come, some won't. But the next and the next and the next thing to enquire is *why*, Rosie, you have run away? And who from? Or should we say, whom-m-m?

*In life, so I'm told, there is no need to stammer,
So long as we keep a sharp eye on our grammar.*

And be sure not to answer if you've *no* wish to say.'

Miss Miller

The little girl looked stealthily over her shoulder, gazed carefully once more at Miss Miller, turned, and breathed out her secret.

'It's my new nurse,' she said. 'She's *not* my real Nannie; *my* Nannie's ill. She's a beast, and I hate her.'

'Ah, now,' cried Miss Miller, clutching more firmly than ever her beaked umbrella; "'a beast"! With four legs no doubt, but not, oh no, a tell-tale at the end of it! What did I *say*! Isn't that *just*, Rosie, what we have to expect? And I'll be bound she can't help it. That's *my* opinion. It's what's called ingrained. So you ran away. And what more likely? Though *not*, we must admit, allowed?

*And there, maybe to mock the eye,
Goes fluttering by a butterfly.
But mark, dear Pilgrim, mark with me,
How rational is the honey bee!*

Hey now, what about *that*? Nurses! It's years and years and years . . . but then you see after all it's only Time, Rosie, that divides us. By us meaning just you and me. And what is *Time*? Nothing I promise you but merely "wear and tear". Merely.'

Yet another prolonged shuddering sob shook the little girl from head to foot, but it was meaning little more now than that solemn foamless swell upon the Pacific which succeeds a storm.

'She won't let me do a single thing I want, and some

Miss Miller

day I'll run right away. Then even my daddy won't be able to find me.'

'I expect *not*' said Miss Miller, 'and especially even if he shouldn't happen to look. You see, my poppet, even if we have the legs and the brrroth to run with, it's very very seldom really "right away". It can't be done. And *there's* the rub. I have frequently noticed it.'

She was still steadily surveying her visitor, her perched-up hat trembling a little in the process. The fair face looked far too young to have had so many troubles begin to show their markings in it. At which sad notion Miss Miller openly smiled at the little girl, though her smile rather more closely resembled a grimace.

'Now when , was about your size and for a good long time after,' she said, 'I didn't myself usually run away. I was run away *from*.'⁹

'Didn't you have a nurse?'

'Three,' said Miss Miller. 'Black, yellow and brown. Turn and turn about. So it wasn't much good.'

'I don't think I quite understand that,' said her visitor.

'No? In such cases I am told it is better to explain. You will understand then, Polly, that when I was young—which is exactly a hundred and forty-eight years ago now, not counting Sundays—I lived in a big, a *great* big house—a whacking great big enormous house.'

'Why?'

Miss Miller

'Because', said Miss Miller, 'it was there it had pleased God to call me. Ahouse, Pollie, not parked as they say in a huge prairie like this one,' and she swept her umbrella across the ample view, 'not with a bit of a pond in it like that one,' and she jabbed its point at the lake, 'but a river, my love, a wide r-r-rolling r-r-river, with cr-r-reeks in its cr-r-rumplings, and simply carpeted with water-lilies. Carpeted. A hop and a skip and a jump and there you were on the other side. And fish—*plop-plop-plopp*, and ducks—quack-quack—*quarrhk!* And besides the woolly sheep, my love, *deer!* Herds of them, dappled and waggle-tailed and some of them horned, and ears like windmills. But believe me, Pollie, *one* flick of a finger and every single one of them clean out of sight! On the other hand, it was not the deer we were referring to, but the house. It had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of windows. Specially up above, of course, where the corridors were—one after another and all the way round.' And Miss Miller spread out the black-gloved fingers of one lank left hand as if that would show exactly how. 'And to every window—or *two*—or three, as the case might be, a room or chamber: chiefly, as I say, bed. Not that I'd attempt to tell you exactly how many. Mistakes cannot always be put right. But imagine me there, if you please, looking *out* of the windows; and the OTHERS, you know, feasting in the HALL.'

'I have my dinner, said her visitor, 'in the nursery; except on Sundays. Then it's with my daddy.'

Miss Miller

'Halls and dining-rooms—much the same, said Miss Miller. 'All depends on the *entourage*. Well', she planted her foot a little more firmly on the little patch of gravel that surrounded the seat, 'it was at one of those windows that I first saw it running away,

'Saw what running away?'

'That, my love, is what I could never positively describe,' said Miss Miller, stooping her long nose and the brim of her hat in the direction of the little girl as if she were a cockatoo on a perch. 'There's some that run, and there's some who are run from, and it's distance lends enchantment to the view. What I can say is that it seemed to be something or somebody I didn't exactly want, you know, to go. *And* such a swimming moon! Every bit as the poem says,' and Miss Miller once more broke into rhyme:

*' There were leaves on the branches like silver,
And dew thick as frost on the grass,
And nought but the moon in the shimmery-shammery,
And me staring out through the glass.*

I say *staring*, Pollie, though we agree it's not polite. But *politesse* apart, as the barber said, it wasn't to be seen from *that* window. And why? Simply, my dear, because it had gone out of sight. So that's where we are.'

'Where?' said the little girl.

'Why, there,' said Miss Miller.

'What did you do?' asked the little girl.

Miss Miller

'That's just it,' said Miss Miller. 'What would you have done? And the answer to that is, I did just the same as that. I ran as fast as my trotters would carry me to the next—and then to the next, and then to *all* the nexteses. *Little* windows, every one of them, with round tops and small—er—panes. But no. *No*—and I repeat it on purpose—not a glimpse. I won't say, mind you,' she continued with due solemnity and with a longer face than ever, 'that all the little bedrooms had beds in them, or wash-hand-stands or even chests of drawerseses. You'll pardon me, but I didn't really *look*. But I *will* say I went in and out, and out and in, and so of course out again of every single one there was, until after twice round the house and back, counting the corridors once and once only, I found myself in the very place I had started from. And by and large, my dear Miss Sheepshanks, that's what we all do. In time.'

Miss Miller thereupon burst out laughing, and even Miss Sheepshanks opened her mouth—not to laugh, but only because she was so intent on her new acquaintance that she couldn't help imitating her.

'What did you do then?' she said.

'Well, then,' said Miss Miller, drawing her cotton-gloved forefinger slowly down her nose as if in deep reflection, and the faded greying tip of it made a right-angle with the rest, 'then—I gave it up; and *it* gave *me* up. It was what's called mutual, my poppet. Then too

Miss Miller

about that time we were compelled to move—the Family, you know. Ups and downs, then downs again' So we dismissed the, the—well—the *entourage*. That is the best thing, don't you think?'

Nella nodded.

'Too-whit, or too-whoo,
Come now, or come soon,
You wont miss the sun
If you look at the moon.

That', said Miss Miller, 'is how it goes in the *pome*. But oh, Pollie, if *only* you could have seen the shadows on the cobblestones and the silvering of the snails!'

'I don't *think*,⁹ said Nella, 'I quite like snails.'

Miss Miller merely beamed on her as though, if she had not entirely disagreed with her visitor, she could not have so easily comprehended a very natural aversion. 'There *are* such people; I admit it,' she cried cordially:

' "*And whether one travels due East or due West,
I'm inclined," said the Sailor, "to think truth is best."*

But as , was saying,' she went rapidly on, 'there might have been dew and there *were* snails, but there was positively nothing else. It had come, my dear; and it had gone, my dove. And if you should ask me what I mean by *it*, I should say it is called being *oun* —like you and me, Miss Cosy. And as for that, and with all due respect for nursemaids and such, the first part of it is apt to be much nicer than the last.'

Miss Miller

The little girl stared at this fantastic Miss Miller sitting so stiff and vertical on her scroll-shaped seat with its iron legs bent under her on the patch of gravel. It was deliciously cool under the fan-like fronds of the great spiky-fruited chestnut tree overhead. The leaves shed a dry fragrance, and the sunburned grass, too; and there came floating on the air from afar the hypnotic whiff of an early autumn bonfire.

Miss Miller appeared for the moment to have forgotten she was not alone, while the round blue eyes of her visitor went on busily examining her from top to toe.

'Do you live in a great big enormous house now?' Nella presently enquired.

'By no means. Not at all,' Miss Miller replied, her black eyes fixed on the far-away. 'Still, for shelter from what are called the Ellimans, my child, only four walls are required, excluding floor and ceiling. What is *space*?⁹

'But you see, said Nella, 'I didn't quite understand what you meant it was when what you couldn't see ran away; out of all those little windows, I mean.'

Miss Miller penetrated the slight ambiguity of this sentence as if with a needle.

'And what more likely?' she agreed. 'No more did I. But you see, *me* never having noticed much that it was there, it wasn't scarcely right or proper to go laving and lamenting up and down when it was gone. Which is

Miss Miller

what is called reasoning, Rosie. Besides, as I say, we moved. What is 17 from, say, 55?

'I think', said Nella, after a long pause, 'it must be thirty something,

'Well, then, it is about thirty something whatever-you-like-to-call-them ago since I climbed up the Tower for the last time.' Miss Miller suddenly stooped and pressed the fingers of her right hand on the toe of her left shoe. Her face had gone a little stiff and surprised-looking.

'Does that bump on your toe hurt you?' enquired her visitor courteously.

'Now and then, replied Miss Miller in her richest tones. 'It does its best. It's what is called a bunion. Not John, of course, though it *may* come, they say, from walking about. And that, my dear, I am pretty well used to. Now the Tower, you must understand, please, was in our park. In what is called the centre, Rosie. Where we went to next, I mean. Two parks in all. But *not*, as I have said before, a public prairie like this!' And yet again Miss Miller swept the panorama with the point of her umbrella. 'This Tower I mention faced to the *east*, you will please imagine, and was of the fairest choicest marble. It might almost be ivory; something like a roly-poly jam-pudding, but pinker and more, as they say, diffused. And its top was like a pepper-pot, marble too, with heads and wings and faces, and cut out with holes like

Miss Miller

flowers for peeping places, and all, all of stone. Quite quite solid too. *And'*—Miss Miller paused and looked at her toe—'perhaps I ought to mention that it was also in the middle of a box-wood. And, as dear Alfred Lord Tennyson says:

*"With here and there a cypress pricking
Black against the blue,
And here and there a dark hut older
Tree they call a yew"*

In the middle of a box-wood, Rosie; and you could see for *miles*—if, that is, and you'll forgive the reminder, you troubled to look. Well, I climbed that tower one morning, birds chim-champing, grass-hoppers whirring, larks in the sky, sun burning, and as I peered up the spiral staircase—you know what a corkscrew is, my child—a twist, a wheeze and a pop?'

Nella, with a small dumpy forefinger pointing upward, pushed that finger round and round and up and up under the tree.

'Exactly. And just at the topmost bend of it, bless your heart, what if I didn't go and see it yet again. Or something at any rate so much like it you could scarcely tell them apart: not at first.'

'What was it doing then?'

'*Just* the same as usual,' said Miss Miller airily. 'Running away. And all as the old song goes.' She actually sang it too, but not loud enough to get beyond the cir-

Miss Miller

cuit of her chestnut since she had her respectability to consider, and at times her voice, even to her own ear, seemed almost too powerful:

*'It's joys and cares and stri-i-ife
I'm singing to you of,
And some they call it li-i-ife,
And some they call it lov.*

So up I went, of course. Round and round and up and up until at last I reached the top, and never a sign of it nowhere.'

Miss Miller inhaled a deep breath of the thin autumnal air, as if to restore her after that long climb in memory. But Nella still stood her ground.

'Not but what I might not say', said her new acquaintance a little craftily, 'there was no vestige of a sign of where it might have *been*. On the other hand it wasn't there then. And everything so calm and still and *tram-*quil you could have dined off thistledown. Why, it might have been carried off in its sleep the very moment I got to the top step and came out into the gallery. So, you see, once more, or, in other words, yet again'—and the lengthy angular face turned slowly about towards the little girl rather like the ominous top of an oast house—'I had been cheated of everything.

*'No, no, papa, I cannot, since
He whom I wed must be a Prince.*

Though how you can call it cheating when every single

Miss Miller

card from the Queen of Hearts to the Ace of Spades was on the table, I'll be dashed, Rosie, if I can see: And you will, I hope, excuse the vigour of the remark.

'Now when you say "It", my dear Miss Sheepshanks,' Miss Miller continued reflectively, 'I suppose we neither of us know exactly what we are talking about. What, I mean, we *mean*; even though it's something we might, given a good supper and a feather bed, dream of, say, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for years and years. *And* on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, including the Sabbath, be trusted to forget. But there is no need for high horses. None whatever.

*'Come what come may; go what go will,
There is such a thing as must.
Then why be philo-so-sophical
So long as one tries to be just?*

You follow me?'

The round cl̄sar eyes under the compact little brow beneath the fair straight fringe of hair and the rim of bonnet gazed steadily back. Then Nella nodded.

¹ 'Precisely,' said Miss Miller with a smile like that of the Conqueror at Hastings, as with a sharp little gesture she planted the point of her umbrella emphatically between the pebbles. 'Precisely. And so between you and me and the gate-post it has been ever since. This prairie, you understand, these here people, and all these trees; you sit, you scarcely need to look, but you know

Miss Miller

it just comes and goes. And the complete *entourage* dispersed! In fact, who would believe, Rosie, that looking out of one's own indefatigably poky little top-floor window, square this time, of course; or rather obbo-longy, with a jar of geranium or mignonette on the sill—and I must say some of those young men who look after the gardens are very civil—and millions of chimney pots over the roofs of every shape and smell and size, and the wires simply humming in the breezes, not to speak of the noise and—er—odours from down below and only twopence-halfpenny to pay for it, *and* a *landlady* who *never* has *change*—who, I say, who would believe, my dear, there could be anything left at all?'

'In the chimney pots?'

'In the chimney pots.'

'Are there many smuts?'

'In winter, hosts, said Miss Miller, 'and in summer, fewer.'

'Do you mean you can't see anything, of what you were saying, there, either? Not even now?' And Miss Miller's square-headed little visitor looked quite anxious about it.

'For certain; never; but of signs of it exactly a thousand and one. Now look at this,' Miss Miller with some little fumbling managed at last to unfasten an old leather vanity bag that hung on her arm, 'look at this.'

Nella with a deep sigh drew a step or two nearer, but

Miss Miller

not too close, while her odd friend held up between cotton-gloved finger and thumb an acorn with a long stalk. 'That,' said Miss Miller almost ingratiatingly as she rapidly twirled it, 'that is an acorn. No doubt of it. And did you ever in your life see anything that fitted better—John Bunyan apart, you know? As if the cup and the seed, or the "a" and the "corn" had been waiting for one another for ages on ages until at last there was no keeping them back. Now that, Rosie, dropped on to my hat as I was walking under its parent tree—this very hat, and not an hour ago. And what did I say to myself when I looked at it, come clean out of the blue sky, so to speak? I said: Observe, Miss Miller; it fits.

*'It might be a lump of amber, ma'am,
It might be a stick of coral;
But what we have to remember, ma'am,
Is to keep our eye on the moral.*

Ah, my dear Rosie, I have sat on that tower at noonday when the clocks were striking the hour, and in the height—though I prefer to say heighth—of the summer, and I have listened to the nightingales in the midst of the box-wood, though of course in the best families they come at night, and we musn't get poetical. And bless my soul—now that your own smudged tears are dry upon your cheeks—I could weep about a bucketful at thought of it—and partly at what didn't fit, you know—if only

Miss Miller

it were not improper to do so in so public a resort as this.'

Nella watched Miss Miller closely, as if in hope of seeing at least one large tear course slowly down her cheek. It would probably keep very close to that long long nose. But far from weeping, Miss Miller was smiling with greater intensity than ever as she sat with that nose turned sidelong towards her little visitor in the shade of the chestnut tree.

'And now, she said, 'instead, my dear Susie, of giving it to you, which might be troublesome, I will return my acorn to my bag. I shall plant it, as a matter of fact, in a pot, and after two or three leaves have appeared it will die. That, my child, is how things go. *And com.* Up went her thin eyebrows, '*And go again.* So why, why, make too much fuss about it?'

At the word 'come', Miss Miller's singularly attentive eye, which had ever and anon roved the green expanse beyond her canopied chestnut tree, had alighted on an enemy, and one rapidly approaching them.

'A fuss? Certainly not,' she added emphatically. 'We are simply *not* going to demean ourselves. And never, never, I say, because our horrid nurse, as I see, in her long grey odious coat and neat little bonnet is stamping after us at this moment like a buffalo over the savannas of the West. We are *not* going to make a fuss; oh, no! And it isn't even mere pride that stops us. What? Eh?'

Miss Miller

Nella had turned her small head with extreme rapidity over her shoulder.

'I must say good-bye now,' she said, a little drily and sedately, turning once more to her friend. 'My nurse wants me. I suppose, you know, it must be nearly time for lunch. *Good morning.*'

'Lunch,' cried Miss Miller merrily. 'Why certainly. , seldom think of it, you know, until I find that most of it isn't exactly *there*. And what's more, it's a long lane, Miss Sheepshanks, that has no turning, which is *not* to mention in any particular respect merely *red* lanes.'

When Nella had reached the big stone floriated vase that stood beside the bridge over the water—and she hadn't been listening very closely to the heated remarks which her nurse had been ejaculating from time to time during their walk—she turned her head and looked behind her; but the scroll-shaped seat under the chestnut tree was now vacant, and there was no sign at all of its late occupant.

But then, at this moment, any one of the 'prairie' trees might easily have hidden that long, spare, sharp-boned figure, including even its nose. And so intent was her small mind still upon her talk with this peculiar stranger, that when her nurse, snatching at her arm as if she were a tottering clockwork dummy which she intended to fling clean across the ornamental pond, said, 'Now,

Miss Miller

mind your *step*, you little imp! Just you wait till I get you home, my fine lady. Ooh, but *you'll* be hearing of this! *You—mark—ME!*'—not the faintest change of expression showed on the child's face. It was almost as if one could learn to be a 'philo—so—sophoser' after one lesson, and that in the open, and without any fee.

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*

Having ascended the three semi-circular damp-darkened steps into his porch, Mr. Asprey slipped his latch-key into its lock with a peculiar disrelish. He was utterly tired, exhausted—, finished. Yet nothing, it seemed, could persuade his fevered mind to desist from its futile activities, although its one need was to be at rest. . .

In a few brief hours he would be compelled to surrender this very key, since he would be leaving the house he knew so well; finally \$ if not 'for good'. Everything had been made ready for his departure. His two maid-servants, the ample Emily and the angular Ada, having muffled the furniture with their sepulchral dust-sheets, and left their charge neat and seemly, had departed but a few hours before, bound for their new situations. How odd a destiny!

Mr. Asprey, being much older than either of them, had, he assumed, deeper roots. At daybreak it would be his turn, and as yet he was by no means certain of any

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particular 'place'¹. Indeed of recent years he had given little thought to this eventuality. He had merely stayed on.

And now his eviction was no longer a question of to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow. Why indeed should he 'wait' until then? And yet, taken for all in all, this house of his had proved a pleasant one; peculiar here and there in 'style' perhaps, yet not wildly eccentric; commodious yet compact, a heritage adjusted to his private purposes, fairly central and yet secluded. He had of course seen and envied residences with amenities more charming—a poor excuse for having neglected his own! But renovation had proved impracticable, and repairs far from satisfactory. In what sense and in what degree it actually *belonged* to him remained one of its many mysteries. Taxes fell due and he had been compelled to meet them. But of rent—hardly a peppercorn; of definite agreement, contract, in early life so frequently referred to by his spiritual pastors and masters—not a trace. If positive landlord there were (himself perhaps the architect) Mr. Asprey of late years had seldom 'called on' him, even in a merely metaphorical sense. And now—well, the one thing certain was that he had been given notice to quit.

Midnight had struck; the stars of the morning, though faintly hazed With a drift of dove-like cloud, were already traversing the heavens. In a little while it would be

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winter dawn. He had always hated change, and resented decay. Nevertheless destiny was spudding at his tap root.

The door ajar, and finger still on key, he turned reluctantly to look back. He had been wandering for hours alone in the darkness, and now he gazed forsakenly and forlornly at the gentle familiar prospect—the wooded downward slope, the faint line of low hills towards the south in the thin illumination of the night, and away, beyond the far horizon line, a soundless sea. The whole world was all but deathly still; and what weak fickle wind there was had lately changed its direction. The dark was turning colder.

And still—almost as if he were dubious whether he were being deceived by dream or wide awake—Mr. Asprey continued to ponder. However sharply he mistrusted the term, he realized that he had been a little *psychic* of late: that, prey of foreboding, he had been living much too closely secluded (even for him) in his own mind. His staid old family doctor, notoriously incompetent at any such extremity as this, had but yesterday morning given him up. A prying probing alienist, more skilful in analysing human puddingstone than quartz, might even have declared him a trifle 'mental'. The notion amused Mr. Asprey. Convinced of his own security, and aware that in these hazy matters silence is best, he had always enjoyed being a trifle mental. Partly perhaps for this reason he had no acute hankering to re-enter his

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house. He hated all good-byes. They entailed not only leaving but being left. Still, only the rankest discourtesy would admit of his posting off from so habitual and, despite its numerous defects and restrictions, so genial a residence with none; not even a grieved *adieu*, an ironic *au revoir*. And there was so much to say good-bye to! Houses, as the years collect, become densely populated. This is especially apparent, Mr. Asprey meditated, when they are about to be left vacant; and memories vividly revived may prove stubborn to exorcise.

They resemble a garden once beloved if seldom weeded, its wilder parts, its transitory solitudes, nearest to the heart and to the imagination. Tears cannot now refresh it, or sighs stir its seeded grasses, and the pitcher is broken at the well. This was the sad and enfeebling fact—Mr. Asprey was being victimized by his past. What folly! Since the future would see to his own interment, why not let that remain buried? 'Is thy servant a dog?' Of recent months, moreover—though often in a perfunctory fashion—it had been Mr. Asprey's odd custom to 'go over' his house before retiring for the night. He had become almost timidly apprehensive of fire, indeed of any 'act of God'; and he had acquired a belated passion for being tidy. Few hours for this were now left to him. He must make the most of them.

First, then, he would descend into the kitchen if merely to make sure that his breakfast would be ready

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for him at about half-past seven. Then he would go on his rounds, even more attentively and systematically than he usually did: Who goes there? *Qui vive?* How fortunate that this was so clearly not an occasion for electric light; since it is not only the most execrable of illuminants to be 'mental' by and in, but, owing to pure prejudice, Mr. Asprey had refrained from having it installed in his ancestral home. He might be in the nature of an introvert, but he was not a spy on himself. He had always enjoyed using his eyes, but seldom with the intention of showing anything or anybody up. He abhorred 'high lights'.

He withdrew the key, groped his way into the house, lit the candle which he had left ready in its old dish-shaped brass holder on a table, and shut the door. For a few moments he stood listening to the tardy and stentorian *Now-then: Now-then* of his grandfather's clock, then made his way to the back parts of the house and down the worn stone steps into the kitchen quarters. What mice were abroad at once scampered away with alacrity to warn their housemates that he was approaching: a few sluggish cockroaches were departing at leisure with the same tidings. Mr. Asprey scanned them an instant to make sure that they were real—aware at the same moment of the surmise that his next abode might be frequented by another species of vermin—then glanced about him. Everything was prepared. Every'

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thing was in order. That, of course, was Emily's doing.

Half the long speckless deal table was covered with a charming chequered tablecloth; the mound under the tea-cloth was without doubt a loaf of bread; the milk was creaming; and there the toast-rack, and the butter in its almost lordly dish. A conical coffee-pot dominated the neighbouring stove, for in spite of silly antiquated aversions, Mr. Asprey had been unable to evade gas. And two plump new-laid eggs stood side by side in their cups upon a plate. From their calm featureless faces they openly surveyed Mr. Asprey, and he them. Human existence, they seemed to be preaching, resembles an egg. In spite of a myriad apparent replicas it is unique, self-contained. Break the shell, you cannot repair it again. Some eggs are good, others are horrid. The stale are an affliction to god and man. And not every specimen need necessarily harbour a chick. And as he stood thus quietly looking, he was also listening. It was as though the vacant house over his head were an echoing shell, and he its hermit crab.

Otherwise there was no reason to linger here; none whatever. Well, he would ascend to the attics and, room by room, proceed slowly down again. The actual order mattered little, except that it is perhaps the doors of a house that should be examined last. They are the usual way out, and in.

Stair by stair went up poor weary Mr. Asprey; but,

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come to the attics, made no attempt to enumerate or to individualize the many Emilys and Adas who had occupied them each in turn. He had always prided himself on being by intention at least a righteous master. He had never deliberately thought of Emilys or Adas as being of else than flesh and blood. He knew we are all human.

None the less he could clearly recall one or two of whose felicity when they were under his roof he now felt a little uncertain. And in retrospect even a discourtesy may seem a crime. Nor, he noticed, had he hitherto been aware either that his last Emily had had no mat on her old oilcloth, or that her ewer was chipped; that a castor was wanting to Ada's bed and that there was no fire-grate in her room. Pampering, oh no! But he *might* have enquired, Are you quite happy here? And if he *could* stay on a little, he would see that their successors. . . . Alone on this uppermost landing close under the roof—a trickle of water ding-donging there like funeral bells in the old lead cistern bespeaking a leaky tap below—he could see into either attic just as he pleased. Each in turn, he solemnly bowed to them—it was the most he could manage—and went on.

As fleeting a look into the lumber room also sufficed. It would never do to botanize long there! But at the closed door of the room at the foot of the top staircase he paused indeed. It had been of old his nursery; and he was aware how easy it is to be otiose concerning one's

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early years. One is so seldom in retrospect a Child of the World. He opened the door and looked in—high fender, coloured pictures in their maple frames, rocking-horse, box of bricks. What dreadful emblems'objects may become! And though with that inward eye of his, which fyad been so active recently, he saw quite plainly his old nurse sitting there beside the empty grate—slipperd feet, stooping head, and clicking needles all complete—she immediately vanished. And instead, he was looking at a small boy, who was now exactly as far away in time as she was; though much further away in most things else.

He was sitting in a bare empty-looking room at a desk, stained with ink, and scarred with letters cut in the wood; and out of his blue eyes and plain face, pen between fingers, he was gazing through the window and over the low brick wall beyond it. It was a spring day out there in the meadows, and the towering clouds with their scarves of rain had but just drifted from over the face of the sun. So that at this moment the whole scene was lit—bright grass, green-budded trees, tumbling stream—with a miraculously radiant panorama of delicate light. Mr. Asprey didn't look at things like that now, or rather no April morning ever enveloped him like that now. His psychic skull must have contracted. It was as if all things were lovely if *only* you could see them—and in the proper light.

Yet in the very midst of this ecstatic reverie of look-

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ing, this inky boy—he realized—knew himself how unhappy he was. He was homesick; he was a muff; he was being kept in; and he deserved to be. None the less, at sight of the child Mr. Asprey had become aware of a peculiar compassion. Unhappy the creature might be, but there was no sign that he knew that he himself—whether unhappy or not—would soon be gone for even. Also, Mr. Asprey was even more perfectly confident that in that young distant mind there was not a vestige of regret that when its owner grew up to be a man he would remain childless. How odd then that at the precise moment when he was abandoning his house for good, he should suddenly be convicting himself of the charge of deliberate heirlessness! To be leaving positively no one behind him who might some day be doing as he was doing now—well, he did not at all enjoy the look of the black cap that topped the bewigged, long, grey, thin-nosed judicial countenance already engaged in trying his case. Black cap apart, even the severest judge upon the bench, glancing up at his prisoner, may nod with a cold, 'Be calm, take your time; I am listening. One word even yet might put you right.'

This in mind, Mr. Asprey promptly took his little notebook out of his pocket—battered and dingy after more than eleven months' wear—and jotted down: 'Secure as soon as may be a natural, pleasant young woman, quiet, non-temperamental, fair, happy-looking, and in need of

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a good home—to ensure a son and heir. Leave her practically everything. This appears to be rather urgent, It appeared to be so urgent that Mr. Asprey added his initials: A.A.A. Even in the act of writing he noticed, too, but did not stay to consider it, that a quite definite young woman for this purpose had emerged out of the groves of memory, was now in his mind's eye. But since he could not have been more than eight years old when she stole his heart away, not even a line in the Agony Column of *The Times*, that had so little to do with time absolute, would now be likely to have any effect. It was a pity. He was afraid it was now too late to be doing even 'his best'.

He closed the door, listened again a moment—what *habits* habits become!—meditated a moment on the deep lovely blue of his candle flame, and passed on down the shabbily carpeted corridor to the next nearest bedroom. This was his father's and his mother's room, or rather it had been theirs many years ago. Their son in the meantime, either in act or thought, had little visited it. It remained as they themselves had left it—the four-poster bed, the ponderous wardrobe, the grey marble-slabbed mahogany washstand, the Landseer engravings. Nor can you be said to *remember*—certainly not to remember a mother—if the happy event is dependent on some casual reminder.

The twin pair of old Venetian blinds now hung low-

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ered to their very last slack slats. The old red damask curtains were undrawn. And there stood Mr. Asprey once more, peering in over his candle flame. And such was his state of mind at the moment that when he came to again he could not have said how long he had remained in this abstracted posture. This absent-mindedness however was chiefly due to the fact that his inward gaze meanwhile had been intent on a large visionary granite sarcophagus topped with an eighteenth-century urn and canopied over by the vast, fringed, heavily laden boughs of a prodigious cedar tree, its edges scintillating like a Maharaja with bead-like rows of full-sized rain-drops.

It was engrossing to observe how apart from this transient jewellery the beam of his candle enlivened the delicate greys and browns and blacks of the corrosive lichens and the bright green of the moss on this vast emblem. The moss indeed was almost as vividly verdant as the meadows had been. But *did* moss grow on granite? Still stranger was it, in Mr. Asprey's experience, that he should be able to spell out the words that were graven on the stone. He would have supposed them to be long since indecipherable. Amazed at the incredibly gross egotism of the inscription, he read: HERE LIES MY F. . . . In plain honest lettering, too, nothing Gothic. For though he was unable to peer round to make sure, there was not a doubt in the world that ATER followed imme-

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diately after the F. Actuality may be grossly abrupt and inartistic enough, but no *human* stonecutter, surely, had ever so clumsily divided the word *father* as that! It was merely yet another jape of the strange jinnee of the dream world—never busier, Mr. Asprey had frequently observed, than when one is wide awake.

However that might be, it was abysmally damp here and atrociously dark. As for the brooding cedar that roofed the tomb, to judge by these gigantic water-crystalled twigs, it could hardly be less than a mile high. It all comes of neglect, thought Mr. Asprey. But whose? How much was all this his father's cumulative dark, how much his own? And why this dateless urn, when filial forgetfulness had been concerned solely with a Victorian angel in Portland stone? Mr. Asprey gave it up. Nor could he be certain whether a father who leaves his son so early an orphan, or that son grown old is the more to blame for any sad and protracted oblivion and neglect. Both surely had been indolent—his departed father in his son's dreams; and he himself in the waking day. Not that this was an hour for recriminations; he must merely strive to be fair. He had too the comfort of realizing that if his mother was lying side by side with that father within these dense cold lost stone walls, she seemed to be perfectly calm and happy. *She* hadn't even so much as turned to smile at him. And though this might be a consolation as dubious as it was sentimental, it was at least of her

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own sharing. Besides, like Mr. Asprey himself, she had always loved moss—'Look, Tony, the very instant rain comes! . . . It's just like a parrot!'

This time a little hesitantly then, out came his battered pocket-book again: 'Have f's grave attended to,' he scrawled in it. '? remove angel; ? replace it with some other kind???'

He paused in a fleeting attempt to petrify even in symbolic image one of Donne's angels, then added as an afterthought: 'If possible, go myself.' He trusted none the less that the expedition would not entail any attempt to fell that antediluvian cedar. He saw himself looking up at it, axe in hand, and the vast and vacant heavens beyond it.

Mr. Asprey closed his parents' bedroom door after him as reverently as he hoped that the less fickle-minded son and heir whom he had vowed some day to be responsible for would finally close his bedroom door after *him*. At grave risk of extinguishing his candle, he snuffed its wick between finger and thumb, and continued on his way down the corridor, thus creating the most fantastic shadows in leering and quixotic motion, but at the same time dispersing its narrow darkness as he went. His next two memoranda, or agenda, both of them concerned with a play-room that for many years—seemingly now how unjustly few!—had been used for his mature pri-

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vate work, were of so personal and secret a kind that he laboriously scribbled them into his book in an amateurish shorthand which he had invented in his youth. One of these, briefly translated, ran: 'Tell Self it didn't so *much* matter, The other was decisively to the opposite effect.

His third and fourth memoranda, in longhand, related to a seldom-used guest-room. Even in the light of one brief candle, this was a room of a most charming pink and white; and particularly since its old-fashioned chintz curtains were at this moment concealing the view from the shuttered windows beyond them—of a dark, leafless, and fruitless orchard behind the house, and an empty dog-kennel. Once within this small sanctuary, and deeply relieved at having passed in furtive celerity his own shut bedroom-door without personal and perilous interruption, Mr. Asprey might as well have ventured 'just as he was' into some evening Reception, so multitudinous was the silent company that had at once phantom-wise thronged about him. With sharp febrile nose and dark-begloomed eyes, his long lanked fingers shielding his candle flame, Mr. Asprey paused until they had, so to speak, become accustomed to his intrusion among them, had thereupon mournfully thinned away, and had left him to himself. After all one *cant* possibly make things right with more than a mere fraction of one's past! No sinner, surely; hardly even a saint!

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At length alone again, Mr. Asprey allowed his gaze to rest a little wistfully on a portrait in water-colour on the wall. The young woman depicted in it must have sat looking sideways at the artist. Thus the longer Mr. Asprey gazed at her, the clearer it became that in a peculiarly open and yet stealthy fashion she was sharing his scrutiny. Twenty years at least now severed him and her; and not a single faded petal or pinch of incense had Mr. Asprey recently offered at her shrine. It may, or may not, be discreet when you have fallen in love to 'tell'. That may depend on the degree of the infatuation, the attitude of the object, the propriety of the passion, and even the state of your health. The only alternative is to allow the toxine, the crisis, to become by-gones as quietly and rapidly as de-'crystallization' permits. Mr. Asprey could not now choose between them. He had been more or less in love more than once, and having 'told' once or twice, had told no more. And *do* hearts warmed up become as indigestible as he had always feared?

This silent, reticent, searching creature here, with the sidelong eyes and early-Edwardian sleeves, was herself one of the told-no-mores. But as he continued to meet her motionless eyes, and himself at last ventured to smile faintly, surely she had smiled faintly back? He tried again; there was no doubt of it. How inadequate a word may 'reassurance' be! There could of course be only one solution to so arresting an enigma; and this, yet again, a

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tragically sentimental one. She must, whatever *then* her state of being, have loved him 'all the time'; that is, always; and for ever. In other words, long before they had ever met; to meet no more. That is, until this very moment!

Mr. Asprey had turned slightly giddy. He was being 'mental' with a vengeance. Still, since he would have no further opportunities for self-adjustment in his earthly home, he was now striving to be strictly honourable. So he forthwith jotted into his diary: 'Explain somehow to Frances M. why I *had* to arrange about the sweetly pretty young woman—good-tempered, but not temperamental—because of an heir.' This entry much amused its writer. He looked up, and without question Frances M.'s painted smile revealed an amusement at least equal to his own.

Thus complacent, he was about to continue on his valedictory pilgrimage when his glance, having vaguely wandered over the room, rested on a dark old wooden box in a shadow-infested corner on the other side of the flounced dressing-table. He could hardly believe anything SQ wooden could be so eloquent. It was as if Conscience had been actually searching for evidence against him—and evidence how stale! Yet there was no need—and in any case he had no wish to pass within range of the looking-glass on the table—there was no need to *open* the box. At sight of it Mr. Asprey had recalled in-

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stantly what it secreted; namely, the manuscript of a novel written by a friend. He had left it, long, long ago in Mr. Asprey's keeping in the hope of friendly criticism and appreciation; and three weeks afterwards he had been drowned at sea. Mr. Asprey's heart fell cold within him at remembering that he had let a full fortnight pass without even a glance at its first page; that he had, in fact, waited for his friend to be drowned before unsealing his MS. He had then, with increasing interest and reluctance, read on to a breakfast 'scene' between three of the characters in the story one dismal morning in a dastardly December.

It described to perfection a virulent quarrel in which the unhappy human beings concerned had said everything they thought, or thought they thought, of human life and of one another. And in the course of this dispute a pot of liquid marmalade had been upset over an iniquitous love letter and the French tablecloth. Poe's raven's *Nevermore* was a cry of lyrical rapture by comparison with that marmalade. The whole chapter was one of the most vivid and caustic fragments of realism, or actualism, in fiction that Mr. Asprey had ever had the misfortune to share. And having heard of its author's tragic end, he had put the MS. away in this box, had entombed it there, with a relief beyond words. He had always fondly suspected that even naturalistic books may deeply affect their readers, and that, 'in parts', life is so real that it is wiser not to

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insist on it. An overdose of honey, yes: but liquid marmalade?

Indeed, he himself, having finished this eighth chapter, had decided to read no more. And that no doubt had been grossly unfair. He acknowledged it; while his drowned fair-haired friend amid gently wavering sea-flowers out of his submarine ooze now quietly continued to watch him from beneath half-shut lids—an indefensible device, since his body had been recovered and interred inland! However that might be, his somnolent eyes *were* fixed on Mr. Asprey's, and Mr. Asprey continued serenely to meet them; with more serenity, indeed, than he had confronted Frances M. in the water-colour—all reservations over. He agreed, oh, yes! that there was money in the M.S.; and, possibly, even a few years' fame. He agreed that his friend's widow would have enjoyed the money—though not perhaps the fame, since she had never inquired after her husband's masterpiece. None the less Conscience was astray this time, and he mustn't give in. With a little nervous nod at the mute drowned face, he put his candle down on the bed and opened his note-book again: 'At very first opportunity burn O.P.'s novel. And better not tell Mrs. P. (or the younger P.'s—not, at least, without a look at them first), when it is done; i.e. in this case *help* "the dead pastV

Thus poor Mr. Asprey proceeded on his way, tidying

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things up, placating as far as he was capable, his jiittvg his familiar—to the tune of at least ten small pages I illegible notes; until at length, the winter night ve'-much older, he returned into the kitchen again. Poor gentleman, there was no need to remind himself that the small hours are an inept opportunity for the making of inventories, and that a house which one is about to leave for ever is not their happiest place. It entails far too hasty an elaboration; and sentimentalists and romanticists may be fully as conscientious as cynics. Was it not true that, whichever Dean Swift may have been, he bequeathed to a friend in his will his third best hat?

Mr. Asprey glanced at his watch. Gracious heaven, it was a quarter past seven. Adieux may exhaust a large quantity of time. There was to be no more sleep for him now. In less than an hour the conveyance—to use as conciliatory a word for it as possible—would be calling for him, to take him away. Winter daybreak, indeed, was already thievishly groping on the glass behind the dark blue canvas blind and the rusted bars of the kitchen window. He shivered. But since he had attempted to lay so many ghosts on his rounds it was no wonder that this semi-subterranean chamber struck now so cold and so still. Foolishly, perhaps, he began listening again. This would never do. Besides, Mr. Asprey was tired of listening. He left his guttering stub of candle on the table, put his notebook down on the stove, and lit the gas under his

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antiquated tin coffee pot. None of your new-fangled glass contrivances for Emily!

He turned about and glanced at his breakfast things. The shrouded loaf was on the table as he had left it: but the eggs were now mere eggs. They had lost all their looks. And where was his table-napkin? He recollected that even over-night he had noticed that something was missing, and nothing, of course, could be allowed to be missing on such an occasion as this; certainly not a napkin. As do the dinner-jacketed in the remotest oases of the Empire, Mr. Asprey felt he must keep up appearances. But where was the missing napkin? Upstairs in the sideboard, probably. Shunning what might be a fruitless journey, he hauled open one of the drawers in the kitchen dresser, just in case. And he did this so violently that it fell on to the floor at his feet, to be immediately followed by a small dark object that had apparently been wedged in and had long lain concealed behind it. And lo and behold, as he stooped to examine this nondescript object, with a most peculiar suggestion of the sea having yet again given up its dead, he recognized it.

It was a pocket-wallet, his: a wallet that had mysteriously vanished at least nine years ago. On the other hand it was a pocket-wallet that had vanished not quite so mysteriously as not to result in the dismissal with the usual month's notice of the reigning Emily-and-Ada dynasty at that time. It is impossible to discriminate in

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these matters. Under a common cloud they were, under a common cloud they went. And here, except that in this fuscous candle-gleam he couldn't tell at a glance whether the wallet now contained the treasure it had once contained—here was ample proof that he had been at least, say, Aai, justified. Whether half or even wholly, however, should he have left the question where left it had been? He had never inquired into the fate of the two females concerned; he had merely left them to their future. To do so now would be a signally belated procedure, even if a practicable one. Well, then, that being so, should he or should he not examine the wallet? To be hesitating again—pestilent habit—at such a moment as this!

Elderly Mr. Asprey stood up, a little giddy after that few moments' concentration at such an angle; and there, standing immediately opposite to him, rounded, squat, in a large apron, with wisps of faded straw-coloured hair and a tallowish face, was none other than the very Emily in question. By no means a shy or demurring or furtive or embarrassed Emily either; she stood there looking at him, quietly, almost pensively, more than resignedly—as if perhaps she were waiting for morning orders. And what set her apart from all the other old friends he had been negotiating with up above was the fact—and it sharply interested him—that her apparition obstructed the view of what was immediately behind it. To this

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degree—and to this degree alone, no doubt—she was substantial; whereas what the mere jinnee of fevered memory produces for one's comfort or otherwise can hardly be said to be even that. And though Mr. Asprey had never succumbed to Materialism, this was a soothing discovery. He might need Emily later. Besides if she was not wholly ideal, pure fantasy, mere mind-stuff of the past, was there not less likelihood of sentimentality in this encounter? However that might be, here was this dumpy, anxious, tallow-faced Mrs. Grosvenor, quite as large as life, though obviously many years dead, looking up and back at him as if she had come to bid him a discreet god-speed, and was meanwhile asking for . . . what?

Mr. Asprey hesitated no longer. He stooped again, picked up the wallet, and there and then, without the least investigatory squeeze between finger and thumb, handed it over to the poor old soul. But why 'poor' ? It is little short of idiotic to call the perfectly competent, whatever their 'state in life' may be, *poor*. 'And would you tell Ada?' Mr. Asprey smilingly added.

The one queer thing in this little interchange was that as the wallet passed from Mr. Asprey's outstretched hand into Mrs. Grosvenor's—and she herself had hardly stretched out hers at all, not so much even as if she were suggesting a small gratuity or remembrance—it had ceased to be real. Unlike the marmalade in the MS., it

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had ceased even to be realistic. Or rather it had become Mrs. Grosvenor's real. And she had accepted it with so natural and benign a grace that it suggested nothing short of, 'Well, sir, I must say one good turn deserves another.' With which, almost as if she were on her way at once to keep the implied promise, her background reappeared. Mrs. Grosvenor was gone.

She had vanished so abruptly and irretrievably that a disastrous sense of dejection and loss and discomfort—cold, kitchen solitude, hushed mice, day-secreted cockroaches—had descended again like a veil of the dingiest crape upon Mr. Asprey's mind. Almost any interruption would be better than that.

And at once, and as if to order, an interruption came; and with it an overpowering, almost stifling, aroma of coffee. He turned about, but turned too late. Fountain-
ing over in a miracle of iridescent bubbles stood his beautiful burnished coffee pot, foaming like Etna with her billowing lava, its lid dancing—more fatefully than any receptacle James Watt had ever idly spied upon—above its froth. This, of course, in itself was a minor tragedy that could easily be remedied. The homely aroma was deliciously refreshing. But no expert of any museum of any country in the wide world would be able to decipher for him the sodden script which Mr. Asprey now gingerly attempted to rescue from this overwhelming cas-

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cade. It was a disaster. He had taken the utmost pains he could with his corrigenda, at what had seemed so brief a notice. There was no time now to begin again; and even if there were, any revised list, even if it were twice as long as the original, would prove, he knew, to be completely different. Indeed while, sad-eyed and breathless, having turned off the gas tap, Mr. Asprey continued to survey these sordid relics, he fancied he heard the sound of wheels. Wheels! Now! Surely, surely not!

Tragi-comedy by all means; but was there the least need to be ironical? His will hovered in an agony of hesitation; his eye discovered no help anywhere. There is no peace for the wicked. He hastened out of the kitchen as fast as—being so old and weary—he *could* hasten, without positively breaking into an undignified canter in his own house. And—oh, for a respite! Oh that his ears had misled him and there were even but one mere moment left! The instant he reached his front door he flung it open; and there and then, in astonishment, but not in dismay, Mr. Asprey all but fell down dead.

Another order of jinnies than his had also been busy in the small hours. The December sun was rising in the East. Out of the East came he. And above that sun, a strange celestially had usurped the wide horizon: low luminous clouds, in tiers of dappling colour against the crystalline nought of space. Line upon line they lay, in

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horizontal glory, waiting. Where had Mr. Asprey seen before this description of beauty, marvellous and cold? So much for the far. And the near? From the tiniest of the leaves of the bushes at his elbow, from every two-edged blade of grass on the powdery path, to the remotest wood between his house and the calm sea, this private world of his was edged, skinned, furred with hoarfrost—hoarfrost of such a splendour that it seemed to be all the colours in earth and heaven, and eye and mind, blazing in a rapture of delight. Alas, Mr. Asprey!—how vulgar now and mean seemed all his efforts. He had ceased to breathe. It was as though his mortal being had become a mere organ of vision: '*OtQy in Silver* by Jinnium Naturae'—a masterpiece! His very soul had begun pondering on the catalogue his nimble mind had presented him with. It *must* be merely Nature's; the blind enchantress's—it always had been. How else?

But before he could determine the question, though not the faintest motion of the air in this infinite waste of wasteless light was manifest, the door that he had left ajar behind him had, unperceived by Mr. Asprey, already begun to stir upon its hinges. There sounded a tiny click in the supreme silence. He turned his head. Too late, again!—the door was shut. And since between heaven and earth there followed not the remotest hint of an approaching *kloop-kloop* of hoof or muffled clatter of wheel, it looked as if he must be intended to walk. So he set out,

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It was an evening in November; too early in the year, that is, for winter coughs to have set in. And coughs to the lecturer are like reefs to the mariner. They may wreck his frail craft. So extreme indeed was the quietude in the Wigston Memorial Hall in which Professor Monk was speaking that if he had remained mute for but a moment, even the voice of the gentle rain that was steadily descending out of the night beyond upon its corrugated roof would have become audible. Indeed his only interruption, and it had occurred but once every quarter of an hour, had been a sudden, peculiar, brief, strident roar. On his way to the Hall he had noticed—incarnadining the louring heavens—what appeared to be the reflected light from the furnaces of a foundry. Possibly it was discharging its draff, its slag, its cinders. In any case, a *punctual* interruption of this kind is a little dramatic; a pregnant pause, and it is over. Nor did it affect him personally.

The professor had read somewhere that on occasion

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a certain eminent mathematician will sink in the midst of one of his lectures into a profound reverie, which may continue for ten minutes together. Meanwhile his students can pursue at leisure *their* daydreams. But students are students, not the general public. He himself, while avoiding Kiramatic pauses, could at once read out loud and inwardly cogitate, and he much preferred a sober and academic delivery. He never allowed his voice to sink to a mutter or rise into a shout; he neither stormed nor cajoled, nor indulged even in the most modest of gestures. A nod, a raised finger, a lifted eyebrow—how effective at their apt moments these may be! He flatly rejected, that is, the theatrical arts of the alien—to let his *body* speak, to be stagey, oratorical.

He even regarded the bottle of water that stood on his reading-desk as a symbol rather than as a beverage, A symbol not, of course, hinting at any connection with sacred Helicon, but of the fact that his lectures were neither intoxicating nor were intended to be intoxicating. How many times, he wondered, had he repeated his present experience? Scores, at least. He had become at last a *confirmed* lecturer.

And yet, to judge by his feelings at this moment, he might almost have been a novice—a chrisom child. This was odd. The particular lecture he was engaged on—its subject the writings of Edgar Allan Poe—was one of his own favourites. He had delivered it at least half a dozen

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times, and always with a modest satisfaction. No more than just that. It owed of course a great deal to its theme; one that possessed an almost repulsive attraction for the queerest of readers. *Anything* about Edgar Allan Poe was edged with the romantic, tinged with the macabre—that strange career, its peculiar fruits.

Nevertheless, and not for the first time, as the professor stood alone up there on the platform, full in the glare of an arc lamp suspended almost immediately over his head, he had become sharply aware not only that he was, with one single exception, the only human being present who was not sitting down but also that he was the only human being present who was making a noise. The realization, in this intensity at any rate, was new to him; and it made him a little uneasy. Not that he had much patience with members of his own calling who pretend they dislike lecturing. That must be affectation. He enjoyed it. But he would enjoy it even more, he sometimes mused, if he could carry off with him a clear and definite notion as to the *effect* of what he had been saying.

Any impression of this kind might of course prove sadly disillusioning, but it would at least be positive. As a professional man, that is, Professor Monk lived in a faint mist. It was not that he pined for encouragement. Certainly not. His appeal was to the intelligence rather than to the emotions. He aimed at nothing in the nature

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of what in his subject's native land is known as the 'heart-to-hearter'. He had views, and tried to express them; it would therefore be helpful to discover if they were shared or rejected. Such evidence was very scanty. Again and again when, his lecture safely over, the customary rattle of applause had followed its last word, he had sat speculating precisely how much of it was due to good manners and how much to a natural sense of relief. A sigh is so much less audible than the clapping of hands. Any physical reaction after one has been sitting cramped and mute for a solid hour is of course as instinctive as sneezing is after snuff. But English audiences are oddly inscrutable.

For this reason he had more than once been tempted to insert in his paper a sentence or two that he himself felt confident was shocking, or even to leave out all the negatives on any particular page, all the *nots*—just to see the effect. But even English audiences are less easy to shock than once they were. Besides . . . well—not tonight. His only desire at the moment was to get finished, to have done. An unfamiliar longing had swept over him to go away, and never come back. Oh, for the wings of a dove, he was sighing with the Psalmist. And he knew why.

It was not the Hall itself that was to blame. Lecture halls are much alike. Sunday-schoolish in atmosphere, they usually resemble railway waiting-rooms in their

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general effect. The fierce light beating into his spectacled eyes and on to his high conical brow was a slight embarrassment—it dazzled if it did not daze. He was accustomed to that too, however. After all, lecturers must be seen, even if they are not heard. He wished again what he had often wished before—that so-called house decorators, when engaged on places of public assembly, would choose for their paint other tints than a dingy duck green edged with a chocolate brown. Why again should the chairs selected suggest an orphanage? Were they assumed to be the only certain means of keeping listeners awake?

Still, this was all in the usual way of things. There was no walk in life without its vexations. As for his chairman, all that he could see of Aim at the moment was a puckered ecclesiastical boot. Simply, however, because he was motionless, he was not necessarily either inattentive or asleep. And what if he was? He himself had a genuine sympathy for chairmen. They were usually far too busy men, and tired. He had shared their trials and temptations. Nor had he the faintest hint of a complaint to make against his audience. He would have preferred, naturally, the furthest few rows of chairs to look a little less vacant; but this was a compliment to the occupants of the rest. All those who had come had stayed, and—though owing to his glasses he was unable to see them very distinctly—those who had stayed had

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been markedly attentive. He remembered a facetious friend once gravely asserting that it is impossible to thin a lecture down too much, and that, if it is to be appreciated to the full, at least one attempt at the jocular is essential every quarter of an hour. Make them laugh; it clears the air. That, however, was not his own method. He had neither thinned nor temporized, nor tried to amuse. Moreover, everybody was listening; no one had laughed; the theory was absurd. Then what was wrong?

Immediately in front of him and at the end of the room a circular white-faced clock hung mid-way above the two low rounded arches which led out of the Hall. Its hands now pointed to fourteen minutes to nine. The end then was in sight. And so, lowering his head a little, and pausing an instant, he ventured to take a second long steady look at what he was now perfectly well aware had been the cause of his disquietude—a solitary figure who was standing (almost like a statue in its niche) within the left of these two doorways.

This person had been the only late-comer. At one moment the alcove was vacant, at the next *there* its occupant was. He must have sallied in out of the night as furtively as a shadow. The lecturer much preferred late-comers to early-goers. The former merely suggested the impracticable—that he should begin again; the latter that it was high time to stop. There was no doubt however that this particular listener had been a little on his

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nerves. Once having vaguely descried him, he had been unable to forget his presence there. Why stand? And why stand alone? He should himself have had the audacity to beckon him in. A warm word of welcome would have been by far the most politic method of—well, he might almost say, of accepting his challenge.

Unfortunately, any such word was now too late. Motionless in the dim light—his dark voluminous cloak around him, and hat in hand—there the stranger stood, leaning indolently the while, one foot crossed over the other, against the hollow of the arch. The attitude suggested a pose, but, pose or not, he had not altered it. The glare of the arc lamp in the professor's eyes, his very uneasiness indeed, prevented him from clearly distinguishing the distant features. But the turn and inclination of the head, the perfect composure, the attitude, vaguely arrogant, of a profound attentiveness—everything suggested that this particular individual was either wholly engrossed in his own thoughts, *or* in what he was listening to. The latter should have been a consoling reflection. But, alas, one may be engrossed in destruction—as was Nero when Rome was burning, as is always the Father of Lies, and the angel of Candour. Well, what of that? Like the professor himself, he had come, he would go; and that would be the end of the matter.

It was none the less a little odd that of all those pre-

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sent none seemed to have become aware of this conspicuous interloper. Yet he was obviously a stranger in these parts. What chance could have summoned him in? Not necessarily the woeful November-weather. For as the professor all alone had come walking along on his way to his lecture through the drizzling lamplit streets, he had passed by not only a flaming picture palace, radiant with seductive posters, but the vestibule of a dingy dejected little theatre—which appeared a good deal more inviting, none the less, than the spear-headed railings and darik brick wall of the cobbled alley which led into the Memorial Hall.

There were, then, rival attractions in the town. If so, why had this theatrical-looking personage not taken advantage of them? Or was he himself one of a company of touring play-actors idling his time away until the call boy claimed him for the second act? Had he ventured out of his green room for a breath of air, or for a draught even more exhilarating? Why again is it that extremely actual things in appearance may at times so closely resemble the imagery of sleep? But what folly were all such speculations. Nevertheless, Professor Monk had continued to indulge in them, and with an amazing rapidity, while he continued to read his paper. To satisfy them was quite another matter.

His voice—and he enjoyed this scrupulous resonant use of it—his voice rang on and on, sounding even

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louder than usual in his own ear by reason perhaps of this attack of what might be called psychic indigestion. Nor was he aware of any suddenly revealed reason to be distrustful, let alone ashamed, of his paper. When looking it over he had taken the opportunity of re-reading some of the stories, most of the poems, and an essay or two. He had consulted here and there one of the more recent Lives. Its actual composition had taken him a good deal more than a week; and it was at least systematically arranged. In four parts, that is—(a) the Environment; (b) the Man; (c) the Tales and Poems; (d) the Aftermath. Even if he had been able to extemporize he would have preferred to keep to the written word. It was a safeguard against exaggeration and mere sentiment.

As, tall, dark, steel-spectacled and a little stiff, he stood up there decanting his views and judgments, it ensured that he said only what he meant to say, and that he meant only what he said. He disliked lectures that meander. He preferred facts to atmosphere, statements to hints, assumptions, 'I venture's', and dubious implications. He detested theorizing, fireworks, and high spirits. The temperamental critic is a snare. And though poetry may, and perhaps unfortunately, *must* appeal to the emotions and the heart, the expounding of it is the business of the head. Besides, a paper simply and clearly arranged is far easier to report. He hoped that his audience would

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go away with something definite in their minds to remember, though he was not so sanguine as to suppose that they would remember much. 'Hammer, hammer, hammer,' he would laugh to himself, 'on the hard high-road!'

Until this hour indeed it was highly probable that many of them had never read, even if they had ever heard of, much more of Poe's writings than 'The Pit and the Pendulum', and possibly 'The Bells'. Others may have accepted him merely as the melodramatist of 'The Maelstrom', or 'The Cask of Amontillado', the sentimentalist of 'Annabel Lee', the cynic of 'The Masque of the Red Death' and the fantast of 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. A few of the more knowledgeable might have stigmatized him not only as a gross sensationalist, of little character and no morals—and an American at that—but something of a poseur and a charlatan. This was a view, he confessed, that had been shared by no less distinguished a compatriot of Poe's than the great novelist, Henry James; who had dismissed his work as a poet in three contemptuous words—'very superficial verse'. Yes, and thrillers are thrillers and shockers shockers, whether they are old or new. He himself could not agree with so sweeping a verdict, but he would not disguise the facts.

It would be only too easy indeed, he had declared, to treat the subject of Poe in what might be called a pleas-

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ing, persuasive and popular fashion. He had tried to avoid that, to be frank and just without becoming censorious. He had admitted that to look for lessons, instruction, spiritual insight, and what in his own country is called uplift, in the career and writings of the author of 'The Premature Burial', 'The Black Cat', or such poems as 'The Conqueror Worm' and 'Ulalume', was like looking for primroses and violets fresh with dew in a funereal wreath of artificially dyed *immortelles*. And though he would agree—and here he had cast a deprecatory glance at his chairman—that it was a lecturer's office to expound rather than to indict, he could not avoid a dutiful word or two on the ethics of his subject. He had expressed his agreement with Longfellow that life is both real and earnest, that books are more than merely a drug, an anodyne, a solace, a way of escape. Poets too have their specific value, and, unlike Plato, he would certainly not dismiss them from his Ideal Republic. 'Not bag and baggage!' None the less poetry is in the nature of honey. It is not a *diet*. He himself was of opinion that a delight in beauty cannot be considered a substitute for the desire for knowledge, an excuse for any laxity of moral fibre, or for the absence of any serious convictions. And he had no wish to be partisan. However that might be, poets themselves, though they secrete this enticing honey, have not always proved themselves the best of bees. Their characters and their

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conduct, alas, are seldom as impeccable as their syntax.

A man's style, whether in prose or verse, in some degree of course reveals that man himself. And Poe on the whole wrote well. But we must be careful. A style that may be good from a merely literary point of view is not necessarily the work of a good man, nor is a bad style necessarily the work of a rascal. Otherwise, how few men of science—philosophers even—would escape damnation! Though, again, what a man writes may reflect himself, as in a sort of looking-glass, it does not necessarily reflect the complete self. By no means, surely, is the whole of Burns in his love lyrics. Was even *Paradise Lost* all Milton? If so, the less Milton he. Byron, Baudelaire, Horace, Herrick, had they nothing of heart, mind and soul but what was imaged in their writings? What then of Poe?

The professor had confessed impatience with the iridescent *veil* theory of poetry. Did the worn-out slogan Art for Art's sake, if examined closely, mean anything more profound than pudding for pudding's sake, or plumbing for plumbing's sake? Nor is a poem as a poem the better or worse for having been written at an age when most young people prefer the excitements of cricket or basket-ball; are, in fact, in Matthew Arnold's words, young barbarians at play. Genius may sometimes manifest itself in precocity; none the less, such a poem as Poe's 'To Helen', which he professed to have written

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at fourteen, must take its place with the rest of his work. It must stand or fall on its poetic merit.

Nor again, the lecturer had insisted, is any piece of literature the richer or more valuable for having been composed in an attic, in wretched circumstances. Not for a moment had he conceded that between poetry and poverty there is only the difference of the letter V—"The viol, the violet and the vine"—that sort of thing. Men of imagination may be naturally sensitive, delicately poised, easily dejected—it is the price they pay for so precious an inheritance. But is it too extreme a price? Even Robert Louis Stevenson—an artist to his fingertips—had not excused the man of genius the obligation of meeting his butcher's bill. Indeed he had said harsher things than that. Chaucer proved himself a man of affairs; Shakespeare made a handsome fortune and retired in his later forties to his birthplace; Robert Browning in the prime of life was occasionally mistaken for a prosperous banker; Westminster Abbey was at this moment positively surfeited with poetic remains. And that is hardly the Valhalla of the disreputable.

But even as a child Poe had been perverse and self-willed. And certainly in the brief months he spent at Jefferson's beautiful and serene University of Virginia, and in his even briefer career as a cadet in the lovely natural surroundings of West Point—though every allowance of course should be made for the young and the gifted—he

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had without question shown himself arrogant, fitful, quarrelsome, unstable. Had he been the reverse of all this, which of its better qualities would be missing from his work?

There was, of course, the other side of the account to consider—Mangan, De Quincey, Coleridge. One could hardly, alas, think of their writings dissociated from certain weaknesses not merely of constitution but of moral fibre. Mangan had died in poverty in deplorable circumstances in the same year as Poe himself, 1849; and this too was the death-year of Beddoes, while Emily Bronte had died only the year before—a strange eventuality, since there was much in common between them all—ill-health, adverse fortune, extremes of mood and imagination. But Branwell's habits rather than her own were Emily Bronte's scourge, and the tragic and morbid end to Beddoes's career seemed to be proof of 'a sadly unstable mind'.

On the other hand, virtue, the lecturer was bound to confess, is not the prerogative either of the Stock Exchange or even of the Church; and our public-houses, our workhouses and other abodes of the unfortunate and the unwise are thronged with human beings incapable even of scribbling a limerick or of rhyming *dove* with *grove*. In other words, it is by no means only the rarely gifted that are responsible for all the failures in life.

Poe's two years as private soldier, corporal and

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sergeant in the American Army, though it had been an experience forced on him, had proved him capable of endurance, discipline and responsibility. He had been sober and diligent, and had won the respect of his officers. No man of genius need be the worse off for *that*! In after years he had remembered the experience with sufficient tolerance at least to make its surroundings the scene of one of the best, one of the most original, and, even better, one of the least bizarre of his short stories: 'The Gold Bug'. 'The Gold Beetle', as we should say. And though the writing of verse and even of poetry is seldom fated to be much more than its own reward, fiction may well be.

One of Poe's earliest stories, indeed, had won him a substantial prize; and it was only editorial discretion that had prevented him from carrying off a prize for the best poem also. 'Your *Raven*' wrote Elizabeth Barrett from her sick couch in Wimpole Street, 'has produced a sensation. . . . Our great poet, Mr. Robert Browning, was struck much by its rhythm.' There was little indeed to suggest that Poe had any extreme aversion to becoming a popular writer. Again and again success—and 'I mean,' the professor had emphasised, with a tap of his finger on the desk—'I mean *material* success'—had been within his grasp. Yet his feeble fingers had refused to clutch at it.

None the less, the professor had refused to ally himself

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with those who maintain that to be popular is a proof of mediocrity. There were great books whose appeal is universal. Poe's triumphs however had been brief and very few. It could hardly be otherwise •with a writer so egregious and idiosyncratic.

In spite of a personal charm and fascination almost hypnotic in effect, even at times on those of his own sex, Poe utterly refused to tolerate any opinions or convictions contrary to his own. He was obstinate and contumelious, scornful of the workaday graces that so sweeten human intercourse, and—to change the metaphor—*oil* the wheels of life. In his youth he had been treated harshly perhaps, had been denied what no doubt he regarded, but quite erroneously, as his rightful inheritance—his foster father's fortune, for example; but he had failed to profit by so drastic a lesson. It could scarcely be said that it was the mere hardships of destiny that had prevented him from rivalling in general esteem even Longfellow himself, who, whatever his failings, seems to have been consistently true to his principles, was accepted as the laureate of his own people, and was a man of as many simple and homely qualities of head and heart as he was nobly leonine in appearance. And *he*, again, had made a fortune!

To compare, moreover, Poe's work with Emerson's was like comparing a neglected graveyard, dense with yew and cypress under the fitful lightings and showings

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of the moon, with a seemly, proportionate, if unadorned country parsonage, in the serene sunshine of a transatlantic morning in May. Man for man, Poe had not the virtues of Emerson, and Emerson had neither the exotic gifts nor the failings of Poe. Let us acknowledge it then. If in literature there is such a thing as the diseased, and even the sordid, why not attempt to exemplify, even though it was exceedingly difficult to define them? The professor had, rather tentatively, made the attempt.

On the technical side of Poe's work, he had himself always realized that his appreciation had been less full and less penetrating than it might have been. Here his lecture had skipped a little. But had it been otherwise how many of his listeners—those rows of silent faces—would have continued to listen? There were children among them. One little girl had a slumbering infant in her arms! Temper then the wind to the shorn lamb. Craftsmanship, artistry, he had announced however, is vital alike in prose and verse; but you cannot really separate words from what they say. And the highest art is the concealment of art; and, beyond that, the concealment of the concealment. Could this be said of Poe's technique? Is not rather one of the chief defects of his poems their flawless mastery of method? Poe, it seems, had never *lisp*ed in numbers, but (quite apart from his own account of the composition of 'The Raven'), we know how laboriously many of his later numbers came.

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with those who maintain that to be popular is a proof of mediocrity. There were great books whose appeal is universal. Poe's triumphs however had been brief and very few. It could hardly be otherwise with a writer so egregious and idiosyncratic.

In spite of a personal charm and fascination almost hypnotic in effect, even at times on those of his own sex, Poe utterly refused to tolerate any opinions or convictions contrary to his own. He was obstinate and contumelious, scornful of the workaday graces that so sweeten human intercourse, and—to change the metaphor—*oil* the wheels of life. In his youth he had been treated harshly perhaps, had been denied what no doubt he regarded, but quite erroneously, as his rightful inheritance—his foster father's fortune, for example; but he had failed to profit by so drastic a lesson. It could scarcely be said that it was the mere hardships of destiny that had prevented him from rivalling in general esteem even Longfellow himself, who, whatever his failings, seems to have been consistently true to his principles, was accepted as the laureate of his own people, and was a man of as many simple and homely qualities of head and heart as he was nobly leonine in appearance. And *he*, again, had made a fortune!

To compare, moreover, Poe's work with Emerson's was like comparing a neglected graveyard, dense with yew and cypress under the fitful lightings and showings

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of the moon, with a seemly, proportionate, if unadorned country parsonage, in the serene sunshine of a transatlantic morning in May. Man for man, Poe had not the virtues of Emerson, and Emerson had neither the exotic gifts nor the failings of Poe. Let us acknowledge it then. If in literature there is such a thing as the diseased, and even the sordid, why not attempt to exemplify, even though it was exceedingly difficult to define them? The professor had, rather tentatively, made the attempt.

On the technical side of Poe's work, he had himself always realized that his appreciation had been less full and less penetrating than it might have been. Here his lecture had skipped a little. But had it been otherwise how many of his listeners—those rows of silent faces—would have continued to listen? There were children among them. One little girl had a slumbering infant in her arms! Temper then the wind to the shorn lamb. Craftsmanship, artistry, he had announced however, is vital alike in prose and verse; but you cannot really separate words from what they say. And the highest art is the concealment of art; and, beyond that, the concealment of the concealment. Could this be said of Poe's technique? Is not rather one of the chief defects of his poems their flawless mastery of method? Poe, it seems, had never *lisp*ed in numbers, but (quite apart from his own account of the composition of 'The Raven'), we know how laboriously many of his later numbers came.

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Still, if writing is an art, so also in its modest way is the compiling of a lecture. The professor had dealt briefly with what he described as Poe's mere tricks as a versifier, his verbal repetitions, his childish delight in the jingling of rhymes, and in emphatic metres. He had referred to his theory and practice of lyrical brevity—that there is no such thing as a *poem* that cannot be read and enjoyed in the course of half an hour. There was, he agreed, a measure of truth in this, but surely it is a question for the reader to decide—the reader, say, of the *Iliad*, the *Divine Comedy*, the *Prelude*. For his part, there could not be too much of a good thing. He had agreed also that the primary impulse of poetry is the sharing of pleasure rather than the teaching of lessons. But there are various kinds of pleasure, they are of differing values; and poems whose chief appeal is to the senses—whether they are in the nature of a stimulant or a narcotic—should for that very reason be examined in the light of reason.

He had, however, left that examination to his listeners, and instead had specified where and when and to what end certain of the poems had been written—'The Bells', for example, which from being a few lines enshrining an idyllic and rapturous moment in the company of the charming but minor poetess, Mrs. Whitman, had gradually been expanded by the poet into the rather heady masterpiece of its kind now only too familiar. It

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had been not only easier but more practical to do this than to attempt a close analysis.

Apropos of Mrs. Whitman, he had broken off to refer to the poet's rather numerous infatuations and attachments, or one might almost say detachments—those fleeting and even fugitive Egerias—from the lovely and doomed Mrs. Stannard, the original of his Helen and the idolatry of his boyhood, to the ladies to whom each in turn in his later years he had proposed—and indeed almost insisted on—marriage: after the death, that is, of his young wife Virginia. Like many other poets, Poe had loved at times unwisely and by no means always too well. He had sipped deep of the cup of feminine adulation—whatever its sediment might be. Scandal in consequence had not spared him, nor even slander, but for the most part it had left him unscathed.

The professor had referred in this connection to the poet's childlike, ethereal, camellia-pale Virginia, 'the tragic bride of but fourteen summers', whose brief life, with all the recurrent horrors shared by them both and incident to her fatal disease, had been but a protracted journey to an early grave. And that said, how could he but also refer to Poe's humiliating dependence on his more than motherly mother-in-law, Mrs. Clemm? Muddie, as he called her, to whom he wrote letters as naturally affectionate and commonplace as most of his correspondence tended to be high-flown.

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There were indeed episodes in Poe's life which it would be futile to pass over, and impossible to condone—dismal lapses, even apart from those due to physical disability and the ravages of drugs. Truth imposes on us the obligation to record what only sympathy and indeed humility can help us to understand. None the less, he had tactfully, regretfully refrained from bestowing that scrutiny on 'the dark side of the poet's career' which one is apt to fix on a drop of ditch-water seen through a microscope. Not that Poe himself had spared others. As a critic alike of humanity and of literature, his bias was on the side of severity; he despised a fool, ridiculed failure, had no mercy on his enemies, and little patience with aims and ideals contrary to his own. Whatever the value of his writings might be, in Poe's eyes 'an inferior poem was little short of a crime'. An arrogant assurance of his own powers was alike his weakness and his strength.

Unlike Poe himself, however, the professor had endeavoured to be moderate. As briefly as possible, he had told of the poet's last few sombre and disastrous days at Baltimore, that final ignominy when he had been found in a high fever, half-naked and scarcely sane, in the clutches of political miscreants who had confined him merely in order that he should serve their purpose at the voting booth. He had spoken of the horror and solitude of his death in the public hospital, that last forlorn cry

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of, 'Is there any help? . . . Lord help my poor soul I' He had lamented that all this had occurred within a few hours of the first occasion in the poet's life when, restored to the Elmira whom in his early days he had loved and been cheated of, promise for the future had never seemed for him so fair, so full of hope and rich with opportunity.

And as he said the words, a sudden overwhelming billow of mistrust had swept over the lecturer's soul. It was as if a complete flock of geese were disporting themselves on his grave. Why, in Heaven's name, instead of perhaps a glimpse of Goya's serene yet appalling picture, 'The Pest House', had Rembrandt's curiously detached study, 'An Anatomical Lesson', flickered at this moment across his mind? And this when his paper was on the point of completion—fourteen minutes to nine?

Solely, it seemed, by reason of the presence of this one silent stranger yonder, who as he himself raised his eyes from his desk to peer at him over his spectacles, had answered him look for look, scrutiny for scrutiny, a moment before. The lecturer had made no statement he was ashamed of; nothing false, nothing even dubious. And yet his words seemed to have lost their savour. But however that might be, he reminded himself that one cannot by a mere wish to do so blot out the past. The mind itself must be its own sexton beetle. One cannot

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unsay the said, even in a lecture. The very attempt would be ludicrous. He was being fanciful. He was falling a victim to what he cordially despised—the artistic temperament! So late in life! He had come to lecture, yet to judge from this sudden disquietude, he was being Earned'. Well, he must hasten on. Life, like a lecture, is a succession of moments. Don't pay too extreme an attention to any one or two; wait for the end of the hour.

'I think perhaps', he was declaring at this moment, 'the most salient, the most impressive feature of Poe's writings, as with Dean Swift's, though the two men had little else in common, is his own personal presence in them. Even in his most exotic fantasies, some of them beautiful in the sense that the phosphorescence of decay, the brambles and briars of the ruinous, the stony calm of the dead may be said to be beautiful; some so sinister and macabre in their half-demented horror that if we ourselves encountered them even in dream we should awake screaming upon our beds—even here the sense of his peculiar personality is so vivid and immediate that, as we read, it is almost as if the poet himself stood in the flesh before us—in his customary suit of solemn black, the wide marmoreal brow, the corrosive tongue, the saturnine moodiness.

'Flaubert's ideal of the impersonal in fiction indeed was utterly beyond Poe. His presence pervades such a

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tale as "The Pit and the Pendulum", "The Cask of Amontillado" or "The Tell-tale Heart" no less densely than it pervades his "William Wilson", his "Masque of the Red Death", his "Ligeia" and "The Haunted Palace". This may in part be due to the fact that his was a mind at once acutely analytical and richly imaginative. This is a rare but by no means unique combination of what only appear to be contradictory faculties. Incapable of compromise, Poe had remained preposterously self-sufficient, self-immolating and aloof; and, in spite of occasional gleams of sunshine, a moody, melancholy and embittered man. He was thus alike the master and the victim of his destiny. If not a positive enemy of society, there is little to suggest that—apart from literature—he was ever much concerned with the social problems, causes, principles and ideals of his own time and place. With some justification perhaps—as events have proved—he distrusted democracy, detested the mob, and he warned his fellow-countrymen of the sordid dangers incident to an ignorant republic. These views none the less were those of an egotist rather than an aristocrat. By birth he was of little account—the son of a mere travelling actor.

'Nor, though he had, it is true, been brought up in the traditions of a gentleman of the Southern States and abhorred all New Englanders, was he by any means a giant among pygmies. Longfellow, Emerson, Washington Irving, Bryant, Whittier, Thoreau, Oliver Wendell

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Holmes were in varying degrees his contemporaries; and, first cousin to him in mind if not in blood, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Since too "The Gold Bug", like "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", is one of the earliest tales of its genre in English, and *Treasure Island* is one of its remoter offspring, one might add Fenimore Cooper. He had lived, that is, in one of the Golden Ages of English literature—not that of our own day, the Brass.

'As for J. R. Lowell, an admirable critic of the widest range, in his knowledge alike of books, men and affairs, though he was responsible for the caustic summary of Poe's work as three-fifths genius and two-fifths fudge, he was one of his closest and loyalest friends.

'I am not', announced at last the professor, wearily, and never before had he been so tired of the sound of his own voice, 'I am not a mathematician, and cannot check Professor Lowell's vulgar fractions. But even if allowance be made for the fact that here in England even the parochial are inclined to sneer at the provincialism of all things American, it must be remembered that for years Poe was anathema, a man accursed among his own people. And it is certainly not in this country that since his death his work has been neglected. It had *not* been a beneficent influence'—the professor had once more assured his audience; and that not merely because 'it is easier to imitate fudge than works of genius. What a man does, however, must not mislead us in our judg-

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ment of what he is. Poe was a round peg in a square hole. The wise and the prudent in this world make the best they can of these conditions. Not so this ill-fated saturnine sinister poet. Whatever our debt to him may be, he flatly refused to follow their example.'

During the pause that completed this sentence—perhaps a tenth part of a second—some imp in the professor's mind engaged in a violent argument with him as to which kind of peg and in what kind of hole he was himself just now; and then reminded him that pegs and holes may be of many shapes other than merely square or round—ovals, hexagons, oblongs, polygons. But he knew this imp of old, and dismissed him.

And now his lecture, which for the first time in his placid career had been little short of a martyrdom, was all but over. Though his air and manner conveyed no symptom of what was in his mind, hotly debating, ill at ease, dejected, not a little indignant, he had come to his peroration. Yet once again he lowered his head for a final fleeting glimpse of the stranger in the doorway, and ejaculated the few sentences that remained.

The last syllable had been uttered. His task was done. He had shut his mouth. For an instant he stood in silence facing his listeners—an intellectual St. Sebastian—no less mute and more defenceless than an innocent in the dock. At the next he had turned stiffly, had gravely inclined his head in the direction of his chairman, and had sat down,

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He crossed his legs, he closed his eyes, he folded his arms. Though the electric vibrations of the hideous arc-lamp over his head continued to quiver beneath his skull, though a vile disquietude still fretted his soul, he had come back safely into his shell again. A moment before he had been a public spectacle; now he was private again; his own man and all but at liberty. Even better, he had ceased to criticize himself.

He was listening instead to his chairman, a smallish man in a clerical collar, and, in spite of that clerical collar, attired in a suit of a cloth much nearer grey than black. He had a square head, square shoulders, square hands, and a plain, good-natured, eager and amusing face. Those hands were now in rapid motion in a mutual embrace one of the other; and, with enviable ease and fluency, he was assuring his audience how much they had all been instructed and entertained. He was rapidly confessing, too, that he had himself come to the meeting that evening knowing very little of Mr. Edgar Poe's works. The name was familiar—but some of us hadn't much time for fiction. So far as he himself was concerned, life *was* real and earnest. He had, it is true, taken a hasty glance at a page or two of what appeared to be a very clever and harmless tale entitled 'The Purloined Letter', and believed he could recite then and there the first few lines of 'Annabel Lee', *not* by the way to be confused

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with an old wholesome favourite of his, 'Nancy Lee'. Their lecturer, however, had not, he fancied, mentioned this particular piece, and had passed over this story, though he had referred to others that were concerned with an even graver crime than that of pilfering, nay—let us give the dog the name he deserves—*stealing* a letter. He meant, brutal murder. There were far too many murders in the fiction of our own day. On the other hand, an orang-outang, whatever its extremes of conduct may be, has not been given a conscience. He is not *morally* responsible. Man, whether his descendant or not, *is*.

Tales of crime were, alas, very prevalent in these days, much too prevalent, he feared. Quite respectable and well-educated people not only read but wrote them. They were yet another symptom of the unrest of the age. The professor had of course referred to America—the United States. Was it to be credited that in that great English-speaking country the harmless if slightly colloquial expression, 'Taking a man for a ride', actually signified consigning a fellow soul into eternity? On the other hand Mr. Edgar Poe, he gathered, could not be held responsible for the present sad state of Chicago. He understood he was a Virginian, a Southerner, and though one of the tales mentioned by the professor bore what he feared was the only too appropriate title, 'MS. Found in a *Bottle*', the poet, it seemed, had lived not only prior to the Civil War, but long before the days of Prohibition.

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That, however, was only a blessing in disguise. For in view of what the lecturer had said of Mr. Poe's sad and afflicting end, they must remember that those responsible for the Volstead Act had *meant* well. There were tragedies in every life, skeletons in every cupboard. And the lecturer's subject was no exception. As for his marriage with a wife then only fourteen years of age, though no doubt it is true that Juliet in the play was also of equally tender years, she was emphatically not Romeo's first cousin. He himself could not approve of this arrangement. We musn't run headlong into wedlock.

Then, again, he heartily agreed with the lecturer that the piece 'To Helen' was a remarkable feat for a lad in his early teens—*most* remarkable. But he deplored any suggestion that *all* lads of fourteen should be encouraged to be equally precocious. There were dangers. Even, too, though a man may be his own worst enemy, he may yet attain renown as a writer. Poe himself had. Nevertheless he implored them one and all to remember that it is better by far for ever to hold one's peace than to write, however attractively, what it may some day be too late to recall. That solemn thought, he gathered, was their lecturer's urgent lesson to them this evening.

Before, he concluded, before inviting that stronghold of their Society, Miss Alibone, to propose a vote of thanks to Professor Monk, he would like to announce that at their next meeting their old friend Mr. Alfred

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Okes, so busy in so many fields, was to talk to then' on the subject of conchology—the science of sea shells, from the whelk to the conch—the latter being famous in mythology, though it was frequently mispronounced. And on *that* occasion there would be lantern slides.

'I ask you, sir,' he suddenly rounded on the professor with the most tactful and endearing of smiles, 'I ask you, sir, to accept our heartiest, our most cordial thanks for your most entertaining, informative, and I will add, even edifying discourse. We have been well fed.'

The professor unsealed his tired eyes, looked up, smiled a little wanly, and hastily pocketed his paper. In a few minutes, the Hall already nearly empty, he had followed his chairman down the five well-worn, red-druggeted steps into the ante-chamber. There he was welcomed by a row of empty wooden chairs, a solid grained table, a copper-plate engraving in a large black frame over the chimney-piece of a gentleman in side-whiskers, whose name, owing to the foxed condition of the print, he had been unable to decipher, and the ashes of a fire in the grate. It had been feebly alight when he arrived. It was now dead out. Why did this seemingly harmless chamber at this moment resemble the scene of a nightmare? He could not tell. His chairman seemed to be finding nothing amiss with it. He was adjusting his grey woollen muffler, he had bidden him a hearty good-night, he had turned away, adding jovially over his

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shoulder, as he hurried forth, 'Ah, Professor Monk, here's a little friend to see you—eager no doubt to drink at the fountain-head. Come in, my dear,—and was gone.

The little friend, however, who was now beaming at the professor from under a dark felt medallioned school-hat and from behind gold spectacles straddling a small blunt resolute nose, was in fact anxious only to secure his autograph and still more anxious to discover if he could possibly be related to Miss *Mima* Monk, the famous film star, 'It's the same name, you see, she said, 'that's why.'

Alas, the professor was compelled to confess, he had no relatives in the neighbourhood of Los Angeles. He opened the little green and gold birthday book, and turned a little wearily to November 8, to read: 'Words are the only things that last for ever.—*William Hazlitt*.⁹ The child watched him as he made the dot after his sedate signature a little more emphatic.

'We've learned some of Mr. Poe's poems in class,' she was assuring him breathlessly. ', think it's *lovely*. Our teacher says "'The Bells' is meant to sound like real bells—it's all imitation.'

'Yes, indeed, the professor replied, 'it is called onomatopoeia.'

'Omonatopoe-oe-oeia, she trebled after him like a wren, and with yet another coy and beaming smile had taken her book and departed.

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Her footsteps it seemed had suddenly quickened into a scamper, then she too was gone. The professor sighed, and rose from his chair. And then, suddenly transfixed, with one arm actually half-way through the sleeve of his antiquated mackintosh, he turned, realizing that what he had vaguely foreseen and apprehended had come to pass.

The gentleman in the black cloak until this moment unperceived in the shadow at the turn of the door had advanced into the room, and was now confronting him from the other end of the varnished table. The glass-shaded electric lamp that hung between them shed a lustre almost as of alabaster on his pallid face and wide prominent forehead—a pallor intensified by the darkness of his long hair, the marked eyebrows, the small moustache. He was a man seemingly aged about forty, rather under the middle height, and spare, but he carried himself with an air of elegance, a trace even of the foppish. His black beaver hat clasped between his delicate hands, he remained silent and motionless, his chin, the least vigorous of his finely-cut features, lowered upon his black satin stock, his dark luminous grey eyes fixed on the professor's face. There was a peculiar abstraction, even vacancy in their depths—a slightly catlike appearance, as if they were not wholly in focus; and this, in spite of the intense regard in them—a regard which brought to the professor's mind a phrase he had read

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somewhere—'they seemed to shed darkness in that place¹. And though they expressed no hostility, and Professor Monk had the advantage in stature, he was finding it difficult to meet them. They were strangely *occupied* eyes. Besides, the Hall outside was now not only silent but empty; and it was atrociously cold.

The imp within his mind had begun chattering again. 'He stoppeth one of three,' was echoing in the professor's consciousness. Why 'The Ancient Mariner'? The cold, perhaps. Meanwhile, he realized that he must break *this* ice. His silence was becoming discourteous. He glanced again at his visitor, and was again sharply reminded that he bore a striking resemblance . . . To what? To whom? There had been no pause in which to collect his thoughts. The professor met many strangers; how could he be expected with all the goodwill in the world to recall always either themselves or their names? Names are at best but labels.

'Er, good evening,' he began—but a low, insistent voice had broken in on him.

'Where is this place?' it was enquiring.

'This place? "*Where?*"' exclaimed the professor. 'Wigston, you mean?'

'Wigston—ah, yes. And England?'

The professor continued to listen, the prey now of another kind of discomfort. There are degrees of eccentricity—and he was alone.

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'That was my impression,' the other was saying. 'And these people'—he raised his hat in a peculiarly graceful gesture towards the doorway—'these people were not completely ignorant of the subject of your address?'

'Indeed, no;' a deprecating smile had crept into the professor's face; 'though we mustn't of course expect . . .' But he was not allowed to complete his sentence.

'And you yourself must have been deeply interested in your theme to venture on compounding a complete lecture upon it. Fifty-three minutes in all!'

'Indeed, yes,' interjected the professor warmly.

'I see.' The stranger paused. 'I observed that the date on the notice-board facing the street is November 2, and the year 1932. You will realize that I have myself come some little distance. There are — difficulties. But it was rather the name than the date which attracted me. Edgar Allan Poe's, I mean, and your own, too, of course. I fear I cannot compliment you upon its appearance.'

'My name! . . . Oh yes, the street?' said the professor.

'Rain so sooty-dark upon a scene so dismal, the niggardly glare, the stench, and what might be described as the realism of it all! You yourself perhaps are unfamiliar with Virginia—Richmond, Charlottesville, the South. You are from Oxford, perhaps? Has that ancient seat of learning also endured of late the ravages of change?'

The slim erect figure had bowed slightly—with a deprecating politeness. The professor shook his head. 'No, not Oxford; London,' he said.

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'Ah, yes, London. I am from . . .' But at this moment, unfortunately, the neighbouring foundry had once more metallically ejected its slag, and the word was lost. 'So Edgar Allan Poe'—his visitor pronounced the syllables as if they were in the nature of a sarcasm or even a jest—'so Edgar Allan Poe is remembered even in this benighted town?'

'Remembered!' cried the professor. 'Why, yes, indeed. My whole intention was to suggest for what reason he should be remembered. The acoustics of the hall, perhaps——'

'But, indeed, the stranger was assuring him, 'I heard perfectly. I was engrossed. Engrossed. A host of remote memories, echoes, speculations returned into my mind. But I have ventured to intrude on you, not to pay compliments which you might find wearisome, but in the hope that you will allow me—even at this late day and hour—to ask you one or two questions,

The professor's dark eyebrows expressed a faint surprise. 'As a matter of fact . . .' he began.

'Oh, yes,' the visitor hastened to add, 'I was aware that your Chairman had invited questions—with a disarming cordiality indeed. But though, Professor, you had remarkably attentive listeners, you will agree perhaps that they were rather passively receptive than actively critical. That was my *impression*. There is an old saying: Every time a sheep bleats it loses a mouthful.

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Well, yours at least never bleated. Apart from that, however, there are questions it may be more courteous to ask in private. Such as mine. May I continue?'

'By all means.' The professor's eye ranged furtively over the intensely unoccupied row of hard-wood chairs. 'Won't you sit down?'

'Thank you,' said the stranger; 'when I disagree I prefer to stand. I have come, as you see, unarmed, except in respect of the tongue. We are on equal terms, then, though you might perhaps agree that in matters of the mind one solitary question may be almost mortal in effect. First, then, am I justified in deducing from what you have said that one word would summarize your own personal attitude towards the man of letters you have lately been dissecting: the word scorn? You were at pains, I admit, to disguise it, to salve in one sentence the wound given by another. But the tone, the flavour, the accent—I could not be mistaken. And is not scorn, Professor, a dubious incitement for the critic, the expounder, the appreciator of any artist and his work? Moreover, it is one thing to despise a fellow-creature, another to malign him.'

'Malign I' cried the professor. 'My sole aim and intention was to tell the truth.'

'Ay, and so you dragged the well. And, am now enjoying the flavour of its dregs. You had ninety-eight listeners this evening. I myself counted them. You gave

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ip' plenty of time—between your ideas, I mean. That was fortunate. Your *poet*, let me inform you, once read his "Eureka"—an essay in the imaginative synthesis of philosophical and scientific thought which you evaded so skilfully by the mere mention of it—he read, I say, his "Eureka"—his mistress jewel—on a stormy night in a bitterly cold hall in Richmond before an audience of only sixty souls in all. It occupied two hours and a half. You and your hungry little flock, then, had not only the easier ordeal, but also a less difficult subject-matter. Apart from the title of your paper, you divided it into four parts: The Environment; the Man; the Tales and Poems; the Aftermath. Am I right? Superficially, that is a simple and lucid arrangement. Did you keep to it? Hardly. Again and again, like the moth to the candle—or shall we say, to the star!—you returned to the poet's private life, to his unhappy childhood, aureoled, in your own pinchbeck phrase, "with the chameleonic hues of romance". To the follies and misfortunes of his youth, to his failures, his poverty, his bereavements, his afflictions of body and mind, and what you supposed to be his soul—to his miserable death. Well, we live and die, and must leave posterity to do its best—and its worst—with us. But was it necessary to regale your docile and ignorant audience with allusions to the poet's young mother, the forsaken, penniless actress, and to *her* vile, tragic death in a filthy tenement when he himself was a

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child? I grant you his Helen. She even reminded your quick wits of Troy. But what of his simple-minded and afflicted sister Eulalie? What of exhuming into the light of night the very remains of his ever-youthful and long-suffering Virginia—to pry and peer into *their* sacred secrets? You used the word morbid. Whose was the morbid, yes, and the sordid, when you declared that those poor relics had actually lain concealed awhile under the bed of one of her husband's besotted biographers? The ashes of Annabel Lee, forsooth! And selfless and faithful old Mrs. Clemm, *her* mother, *his* more-than-mother, with her basket of broken meats collected from door to door to save her loved ones from starvation. And the poet's cloak, that in those icy winters in New York had to serve by day as a protection for his own wretched back, and by night as a coverlet for his dying Virginia's bed. You used the term, tragedy, Professor; why did you turn it into a melodrama? Is there to be no humanity, no decent reticence concerning the life of a man who is dead, merely because he was a writer? Is *every* poet at the hands of *any* showman doomed to suffer again and again the pangs of a Monsieur Waldemar? I ask you—I put the question.'

'Let me repeat,' said the professor frigidly, 'you have misjudged my intention. You imply that a man's circumstances in life have no relation to his actions, to his principles, to his ideals. I deny it. Knowledge aids understanding. How else explain, excuse, condone?'

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'Condone! It was, then, with the same compassionate aim that, having condensed a lifetime of forty years—not an exorbitant allowance—into a sensational and appetizing quarter of an hour, you dealt with the *nfan*? It was perhaps your passion for moderation that persuaded you only to hint at such words as mountebank, ingrate, wastrel, fortune-hunter, seducer, debauchee, dipsomaniac. Hints serve better. But words, Professor, have the strange power of revealing not merely what a man consciously intends to say, but what, perhaps unknown to himself, he means and feels. And the simplest of your listeners can have been in little doubt of that. I confess to perplexity. Have the poets themselves ever claimed to be saints? Have the most exemplary of them ever professed to be anything but sinners? Name me one poet, one imaginative writer even, of any account, whom you yourself suspect of believing that his failings as a man in any sense or degree *aided* his genius. They may profess it—but not within themselves! Oh yes, I agree that a man's writings indelibly reflect him and all of him that matters most. And since your poet's are all that is left of him in this world, and they alone are of lasting value, should we not look for him there? Did you attempt to depict, to describe, to illuminate that reflection? No: for that would have needed insight, the power to divine, to recreate. *You* are a stern and ardent moralist, Professor. But since when has the platform become a pulpit? It

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needs, too, little courage to attack and stigmatize the dead,

The stranger's wandering gaze had returned slowly to the professor's face. 'Provided of course you are confident that dead he will remain. None the less it seems to me a rather paltry amusement—carriage stuff,

'I say again,' cried Professor Monk hotly, 'truth was my aim. I resent this attack. It is beside the point.'

'For my part', said the other, 'I resent nothing. I am here merely to "drink from the fountain-head". But even if we admit that from his childhood up, as a human being, gentleman and Christian, your poet fell far short even of the happy mean, is there no other standard by which to judge him? The decalogue he shared with every man, and, like most men, and many professors, he would long since have been forgotten if he had not proved himself—I will not venture to say worthy of remembrance, but—defiant of oblivion. What he *might* have done even in spite of his miseries and weaknesses, his tortured nerves and treacherous body—that no man can declare. But in respect, Professor, to what he actually *did*—as an artist, a man of letters, a poet? Does that suggest that he ever consented to sell the smallest fraction of his soul for bread, or wine, or—brief anodyne against a world which he himself had no hand in creating—even drugs? Did he condescend to write down to his readers; or, worse, up? Did he betray his intelligence; prostitute his mind;

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parade his heart? Did he even attempt to improve the *shining* hour? You would agree that the writer in his solitude must obey scruples, hold fast to an aesthetic probity, serve with a forlorn devotion in a'cause which the generality of men know nothing of. But *his* laws are unwritten laws. Not that I suggest that your victim even in this was blameless—far from it. But you yourself seem never to have been aware of such an ordeal. You made pretty play with the artistic temperament—with your morbid, and your moody, and your melancholy, and your misanthrope—but of the artist's *conscience* not one word.'

'Even if your allegations were not grossly exaggerated,' said the professor, 'surely there is little novelty in such a notion, and I had to consider my listeners.'

'Had the poets', said the other, 'put their faith solely in novelty and considered only their listeners, there would have been no *Paradise Lost*, no *Hamlet*, and few of the Greek tragedies. Surely only an artist's *best* is worth his trouble? And that being so—Heaven help him—can he, *need* he care who shares it? Let me repeat, I am not defending Mr. Poe, God forbid; he is gone long since, as your genial friend the minister on the platform would put it, to his account. It could be only then in the strangeness of some sepulchral dream that he could or would return to a world he little liked, and was little liked by. But all this apart—these dingy relics, I mean, the un-

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savoury events of his life and the invaluable lessons to be derived from them: what conceivable concern had they with the very subject of your paper?'

The slate-gray eyes peered out dark with anger from behind the glass of their spectacles. ' "Subject" ?'

'It has escaped your memory, it seems. Read your own handbills then. The *Writings* of Edgar Allan Poe V

'That is a quibble,

'It is essential. Your better nature gave you the title of your paper. Your worse followed the easier, the more appetizing, the more popular, the charnel-house treatment of your theme.'

A pallor almost as extreme as that of his visitor had spread over Professor Monk's features. A hatred of this stranger, a hatred not the less bitter for being now innocent of contempt, was stirring in his mind. His glance fell from the fixed eyes to the thin satirical lips and thence to the delicate hands, but he realized that this petty effort to appear indifferent had woefully failed him.

'I consider, he managed to say, in a low, hardly articulate voice, 'I consider this is an outrage and an insult.'

'That may well be so,' responded his visitor, with a hardly perceptible shrug of his cloaked shoulder. 'And I believe if your poet were here—I mean, Professor, in the flesh—that he too would not hesitate to agree with you. But let us be honest for a moment. Apart from other writers—Thomas Lovell Beddoes and a Miss

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Bronte—you mentioned James Clarence Mangan, hinting that possibly Poe himself definitely stole, cheated him of his technique. Did you produce one single syllable in proof of this? And if you had, when, may I ask you, were poets forbidden to gild the silver they borrow? You said that Poe shared with these writers something of their dreams, their visions, their frail hopes and aspirations. How far did you inform us regarding the meaning, the source, the value and reality, quite apart from the fascination of those dreams? Poe's complete mortal existence was a conflict with his woe of spirit, his absorption in death and the grave, his horror of the solitude of the soul, of the nightmares that ascended on him like vultures from out of the pit of hell when he lay on his hospital death bed. What do *you* know of these? What will your listeners find of comfort, of reassurance in your academic mouthings and nothings when *they* come to face their terrors of the mind, *that* unshatterable solitude?

'My only speculation is not concerning which of the authors you mentioned you know least about, but what conceivable satisfaction you found in reading their books. And believe me, my dear Professor, your groping remarks on poetic technique were nothing short of fatuous. Not only can you never have written a line of verse yourself, unless perhaps as an inky schoolboy you thumped out a molossus or a spondee or two on your desk, but you can never even have read with any insight the poet's

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essay on the subject. Indeed, what is your definition of poetry? Did you refer to his? It is deplorable enough that you have confused the imagination, that sovereign power, that divine energy, with a mere faculty. Reason, yes. But is not man's feeblest taper, like the sun itself in heaven, a *dual* splendour—of heat *and* light? Are you aware that you made no use of the word intellect, or divination, or afflatus, ay, and worse, even music? Did not Poe himself maintain that "in enforcing a truth, we must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical"? That, you may claim, was a mood you endeavoured to share. But did *he* never share it? Was opium or Hippocrene his aid in that? How then can you justify your commendation of that vain piping wiseacre Emerson, who in his own practice suggested that poetry is skim-milk philosophy and flowery optimism cut up into metre, and dismissed all else as jingle? Or your half-hearted rejection of Mr. Henry James's shallow gibe, "very superficial verse". Is beauty the less admirable because it is skin deep? I know little of Mr. James, but assume from what you yourself said of him that one might as justly dismiss his fiction as sillily super-subtle psychology. Was *he* a devotee of the Muses—of Music? *Music*, let me quote again, "music when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is

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simply music; the idea, without the music, is prose, from its very definiteness".'

'Who said that?'

'Ah! Is it sense or nonsense?'

'I had an hour, muttered the professor tartly, 'not all night,

'And what virtual service', continued his visitor more genially, 'is there in comparing poems different in aim, in kind and in quality? Has not even the ass its own niche in the universe? Is not every work of art—yes, even your own lecture—something single, unique; and are these precious comparisons anything better than mere mental exercises? Heaven forbid, and heaven forbids much, that I should legislate in such matters. My mere question is, how canj'ou? Believe me, while what you told us of creative insight—invention as you called it—might set any sensitive human heart aching with despair, your remarks on the art of writing were nothing short of a treason to the mind. They were based on inadequate knowledge, and all but innocent of common sense. Have you ever read that Poe never *laughed*? Perhaps not. And you had no reason to notice that one at least of your listeners refrained even from smiling, though on my soul I can imagine no moment in which he would be more bitterly tempted to indulge in the cachinnation of fools than in this.

' "Questions"—questions! I awaited in vain the faint-

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est intimation that our poet was perhaps the first of his kind to foresee the triumphs and the tyranny of modern science; that he was no mere groping novice in astronomy, physics, and the science of the mind. Creature of darkness his imagination may have been: but was there no light in his *mind*? If you could meet him face to face, Professor, at this moment, here, now—I ask you, I entreat you to confide in me, would you deny him the light of his Reason? Would you? You might even try to forgive his extravagances, his miseries; you might even agree that even four-score years of purgation could hardly serve to annul the habits of a lifetime; and that yet in spite of his discordant nature, his self-isolation, he was happier in the solitary company of his own miserable soul than . . . But I must refrain from being wearisome. I will burden you with but one more quotation:

ⁱ "We have still a thirst unquenchable. . . . It belongs to the immortality of man. . . . It is no mere appreciation of the beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the beauty above . . . to attain a portion of that loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone. . . ."

"Those tears, then, that respond to poetry and music are not from "excess of pleasure, but through a certain petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which, *through* the poem, or

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through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses". These words, Professor, though you are evidently unaware of it, were Edgar Allan Poe's. And I—I myself have as yet found no reason to retract the conviction of their truth.'

Professor Monk's apprehension that his visitor, if not positively insane, was far from 'normal', had become a certainty. Their eyes, or rather the sentinels that look out of them, had met again. Who goes *there*? they had cried one on the other. And again it was the professor's that had returned no countersign. But dislike—a transitory hatred even—of his censor had fallen away into a sort of incredulity. That he should have consented to such a catechism. That a mere lecture should have led to this! He had been hardly troubling indeed to follow the meaning of the last remarks he had heard. His sole resource was to mutter that though he was grateful for his visitor's suggestions, it was clear that they would never see eye to eye in these matters, that the hour was growing late, and that he must be gone. He even managed to grimace a slant but not unkindly smile. 'We live in two worlds,' he said, 'you and I, and I fear we shall never agree. None the less, and though you prefer to doubt it, I share your interest and delight in poetry, and, within strict limits, your admiration of Poe.' He cast a forlorn glance towards his hat perched in solitude upon a chair. 'We shall at least, I hope,' he added, 'part friends.'

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'So be it, replied his visitor, drawing his cloak more closely around him, raising slowly his heavy head.

*' The cock he hadna crowed but once,
And clapped his wings at a',
Whan the youngest to the eldest said,
Brother we must awa. . . .*

I also must be gone. We have met by chance. Let us not make it a fatality. By just such a chance indeed as that in your dreams to-night you may find yourself in regions such as our poet described, and may not, I fear, find much comfort in them. So, too, this evening, I found myself—well, here: in a region, that is, which it is your own excellent fortune to occupy, and which is yet of little comfort to *me*. Is there not a shade of the Satanic in these streets? But what are waking and dreaming, my dear sir? Mere states of consciousness; as too in a sense is this, your world of what you call the actual, and the one that may await you. Opinions, views, passing tastes, passing prejudices—they are like funguses, a growth of the night. But the moon of the imagination, however fickle in her phases, is still constant in her borrowed light, and sheds her beams on them one and all, the just and the unjust. We may meet again.'

The dark, saturnine head had trembled a little, the weak yet stubborn mouth had stirred into a faint smile as the stranger thrust out an ungloved hand from beneath his cloak over the varnished wood of the table.

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Professor Monk hesitated, but only for a moment. Critic though he might be, and so not by impulse a man of action, he was neither timid nor unforgiving. His fingers met an instant the outstretched hand, and instantly withdrew, not because he had regretted the friendly action, but because of the piercing cold that had run through his veins at this brief contact. A sigh shook him from head to foot. A slight vertigo overcame him. He raised his hand to his eyes. For an instant it seemed as though even his sense of reality had cheated him—had foundered.

And when he looked out into the world again his visitor had left him. At last he was indeed alone. He stayed a moment, still dazed, and staring at nothing. Then he glanced at his mute typescript on the table, and then furtively into the grate. He paused, musing. His fingers fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, but encountered only a penknife. It was in part with a penknife, and when seated in his winter house before a burning fire, that King Jehoiakim had destroyed the Prophet Jeremiah's manuscript. But though, unlike the angel's little book in Revelations, the professor's paper was no longer sweet on his tongue, and there were a few dead coals at hand, he had no matches. His evening had wearied him, but this vile altercation seemed to have sapped his very life. Had he changed his views concerning the genius of Poe

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as a writer?—not by one iota. As a man? He had always, he realized, disliked and distrusted him; now he hated him. But this was immaterial. An absurd conviction of his own futility had shaken and shocked him. Life itself is a thing of moments, the last being its momentary apex. And *now* he felt as dead and empty as some sad carcase suspended eviscerated from a butcher's hook. By a piece of mere legerdemain in this cold and hideous room his view of himself and even of his future had completely changed. The pattern in the kaleidoscope—was that then nothing but a trick? A few dull fallen fragments of glass now, and no pattern at all? Being a man of habit and purpose and precision, Professor Monk was well aware that a drug, however potent, and whatever its origin, wears out at length its own effects. So with this evening's enterprise; he might, he *would*, soon be his own man again. But meanwhile . . . Well, he would await the morrow, when perhaps his second thoughts would be less impetuous—and he himself less hideously cold.

He stooped awkwardly for his hat, and as he did so caught a glimpse of the little wizened, warty, bent-up old caretaker peering in at the doorway. 'Ah, there you are, sir,' he was assuring him, with the utmost friendliness. 'I was beginning to think you had passed out without my seeing you. They do sometimes. No hurry, sir.' Professor Monk hesitated; then paused; while yet again the adjacent foundry discarded its slag.

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'Which way did that—er—gentleman go?' he enquired.

'Gentleman, sir? I've set eyes on no gentleman. Except for one of them saucy young schoolgirls from St. Ann's half an hour ago, I see them all come along out together like rain out of a gutter-pipe. And the Reverend Mortimer hard at heel after them. It's fine now, sir, and starry, but the wind's rising. I have been talking with a friend.¹

'Ah, yes. Thank you!' replied the professor. But it was well under his breath that he repeated, 'Ah, yes.'

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*

Hilbert had cooled down at last. And now so sweetly chimed his heart, so transporting a sense of peace had stolen over his mind, that he had all but repented of his hasty vow—never, never to run for a train again. And particularly for a train not his own. After the din and fever of the arterial road, this tiny station—Bovey Fausset—of which he was the sole occupant, with its Noah's Ark trees, its nursery bridge and tall toy signal-post, was like a scene out of some Hans Andersen fairy-story. How very odd that those dreadful Victorians, those slaves of the squat god, Pocket, should have indulged in anything so ridiculous and charming! The whole thing looked as if it were made of cardboard, and just for fun. If, now and then, between trains, he could sit on here, on this hard hot narrow bench in this westering September sunshine—mellow as a vintage hock—how simple it would become to stuff lines of verse with sad melodious thoughts; to rhyme *pass* with *alas!*—*anguish* with *languish*. This morning, unfortunately, he had hastened out of the house *minus* his fountain pen.

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So narrow was the single track of glinting steel that he could have jumped it with ease—a hop, a skip, and clean over. If he had been sure he was not alone he would have made the attempt. But 'deeds of reckless daring demand an audience of the fair'! All along the twin platforms—snapdragons, cottage roses, dahlias—yellow sunflowers of every tint and magnitude, from Van Gogh tea-trays downwards, stood opulently exposing their charms to a host of bees and flies and butterflies in the gentle breeze—a breeze so gentle indeed that it had taken exactly twenty minutes to cool Hilbert's fevered brow.

If he had refused to believe that a ramshackle train going the wrong way could possibly be his own, if he had merely mocked at the silly fallacy of 'saving' time, he would long ago have detected how heavenly, how earthly-sweet this faint wind was, as if it were laden with the spices of the Hesperides. The little old leather hand-bag now squatting on the seat beside him and packed almost exclusively with pretty little bibelots—how *could* it have come to weigh so heavy. His own Works, too!

They simply irradiated the air—the sunflowers; and continued to be the bliss of Hilbert's outward eye until suddenly he remembered that their very splendour proclaimed that autumn had come. Autumn! Bedizened creatures, how odd that they should wait so long to bloom. But then poor Hilbert seemed now unlikelier than ever to bloom at all. Never. And this in spite of the

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fact that his present little expedition, which for the moment had come to so hapless yet serene a pause, just hinted that in a more favourable sphere and loaded up with some other kind of merchandise, he might have proved himself to be a really rabid go-getter.

The little expedition had been solely his own idea, too. Hilbert, in fact, had long had leanings towards literature. He was already the author of the quite recently published little volume of fancies, *pensdes*, conceits, now in his bag. And so precisely mid-way were its contents between a respectable prose and a defensible verse that the harsh critics of an earlier era might have avowed that they had issued from a vacuum with the merits of neither, Hilbert's very few reviewers—still following a passing fashion to 'say it with flowers'—had been far more indulgent.

One of them, after a jocular sally (in July) at 'spring poets', had referred to 'these, as doubtless we may assume, dainty first-fruits'; and another, after (possibly with the help of the printer) citing the title of the book as *Parlourings* instead of *Parleyings with Pegasus*, had pleasantly remarked that Mr. Hilbert Winslow 'wielded a dainty and pensive quill'. This had been a no less welcome tribute for being purely metaphorical, since the pen Hilbert had that morning left at home on his dressing-table, between a rather decayed ivory-backed hair brush and an empty bottle of brilliantine, was an exceedingly bloated *Swan*.

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How odd that critiques as affable as these should have failed to sell a single copy of *Partyings*. Even poems by Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell had wooed three into the fold; and editors of course *must* know what is good for their readers! But then—though economy rather than foresight had counselled it—how fortunate that Hilbert had ordered only a hundred copies in all. 'I suppose it's the gilt,' his mother had remarked on seeing the binders' account, 'I suppose it's the gilt, darling, that makes it so expensive, but I am sure it deserves every penny.' Thirty of these Hilbert had squandered on the Press. Three had gone to relatives, and twenty-two to friends and well-wishers—a phrase, alas, that for the literary novice is by no means equivalent to go-getter. And the family bookseller had taken twenty. Not on approval, of course, but, as he carefully explained, for 'sale or return'.

Within ten days, Hilbert was astounded to hear, this enterprising tradesman had disposed of the complete batch. And Hilbert had naturally asked for some description of his local patrons. At this the bookseller had looked a trifle confused. He had retrieved at last—but very vaguely—a tall dark gentleman in spectacles; and then—'a lady, yes, a lady, sir.'

It was at mention of the lady that Hilbert's heart had sunk. Telepathy, perhaps.. But although next morning he had peeped into his mother's bedroom and afterwards covertly surveyed the bookcase in her little sitting-room,

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he had actually detected only one copy of his little masterpiece. This was lying with her Prayer Book on the barley-sugar-legged walnut prie-dieu at her bedside, and its fly-leaf was adorned with his signature. 'I always *told* my beloved one, darling, that some day you would be famous; although I must say books never entered my head. I fancied perhaps something useful. Your Uncle Charles, you know, once went down in a diving-bell.'

But even if, in the abundance of her maternal heart, Hilbert's mother *had* acquired those nineteen copies, a little discreet questioning soon showed that she could not possibly have read them all. 'Knowing my precious boy, as I do,' she had assured him, 'there's no need to *study* the book. Why, darling, I might have made up every word of it myself—though I should *never* have thought of the title! Let me see, in *which* story of Charles Dickens is it that that poor old Mr. Pegasus is drowned?'

It needed only Hilbert's mastery of arithmetic to calculate that he had thus been left with twenty-four copies in all—copies stranded, as he feared, high and dry. So having decided that since the mountain showed no symptom of coming to Mahomet, Mahomet had better make the first advances, at intervals of a few days he had sallied out with the little brown bag which now shared with him the autumnal sunshine of his painted bench, and had already managed to dispose of ten of them. One on the seat of a bus, two in the corner of a tram, four on the

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shelves of an unsuspecting secondhand bookseller, one on the verger—a widower—of St. Swithin's, who left it by an oversight on the lectern, one on the counter of an obscure haberdasher's shop, and two (in late dusk) pushed through a dentist's letter-box. Like the young Benjamin Disraeli, all in his finery and plush, and facing a discordant House, Hilbert had muttered to himself, 'Some day they *shall* read me, By which he meant the fastidious few. The degradation of becoming a best-seller had never even in fancy so much as darkened his mind.

Thus it came about that he had this morning set out bound for a quarry a little further afield—a populous town that boasted no fewer than three booksellers—a town, it seemed, pining for sweetness and light. Nevertheless he had twice failed to sell a copy of his *Parleyings*, in spite of offering a very liberal discount. And the third bookseller was so barbarous in appearance that he had not even made the attempt. So he had given it to the boy.

Indeed when it came to a question of *acquiring* a stock in trade rather than of disposing of one, booksellers as a species appear to be singularly busy and absent-minded men. They would palm off on you a complete encyclopaedia in chaste morocco without turning a hair; whereas the very notion of purchasing even one copy of a bibelot seemed to threaten insolvency. To get the slightest attention from Mr. A,—a man with thick and powerful

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spectacles precariously perched on a broken nose—Hilbert had been compelled to buy a secondhand copy in purple leather of *Poems of Passion* by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—even though in business transactions passion is anathema and, unlike Sappho, Mrs. Wilcox had always left him cold.

With Mr. B, on the other hand, a little fussy man with a somewhat ragged black moustache, the purchase of a shilling shocker had sufficed, Hilbert having no further stomach left for a rival wooer of the Muses. In spite of the profit thus to be derived, neither Mr. A nor Mr. B had consented to accept his commission. 'If you will *leave* a copy with me, sir, I will look it over and let you know, had been their reply—and in almost identical terms. And Hilbert had with difficulty resisted the temptation to don a false beard, return to the shop and persuade *this* busy B to sell him his particular copy before he had had time to be as good as his word.

Outside B's rather musty little shop Hilbert's four-year-old Austin Seven, as if in umbrage at her master's ill-fortune, had decided that she needed a rest-cure, and the railway had proved to be his quickest way home. Nevertheless every ounce of Hilbert's moral fibre and better nature had revolted at the notion of his ignominiously returning home with his four unwanted. But how dispose of them? After all, *Parleyings with Pegasus* was his firstborn. Mere paternal affection alone shunned the

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temptation of leaving his offspring under the seat. It was of course his infants, not his literary masterpieces, that Jean Jacques Rousseau had abandoned. There are degrees of consciencelessness.

What then was the alternative? Tracts being obsolete, the only literature nowadays bestowed gratis is the circular. There are Philistines who resent even these. It is a sad fact, Hilbert mused, that human nature should suspect a taint in anything that is given away—unless it is accompanied by tea or tobacco. The cost of circulars, he supposed, worked out at about ten a penny; whereas every single 3s. 6d. copy of his *Parleying* had cost his mother Ios. 11.3 7 s d, *net*. He had done the sum himself.

None the less, the frigidity of Messrs. A and B had only fanned the flame of his enthusiasm. In spite of all such rebuffs Hilbert had made no attempt to unbridle his Pegasus. There was plenty of sugar where the Parleyings had come from; and some day—Some Day—he would find himself in the saddle cantering gaily off to Mt. Helicon. Nothing could exceed his assurance of this. Ever since he had been a fat little boy with flaxen finger-curls he had had a passion—undiluted, ineradicable—for putting himself into words—the very best words in the very best order.

So had William Shakespeare. Why, at this very moment there was scarcely an object around him which was not pleading for its real right setting: *The Haunting sunflower*

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at the platform's brink; The spidery arch that spans the way-side track; Sadly I sat while Autumn's furtive rust. Whithersoever his eye roamed his vocabulary coyly responded. *Motsjustes*, like midges, fairly danced in his mind. Hilbert had quite recently decided that his next volume should be in verse: a poetry book. This would, he knew, be shockingly out of fashion. Rhymes were gone; punctuation was gone; verse, free or otherwise, need not nowadays even trouble to scan. But then stops for Hilbert had always been a stumbling block, and their absence does of course keep any kind of verse from reading like mere prose. While as for rhymes, even a Petrarchan sonnet *per* morning would be child's play without them. He would defer his decision concerning these little trifles, in the assurance that he could dispense with them at a moment's notice.

He could too no less safely postpone any premature effort to put his *political* views into verse, until at any rate he had discovered what these were. At present any such phrase as Propaganda for the Amelioration and Solidarization of the Proletariat positively scared him. It sounded as if life were made of the spongiest india-rubber. Were even the Muses nowadays no better than bourgeoisie? He pined to be clear about such things; but might none the less in a year or two fall back on being obscure if, meanwhile, other means of self-communication had failed him.

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Then too there was what was called the Problem of Sex. From infancy Hilbert had fought shy of problems. And this one? Could he not when necessary take it in his poetic stride? Freud after all was only a foreigner; and his obsession one concerning which, he fancied—a flush suffusing his cheek the while—if only he consented to delve a little, he was himself less ignorant than un-'knowing'. There were candid Manuals, of course. The broken-nosed Mr. A had laid in a pile of them. And he had a friend. . . . Besides, he had often vaguely felt that so far at least as his notion of poetry was concerned, Sex—with the capital, that is—was very little better than a dubious *cul-de-sac*. The further you went in the longer it took you to get out. Anyway a *blind alley*—like one's appendix. Caecum, wasn't it called, which, provided that it just functions in the usual way—*what* hideous words they secreted!—mattered no more than any other human requisite. One's brains, say. What's more, he was pretty confident that until any crisis came, as with one's poor vermiform appendix itself, there was no need to have it out—no, not with anybody! There was no need at any rate for indecent *haste*. Besides, as yet, he felt, he couldn't think very badly about life—not as yet. It had not at any rate proved itself to be a positive sink—of anything. Why not then repose for a little while upon the future? The murmurous heavy-bosomed sunflowers languishing at him from across the gleaming metals exhibited not the faintest hint of haste.

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By and large, in fact, Hilbert was conscious at this serene and happy moment of no particular urge or vocation to become a 'modern' poet—even if he could manage the technique. And that of course brought him back to the question whether poetry—of any kind even—was really wanted. Had it of recent years become a mere luxury, a sort of literary cosmetic? It certainly sometimes seemed so. And yet, in spite of mercenary booksellers, tepid reviewers, an invidious aunt, and retired uncles whose staple topic of conversation at afternoon tea was the moral necessity for a young man to be self-supporting, Hilbert didn't believe it. There must be *many* Hilberts still carrying on the smouldering torch! He had lived, comparatively speaking, laborious days. He had seldom toyed with any Neaera's hair. His electric lamp could frequently be seen burning long after midnight. When engaged in polishing his *pensdes* had he not frequently even forgotten to touch his morning's glass of milk?—I'm sure, Hilbert dear, it's very unwise to compose even poetry on an empty stomach.' Why then had he failed? And here—not twelve inches away—was Mrs. Wilcox in limp leather pleading to answer his questions! Passionately pleading. But, passionately or otherwise, he refused to pay her the faintest attention.

Anyhow, his own answer was No—a thousand times, No! This England had *not* forsworn herself, and not even calling her Britain would make her. Nothing should ever

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shake his rooted conviction that every boy and every gal that's born into this world alive must in due season and if given the opportunity, take to rhymes—and maybe even to *vers libre*—as naturally as a duck to water—or rather, as kittens take to cream. He had himself. Why, for centuries past every Society Beauty, every Prime Minister even, must have been bred up on 'Goosey Gander'; and was there a labour leader in the land who had not taken 'Little Jack Horner' to heart before he was five? It must be these sterilized fossilized old grown-ups who are the offenders. Like William pears, humanity is apt to go sleepy with age, and no doubt it is education that is to blame. All ruts. A diet of indigestible facts—husks. What wonder we were all so repulsively alike? Possibly if nobody had been educated, the demand for poetry, and incidentally for his *Parleying*, might have . . .

Here Hilbert paused. But he was not going to betray his sense of truth by any appeal to his own vanity. He would stick to his point. As scores of lady authors, and many of them titled lady authors, were continually proclaiming in the newspapers, every adult who has fallen in love, or felt homesick, or smiled at an infant, or bowed to the new moon—and what human crustacean can have evaded the complete quartette?—has momentarily at the least *been* a poet, however much he might resent the charge if he were challenged. Had he not seen his own family butcher—his right hand non-

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chalantly clasping a black three-cornered knife, its poiis embedded in his block—gazing pensively on and on oil' of his shop at the sunset, just as if the ensanguined clouds dappling the blue were as much of his own make as was the necklet of sausages dangling behind him on its rack?

No: Hilbert had complete faith in his fellow-creatures—a remnant at any rate; and here and now he was going to prove it justified. Why, of course, one can't 'maie' poets, since every human being is thus by Nature ready-made! This inspiring thought had actually and instantly brought him to his feet, bag in hand, though the signal was still steadily against him. He took a pace or two and sat down again, but only because he fancied the porter who a moment before had peered out of a little den at the other end of the other platform had heard his footsteps. His blue eyes glistened, his cheek paled a little. So swiftly the imagination flies that Hilbert had already betted himself an even five shillings that he would prove his thesis *Four times over* before he got home that evening.

What is more, he vowed that if he failed, say, twice—no, say, thrice out of the four, he would give up all hope of Pegasus altogether. He would buy a sixpenny padlock and lock the stable up. He would let grass grow between its cobbles and house leeks on its tiles. And it wouldn't matter a bit if now and then silly sentiment should persuade him to sit and snuff the equine atmo-

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sphere, to watch the sparrows, and to overhear an occasional thud of hoof on brick, or rattle of manger rope. For since Pegasuses are immortal, not even the S.P.C.A, could enquire why you-had immured one particular specimen out of the light of the morning and had not even supplied it with a bottle of old hay.

It was the simplest thing in the world, this project of Hilbert's. He had already dabbled in the experiment. It was merely, for one brief afternoon, to play Paul Pry to the world at large. Englishmen (he wasn't quite so certain about Englishwomen) are so unaccustomed to talking to strangers that when they do, they are far more inclined to ease their hearts of all their ills, to say out really what they not only mean but feel—to confide, to confess, to tell secrets. And once the heart itself begins to talk—you simply cannot help it—*poetry*, just its gold *dust*, is bound to follow. Your tongue takes to itself cadences, tunes, even metres which are positively lyrical! That is why money-lenders, stock-brokers, schoolmasters, bookmakers and most officials are so prosaic—they live in their heads and abandon their feelings. Who ever heard of a tax-inspector or a gas collector making up rhymes? Why did Cabinet Ministers so seldom resort in their speeches to blank verse? Simply because their *hearts* were not in their work.

'Emotion remembered in tranquillity'—yes, at this very first chance Hilbert would get the beggars to talk—of

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their feelings, of their pasts—preferably of their hidden pasts. Then he would wait. And the very first syllable which even a neutral would agree so much as hinted that the speaker had even the slightest claim to be representative of the tiny island that had been responsible for the greatest, noblest, deepest, oddest, crankiest, imaginativest, essentialst poetry in the whole history of the world—the very moment those lips, bucolic or otherwise, audibly proved themselves to have been even touched with (even a fading cinder of) the divine fire, well, that would be a definite proof of Hilbert's thesis. And for immediate reward out would come one of the four copies of his *Parleyings* now reposing in his bag, and the first quarter, the first twenty-five *per cent* (as Messrs. A and B would prefer to call it) of his good deed for the day would have been done.

It is true, of course, that poetry *needs* no reward. But does even the poet himself need a Neaera if he is already in blissful possession of an Amaryllis? And it was not until a full moment after this happy metaphor had occurred to him that Hilbert wondered if it had any bearing on his argument.

He might, of course, encounter only Scotchmen. And they, in spite of being the strident sponsors of Burns and other local bards, are so thrifty by nature that they appear in general to keep to statements like *Ech*, or '*Ye dinna*', or '*Och, mon*\ Whereas Irishmen delight

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in blarney, *and* have a poetry all their own. As for the Welsh, well, Hilbert had never really penetrated, so to speak, beneath the beards of the Druids. He would, then, have to be cautious.

But what a lark it would be! From first to last in his experiences of private publishing he had never dreamed of such a reward. What's more, there was charity in it. He was going to give—even to give himself—away!

Yet again that distant porter had peered out of his lair in his direction. No doubt he was looking for the 4.10. And rightly so, since at this moment it was 4.44; and perhaps he wanted his tea. So did Hilbert. But he had been so intent on other cravings that he had failed to notice it. This time, however, the porter had not gone in again; on the contrary, he was sallying out. Why, thought Hilbert, watching him, is a green-glassed lantern so magical an object in full daylight? Was it because, like poetry itself, it is of no immediate use? And why, in a dear mediaeval little wayside station like this, where heavy luggage must be scarce, had the porter bow legs?

He was crossing the line, lantern in hand, as blindly and deliberately as even Destiny paces on. And Hilbert, as childish as ever, loved crossing the line. He envied him. And yes—he was coming this way. How awful! Hilbert was so utterly isolated that he would be morally bound to speak to him, and that might entail a protracted

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conversation. He had yet again realized that he detested talking to strangers. Or rather, he detested the thought of talking to strangers; particularly strangers engaged in really practical occupations—ploughmen, carpenters, hedgers and ditchers, grooms, plumbers. They always made him feel so absurdly ignorant and what is called supererogatory. Well, one thing, the porter's peculiar fiddle-face resembled a sexton's lantern, he was well over middle-age, and looked rheumatic and taciturn.

'What a lovely afternoon!' exclaimed Hilbert. The porter slowly and cautiously surveyed his surroundings, high and low. He reminded Hilbert of a bivalve at taste of salt water gently chinkening open its shell.

'It is *that*, sir,' he replied at length. 'We usually get this kind of weather here.'

'Really!' said Hilbert. 'Really! Perhaps one doesn't notice it enough. Of course, as it's so very quiet—I mean when there are no trains about. . . .'

'Ay,' said the porter, his black eyes firmly fixed on the almost maidenly smile of the young man, 'ay, that's part of it.'

'Yes,' said Hilbert.

'Quiet!' repeated the porter. 'There was a gennel-man here not long ago who said that looking under that bridge was like a picture frame. And if you make allowances, sir, so it is. Sometimes it's just the same; and sometimes it's quite different.'

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Hilbert stooped a little to peer through under the bridge—green-bright meadows, changing woods, the distant hill. But so dark, so vacantly pitched were the eyes of the porter as he surveyed it himself that Hilbert refrained even from nodding his head.

'Quiet!' repeated the porter. 'Look at them sparrows there. You can sometimes catch the tic-tac of their claws on the metals as they hop it over.'

Hilbert listened. 'No, he said, ', can't.'

The porter smiled—a slow, tranquil smile, like the shifting chequer of leaves on a tomb in a churchyard. 'You have only just come, sir,' he said. 'And perhaps it's *time* as does it. But what, now, they varmint pick up among them flints,' he continued, ' considering I've never seen nobody much *feeding* hereabouts, needs an eye I've never got. And I've watched 'em hours at a stretch till I've felt my own nose sharpening. I expect they know best. But when it comes to they pied wagtails after the *fiiies*! Tic-tac? Not them. Lor' bless you, they are that dainty and easy in the air you'd think they'd gone to school to their own shadows.'

Hilbert eyed him. Hans Andersen, indeed: the horsey creature was talking like a book.

The immense bulbous hob-nailed boots were now less than half an inch from the edge of the platform. He appeared to be quite indifferent to an habitual danger. Indeed he turned and spat very carefully on to the track,

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then eyed his companion again. 'She won't keep you mooning much longer, sir,' he reassured him. 'You can hear her low-like humming on the metals like them evening bumbledores even when she's a good three miles still to come.'

He spat again, turned away, and his bow legs were steadily carrying him off. Hilbert had been listening, but only half-heeding, he was so intent on the cavernous face. The next instant his mind had reverted to the 'picture frame', and to the tic-tac, and the iron rumour of the 'she' he was awaiting. How intensely odd—incredible! Why, one of his favourite chapters in his *Parleyings* had been all about birds—and in a prose he had fondly hoped was not wholly out of keeping with them. He had referred in it to William Davies's unforgettable robin—'half-way up his legs in snow'—to Lesbia's sparrow, and Skelton's too, but he had clean forgotten the wagtail—nimble Sallie Dishwasher—and had never himself even noticed her shadow; no, nor the tic-tac either. And if such little things as these were not at least on the way to *poetry* he was a Double Dutchman and deserved to write it in his native tongue. To think that Heaven should have consented to reward him so swiftly! The spring locks of his little bag flicked back with a spirited clap, his hand dived in, he clasped a copy of his *Pegasus*, grass-green as Flora's mantle, and hastened after the porter.

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'*Would you*', he cried, a little breathlessly, calling after him, '*accept this? A—a keepsake?*'

The porter turned, opened his mouth, and looked at the book—as if he were Robinson Crusoe contemplating a powder-puff that had been washed up on to his beach. Then he dusted his large right hand on his green corduroy trouser-leg, and held it out.

'Why, sir,' he said, 'that's an uncommon kind thought of yours, and very welcome too, I'm sure. My daughter, now; she's none too clever in her intellects, poor dear. She'll take a deal of pleasure in it, even though she keeps only to the covers. If there's one thing that keeps her smiling, sir, it's pretty colours. Green in particular. And eyes like hers, watching out quiet in the porch most fine mornings, don't seem to cotton much to many words; though what she don't say, sir, would be a sight better worth hearing than most.'

'No,' said Hilbert. 'Yes, I mean.' It was an awkward pause, but the porter did not seem to be indulging either in sentiment or irony. He continued to clasp the dainty little book between grimy finger and thumb as gently as Cupid a daisy; but found no more words to say. Conscious of looking a little hot, damp, and diffident Hilbert nodded, smiled, and returned to shut his bag. One from four leaves only three, he announced to himself. The sum reminded him of the Young Man with the Cream Tarts, though he rejoiced that the wager he

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had made with himself did not entail his having to *eat* his little books.

A peculiar faint drumming, as of a prodigious harp-string, had begun furtively to resound. The porter was ding-donging an old bell. 'She', then, was probably not more than a mile away now. Yes, here she came, puffing out delirious clots of wool and advancing on the toy railway station as meditatively as a gigantic snail. If Hilbert took a few lessons from the porter at Bovey Fausset he might at last succeed in detecting her at double the distance. 'Man's senses,' suddenly exclaimed a small dry voice from deep down beyond his sub-sub-consciousness—'Man's senses are his highway to the infinities.' Hilbert determined to make a note of that. Meanwhile he was hoisting himself into his chosen compartment.

When at last he had settled himself into his corner, and—his eye on the revolving scenery beyond the window—had paused long enough to make the survey a little more polite, he ventured to glance at his only companion. This old gentleman looked about seventy. He was frail but fibrous, and consisted of a series of narrow cylinders that were all but oblongs; a high narrow head, a long narrow body, and two right-angled legs in black trousers. His waistcoat was faintly speckled, and his little white cambric bow was like that of an old-fashioned waiter. He was reading a dumpy leather-bound book, and appeared to be as far away from the rocking

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clatter of his surroundings as a sleeping infant would be during a performance of *GStterdammeTung*.

Did Jesuit priests ever wear speckled waistcoats? Hilbert didn't know—indeed he knew very little about the Society, though he had often coveted the privilege of meeting one of its members. They were always aware, he had somehow divined, of exactly what they were talking about. How motionlessly the old gentleman's eyelids hung over his shuttling eyes. The lean-knuckled blue-veined hand clasping the book never stirred. 'Pious—no question,' Hilbert was whispering to himself, 'but a thoroughly good sort, I should guess. Austere, though. He looks', he added a moment afterwards, 'as dry as an old biscuit.' It might be exceedingly questionable manners—but dared he venture?

Nothing venture, nothing win. And though the porter had been a purely gratuitous godsend, Hilbert couldn't expect an average of one disposed-of volume every quarter of an hour, even though less than sixty minutes would see him home again.

He leaned forward as winningly as might an uncommonly good-natured barmaid. 'I am so very sorry, sir, to interrupt you, but could you tell me if this is the *up* train?'

The old gentleman's good angel first gently composed her wings; he himself then lifted his eyelids, lowered his book, and glanced at the young man—out of

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small bright blue-grey eyes, as keen as a kestrel's. He watched him a moment, and a tiny wrinkle showed at the corner of one of them.

' "*Up*"?' he repeated. 'Let me see. That's going north, isn't it? Yes, and the sun is descending on your side. Observe the shadows. I haven't any doubt in the world we are both of us on our way *up*! And that, I sometimes endeavour to remind myself, is the way I once hoped to be going. Alas, I can be perilously absent-minded.' He had smiled outright now, as if in private confabulation with his little jest. Still, there had been that in his '*up*' and in the wintry twinkle that accompanied it, which had set Hilbert speculating. It was a kind of Sesame. He peered into the cavern thus revealed, and though he could see but a little way, evidently it was neatly kept. There was a vista. But had the old gentleman passed his test?

Now, poetry, he was thinking to himself, depends at least in part on condensing, without, possibly, any clear excuse for it, a wide metaphorical view out of some tiny morsel of quite commonplace fact. 'Bird thou never wert', for example; and 'Of his bones are coral made'. That being so, the *up*, surely, was just on the mark. This decision, however, left the question whether its author—who was in every line and accent and feature as unquestionably a firm believer in the virtues of a sound prose as the 'Great Bear' himself—could possibly care to

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accept what poor Hilbert was tempted there and then to label, say, a hybrid medium—his *Partyings*? For both their sakes Hilbert wished to be considerate. But his fingers had already strayed towards the catch of his little brown bag.

'Thank you very much,' he said. Very much indeed. It is always a—a relief to know, to be sure one is not in the wrong train—when travelling, I mean. But I am not a traveller in the other sense—not *commercially*, I mean, nor perhaps . . . It's only that—well, that a friend of mine has suggested . . .' his eye faltered and fell under the old gentleman's steady scrutiny. 'I was wondering, sir, if you would do me the kindness of accepting—*this*?⁹

He snapped open his bag and withdrew the first copy that presented itself. 'It's—it's only *prose*, even if that, I'm afraid.'

'You are exceedingly kind, sir,' said the old gentleman, bestowing on Hilbert a formal but courteous nod of the head as he took the book between his lean old fingers. 'Thank you. I am not a great reader, indeed have little leisure for it, but when the opportunity comes I shall be most happy to peruse the book.'

At which, heedless of the blush which he was aware had mantled his brow, Hilbert managed to retrieve his fib. 'As a matter of fact,' he blurted, 'it was *not* exactly a friend. I — I mean—I, that is, am the author. It is,' he

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had sighed in spite of himself, 'it is my first-effort,

'Indeed!' said the old gentleman. 'That makes the gift doubly welcome. Until this moment we had never met, and now, in what remains of this life'—he tapped the book with his finger—'we shall never be parted.'

Goodness, Intelligence, and their younger sister, Courtesy—here, Hilbert decided, were the three Graces all at play in this one aged and quiet face; and, for Dorian porch to the temple within, those strait keen lines between the eyes.

For some little time, as his new acquaintance had at once resumed his reading, Hilbert sat watching the passing countryside—sheaves heavy with harvest in the stubble fields, green-feathered 'roots' in others; whirring flights of autumn birds. Another year was emptying itself away. We plough the fields—and scatter.

'And now, in what remains of this life, we shall never be parted'—well, if that was not a wholly non-prosaic welcome to a greenhorn little book from the trembling hands of a novice less than a third of one's own age—well. . . . Nevertheless Hilbert felt the least bit uneasy. Not at the difficulty of deciding whether what is non-prosaic is *per se* poetical; but because he had not confided to the old gentleman *all* the facts of the case. But while he was pondering on how delicate a task that might have proved, his head nodded, chin on chest, and he fell asleep.

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He awoke so sluggishly that he was aware of a voice declaiming on and on long before he had decided whether or not to open his eyes.

'What, say is, treat 'em rough and ready and they'll lick your boots. Pamper them, and they won't give you not so much as a Thank-you. But no; Aggie never was the one to take advice. Never. Not her. In at one ear and out at the other; though, if she hasn't had her lesson now—pretty heavy on the stomach and her whole life in ashes as you might say—I'm not the one to rub the salt in. Straight up from the country, fare and all, that girl had come—somewhere from down Swindon way, so she *said*. And before she'd been in the house a week, in came m'lady from the Pictures at getting on for one in the morning with her No. 2 in young men beside her as large as life, and she, I give you *my* word, dressed up to the knocker and as bold as brass in Aggie's blue hat and her best glassy kids. There—on her*feet*, mind you!'

'Go on!' murmured a second unseen speaker, apparently hampered with adenoids.

'I should just about say she did go on! And her husband sitting there with his pipe between his teeth as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Not much. Swinging his legs and yawning his head off. And *him* reely and truly the founting head of all the trouble—brazen trollop. Not that I wouldn't allow it was chiefly Aggie's *fault*. As you make your bed in this world, so you must

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lay on it. Spoiled, that was what *that* girl was, like the one that had gone before her. Gas stove fresh from the works, Bristle's sweeper, pink-edged kitchen crockery and a spring mattress all complete—I never heard the likes of it. What things are coming to I *ioxit* know. What's more, he defended her, put in *his* spoke, he did. 'No more than a child; up from the country"—that kind of smooth-me-down. Child! Country!—ask *me*; a chit with rouge and lipstick all over her face, and that pasty-skinned you could have seen the smirk on her sly cat's features without a candle in the dark!'

'Go on! And that young feller and all!'

'Yes, and so they did, all three of 'em, hammer and tongs, though as for him he was nothing but a blind and soon made himself scarce. As for what Aggie thought of that Albert of hers, she kept that for upstairs and the door shut—not for *that* baggage to be listening in to. A bit of her mind Aggie gave him, too, though I will say she hasn't too much to spare. And when the pair of them come down next morning, lo and behold nothing but what remained of the slut's meat breakfast on the kitchen table—meat, mind you—and the girl herself gone, lock, stock and barrel, and Aggie's best set of real silk undies gone with her.'

'Silk! Real! Lor! I never! Go *on*!'

'Nor didn't Aggie. Fare paid and faked-up references, until I expect she's got to Buckingham Palace by now—

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or Holloway. And that angelic-looking in spite of her sauce, you might have been staring straight into the Garden of Eden every time she opened her mouth,

'Goon!'

'Yes, and ask *me*, that's what kept *him* quiet. Give a man a face to look at, and the devil himself might just as well throw in his checks for all what he thinks is nothing but envy and slander. That ended it. He couldn't stand it any longer, and she went back to her mother, Aggie did, and to that poky upstairs dressmaking business all over again. But it's that pore little Amy *my* heart bleeds for. Pore mite, with her saucer eyes shivering there on the brink! Better her daddy safe in his grave, if I had my choice! It's my belief we're here because we are put; and you might as well be a cabbage as think you have got any say about it. I never did hold with it, and never shall.'

But this time the second unseen refrained from expressing any view at all. She hadn't even invited her friend to 'go on'.

Hilbert, having rapidly attempted to digest this secondhand miscellaneous slice of human experience, opened his eyes and peered out in the direction of the voice at what now occupied the further corner of the carriage, whence alas, his tranquil old Jesuit, while he himself was dreaming, had silently departed. Thus motionless, he explored yet another stranger.

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She was a woman dressed up in what Hilbert supposed to be cretonne, and that of a bold and remarkable design, and she wore pink stockings. She had a long face and high knee bones, an eye like a suffering, if not long-suffering, and contemptuous hen, and a mouth that told an inexhaustible tale of inward woe and outward wailing. Beside her stood a tall gaping basket, woven of gaudy bast into a pattern that would intoxicate a Hottentot. Its maw gaped as omnivorously as a shark's.

Now Hilbert, above all things, wished to be fair—to himself, to his apple-green first-fruits, to humanity in general, and above all to the Muses. Possibly because the talk he had just heard had been poured into his ear while he sat between sleeping and waking, he could recall a good deal of it. And if style is the man himself, certainly *its* was a large part of this lady. Like a humble-bee in a garden, he hardly knew where to alight first. On Aggie's blue hat or the devil's checks? Or on the fat open-mouthed young blonde squatting squarely in front of her—concerning whom the merest fleeting glimpse had disclosed that she must have very few clothes on?

Hilbert was frailly human enough too to be bowled over even by the most casual of references to the Garden of Eden, and he narrowed his inward eye a little at recollection of the 'pore mite's'—little Amy's—'brink'. He felt disquieted. His chapter on *Images* had suddenly

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in memory fallen a little flat. His old Jesuit had packed a lifetime into a word of two letters, the word 'up'. Aggie's friend preferred abandon, and so was far nearer the cauliflower in effect than the cabbage. But was there any connection between cauliflowers and poetry?

What would Mrs. Wilcox have said? Far too much, he was afraid. And already on nimble wing he had sped off to Matthew Arnold, to his 'criticism of life', and was reassured.

In his precise pernickety fashion Hilbert had once been enquiring enough to look up this word 'criticism' in a formidable dictionary, and had then discovered that Matthew Arnold had by no means meant just *criticism*—niggling, gnawing, fretting, shredding, ravelling out, the activities of moth and rust—but discernment, insight. He had memorized the poet's very words: 'Criticism', he was gently repeating to himself, while a simmering silence continued to prevail between the two amazons now watchfully aware that the grey-flannel-suited young man in the corner was awake—'Criticism is a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.' But 'the best', mused Hilbert, surely, of its *kind*?

He ventured on another peep at Aggie's friend. And their glances met: a glance on the one side like a venomous dart from the blow-pipe of a man of Borneo, out of an eye bead-like, reddish, hot and fiery, which had in-

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stantly transfixed as if with a needle his own round orb of a pale and pensive blue. It was Hilbert's that faltered; but not before he had decided that of her kind she had lavished on him a draught not only black, but piping hot and strong.

The heat, the violence, the conviction, the expansiveness of her remarks! That hugger-mugger stage, the domestic drama, the ferocity. *Shouldhe* try poems, after all? 'Go on!' indeed. He would willingly have paid the full price for a middle stall in the front row of Covent Garden if only she would consent to go on in the same strain—until the end of his journey. And surely, wouldn't sweet William, Swan of Avon, have simply revelled in her fumes? 'Stay put!' She! Never. But heavens alive!—the train was slowing up. The lady had swivelled round her henlike head straight at him, and had clutched at the handles of her basket as if in sheer defiance of the Universe. In another moment she would be gone—for ever. But meanwhile she was at it again.

'What I say is, trewth's trewth; and I don't care what eavesdroppers perking their ears up in corners unbeknown and shamming doggo may have heard me. A woman may work her fingers to the bone for a man and him not so much as a Thank-you. But Aggie—*she* go back—never! Though she's no more of what I should call female *charm* than a tallow candle.'

She had risen; the train had stopped. There was no

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time now even for a word of congratulation, let alone a convincing decision. Aggie's friend's pink loose-mouthed young companion had already squeezed lingeringly past his knees and was alighting. The bast bag yawned like Limbo a few inches under his nose. With a triumphant, contrite, glancing gaze up into the woman's constricted visage, and with lightning rapidity, Hilbert opened *his* little bag, extracted yet one more copy of the *Tatleyings*—his third—and slipped it in. Could enterprise go further?

Well, there may well have been a streak of the troubadour in his hereditary make-up; it accounted, perhaps, for the fact that his 'purple patches' were occasionally of a purple a little loud. As the wheels of his carriage began more rapidly to revolve again, he stood up at the window, smiled charmingly at both parties, and—raised his hat.

Decisions are always reviving. Refreshed after his iap, alert and alone, he returned to his corner. And there, amid the rattle of glass and wood and metal—the long-shadowed September sunshine beyond his window, rusty gold on sheaf and stack and thatch and pensive beechwood—he burst out laughing. Never for a moment had he dreamed that the mere circulation of his *Tarleyings* could require such critical skill. He was three up, one to play, and (he glanced at his watch) there was still thirty minutes to go. Why, he could probably have dis-

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posed of the complete edition on a five-shilling fare in two days' railway travelling. Much would depend on what happened to his 'fourth'. At which, as if he had positively beckoned it with his finger, the name-board of the station he had but a moment before left behind him, flashed back into his consciousness. His own was three behind it! He had overslept.

By nature impulsive, Hilbert at once seized his bag, tugged at the brim of his hat and prepared to alight; and then, seeing that the train was bumping along at not much less than twenty miles an hour, he sat down again. When he did get out—a few minutes afterwards—the only human being in sight (after he had explained his sad case to the ticket collector) was a curate—a strapping young man, with lips like a cherry, and the assured air of a juvenile archdeacon. How odd; two of a cloth, if not of a kidney, in less than an hour! Still, if the Church went on like this all would be well.

The cherry effect—Hilbert felt assured, as he stalked his latest prey up the wooden steps and over the bridge—was only skin deep. The young man walked with decision, and so held his head as if he were dead certain it was brimmed with brains of an inestimable value. But yet it was a head that looked a little unpromising—for Hilbert's purposes. A trace of the Byronic perhaps, but none of the Wordsworthian. Its mere shape and carriage

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suggested that it was seldom closely connected with its companion piece, the heart. Its owner might no doubt be bound for a New Jerusalem, but what little Hilbert detected of it hadn't the least resemblance to Blake's.

Hilbert began to fear it might be as easy to extract plums from plain duff as what he wanted from this athletic young ecclesiastic. Still, *dum spiro spero*, though he must waste not a moment.

The curate had seated himself, and from a side-pocket had extracted a copy of a bluish-covered magazine. Hilbert passed him by, paused, wheeled, coughed.

I'm so sorry; but I have been taken on', he said, 'by mistake. I went to sleep, in fact. This is the platform for Dunmow Downs, isn't it?'

The young man in holy orders looked up. 'Absolutely,' he said. 'I am expecting—er—a friend by the next one in, and my own station is the one before it. Bad luck.'

'Not at all,' said Hilbert, continuing to smile because he was listening so hard. 'It's this drowsy autumn weather.'

'Yes,' said the young stranger, whose jacket and trousers and nattily tailored 'vest' were *all* of pepper-and-salt, and who, from dog collar to black brogue shoes, was as neat as a new altar vase, 'it is a bit close. Thunder, perhaps. I always wake *myself* by knocking my skull on the window frame once for each station I have

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to go. It's infallible. But then, when , go to sleep I always intend to; and I never dream.'

'Gracious heavens!' groaned Hilbert inwardly. He surveyed the choice shaven face with ill-concealed consternation. He must try another tack. 'One misses so much too,' he went on seductively, 'even if one does. Dream, I mean. That lovely bit of landscape, you remember, with the pewits and the old mill between here and Bewley Marshes. And *especially*,' he stooped forward a little, 'especially when it is getting towards evening, and the sun is low.' The very cadence of the words was an anodyne and a spell.

At this the young man eyed Hilbert steadily, and eyed him whole. Then he slowly refolded his magazine, replaced it in his pocket, and said, 'Yes. I suppose nice scenery is a pleasant adjunct to railway travelling—but I haven't much time for it myself.'

'No,' breathed Hilbert, and nodded. 'Yes,' he added, 'a great adjunct. And now the swallows will soon be flown.'

'Odd beggars, aren't they?' remarked the curate. 'AH that irrational journey just to come back! Purely mechanistic, you know; it's merely the light that does it; not even the weather. Only the other day I happened to pick up a scientific periodical, or rather a quasi-scientific periodical—*The Aviarian*, you know—and some old Lincolnshire windbag was saying . . .'

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The ensuing soliloquy which ranged from natural or quasi-natural history to—in Hilbert's modest opinion—completely unnatural socialism lasted exactly five and a half minutes. And the moment his new acquaintance had warmed up, he needed no stoking.

Quite the reverse, for when in desperation Hilbert had managed to interejaculate, 'But I do sometimes feel, you know, that being absolutely broke and *not* on the dole merely because one is not a sweep or a stoker or a bricklayer, and being so vilely harassed and harried that one becomes half-daft and physically *sick* with . . .'

'Speaking for myself,' shouted the curate, 'there is absolutely *no* silly trouble or ailment of body or mind—or heart, *ha, ha*, either—that cannot be cured by a cold bath,

'Yes; and even life itself,' Hilbert had faintly murmured. To which, with an inhalation that seemed to have exhausted the air for yards around them, his companion had retaliated with, '*Life*, you say! Why, as for *life*'—and on he went.

It was soon as much as Hilbert could do to refrain from listening. If the sea—sad prospect—consisted solely of sand, then this electric young cleric—at least on his favourite topics—talked like a spring tide.

But it is not, Hilbert was dolefully reflecting, from sand of this nature that Poesy's buds of Sharon raise their gentle heads. He had had too much luck at the word

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'Go!'; and now wind and weather were failing him. His little bag was three copies lighter, but by yet another not quite light enough; and how much heavier was his heart!

Four minutes before his self-allotted time was up a train rolled into the station. And yet—such are the oddities of human destiny—until its guard's van with screeching brakes jangled into view, Hilbert hadn't the faintest notion that it was bringing with it the strangest and blesseddest fraction of his future life on earth. Its last but one grained-box compartment proved to contain the 'er—a friend' to whom it seemed, centuries ago, the curate had airily referred. And at one glance at its only occupant he was lost. Everything in the world, in Time and in Eternity, if not perhaps forgiven, was utterly forgotten.

She was standing at the open window, looking out, but not as if she had ever entirely desisted from looking *in*—an oval face with highish cheekbones, and eyes and mouth from which a remote smile was now vanishing as softly and secretly as a bird enters and vanishes into its nest. A moment of dazzling vertigo had swept over Hilbert's being. That mystery of age-long severance and incredible reunion and recognition! Where . . . when . . . had they met before? Only heaven could have told him, and he had no need to know. In a flash of acute foreboding he had instantly scanned the eight

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ungloved fingers that clasped the window sash. That once almost meaningless 'er—& *friend*' had suddenly echoed in his heart like a knell. But no; every one of the eight was ringless—every single one. He turned his head away, as if momentarily exhausted yet unspeakably revived.

'Ah, there you are, Sis!' the curate had now breezily announced, 'and *only* twelve and a half minutes late! . . . What was that about Karl Marx I was saying just now before I was interrupted . . .' His voice, like that of a Bull of Bashan haranguing his subservient heifers, had come booming again over his shoulder towards Hilbert—and Hilbert, as meekly as a dove, had followed him in.

Seated opposite brother and sister, almost forgetting to breathe, and in a panic of spirit that was past all mundane concerns, he forgot who he was, where he was, what: his bet, Messrs. A and B, his Jesuit, Aggie, and even his little bag and the Muses. His one and only wish in this strange world was that the peculiarly disguised young Good Samaritan in the opposite corner should continue his discourse—his dessication and disposal of Syndicalism, the National Recovery Act, Major Douglas, dictatorships, Naziism, Aryanism, and every other *ism*—just *ad infinitum*. When he stopped, the train would have stopped and—well, she would be gone. Meanwhile, to that vibrant, lusty 'Oxford¹ voice, an occasional faint, 'Yes', or a much fainter 'No' was proving no more of an obstruction than a pebble is to a cataract.

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What *she* was thinking of, or rather, not *thinking* of, Hilbert hadn't the faintest notion. And yet, such is the inflammability of the imagination, but one single glance into this fair serious face had sufficed him for the vernal stirrings of a latter-day *Paradiso* (and that in *terza rima*) to which even the long and hairy ear of Fleet Street would be compelled to incline. But now, alas, as he had forlornly foreseen, since the train had stopped, the voice had stopped, and so had his own semi-conscious 'cerebration'.

'Well, Miss Mute, and what do you say?' The young curate had bawled his second mocking challenge at his Griselda-like sister as if it were a bone to a dog. And she, as if to be serious was a refuge for everything worth having in a world so noisy and exclamatory and absurd, turned not to her brother, but to Hilbert. She sat there, quite still for a full moment, one hand resting lightly on either side of her lap, and then, smiled. A volley of the quasi-archest and hollowest ecclesiastical laughter followed.

'Oh, *she I*—she never says anything!' the young man had assured his fellow-traveller, and—with a breezy 'Good day to you!'—he was gone.

Left alone for the fourth time since, hot and panting, he had galloped up into Bovey Fausset station, Hilbert drew his brown bag a little closer. It contained at this

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moment, apart from his Wilcox and his other shocker, that one forlorn copy of his *Partyings*. And this now would never, never, never leave his possession. He might perhaps get another copy exquisitely bound in green tooled lambskin, its margins edged with a tiny design of doves and daisies, just in the remote hope that destiny would give him one more chance. But that copy would have nothing whatever to do with his bet, which by a niggardly twenty-five *per cent* had now, it seemed, been irretrievably lost.

For now not only was his time up, but, since he had to be honest with himself, if only for his old Jesuit's sake, the *terms* and conditions of his wager had been poetry '*audibly proved*'. And she—she had said nothing, not a word. And of course, strictly speaking, Thomas Gray's 'mute . . . Milton' was a contradiction in terms. Hilbert could quite easily have explained all this to her—if only she had been there to explain it to! Meanwhile he had realized also that there is a goddess whose name is Silence, and that it is in her light and loveliness that the buds of Sharon break into bloom.

'You see, he was patiently explaining to himself, as he pulled the bell in the old eighteenth-century porch of his mother's house, for he had forgotten his latch-key, 'you see what is *called* poetry is merely a trying to put into words what can, of course, never, never be really *said*.'

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A tiny barking like the remote jangling of Chinese temple bells had greeted him from afar; and a voice no less silvery had thereupon expostulated, 'Silence, Pym! You naughty, foolish Pym, don't you know who *that* is! And now go and tell the poet that he is exactly forty minutes late for tea, bad boy!' But Hilbert was too deep in thought to have heeded this familiar greeting. He had gently closed the door. 'Never,' he added *sotto voce*, as he hung up his hat; 'Never, I am afraid.'

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'For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel. .

'And he said . . . Am I my brother's keeper?'

The minute church, obscurely lit by a full moon that had not yet found window-glass through which her direct beams could pierce into its gloaming, was deserted and silent. Not a sound, within or without, disturbed its stony quiet—except only the insect-like rapid ticking of a clock in the vestry, and the low pulsating thump of a revolving cogwheel in the tower above the roof. Here and there a polished stone gleamed coldly in the vague luminous haze—a marble head, a wing-tip, a pointing finger, the claws and beak of the eagle on the brazen lectern, the two silvergilt candlesticks flanking the colourless waxen flowers upon the altar. So secret and secluded seemed the church within its nocturnal walls that living creature might never have been here at all—or creatures only so insignificant and transitory as to have left no perceptible trace behind them.

Like a cataleptic's countenance it hinted moreover at

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no inward activity of its own. And yet, if—fantastic notion—some unseen watcher through the bygone centuries had kept it perpetually within gaze, he might at last have concluded that it possessed a sort of stagnant life or animation, at least in its passive obedience to the influences of time, change, decay, and the laws of gravitation. Now it revealed not the faintest symptom of it. If, on the other hand, any immaterial sentinel were still, as ever, on guard within it, he made no sign of his presence here.

Unhasteningly, like water dripping from a fateful urn, the thump-recorded moments ebbed away; and it was approaching midnight and first cockcrow when from beyond the thick stone chancel walls there came the sound of a stealthy footfall, crunching the rain-soaked gravel. An owl squawked, the footsteps ceased; and after a brief pause, began again. The groping rattle of a key in the wards of a lock followed, and presently—with a motion so slow that it was barely perceptible—the heavy curtain that hung over the entrance to the vestry began as if with an infinite caution to be drawn aside; and the slender cone-shaped rays from the thick glass of a small bull's-eye lantern—its radiance thinning into the dusk of the moonlight as it expanded in area—to funnel inquisitively to and fro.

The lantern-bearer himself now appeared—a small boy. His thick fair hair was tousled over a pale fore-

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head, his mouth was ajar and his lips were drawn back a little above his teeth, his eyes gleamed as they moved. The collar of his dark great-coat had been turned up about his ears, but nevertheless disclosed in the crevice between its lapels the stripes of a pyjama jacket which had been tucked into a pair of old flannel breeches. Stockinged ankles and damp mud-stained rubber shoes showed beneath the great-coat. His cheeks at this moment were so pale as scarcely to be tinged with red, and since the pupils of his blue eyes were dilated to their full extent they appeared to be all but jet-black. He was shivering, in part by reason of the cold, in part because of certain inward qualms and forebodings. Only by an effort was he preventing his teeth from beginning to chatter. Still acutely cautious and intent, his head thrust forward, his eyes searching the darker recesses of the building around him as they followed the direction of his tiny searchlight, he stole a pace or two forward, the border of the heavy curtain furtively swinging to behind him. In spite of the door-key safe in his pocket, he appeared to be divided in mind between hope and dread that he might prove to be not the sole occupant of the church.

Where there is space enough for the human cranium to pass, the shoulders, it is said, can follow; and particularly if they all three belong to a child. One small diamond-paned window in the vestry he had already ob-

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served was open. Images, too, less substantial in appearance than those of human beings were occupying his mind's eye. When then a little owl in the dark of the yew tree over the south gate in the moonlit churchyard again suddenly screeched, he started as if at an electric shock. And twice his mouth opened before he managed to call low and hoarsely, 'Are you there, Dick? . . . Dick, are you there?'

Not a stony eyelid in the heads around him had so much as flickered at this timid challenge. The stooping eagle—a large shut Bible on its outstretched wings—had stirred not a feather; the pulpit remained cavernously empty. But a few high-panelled pews, relics of the past, were within view, and even moonlight and lantern-light combined were powerless to reveal anything or anybody that might be hiding behind them. The trespasser appeared to be on the point of retiring as secretly as he had come, when a jangling gurgle, as of some monster muttering in its sleep, began to sound above his head, and the clock chimes rang out the second quarter of the hour. The vibrant metal ceased to hum; and, as if reassured by this interruption, he drew out of his pocket a large stone—a flint such as his remote ancestors would have coveted—roughly dumb-bell in shape, and now waisted with a thick and knotted length of old blind-cord. This primitive weapon, long treasured for any emergency, he gently deposited on the shelf behind him, and then followed it into the pew.

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Lantern still in hand, he seated himself on the faded red cushion that lay along the seat. It was that one of the mighty, the rector's warden. Even in this half-light, as easily as a cat in the dark, he could spy out all about him now, organ-recess to gallery; but he opened his brand-new lantern none the less and trimmed as best he could with his finger nail its charred and oily wick. The fume and stench of the hot metal made him sneeze, whereupon he clicked to the glass, covered it with his hand, and began listening again. 'Sneak,' he muttered, then suddenly plumped down on the hassock at his feet, rapidly repeated a prayer, with a glance over his shoulder half-covertly crossed himself, then as promptly sat up again; glancing as he did so at the pulpit over his head which he was accustomed to find comfortably brimmed with his father's portly presence.

Fortified by his prayer and by his wrath with the friend who it seemed at the last moment had abandoned their enterprise, he was now comparatively at ease. Tortoise-fashion he snuggled down in his great-coat in the corner of the pew, having discovered that by craning his neck a little he could fix his vacant eyes on the brilliant disc of the still-ascending moon.

She was the Hunter's moon, and her beams had now begun to silver a clear-glassed square-headed window high up in the south wall of the chancel. He watched her intently, lost in astonishment that at this very moment

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she should be keeping tryst with him here. But before she had edged far enough above the sill to greet the gilded figure of an angel that surmounted an ornate tomb opposite her peephole, a faint thief-like "shuffle from the direction of the vestry door caught his ear. He instantly dropped out of sight into the shelter of his pew. The shuffling ceased, the door creaked. He crouched low; a smile at once apprehensive and malicious creasing his still-childish face. He would give his friend Dick a taste of his own physic.

In the hush, a lamentable *Oh, oh, oh, oh* 1—like the cry of a captured mermaid wailed up from his lips into the dusk of the roof. *Oh, oh, oh!* Then silence—and silence. And still there came no response. The smile faded out of his face; he had begun to shiver again. He was positively certain that this must be the friend whom he was expecting. And yet—suppose it was not! He leapt up, flashing at the same instant his toy lantern full into the glittering eyes of a dwarfish and motionless shape which were fixed on him through the sockets of a pitch-black battered mask—a relic of the last Fifth of November.

He had realized what trick was being played on him almost before he had had time to be afraid. Nevertheless, for a few moments, his mouth wide open, he had failed to breathe; and stood shuddering with rage as well as terror. His friend Dick, however, having emerged from his lair in the folds of the curtain, was now plunging

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about half doubled-up and almost helpless with laughter.

⁴'You silly fool!' he fumed at him in a whisper, 'what did you want to do that for? Shut up! Shut *up*, I tell you! You think it's funny, I suppose. Well, I don't. You're hours late already, and I'm going home. Stop it, do you hear? Can't you remember you're in a *church*?⁹

From beneath its mask a small sharp-nosed and utterly sober face now showed itself—all laughter gone. 'Who began it, then?' Dick expostulated, dejectedly squeezing his pasteboard mask into his pocket. 'You tried it first on me, with your Oh-oh-oh-ing. And now just because . . . , You didn't think of "church" then.'

'Well, I do now. Besides, it's near the time, and I might have broken my neck for all you cared, getting out of the window. What made you so late?'

Dick had been eyeing his friend as might a sorrowful mouse a slice of plum cake a few inches out of its reach. 'I'm sorry, Philip,' he said. 'I didn't mean any harm; honest, I didn't. It was only a lark.' He turned penitently away, and the next instant, as if all troubles were over and all discord pacified, began peeping about him with the movements and anglings of some little night-creature on unexpectedly finding itself in an utterly strange place.

'I say, Philip,' he whispered, 'doesn't it look creepy, just—the moon shining? I hadadream, and then I woke. But I couldn't have come before. My father was down-

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stairs with a lamp, reading. Besides I was waiting for you outside, under the trees. Why did you come *in*? It's by the gate you see them. That's what my mother heard *your* mother say. Oh, I'm glad I came; aren't you?'

The sentences were sprayed out in minute beads of words like the hasty cadenzas of a bird. The neat black head, the small bright eyes, the shallow wall of close-cropped hair, the sloping shoulders—every line, movement and quick darting variation of posture gave him a resemblance to a bird—including the alert, quick, shy yet fearless spirit within that neat skull's brittle walls.

Philip, who had been intently watching him meanwhile, had now recovered his equanimity, his pulse had sobered down, but he was still only partially placated, and querulous.

'Of course I came in. What was the good of loafing out there where anybody might see us? It's cold and mouldy enough in here. You don't seem to remember I mustn't go out at night, because of my chest. I've been waiting until my feet are like stones. Did you hear that owl just now—or something?'

Dick having at last ventured in from the other end of the pew, had now seated himself beside his friend on the flat crimson cushion.

'Golly!' he exclaimed, his sharp eyes now fixed on the flint, 'what's that for? I shouldn't care to have a

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crump over the head with that!' He peered up winningly into his companion's fair face. 'I didn't really expect you would come, Philip. But', he sighed, 'I'm glad.'

'Didn't I say I would come?' retorted Philip in a small condescending voice. 'That's nothing.' He nodded at his stone. 'I always carry that at night. How was I to know . . . ? *Didn't I?*'

The neat small head nodded violently. 'M'm.'

'Then why didn't you expect me to?'

'Oh, well, I didn't.' A thin ingratiating little smile passed over Dick's face and as quickly vanished. 'It wasn't so easy for you as it was for me. That's why.'

'That stone', said Philip incisively, 'keeps any harm from happening to me. It's got magic in it.'

'Has it, Philip? . . . What did *that?*'⁹ He was eyeing the patch of dried blood on the hand that clutched the bent wire handle of the lantern.

'Oh, that?' was the lofty reply. 'That's nothing; that was only the rope. It burned like billy-oh, and I fell half-way from my bedroom window-sill on to the lawn. An awful crack. But nobody heard me, even though the other windows were wide open round the corner. You could see them against the sky. My mother always sleeps with her windows open—all the year round. A doctor in London told her it would be good for her. I don't believe that about your father reading, though. When everybody is in bed and asleep! I didn't even know your father *could* read.'

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'Well, he was, or I Wouldn't have said so. He was reading the Bible. How could I tell that if he wasn't reading at all?'

'Anyhow, I bet it wasn't the Bible. Even my father wouldn't do that—not after evening prayers. Would he whack you much if he caught you?'

Dick shook his head. 'No fear. My mother won't have *him* punishing me, whatever happens. He preaches at me no end; and says I'll never be good for anything. Once,' he added pensively, as if scarcely able to believe his own ears, 'once he said I was a little imp of hell. Then my mother flared up. But he wouldn't beat me; oh no, he wouldn't beat me. Yesterday my mother came back with a big bundle of old clothes. There was a black silk jacket, and some stockings and hats and feathers and things, an *enormous* bundle. And this—look!'

He undid a button of his jacket and pulled out from underneath it a pinch of an old green silk dressing-gown.

'Why, that's mine!' said Philip. 'I've had it for ages.' He stared at it censoriously, as if dubious whether or not to ask for it back. 'But I don't think I want it now, because it's miles too small for me. My grandmother gave it me for a Christmas present donkey's years ago. She's so rich she doesn't mind *what* things cost—when she gives me anything. That's real Spitalfields silk, that is; you can't get it anywhere now. You'll crumple it up and spoil it if you wear it stuffed in like that.' He peered

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closer. 'What have you got on underneath it? You're all puffed out like a turkey-cock.'¹

Dick promptly edged back from the investigating finger, a sly look of confusion passing swiftly over his face. 'That's my other clothes,' he explained.

'What, say,' said Philip, still eyeing his companion as if only a constant vigilance could hope to detect what he might not be up to next, 'what, say is, your mother's jolly lucky to get expensive things given to her—good things, even if they *are* left-offs. Most of our old stuff goes to the Jumble Sales. I bet,' he suddenly broke off, 'I bet if your *real* father found you skulking here, he'd whack you hot and strong.'

The alert and supple body beside his own had suddenly stiffened, and the dangling spindle legs beneath the pew ceased to swing.

'No, he wouldn't,' Dick hardly more than whispered.

'Why not?'

'For one thing he just wouldn't. He knows he's nothing to do with me; not now; and leaves me alone. For all that, I went out rabbiting with him one night last summer. And nobody knew. It was warm and still and pitch dark—not like this; and when the moon began to come up over the woods, he sent me home. I know *he* wouldn't either. Besides,' he drew in his chin a little as if the words were refusing to come out of his throat, 'he's dead.'

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'Dead! Oh, I say! I like that! Oh no, he isn't; *that's* not true. *He* isn't dead. Why, I heard them reading out about him in the newspaper only a few weeks ago. That's what you say. I know what has become of him; and I bet your tongue is burning. What's more, if your other father hadn't been Chapel you would never have had *any* father—not to show, I mean. Your mother would have been just like any other woman, though I don't suppose she could have gone on living in the village. But as he *is* Chapel, and, according to what you say, sits up as late as this reading in the Bible, I can't understand why he let's you sing in our choir. I call *that* being a hypocrite. I'd like to see my father letting *me* go to Chapel. He must be just a hypocrite, Bible or not.'

Dick made no attempt whatever to examine this delicate moral question. 'Oh no, he isn't,' he retorted hotly. 'He's as good as yours any day. He goes by what my mother says: if you are Chapel, keep Chapel. *She's* not a hypocrite. And you'd better not say so, either.'

'I didn't say it. I didn't say that your mother was a hypocrite; not a *hypocrite*. I like your mother. And nobody's going to prevent me from going with you either, if I want to. Not if I want to. Your mother's been jolly decent to me—often. Mrs. Fuller sneaks: *she* doesn't.'

'So is your mother to me—when you aren't there. At least she talks to me sometimes then. And I'm glad you're my friend, Philip. The other day she gave me a

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hunch of cake, and she made me share a sip of wine from my mother's glass. Because it was her birthday. Some day I'm going to be a sailor, and going to sea. She had been crying, because her eyes were red; and, our mother said that crying was no use at all—because I'm growing up more and more like her every day, and shall be a comfort to her when I'm a man. And so I will; you see!'

' "Wine"! Did she just? But that was only because she's always kind to people—to everybody. She doesn't mind *who* it is. That's why she likes being liked by everybody. But after what my father read out in the newspaper, he said he entreated her to be more careful. She must think of Aim, my father said. He didn't want to have the village people talking. He tapped his eyeglasses on the paper and said it was a standing scandal. That's what he said. He was purple in the face.' His voice rather suddenly fell silent, as if, like a dog, he had scented indiscretions. 'But I say: *if your* real father is just dead, he would be the very person according to you to be coming here to-night. *Then* you'd look mighty funny, I should think.'

Dick's legs, like opposed pendulums, had begun very sluggishly to swing again. 'Oh no, I wouldn't, because that's just what doesn't happen; and I told you so. It's the people who are going to die soon—next year—who come: *their* ghosts. Wouldn't they look white and awful, Philip, coming in under the yew tree. . . . I expect its

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roots go down all among the coffins. Shall we go out now and watch? It's as bright as day; you could see a bird hopping about.'

' "Ghosts"! ' was the derisive reply. 'I like that! *You* can. I'm not. How can they be ghosts, silly, if they're still alive? Besides, even if there are such things, and even if what your mother told you is really true, you said yourself that they would come *into* the church. So if any *should* come and we keep here and hide and peep over the edge, they can't possibly see us—if ghosts do see. And then we shall be near the door in there. They would be surprised to find that one open, I should think. But even if they were, and ghosts don't mind doors, they wouldn't come in at a potty little door like that.'

He paused as if to listen, and continued more boldly. 'Not, mind you, that I believe a single word of anything you've said—all that stuff. Not really. I came . . .' he faltered, turning his head away, 'only just for a game, and because you dared me to. Why you asked me to come *really* is because you were frightened of being here alone. You wait and see, I'll dare,ou in a minute. Besides, how do you know anybody *is* going to die in the village next year—except old Mrs. Harrison? And she's been dying ever since I can remember. She takes snuff, but she can't stir a foot out of her bed. I bet she hasn't any ghost left. *She* wouldn't come, The sentence suddenly concluded

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in a prodigious shuddering yawn. It reminded him that he was cold and that the fatal moment was rapidly nearing. 'Did they say, before, or after, the clock strikes?'

Dick paused a moment before replying, and then piped up confidently: 'It's the very second while the last clump of the bell is sounding. That's when they get to the church. Because it's midnight. And all the ghosts begin to walk then. Some come up out of their graves. But'—he sighed, as if saddened at the poverty of his expectations—'only very seldom. The people who go to heaven wouldn't want to, and the Devil wouldn't let the others out. At least that's what I think.'

'What *you* think! And yet,' retorted Philip indignantly, 'you talk all that stuff about ghosts; and believe it too. I'd just like to see your ghost. That'd be a skinny one if you like—like a starved bird. Would *you* come back?'

Dick leant his body forward; he was sitting on his hands; and at this his black, close-cropped head nodded far more vigorously than a china Mandarin's. 'I don't *know*,⁹ he said; 'but I like being out at night. I like—oh, everything. . . . If ghosts can smell,' he began again in small matter-of-fact tones, 'they'd soon snuff *us* out. Look at it smoking.'

The two boys sat mute for a while, watching the tiny slender thread of sooty smoke from the lantern wreathing up in the luminous air; and in the silence—which,

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after their tongues had ceased chattering, immediately flooded the church fathoms deep—they stayed, listening; their senses avid for the faintest whisper. But the night was windless, and the earth coldly still in the deathly radiance of the moon. And if the Saints in their splendour were themselves assembled in the heavens to celebrate their earthly festival, no sound of their rejoicings reached these small pricked-up human ears.

'If, at last Dick exploded, gazing up into the vaporous glooms of the roof above his head, 'if any more light comes in, the walls will burst. I love the moon; I love the light. . . . , 'm going to have a peep.'

With a galvanic wriggle he had snatched his arm free from Philip's grasp, had nimbly whipped out of the pew, and vanished behind the curtain that concealed the vestry door.

Philip shuffled uneasily in his seat, hesitating whether or not to follow him. But from a native indolence and for other motives, and in spite of his incredulity, he decided to stay where he was. It seemed safer than the churchyard. From a few loose jujubes in his great-coat pocket he chose the cleanest, and sat quietly sucking, his eyes fixed on the monument that not only dominated but dwarfed the small but lovely chancel. The figure of its angel was now bathed with the silver of the moon. With long-toed feet at once clasping and spurning the

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orb beneath them, it stood erect, on high. Chin out-thrust, its steadfast sightless eyes were fixed upon the faded blue and geranium red of the panelled roof. Its braided locks drawn back from a serene and impassive visage, its left hand lay flat upon its breast, and with the right it clasped a tapering, uplifted, bell-mouthed, gilded trumpet, held firmly not against but at a little distance from its lips.

Unlike Dick, Philip was not a chorister. He was none the less his father's son, and as soon as he had learned to behave himself, to put his penny in the plate and to refrain from babbling aloud, he had been taken to church every Sunday morning. This had been as natural an accompaniment of the Sabbath as clean underclothes, Etons, and hot sausages for breakfast. Thus he had heard hundreds of his father's sermons—sermons usually as simple as they were short. If only he had listened to them he might by now have become well-founded in dogma, a plain but four-square theologian. Instead of listening, however, he would usually sit 'thinking'. Side by side with his mother, his cheek all but brushing her silks, with their delicate odours, his fingers—rather clammy fingers when the weather was hot—lightly clasping hers while he counted over and over the sharp-stoned rings on her dainty fingers, he had been wont to follow his fancies.

Morning service had been the general rule. During the

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last few years however his mother had become the victim of periodical sick headaches, of lassitude and palpitations, and had been given strict injunctions not to overdo things, to rest. Occasionally too she had worldly-minded visitors, including a highly unorthodox sister, whom it would be tactless even to attempt to persuade to spend her Sundays as, usually, she felt dutifully impelled to spend her own. All this she would confide to Philip. She must on no account, she repeatedly admonished him, be alarmed or worried, distressed or disturbed. As for his stout and rubicund father, who was at least ten years her senior, he adored every bone in her body. But though by nature placable and easy-going, he was also subject to outbursts of temper and fits of moroseness as periodical as her attacks of migraine. It was therefore prudent, if only for her sake, to avoid anything in the nature of a scene. 'So Philip,' she would cajole him, 'you will *promise* me to be a good boy, and you'll go to church this evening, won't you—instead of now? And you won't make any fuss about it? You know your father wishes it.'

Philip might demur, and, if it was practicable, bargain with her; but at heart he much preferred this arrangement. It meant that on these particular Sundays he was safe from interference, and could spend the whole morning as he pleased. It was too the darkening evenings about the time of the equinox, when it was not yet neces-

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sary to light the brass oil-lamps that hung in the nave, and two solitary candlesticks alone gleamed spangling in the pulpit—it was these he loved best. Only the village and farm people came to evening service, and not many even of them. Philip would sit in his pew, and, absorbed in his secret cogitations, enjoy the whole hour. The church changed then its very being. It welled over with mystery. Even in the joy of a Harvest Festival, when he could admire the flowers and vegetables and the gigantic loaf of bread under the lectern, the bloom of grapes and apples, the minute sheaves of wheat and barley gently nodding their heads to the more impulsive strains of the organ, there was still a faint tinge of sadness. And the unheeded sermon drowsed his senses like an incantation. His father's honeyed pulpit voice rose and fell like that of some dulcet Old Man of the Sea; and he himself, though not, like Dick, sporting and whispering noiselessly with his surpliced choir-mates out of sight of the preacher, was at any rate beyond any direct scrutiny. Meanwhile the bulky family cook, his mother's usual proxy on these occasions, would settle down beside him into a state of apathy so complete, her cotton-gloved hands convulsively clasped over her diaphragm, that it was only by an occasional sniff he could tell that she was perhaps leading as active an internal life as he was, and was neither asleep nor dead.

Now and then he had himself been wafted away in

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sleep into regions of the most exorbitant scenery, events and vagaries; to be aroused suddenly by, 'And now to God, the Father . . .', bleary-eyed, lost, and with so violent a start that it had all but dislocated his neck. The most beguiling and habitual of these reveries had been concerned with the angel. How and when his speculations on it had originated, what random bird had dropped this extravagant seed of a hundred daydreams into his mind, was beyond discovery now. But it was to the cook that he had confided his first direct questions concerning it.

One low thundery evening, during their brief solitary journey through the churchyard into the hedged-in narrow lane by the coach-house and stables, and so through the garden and back to the rectory, he had managed to blurt out, 'Mrs. Sullivan, why did they make the angel so as she can't *blow* the trumpet?' And this although his mind had been busied over the wholly different and more advanced problem—What exactly would happen if for any reason she ever did?

Until this moment Mrs. Sullivan had been unaware of the angel's perpetual predicament, and her attitude was cautious and tentative.

'I *expect*⁹, she said, 'it was because they couldn't help themselves. Besides, Master Philip, what you are talking about isn't a real angel, no more than what her trumpet is a real trumpet. And who's to say if even a real angel

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could blow a trumpet that isn't real. I wouldn't care to go so far as that myself. Besides who's to know as it is a she?'

Here, in this darker quiet, under the thick-leaved illexes, Philip always drew a little nearer to his stout and panting companion; and sometimes for reassurance slipped a hand under her elbow. Free again, and the stars visible in the autumn sky, he had ventured to protest.

'But *why* couldn't they? And of course it's a she. Besides it was , who said she can't. , told *you*. It's three inches at least from her mouth. Like this. I've measured it heaps and heaps of times.'

' "*Measured* it", Master Philip! Well, that's a nice thing to be getting up to! All I can say is if that's the kind of mischief you are after I don't know what your father wouldn't say.'

'I didn't mean *really*,' was the impatient reply. 'How could I? I meant by looking, of course. How *could* I mean "really"?' There was scorn in his voice, even though his question had fallen like a hint from heaven into the quiet of his mind.

'If it's just guessing,' Mrs. Sullivan had complacently decided, 'I wouldn't suppose it could be *three*. And, though *your* young eyes may be better than mine, it might be no more than just a shadow. . . . It looks as if it had been raining, according to all these puddles.'

Philip had paid no attention to the puddles, except

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that he had continued to enjoy quietly walking through them. 'But you said just now,' he persisted, 'that you'd never even seen the angel. So how can you possibly tell? Anyhow, it is three, it's more than three, it's more likely four or five. You don't seem to remember how far she is up under the roof. Why, the end of her trumpet nearly touches the ceiling. I think that was silly. *Why* didn't they?'

They were drifting back to his original riddle again. But Mrs. Sullivan, reminded of another kind of trumpet, was meditating vaguely at this moment on a deaf bed-ridden sister who lived in the Midlands. 'I never knew a boy with so many questions,' she answered him ruminatively, almost as if she were explaining the situation to a third party. 'I suppose it's because the Last Day hasn't risen on us as yet. That at least is what it was meant to mean for the gentleman that's laid in the tomb beneath it—and for any of us for that matter. God send it never may!'

'You *mcanjou* think *she* is waiting for the Last Day? I don't know what you mean by "never". There must be a Last Day, and that would be *the* Last Day. And if she's waiting for that, what will happen then—*after* the last?'

'Well, Master Philip, if you are the son of your own father, which I take you to be, you should best be able to answer that question for yourself. I don't hold with such prying. It's far from ready *Vm* likely to be.'

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'Why not?'

'Because', said Mrs. Sullivan, I'm getting old, and time is not what it was. When I was a young girl I nearly brooded all the blood out of my body thinking of things like that; though you might not suppose so now. Not that the young should or need be doing so, though I'm not saying there's no need even for *them* not to mind their p's and q's. There is.'

'What are p's and q's?'

But this tepid and lifeless enquiry might have been borne on the winds of Arabia, it seemed so far away.

'Goodness gracious, you've got a tongue like an empty money-box. I see your mamma has gone to bed. Let's hope her sick headache is no worse. And here comes the Rector.'

Philip had accepted Mrs. Sullivan's complex solution of his difficulty with reservations, and had pondered continually on parts of it. After that, apart perhaps from a stray dog or bird, or a strange human face, nothing in church, or in the scriptures, not even Jezebel or the Scarlet Woman, or Gideon, or Og, or Samson's foxes in the wheat, or golden Absalom hanging in the oak tree, or hairy Esau with his mess of pottage, or Elisha and the widow's cruse—nothing had so instantly galvanized him into a rapt attention as the least word he heard uttered about an angel or a trumpet. He had even taken to

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searching the Bible on his own account to satisfy his craving.

To-night, none the less, was the first time he had ever been alone with his angel—wholly aloffe. And he had risked a good deal for her sake—a caning from his father; a break-neck fall from his bedroom window if the clothes-line had proved as rotten as it looked; a scurry, heart in mouth, through the fusty dark of the shrubbery; and the possibility, far more affrighting than he had confessed, of strange meetings at the lych gate. Besides there was the humiliation of having been beguiled into this crazy expedition by a friend who was frowned at if not forbidden, and who was not only one of the Village boys', but clouded and compromised at that.

It was a companionship that fretted Philip at times almost beyond bearing, but from which he could not contrive to break free. Scrubbed and polished Dick might be, but he never *looked* clean. He could be stupider than an owl, and yet was as sharp and quick as a pygmy sparrowhawk, and feared nothing and nobody. Sometimes even the mere sight of his intent, small-nosed face, and its dark eyes, now darting with life and eagerness, now laden with an inscrutable melancholy; of his very hands, even—small and quick, and his tiny pointed ears, filled Philip with an acute distaste. Yet there was a curious and continual fascination in his company.

He was like a mysterious and unintelligible little

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animal, past caging or taming, and possessed of a spirit of whose secret presence he himself was completely unaware. Contrariwise, he could be as demure, submissive and affectionate as a little girl, and it was past all hope to find out where his small mind was ranging. Philip admired, despised, was jealous of, and sometimes bitterly hated him.

Why, he wondered, did his father always become so flustered and unreasonable at the mere mention of his name; or why, his mother either, for that matter? If an unexpected tradesman's bill from London or the county town accompanied his *Morning Post*, why was the heated discussion of this particular topic almost bound sooner or later to follow? First a few 'words'—and of a steadily densening drift; a desultory wrangle; but at last his mother, flaming with anger, in tears, would flare up like a loose heap of gunpowder, and his father would subside into a sulky and cowed acquiescence.

Even if Dick was *not* the son of the sober and crusted old wheelwright at the other end of the village, what did that matter? And if Dick's mother *was* so close a confidante of his own mother, what did that? Wasn't there every reason why she should be? Only a few years before this, she had been parlourmaid at the Rectory, a quiet, fair, meditative creature. And then all of a sudden she had left and got married. But she was still the best 'help' in the house imaginable. No one could wait at table so

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deftly and sedately as she could; and not even Philip's indolent and elegant mother was such a marvel with her needle. And yet she was so quiet and so far away that when suddenly spoken to she would start and flush as if she had but just come out of some secret hiding-place.

It was only the spiteful new cook, Mrs. Sullivan's successor, who had steadily refused to be won over; and Philip hated *her* anyhow. His father, on the other hand, took no more notice of Dick when he passed him by in the Rectory garden than if he had been a toadstool.

It was a mystery. If ever on any rare feast or festival, there was a solo to be sung in the minute village choir, it was Dick who sang it—'As pants the hart', 'With verdure clad'—and as roundly and sweetly and passionlessly as the strains of some small woodland flute. His voice at any rate would need no angelic tuition—even in a better world. Nevertheless, although the Rector had been known to boast of the prowess of his choir, Philip could not recall a single word of commendation from his father after the service was over, not even so much as a pompous little pat on the head. So far as *he* was concerned, Dick might have been a deaf-mute.

Yet if nuts, or peppermints, or marbles, or a grasshopper, or a glow-worm in a matchbox was brought into church for furtive display, and Dick was discovered to be the culprit, very little happened. Other boys when they were caught were given a good lecture in the Rector's

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study, and one runagate far less enterprising than Dick had been expelled from the choir.

However closely he listened, Philip could never unravel the secret of this mystery. Even when he most enjoyed Dick's company, he could never for a moment conceal his own sense of superiority. At one moment he might be green with envy of Dick's silly, dare-devil, scatter-brained ways; at the next utterly despise him. There was a perpetual conflict in his mind between affection, jealousy and contempt. And Dick would detect these secret feelings, as they were expressed solely in his face and actions, as neatly and quickly as a robin pecks up crumbs. Yet he never referred to them, or for more than a minute or two together seemed to resent a single one.

Just now, however, his protective stone and the increasing stench of his lantern unheeded, Philip had all but forgotten what had brought him into his present extraordinary situation. Like the restless imp he always was, Dick had taken himself off. Let him stay away, then! Meanwhile he had himself sat stolidly on, lost in contemplation, the prey of the most fantastic and ridiculous hopes and forebodings.

The church was brimmed so full of limpid moonlight that at any moment, it seemed, the stone walls, the pulpit, the roof itself might vanish away like the fabric of a dream. Its contents appeared to have no more

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reality than the reflections in a glass. Every crevice in the mouldings of the arches, every sunken flower and leaf in the mullions of the windows, even the knot in the wood of the pew beneath his nose stood out as if it had been blacked in with Indian ink. Every jut and angle, corbel and finial, marble nose and toe and finger seemed to have been dipped in quicksilver. Arid Philip, his eyes fixed on the faintly-golden, winged, ecstatic figure—mutely 'shaking her gilded tresses in the air'—whose gaze he pined and yet feared even in imagination to meet, was lost for the time being to the world of the actual. He failed even to notice urgent reminders that one of his legs from knee to foot had gone numb, and that he was stone cold.

The premonitory whirring rumble of the clock over his head and the chimes of midnight roused him at last from this lethargy. He 'came to', and listened starkly to the muffled, sullen booming of the bell, as if he had suddenly escaped from the mazes of a dream. '. . . Eleven . . . Twelve'. The sonorous vibrations ebbed into inaudibility, and a dead and empty silence again prevailed. He had steadily assured himself, from the moment the project had been decided on, that nothing would happen. Nothing *had* happened. He felt spiritless and vacant, and now realized miserably that in spite of this radiance and beauty, he was further away from his angel than he had ever been before. It was she who had withdrawn

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herself from him, and with that withdrawal a faltering speechless faith and belief in her powers had faded out of his heart.

And as he crouched there, chilled and sick, there rose suddenly into the night beyond the chancel windows a restrained yet fiendish screech, compared with which his own *Oh, oh, oh*, had been sweet as the lamentations of a mermaid. Even though he had instantly guessed its origin, he sat appalled. His eyes fixed on the heavy folds of the curtain that had softly swayed forward as if in a waft of the wind through the open door, he had in his horror almost ceased to breathe. What if he were mistaken? What ghoulish wraith might *not* be skulking there! All but indetectibly the curtain was edging apart to disclose at length a lean faceless shape draped as if with a shroud from its flat-topped shapeless and featureless head downwards. Even in his consternation he marvelled at the delicate play of the moonlight in the folds of the cambric. With pointing sooty finger, this ridiculous scarecrow had now begun noiselessly edging towards his pew. The effort to prevent a yell of terror from escaping his throat had brought the taste of blood to Philip's lip; and he at once fell into a violent passion.

'You're nothing but a damn silly little fathead,' he bawled, as it were, under his breath, 'and it would serve you jolly well right if I gave you a good licking. Stop that rot! Stop it! Come *out*, I say!'

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The spectre, notwithstanding had fallen into a solemn yet nimble negro shuffle and a voice out of its middle began to intone:

*'Dearly beloved brethren, is it not a sin
To eat raw potatoes and throw away the skin?
The skin feeds the pigs and the pigs feed you;
Dearly beloved brethren, is—it—not—TRUE?'*

Pat with the last word, and having flung off the Rector's surplice and discarded the semi-hairless broom of the old church charwoman, Dick skipped out from his disguise, looking smaller and skinnier than ever. It was as if his high spirits, having learned that the same jest is seldom successful twice, had been crushed out of him for good by this rebuke. He stood dumbly staring at Philip, like a stricken and downcast little monkey that has been chastised by its master.

'Keep your silly wig on,' he expostulated at last. 'That's what you always do. You can't take any joke unless you've made it yourself. I'm tired of being here. There's nothing coming—and there never was. Perhaps if you had been alone . . . ' Unstable as water, his mood began to revive again. 'I know! Let's go down to the mill-pond, Philip, and look at the fish. The moon's like glass. You could catch 'em with your hands with that lantern. Let's try. Come on.'

'Oh no, you don't,' retorted Philip morosely. 'You needn't suppose you're going to wriggle out like that.'

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You dared me to come, and I dare you to stay. Anyhow, you shan't put your nose ever into our house again or into the garden, either, I can promise you, if you're nothing but a sneak—and afraid. I know something that will soon put a stop to that.'

Dick stood irresolute, eyeing him sharply, his high cheek-bones a bright red, his eyes shining, his mouth ajar.

'I'm not a sneak. And who'—a doleful quaver jarred his thin clear treble voice—'who *wants* to come into your silly old garden. If my mother . . . Besides, you *know* I'm not afraid!'

'Oh, do I ! ' A crafty stealthy designing look had crept into Philip's fair face, and a slight haze into his blue eyes. A faint ambiguous smile faded out of his angel features. He glanced covertly about him. 'What's more likely is you only want to show off,' he sneered. 'Wheedle.' He half yawned. 'You know perfectly well that I shouldn't be here now except for some silly story you told me and couldn't have understood. Dare for yourself! Why, you haven't even the pluck to climb up into the belfry and give the least tiny ding on one of the bells. Not all alone.'

'Oh, wouldn't I! Yes, I would. Where's the key? There's an old owl's nest in the belfry. . . . "*Onel*"—why, even if anybody in the village woke and heard it, they'd think it was nothing but the wind.'

'Well, *three* dings, then. Anybody can make excuses.

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And you knew I hadn't the key! What's more, you wouldn't take a single flower, not even a scrap of a green leaf, from one of those vases up there.'

Dick's gaze angled swiftly over the silver candlesticks upon the altar, the snow-white linen, the rich silk embroidered frontal, with its design in gold thread—I.H.S., the flat hueless shields of hothouse flowers. 'Yes, I would, if I can reach them.'

'Oh, would you! And there you are again—"if!" But you shan't—not while *Vm* here. That would be worse than stealing even, because this is a church, and that's the altar. And that's holy. This is not one of your mouldy old chapels.' Once again he glanced about him. 'I bet this, then. You wouldn't go up into the gallery and scratch out the eye in *that*—not even if I lent you my knife to do it with. Why, you'd be scared even of falling off the chair!'

The 'that' he was referring to was an ancient painted lozenge-shaped hatchment, fastened by tenpenny nails in its clumsy black frame to the lime-washed western wall. It was blazoned with a coat of arms, and above the coat was a crest—the turbaned head of a Saracen in profile ; and beneath the coat, in bold Gothic lettering, the one word, *Resurgam*.

Dick gazed motionlessly at its darkened green and vermilion and at the sinister head. 'Yes, I would,' he muttered. 'What does *Resurgam* mean?'

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'It's Latin,' replied Philip, as if he were a little mollified by the modesty of the enquiry. 'And it means, , *shall rise up again*. But it *might* be the subjunctive. It's what's called a motto, and the head's the crest, and the body's down in the vault. I expect he was a crusader. Anyhow, anybody could do that; because you know very well it mightn't be noticed for ages. Never, p'raps. Besides, what's the use? . . . I'll give you a last chance. I'll tell you what you *wouldn't* do, not if you stayed here for a month of Sundays, and not a single soul came into the church to see you!'

His cheek had crimsoned. He nodded his head violently. 'You wouldn't climb up that, and—and blow that trumpet.'

Dick wheeled about, lifting his dark squirrel-bright eyes as he did so towards the Angel, and looked. He continued to look: the angel at this moment of its nightly vigil, though already the hand that clasped the trumpet had lost its silver, seemed with an ineffable yearning as if about to leap into a cataract of moonlight, like a siren erecting her green-haired head and shoulders out of a rippleless sea to scan the shore.

'You *said*, what would be the use?' he protested at last in a small, scarcely audible voice, and without turning his head. 'Even if I did, no one would hear. . . . Why do you *want* me to?'

'*Who* wants you to!' came the mocking challenge.

The Trumpet

'You asked me to give you a dare. And now—what did I say! Shouldn't , hear? I don't believe you've ever even looked at it, not even *seen* it before!'

'Oh, haven't I ! ' Dick faltered. 'You say that only because on Sundays I don't sit on your side. And what's the use? Staring up gives you a crick in the neck. But it's not because I am afraid. . . . Besides, she's only made of stone.' In spite of this disparagement he continued to gaze at the angel.

'Is she then! Stone! That's all you know about it. She's made of wood, silly. How could she be that colour if it were marble or even *any* stone? Anybody could see that! And even if she *is* only wood, there are people all over the world who worship idols and—and images. I don't mean just savages either. If she'—for an instant his eyes shut and revolved beneath their pale rounded lids—'if she or anybody else was to blow through that trumpet, it would be the Last Day. I say it, and I *know*. Even if your father has ever heard of angels, I bet he doesn't believe in them. I'm *sure* he doesn't. My father does believe in them, though. And if you had ever really listened to what he reads out about them in the Lessons you'd know too. I—*have*.'

He sat for a moment, torpid as a spider engaged in digesting or contemplating a visitor to its nets. Dick's small, alert, yet guileless face was still turned away from him, upwards and sidelong. As one may put one's ear to

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a minute device in clockwork and listen to the wheels within going round, the very thoughts in his cropped, compact head seemed audible. And then, as if after a sudden decision to dismiss the subject from his mind, Philip casually picked up his bull's-eye lantern, idly twisted its penthouse top, and directed first a greenish, then a thin red beam of light towards the lustrous monument. But the moon made mock of this trivial rivalry.

'What,' was Dick's husky enquiry at last, 'what *does* the Bible say about angels? It must be a lovely place where they are, Philip.'

Philip ignored the sentimental comment. 'Oh, heaps of things. I couldn't tell you; not half of them, not a quarter.' A mild, absent-minded, almost hypnotic expression now veiled his pale cold features. He began again as though he were repeating a lesson, in tones low yet so confident that the whole church could easily play eavesdropper to his every word. Nevertheless the sentences followed one another tardily and piecemeal, as if, like a writer of books, he could not wholly trust his memory, as though words and ideas were stubborn things to set in order and be made even so much as to hint at what was pent up in his mind.

'Well, first there was St. Paul; he went to a man's house who had *seen* an angel. Then there was the angel who came to tell his mother about Samuel, when she

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was sitting alone sewing in her bedroom. . . . And there was the angel that spoke to a man called Lot before he came out of a place called Sodom that was burned in the desert and his wife was turned into a pillar of salt. Because she turned back. Oh, heaps! *You* seem to suppose that because people can't see them now, there never were any angels. What about the sea-serpent, then; and what about witches? And what about the stars millions and billions of miles out in space, and mites and germs and all that, so teeny-tiny nobody ever saw them until microscopes and telescopes were invented? I've looked through a microscope, so I know.'

Dick nodded vacantly. 'If people can *see* them,' he admitted, 'there must be sea-serpents. And I *have* seen a witch. There's one lives in Colney Bottom, and everybody says she's a witch. She's humpty-backed, with straggly grey hair all over her shoulders. I crept in through the trees once and she was in her garden digging potatoes. At least I *think* it was potatoes. She was talking; but there was nobody there and it wasn't to *me*. But you were telling me about the angels, Philip. Won't you go on?'

' "Go on"! ' echoed Philip in derision, and began again fumbling with his lantern. 'Good heavens, you don't expect me to tell you half the Bible, do you? Why don't you listen? I don't believe you've any more brains than a parrot. "Go on"! Why, *everybody* has heard of the

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angel that when Moses was with his sheep called to him out of the middle of the burning bramble bush on the mountains. Its leaves and branches were all crackling with flames. That's another. And when Elijah was once lying asleep in the desert under a juniper tree an angel came in the morning and touched him to wake him because he had brought him some cake, and some fresh water to drink. That,' he pondered a moment or two, 'that was before the ravens. And I suppose you've never even heard of Joshua either? He was a captain of Israel. And when he was standing dressed in his armour on the sand, with his naked sword in his hand, and looking at the enormous walls of Jericho, he saw an angel there beside him, in armour too, just as you might see a man in a wood at night. They stood there together looking at the *enormous* walls of Jericho. But you couldn't see them very plainly because it was getting dark, and there weren't any lamps or lights in the houses. So nobody inside knew that they were there, not even the woman who had talked to the two spies who had stolen the bunches of grapes.'

Philip, unperceived, had quickly and suddenly glanced at his friend, who, his face wholly at peace, had meanwhile been emptily watching the coloured lights succeeding one another in the round, glass, owl-like eye of the toy lantern.

'I should like to see an angel,' he said.

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'Oh, would you? Then that's all you know about it. There are thousands upon thousands of them, most of them miles taller than any giant there ever was and others no bigger than—than ordinary. Not all of them have only two wings either; some of them have six—here, and here, and here; with two they fly and with two they cover their faces when they are asleep. And they have names too; else God wouldn't be able to call them. But don't you go and think they are like *us*; because they aren't. They are more like demons or ghosts—real ghosts, I mean, not the *kindjou* were talking about. And I don't believe either that just because anything is made of wood or stone, it hasn't any life at all—not at *all*. Even savages couldn't be as stupid as all that. You only *think* you could touch angels. But you couldn't. And some angels, though I don't know even myself if they are most like women or men'—his voice ebbed away almost into a whisper, like that of a child murmuring in its sleep, as if he were not only nearing the end of his resources, but was losing himself in the rapture of some ineffable vision in his mind—'some angels are far far more beautiful to look at than any woman, even the most beautiful woman there ever was. And even than—*that!*⁹

Yet again Dick lifted his intense small eyes towards the image. It had, it seemed, as if in an instant, returned to an appearance of mute immobility; but only in the nick of time to elude his silent questioning.

The Trumpet

'I shouldn't mind any angel', he said, 'if it were only like that. Not *mind*, I mean. If she *looked* at me, perhaps I might. She's like Rebecca, the girl that lives up at the farm. My mother taught me a hymn once to say when I am in bed. I can't remember the beginning now, but some of it I can:

*Four corners to my bed;
Four angels round my head:
One to bless, and one to pray,
And one to bear my soul away, . . .*

If you are not afraid, she says, not anywhere, ever, nothing can do anything against you.'

'Oh, they can't, can't they! That just shows *dlljou* know about it. Besides, what you've been saying is only a rhyme for children. It's only a rhyme. My nurse told me that ages ago. Those angels are only one kind. Why, there are angels so enormously strong that if one of them no more than touched even the roof of this church with the tip of his finger it would crumble away into dust. Like that'—he firmly placed his own small forefinger on the dried-up corpse of a tiny money-spider that had long since expired in the corner of the pew—'absolutely into dust. And their voices are as loud as thunder,, so that when one speaks to another, the sound of their shouting sweeps clean across the sky. And some fly up out of the sea, out of the East, when the sun rises; and some come up out of a huge frightful pit. And some

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come up out of the water, deep dangerous lakes and great rivers, and they stand on the water/and *czxifiy*—straight across, as if it was lightning, from one edge of the world to the other—like huge tremendous birds. I should jolly well like to see what a pilot of an aeroplane would do at the edge of the night if he met one. They can'—he bent forward a little, his pale face now faintly greened with his own lantern—'they can see without looking; and they stay still, like great carved stones, in a light—why, this moon wouldn't be even a candle to it!

'And some day they will pour awful things out of vials down on the earth and reap with gigantic sickles not just ordinary corn, but men and women. Men and women. And besides the sea,' his rather colourless eyes had brightened, his cheeks had taken on a gentle flush, his nervous fingers were clasping and unclasping themselves over the warm metal of his lantern, 'and besides the sea, they can stand and live exulting in the sun. But on the earth here they are invisible, at least *now*, except when they come in dreams. Besides, everybody has two angels; though they never get married, and so there are never any children angels. They are called cherubs. And I know this too—you can tell they are there even when you cannot see them. You can hear them listening. If *they* have charge of you, nothing can hurt you, not the rocks—nor the ice—not even of the highest mountains. And that was why the angel spoke to Balaam's donkey when

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they were on the mountain pass, because he wished not to frighten him; and the donkey answered. But if you were cursed by one for wickedness, then you would wither up and die like a gnat, or have awful pains, and everything inside of you would melt away like water. And don't forget either that the devil has crowds of angels under his command who were thrown out of heaven millions of years ago, long before Adam and Eve. They are as proud as he is, and they live in hell. . . . They are awful.'

It was doubtful if Dick had been really attending to this prolonged halting almost monotoned harangue; his face at any rate suggested that his thoughts had journeyed off on a remote and marvelling errand of their own.

'Well,' he ventured at last, with a profound half-stifled sigh, 'I *would* climb it anyway. And not because you dared me to, either. Even *jou* couldn't say what I might not see up there.'

He tiptoed a pace or two nearer the shallow altar steps and again, fixed his eyes on his quarry. 'What about the trumpet?' he suddenly enquired, with a ring of triumph in his voice, as if he had at last managed to corner his learned friend. 'The trumpet? You didn't say a single word about the trumpet.'

'Well, what if I didn't?' was the flat acrimonious answer. 'I can't say two things at once, can I? You don't know anything. And that is simply because you never

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pay any attention. You're just like a fly buzzing about among the plates seeing what you can pick up. I don't suppose, if I asked you even now, you could tell me a single word of *all* that I've been saying!'

Dick turned, glancing a little sadly and wistfully at his friend. 'I could, Philip. At least, I think I could. Besides flies do settle sometimes; I suppose then they are asleep.'

'Oh, well, anyhow,' replied Philip coldly, 'I don't think I want to. But I could if I had the time.' He sighed. 'You don't even seem to understand there are so many *kinds* of trumpets. You don't seem ever to have heard even of Gideon's trumpets. Some are made of brass and some are silver and some are great shells and some are made out of sheep's horns, rams'. And in the old days, ages ago, war-horses loved the sound of trumpets—I don't mean just men going hunting. It made them laugh and prance, with all their teeth showing. "*Ha, ha!*"—like that. Simply maddened to go into battle. And besides, clergymen, priests they were called in those days, used to have trumpets, but that was ages before Henry VIII. And they used to blow them, like that one, up there, when there was a new moon; and when,' he glanced sidelong, his eyelids drooping a little furtively over his full eyes, and his voice fell to a mumble, 'and when there was a full moon too. And at the end there will be incense, and dreadful hail, and fire, and scorpions

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with claws like huge poisonous spiders. And there's a Star called Wormwood; and there will be thousands and thousands of men riding on horses with heads like lions. . . .' He fell silent and sat fumbling for a few moments. 'But I wasn't really going to talk about all that. It's only because / have listened. And it's just what I've said already, and I know the very words too.' He nodded slowly as if he were bent on imparting a deathless and invaluable secret: ' "The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised." Those are the very words. And / see what they mean.'

Dick had meanwhile become perfectly still, as if some inward self were lost in a strange land. He appeared to be profoundly pondering these matters. 'And supposing,' he muttered at length, as though like the prophet he had swallowed Philip's little book and it were sweet as honey, 'supposing *nothing* happens, Philip? If I do? Perhaps *that* trumpet is only solid wood all through. Then it wouldn't make *any* sound. Then you would only burst your cheeks, trying. Wouldn't it be funny—if I burst my cheeks, trying!'

'That,' replied Philip, disdaining the suggestion, 'that would only mean that it isn't really a trumpet. But you wouldn't even be *thinking* of that if you weren't too frightened to try. You're only talking.'

'You wouldn't.'

'I like that!' cried Philip, as if in a brief ecstasy. 'Oh,

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I like that! Who *thought* of the angel, may I ask? Who *asked* to be dared? Besides, as I have said again and again, this is my father's church; and chapel people don't believe in angels. They don't believe in anything that really matters.'

'You can say what you like about chapel people said Dick stubbornly, his eyes shining like some dangerous little animal's that has been caught in a snare. 'But I'm *not* afeard, even if you won't go yourself.'

'Oh, well'—a cold and unforeseen fit of anxiety had stolen into Philip's mind as he sat staring at his friend. 'I don't care. Come on, let's clear out of this, I say. You can *try* if you want to, but I'm not going to *watch*. So don't get blaming anything on to me. It's nothing to do with me. That's just what you always do. You're a silly little weathercock. First, yes; then, no.'

Cramped and spiritless, he had got down from his pew and, as if absent-mindedly, had pushed his magic dumb-bell flint into his great-coat pocket and shut off the light of his lantern. The moonlight, which a few moments before, from pavement to arching roof, had suffused the small church through and through, had begun to thin away into a delicate dusk again; and at the withdrawal even of the tiny coloured lights of the lantern, its pallor on the zigzag-fretted walls and squat thick stone shafts of the piers had become colder. Moreover the quietude around them had at once immeasurably

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deepened again now that the two boys' idle chirruping voices were stilled.

Philip took up the lantern, and looked at his friend. A curious, crooked, scornful alarm showed on his own delicate features. But it was the scorn in it that his ardent, undersized and peeping devotee had detected most clearly. His intensely dark eyes were searching Philip's face with an astonishing rapidity.

'You said, "blaming",' he half entreated. 'And did I ever? I — I ... Haven't I always shown that we — I ...! It's only because I didn't think anything might happen. But I'm not afraid, whatever you may think. Besides, you asked me, Philip. And anything—anything you asked me. ... So it couldn't be *only* a dare.'

Like a cork on a shallow stream that has come momentarily to rest in the midst of rippling and conflicting currents, Philip stood motionless, his pondering eyes intent on the young adventurer whom he had at last decoyed into action. A faintly apprehensive, faintly melancholy expression had now crept into his features. The cold detaining fingers he had thrust out of his coat-sleeve fell slackly to his side again. For Dick had already straddled over the thick red plaited cord that dangled between nave and chancel, disclosing as he did so a frayed gaping hole in the canvas of one of his shoes. Their rubber soles made not the faintest sound as he

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trod lightly over the thick Persian rug and the stone slabs towards the great monument in the further corner, only a few paces from the altar.

It was a monument constructed of many ornate marbles, and these supplied cold couch and canopy for the effigy in alabaster of a worthy knight who, as its inscription declared, had long ago surrendered the joys and sorrows of this world. He reposed, rather uneasily, on his left elbow; his attire, ruff and hose, not less decorative and rococo than the wreathings and carvings, the cherubs and pilasters of his tomb. But like an Oriental bed in a small English bedroom, the tomb was a size or two too large for the church.

Until this moment Philip had not fully realized its loftiness, and how angularly its pinnacles soared up under the roof. Dark and dwarfed against the whiteness of its marble, Dick had now begun to climb. But he had mounted only a few feet from the ground when Philip noticed that the moon had now abandoned the carved ringlets, the rounded cheeks, the upturned sightless face of his angel. Though her pinions and feet were still chequered with its silvering beams, her trump now lifted its mouth into a cold and sullen gloom. An unendurable misgiving had begun to stir in him.

'The moon's gone, Dick,' he whispered across. 'What's the good? Come down!'

'I say/ came the muffled but elated answer, 'the

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ledges are simply thick with dust, and don't they just cut into the soles of your feet. I can't hear what you're saying.'

'I said,' repeated Philip, still patiently, 'come down!' But he might as well have been pleading with the angel itself. There came no response. 'Dick, Dick,' he reiterated, 'I said, Come down! Oh, I'm going.' In a sudden fever he pushed his way under the curtain into the vestry and vanished. But it was only a ruse. He came flying back in a few moments as if in utter consternation.

'Quick, Dick; quick, I say!' he all but shouted. 'Come down! There's someone, something *coming*. It isn't a man and it isn't a woman. Quick! It won't be a minute before it's in the church. Oh you silly, silly fool! I tell you there's someone coming!' His voice broke away into a sob of bewilderment, rage, apprehension and despair. 'By God,' he called, 'I'll tell my father of this! You see if I don't.'

But the snail-slow groping figure, still radiantly lit with the moon's downcast beams as it continued to scale the monument, was far too much engrossed in its mission to pay any attention to him now, and hardly paused until with a small, black, broken-nailed hand it had securely clasped the angel's foot. 'I'm nearly up, Philip,' he called down at last. 'Look! *Look* where I am! I'm even with the gallery now, and can hardly see because of the dazzle. It's cold and still and awful, but oh,

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peaceful; and I can see into the moon. The angel's lovely too, close to, but much, much bigger. Supposing I blow with all my might and the trumpet doesn't sound? It won't be my fault, will it? And we will still keep friends, always, won't we, Philip?'

'Oh, you fool, you idiot crock fool,' called Philip hoarsely. 'Didn't I *tell* you, didn't I tell you, what might come to *everybody*! . . . And you believed it! Oh, it was all a story, a lie, a story. Dick, I will give you anything in the world if you will only come down.'

'I don't want anything in the world,' was the dull, stubborn retort. Even as he spoke, the lower dust-dried hand had crept cautiously up to join its fellow, and in a few moments, himself half in and half out of the moonlight, his fingers were clutching the acorn tassels of the cord that bound its convoluted hood to the angel's head. Philip was now all but past motion or speech. He was shivering from head to foot, and praying inarticulately in his terror, 'Oh God, make him come down! Oh God make him come down!'

'I believe', a calm but rapturous voice was declaring, 'it is hollow, and I *think* she knows I'm here. You won't say I was afraid now! Philip, I'd do anything in the world for you.'

But at this moment, it seemed, the ancient guardians of the sanctity of the edifice had deemed it discreet to intervene. A cock crowed from its perch in the hen-

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roost at the farm where Rebecca now lay fast asleep. A vast solemn gust of wind evoked from nowhere out of space had swept across the churchyard and in at the open vestry door, powerful enough in its gust to belly out the dark green felt curtain and to add its edge of terror to Philip's appalled state of mind. 'Look! Quick! It's coming. Didn't I say it was all . . .'

And this time the small human creature clinging to its goal, a lean skinny arm outstretched above his head, had heard the warning cry. 'Who? What's coming?' he called, faint and far. 'Oh, it's lovely up here. I'm alone. I can't stop now. I'm nearly there.'

'I say, you are *not* to, you are *not* to.' Philip was all but dancing in helpless fear and fury. 'It's wicked! It's *my* angel, it's *my* trumpet! I hate you! Listen!—I tell you! I *command* you to come down!'

But his adjurations had become as meaningless as is now the song the Sirens sang.

A rending snap, abrupt as that of a pistol shot, had echoed through the church. The tapering wooden trumpet, never since its first fashioning visited by any other living creature than capricious fly and prowling spider, had splintered off clean from the angel's grasp. And without a cry, a syllable, either of triumph or despair, Dick had fallen vertically on to the flag-stones beneath, the thud of his small body, and the minute crack as of some exquisitely delicate and brittle vessel exposed to

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too extreme a tension being followed by a silence soft, and thick, and deep as deep and heavy snow.

The stolid pendulum had resumed its imperturbable thumping again, the fussy vestry clock its protest against such indifference. By any miracle of mercy, *could* this be only yet another of this intrepid restless little Yorick's infinite jests? The sharp-nosed crusader continued alabaster-wise to stare into his future. The disgraced angel, breast to lock-crowned head, stood now in shadow as if to hide her shame. Her mute wooden trumpet remained clutched in a lifeless hand. . . No.

'Dick! Dick!' an anguished stuttering voice at last contrived to whisper. 'I didn't mean it. On my oath I didn't mean it. Don't let me down . . . Dick, are you dead?'

But since no answer was volunteered, and all courage and enterprise had ebbed into nausea and vertigo, the speaker found himself incapable of venturing nearer, and presently, as thievishly as he had entered it, crept away out into the openness of the churchyard, and so home.

