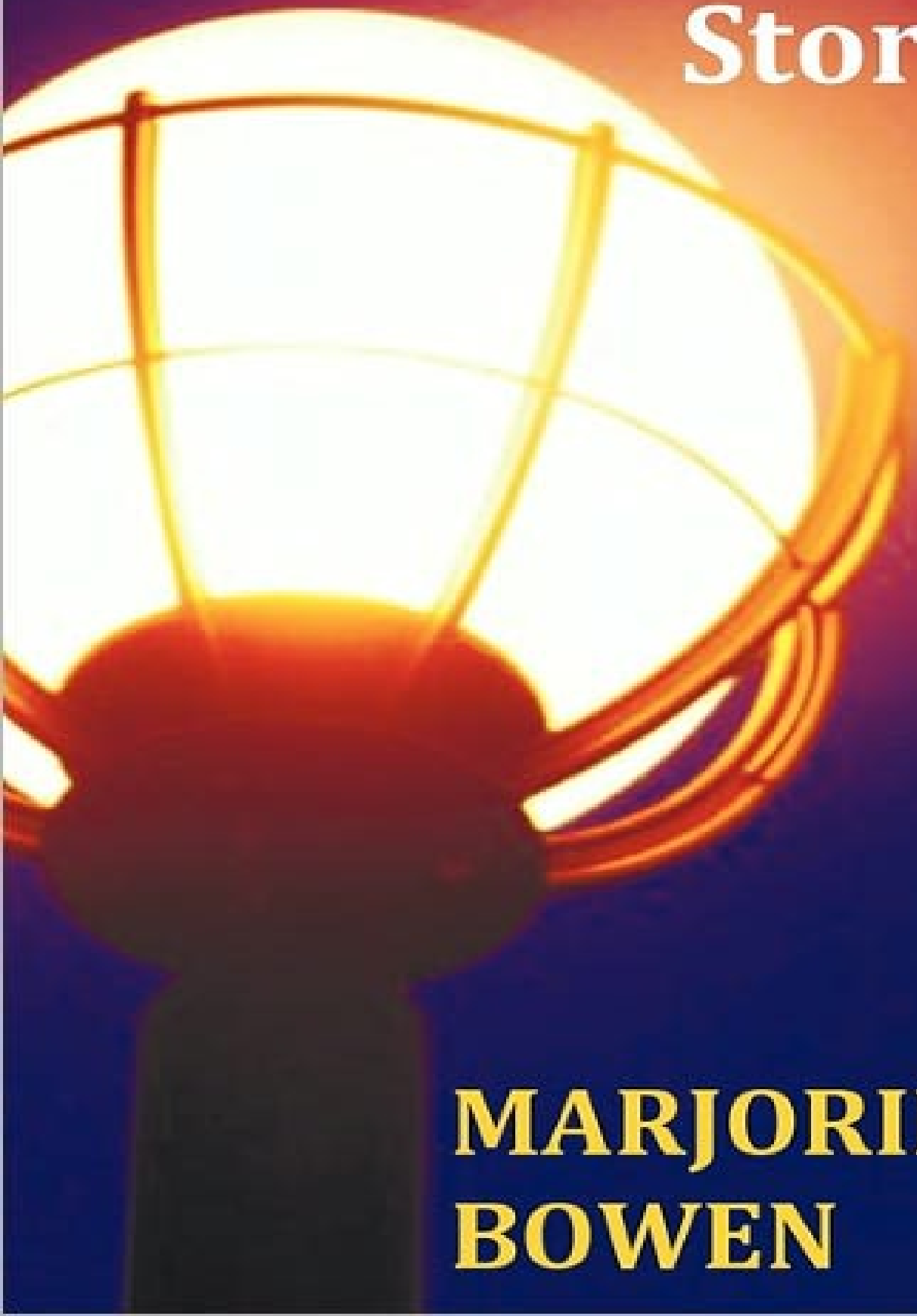
Collected Twilight Stories



MARJORIE BOWEN

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Scoured Silk

This is a tale that might be told in many ways and from various points of view; it has to be gathered from here and there--a letter, a report, a diary, a casual reference; in its day the thing was more than a passing wonder, and it left a mark of abiding horror on the neighborhood.

The house in which Mr. Orford lived has finally been destroyed, the mural tablet in St. Paul's, Covent Garden, may be sought for in vain by the curious, but little remains of the old piazza where the quiet scholar passed on his daily walks, the very records of what was once so real have become blurred, almost incoherent in their pleadings with things forgotten; but this thing happened to real people, in a real London, not so long ago that the generation had not spoken with those who remembered some of the actors in this terrible drama.

It is round the person of Humphrey Orford that this tale turns, as, at the time, all the mystery and horror centered; yet until his personality was brought thus tragically into fame, he had not been an object of

much interest to many; he had, perhaps, a mild reputation for eccentricity, but this was founded merely on the fact that he refused to partake of the amusements of his neighbors, and showed a dislike for much company.

But this was excused on the ground of his scholarly predilections; he was known to be translating, in a leisurely fashion, as became a gentleman, Ariosto's great romance into English couplets, and to be writing essays on recondite subjects connected with grammar and language, which were not the less esteemed because they had never been published.

His most authentic portrait, taken in 1733 and intended for a frontispiece for the Ariosto when this should come to print, shows a slender man with reddish hair, rather severely clubbed, a brown coat, and a muslin cravat; he looks straight out of the picture, and the face is long, finely shaped, and refined, with eyebrows rather heavier than one would expect from such delicacy of feature.

When this picture was painted Mr. Orford was living near Covent Garden, close to the mansion once occupied by the famous Dr. Radcliffe, a straight-fronted, dark house of obvious gentility, with a little architrave portico over the door and a few steps leading up to it; a house with neat windows and a gloomy air, like every other residence in that street and most other streets of the same status in London.

And if there was nothing remarkable about Mr. Orford's dwelling place or person there was nothing, as far as his neighbors knew, remarkable about his history.

He came from a good Suffolk family, in which county he was believed to have considerable estates (though it was a known fact that he never visited them), and he had no relations, being the only

child of an only child, and his parents dead; his father had purchased this town house in the reign of King William, when the neighborhood was very fashionable, and up to it he had come, twenty years ago--nor had he left it since.

He had brought with him an ailing wife, a house-keeper, and a man-servant, and to the few families of his acquaintance near, who waited on him, he explained that he wished to give young Mrs. Orford, who was of a mopish disposition, the diversion of a few months in town.

But soon there was no longer this motive for remaining in London, for the wife, hardly seen by anyone, fell into a short illness and died--just a few weeks after her husband had brought her up from Suffolk. She was buried very simply in St. Paul's, and the mural tablet set up with a draped urn in marble, and just her name and the date, ran thus:

FLORA,
WIFE OF HUMPHREY ORFORD,
ESQ., OF THIS PARISH,
DIED NOVEMBER,
1713, AGED 27 YEARS.

Mr. Orford made no effort to leave the house; he remained, people thought, rather stunned by his loss, kept himself close in the house, and for a considerable time wore deep mourning.

But this was twenty years ago, and all had forgotten the shadowy figure of the young wife, whom so few had seen and whom no one had known anything about or been interested in, and all trace of her seemed to have passed out of the quiet, regular, and easy life of Mr. Orford, when an event that gave rise to some gossip caused the one-time existence of Flora Orford to be recalled and discussed among the curious. This event was none other than the sudden betrothal of Mr. Orford and the announcement of his almost immediate marriage.

The bride was one who had been a prattling child when the groom had first come to London: one old lady who was forever at her window watching the little humors of the street recollected and related how she had seen Flora Orford, alighting from the coach that had brought her from the country, turn to this child, who was gazing from the railing of the neighboring house, and touch her bare curls lovingly and yet with a sad gesture.

And that was about the only time anyone ever did see Flora Orford, she so soon became ailing; and the next the inquisitive old lady saw of her was the slender brown coffin being carried through the dusk towards St. Paul's Church.

But that was twenty years ago, and here was the baby grown up into Miss Elisa Minden, a very personable young woman, soon to be the second Mrs. Humphrey Orford. Of course there was nothing very remarkable about the match; Elisa's father, Dr. Minden, had been Mr. Orford's best friend (as far as he could be said to have a best friend, or indeed any friend at all) for many a long year, both belonged to the same quiet set, both knew all about each other. Mr. Orford was not much above forty-five or so, an elegant, well-looking man, wealthy, with no vices and a calm, equable temper; while Miss Elisa, though pretty and well-mannered, had an insufficient dowry, no mother to fend for her, and the younger sisters to share her slender advantages. So what could anyone say save that the good doctor had done very well for his daughter, and that Mr. Orford had been fortunate enough to secure such a fresh, capable maiden for his wife?

It was said that the scholar intended giving up his bookish ways--that he even spoke of going abroad a while, to Italy, for preference; he was of course, anxious to see Italy, as all his life had been devoted to preparing the translation of an Italian classic.

The quiet betrothal was nearing its decorous conclusion when one day Mr. Orford took Miss Minden for a walk and brought her home round the piazza of Covent Garden, then took her across the cobbled street, past the stalls banked up with the first spring flowers (it was the end of March), under the portico built by the great Inigo Jones, and so into the church.

"I want to show you where my wife Flora lies buried," said Mr. Orford.

And that is really the beginning of the story.

Now, Miss Minden had been in this church every Sunday of her life and many weekdays, and had been used since a child to see that tablet to Flora Orford; but when she heard these words in the quiet voice of her lover and felt him draw her out of the sunlight into the darkness of the church, she experienced a great distaste that was almost fear.

It seemed to her both a curious and a disagreeable thing for him to do, and she slipped her arm out of his as she replied.

"Oh, please let us go home!" she said. "Father will be waiting for us, and your good Mrs. Boyd vexed if the tea is over-brewed."

"But first I must show this," he insisted, and took her arm again and led her down the church, past his seat, until they stood between his pew end and the marble tablet in the wall which was just a hand's space above their heads.

"That is to her memory," said Mr. Orford. "And you see there is nothing said as to her virtues."

Now, Elisa Minden knew absolutely nothing of her predecessor, and could not tell if these words were spoken in reverence or irony, so

she said nothing but looked up rather timidly from under the shade of her Leghorn straw at the tall figure of her lover, who was staring sternly at the square of marble.

"And what have you to say to Flora Orford?" he asked sharply, looking down at her quickly.

"Why, sir, she was a stranger to me," replied Miss Minden. Mr. Orford pressed her arm.

"But to me she was a wife," he said. "She is buried under your feet. Quite close to where you are standing. Why, think of that, Lizzie, if she could stand up and put out her hand she could catch hold of your dress--she is as near as that!"

The words and his manner of saying them filled Miss Minden with shuddering terror, for she was a sensitive and fanciful girl, and it seemed to her a dreadful thing to be thus standing over the bones of the poor creature who had loved the man who was now to be her husband, and horrible to think that the handful of decay so near them had once clung to this man and loved him.

"Do not tremble, my dear girl," said Mr. Orford. "She is dead."

Tears were in Elisa Minden's eyes, and she answered coldly:

"Sir, how can you speak so?"

"She was a wicked woman," he replied, "a very wicked woman."

The girl could not reply as to that; this sudden disclosing of a painful secret abashed her simple mind.

"Need we talk of this?" she asked; then, under her breath--"Need we be married in this church, sir?"

"Of course," he answered shortly, "everything is arranged. Tomorrow week."

Miss Minden did not respond; hitherto she had been fond of the church, now it seemed spoilt for her--tarnished by the thought of Flora Orford.

Her companion seemed to divine what reflection lay behind her silence.

"You need not be afraid," he said rather harshly. "She is dead. Dead."

And he reached out the light cane he wore and tapped on the stone above his wife's grave, and slowly smiled as the sound rang hollow in the vaults beneath.

Then he allowed Elisa to draw him away, and they returned to Mr. Orford's comfortable house, where in the upper parlor Dr. Minden was awaiting them together with his sister and her son, a soldier cousin whom the quick perceptions of youthful friends had believed to be devoted to Elisa Minden. They made a pleasant little party with the red curtains drawn, and the fire burning up between the polished andirons and all the service for tea laid out with scones and Naples cake, and Mrs. Boyd coming to and fro with plates and dishes. And everyone was cheerful and friendly and glad to be indoors together, with a snowstorm coming up and people hurrying home with heads bent before a cutting wind.

But to Elisa's mind had come an unbidden thought:

"I do not like this house--it is where Flora Orford died."

And she wondered in which room, and also why this had never

occurred to her before, and glanced rather thoughtfully at the fresh young face of the soldier cousin as he stood by the fire in his scarlet and white, with his glance on the flames.

But it was a cheerful party, and Elisa smiled and jested with the rest as she reserved the dishes at tea.

There is a miniature of her painted about this time, and one may see how she looked with her bright brown hair and bright brown eyes, rosy complexion, pretty nose and mouth, and her best gown of lavender blue tabinet with a lawn tucker and a lawn cap fastened under the chin with frilled lappets, showing now the big Leghorn hat with the velvet strings was put aside.

Mr. Orford also looked well tonight; he did not look his full age in the ruddy candle glow, the grey did not show in his abundant hair nor the lines in his fine face, but the elegance of his figure, the grace of his bearing, the richness of his simple clothes, were displayed to full advantage; Captain Hoare looked stiff and almost clumsy by contrast.

But now and then Elisa Minden's eyes would rest rather wistfully on the fresh face of this young man who had no dead wife in his life. And something was roused in her meek youth and passive innocence, and she wondered why she had so quietly accepted her father's arrangement of a marriage with this elderly scholar, and why Philip Hoare had let her do it. Her thoughts were quite vague and amounted to no more than a confused sense that something was wrong, but she lost her satisfaction in the tea-drinking and the pleasant company, and the warm room with the drawn curtains, and the bright fire, and rose up saying they must be returning, as there was a great store of mending she had promised to help her aunt with; but Mrs. Hoare would not help her out, but protested, laughing, that there was time enough for that, and the good doctor, who was in

a fine humor and in no mood to go out into the bleak streets even as far as his own door, declared that now was the time they must be shown over the house.

"Do you know, Humphrey," he said, "you have often promised us this, but never done it, and, all the years that I have known you, I have never seen but this room and the dining-room below; and as to your own particular cabinet--"

"Well," said Mr. Orford, interrupting in a leisurely fashion, "no one has been in there, save Mrs. Boyd now and then, to announce a visitor."

"Oh, you scholars!" smiled the doctor. "A secretive tribe--and a fortunate one; why, in my poor room I have had three girls running to and fro!"

The soldier spoke, not so pleasantly as his uncle.

"What have you so mysterious, sir, in this same cabinet, that it must be so jealously guarded?" he asked.

"Why, nothing mysterious," smiled the scholar; "only my books, and papers, and pictures."

"You will show them to me?" asked Elisa Minden, and her lover gave graceful consent; there was further amiable talk, and then the whole party, guided by Mr. Orford holding a candle, made a tour of the house and looked over the fine rooms.

Mrs. Hoare took occasion to whisper to the bride-to-be that there were many alterations needed before the place was ready for a lady's use, and that it was time these were put in hand--why, the wedding was less than a fortnight off!

And Elisa Minden, who had not had a mother to advise her in these

matters, suddenly felt that the house was dreary and old-fashioned, and an impossible place to live in; the very rooms that had so pleased her good father--a set of apartments for a lady--were to her the most hateful in the house, for they, her lover told her, had been furnished and prepared for Flora Orford, twenty years ago.

She was telling herself that when she was married she must at once go away and that the house must be altered before she could return to it, when the party came crowding to the threshold of the library or private cabinet, and Mr. Orford, holding the candle aloft, led them in. Then as this illumination was not sufficient, he went very quickly and lit the two candles on the mantelpiece.

It was a pleasant apartment, lined with books from floor to ceiling, old, valuable, and richly bound books, save only in the space above the chimney piece, which was occupied by a portrait of a lady and the panel behind the desk; this was situated in a strange position, in the farthest corner of the room fronting the wall, so that anyone seated there would be facing the door with the space of the room between; the desk was quite close to the wall, so that there was only just space for the chair at which the writer would sit, and to accommodate this there were no bookshelves behind it, but a smooth panel of wood on which hung a small picture; this was a rough, dark painting, and represented a man hanging on a gallows on a wild heath; it was a subject out of keeping with the luxurious room with its air of ease and learning, and while Mr. Orford was showing his first editions, his Elzevirs and Aldines, Elisa Minden was staring at this ugly little picture.

As she looked she was conscious of such a chill of horror and dismay as nearly caused her to shriek aloud. The room seemed to her to be full of an atmosphere of terror and evil beyond expression. Never had such a thing happened to her before; her visit to the tomb in the afternoon had been as nothing to this. She moved away, barely

able to disguise an open panic. As she turned, she half-stumbled against a chair, caught at it, and noticed, hanging over the back, a skirt of peach-colored silk. Elisa, not being mistress of herself, caught at this garment.

"Why, sir," cried she hysterically, "what is this?"

All turned to look at her; her tone, her obvious fright, were out of proportion to her discovery.

"Why, child," said Mrs. Hoare, "it is a silk petticoat, as all can see."

"A gift for you, my dear," said the cheerful doctor.

"A gift for me?" cried Elisa. "Why, this has been scoured, and turned, and mended, and patched a hundred times!"

And she held up the skirt, which had indeed become like tinder and seemed ready to drop to pieces.

The scholar now spoke.

"It belongs to Mrs. Boyd," he said quietly. "I suppose she had been in here to clean up, and has left some of her mending."

Now, two things about this speech made a strange impression on everyone; first, it was manifestly impossible that the good housekeeper would ever have owned such a garment as this, that was a lady's dress and such as would be worn for a ball; secondly, Mr. Orford had only a short while before declared that Mrs. Boyd only entered his room when he was in it, and then of a necessity and for a few minutes.

All had the same impression, that this was some garment belonging to his dead wife and as such cherished by him; all, that is, but Elisa,

who had heard him call Flora Orford a wicked woman.

She put the silk down quickly (there was a needle sticking into it and a spool of cotton lying on the chair beneath) and looked up at the portrait above the mantelpiece.

"Is that Mrs. Orford?" she asked.

He gave her a queer look.

"Yes," he said.

In a strange silence all glanced up at the picture.

It showed a young woman in a white gown, holding a crystal heart that hung round her neck; she had dark hair and a pretty face; as Elisa looked at the pointed fingers holding the pretty toy, she thought of the tablet in St. Paul's Church and Mr. Orford's words--"She is so near to you that if she could stretch out her hand she could touch you," and without any remark about the portrait or the sitter, she advised her aunt that it was time to go home. So the four of them left, and Mr. Orford saw them out, standing framed in the warm light of the corridor and watching them disappear into the grey darkness of the street.

It was a little more than an hour afterwards when Elisa Minden came creeping down the stairway of her home and accosted her cousin, who was just leaving the house.

"Oh, Philip," said she, clasping her hands, "if your errand be not a very important one, I beg you to give me an hour of your time. I have been watching for you to go out, that I might follow and speak to you privately."

The young soldier looked at her keenly as she stood in the light of the

hall lamp, and he saw that she was very agitated.

"Of course, Lizzie," he answered kindly, and led her into the little parlor off the hall where there was neither candles or fire, but leisure and quiet to talk.

Elisa, being a housekeeper, found a lamp and lit it, and apologized for the cold, but she would not return upstairs, she said, for Mrs. Hoare and the two girls and the doctor were all quiet in the great parlor, and she had no mind to disturb them.

"You are in trouble," said Captain Hoare quietly.

"Yes," replied she in a frightened way, "I want you to come with me now to Mr. Orford's house--I want to speak to his housekeeper."

"Why, what is this, Lizzie?"

She had no very good explanation; there was only the visit to the church that afternoon, her impression of horror in the cabinet, the discovery of the scoured silk.

"But I must know something of his first wife, Philip," she concluded. "I could never go on with it--if I did not--something has happened today--I hate that house, I almost hate--him."

"Why did you do it, Lizzie?" demanded the young soldier sternly. "This was a nice homecoming for me...a man who might be your father...a solitary...one who frightens you."

Miss Minden stared at her cousin; she did not know why she had done it; the whole thing seemed suddenly impossible.

"Please, you must come with me now," she said.

So overwrought was she that he had no heart to refuse her, and they took their warm cloaks from the hall and went out into the dark streets.

It was snowing now and the ground slippery under foot, and Elisa clung to her cousin's arm. She did not want to see Mr. Orford or his house ever again, and by the time they reached the doorstep she was in a tremble; but she rang the bell boldly.

It was Mrs. Boyd herself who came to the door; she began explaining that the master was shut up in his cabinet, but the soldier cut her short.

"Miss Minden wishes to see you," he said, "and I will wait in the hall till she is ready."

So Elisa followed the housekeeper down to her basement sitting-room; the man-servant was out, and the two maids were quickly dismissed to the kitchen.

Mrs. Boyd, a placid soul, near seventy-years, waited for the young lady to explain herself, and Elisa Minden, flushing and paling by turns, and feeling foolish and timid, put forth the object of her coming.

She wanted to hear the story of Flora Orford--there was no one else whom she could ask--and she thought that she had a right to know.

"And I suppose you have, my dear," said Mrs. Boyd, gazing into the fire, "though it is not a pretty story for you to hear--and I never thought I should be telling it to Mr. Orford's second wife!"

"Not his wife yet." said Miss Minden.

"There, there, you had better ask the master yourself," replied Mrs. Boyd placidly; "not but that he would be fierce at your speaking of it,

for I do not think a mention of it has passed his lips, and it's twenty years ago and best forgotten, my dear."

"Tell it me and then I will forget," begged Miss Minden.

So then Mrs. Boyd, who was a quiet, harmless soul with no dislike to telling a tale (though no gossip, as events had proved, she having kept her tongue still on this matter for so long), told her story of Humphrey Orford's wife; it was told in very few words.

"She was the daughter of his gamekeeper, my dear, and he married her out of hand, just for her pretty face. But they were not very happy together that I could ever see; she was afraid of him and that made her cringe, and he hated that, and she shamed him with her ignorant ways. And then one day he found her with a lover, saving your presence, mistress, one of her own people, just a common man. And he was just like a creature possessed; he shut up the house and sent away all the servants but me, and brought his lady up to town, to this house here. And what passed between her and him no one will know, but she ever looked like one dying of terror. And then the doctor began to come, Dr. Thursby, it was, that is dead now, and then she died, and no one was able to see her even she was in her coffin, nor to send a flower. 'Tis likely she died of grief, poor, fond wretch. But, of course, she was a wicked woman, and there was nothing to do but pity the master."

And this was the story of Flora Orford.

"And the man?" asked Miss Minden, after a little.

"The man she loved, my dear? Well, Mr. Orford had him arrested as a thief for breaking into his house, he was wild, that fellow, with not the best of characters--well, he would not say why he was in the house, and Mr. Orford, being a Justice of the Peace, had some

power, so he was just condemned as a common thief. And there are few to this day know the truth of the tale, for he kept his counsel to the last, and no one knew from him why he had been found in the Squire's house."

"What was his end?" asked Miss Minden in a still voice.

"Well he was hanged," said Mrs. Boyd; "being caught red-handed, what could he hope for?"

"Then that is a picture of him in the cabinet!" cried Elisa, shivering for all the great fire; then she added desperately, "Tell me, did Flora Orford die in that cabinet?"

"Oh, no, my dear, but in a great room at the back of the house that has been shut up ever since."

"But the cabinet is horrible," said Elisa; "perhaps it is her portrait and that picture."

"I have hardly been in there," admitted Mrs. Boyd, "but the master lives there--he has always had his supper there, and he talks to that portrait my dear--'Flora, Flora' he says, 'how are you tonight?' and then he imitates her voice, answering."

Elisa Minden clapped her hand to her heart.

"Do not tell me these things or I shall think that you are hateful too, to have stayed in this dreadful house and endured them!" Mrs. Boyd was surprised.

"Now, my dear, do not be put out," she protested.

"They were wicked people both of them and got their deserts, and it is an old story best forgotten; and as for the master, he has been just

a good creature ever since we have been here, and he will not go talking to any picture when he has a sweet young wife to keep him company."

But Elisa Minden had risen and had her fingers on the handle of the door.

"One thing more," said she breathlessly; "that scoured silk--of a peach color--"

"Why, has he got that still? Mrs. Orford wore it the night he found her with her sweetheart. I mind I was with her when she bought it--fine silk at forty shillings the yard. If I were you, my dear, I should burn that when I was mistress here."

But Miss Minden had run upstairs to the cold hall.

Her cousin was not there; she heard angry voices overhead and saw the two maid-servants affrighted on the stairs; a disturbance was unknown in this household.

While Elisa stood bewildered, a door banged, and Captain Hoare came down red in the face and fuming; he caught his cousin's arm and hurried her out of the house.

In an angry voice he told her of the unwarrantable behavior of Mr. Orford, who had found him in the hall and called him "intruder" and "spy" without waiting for an explanation; the soldier had followed the scholar up to his cabinet and there had been an angry scene about nothing at all, as Captain Hoare said.

"Oh, Philip," broke out poor Elisa as they hastened through the cold darkness, "I can never, never marry him!"

And she told him the story of Flora Orford. The young man pressed

her arm through the heavy cloak.

"And how came such a one to entangle thee?" he asked tenderly. "Nay, thou shalt not marry him."

They spoke no more, but Elisa, happy in the protecting and wholesome presence of her kinsman, sobbed with a sense of relief and gratitude. When they reached home they found they had been missed and there had to be explanations; Elisa said there was something that she had wished to say to Mrs. Boyd, and Philip told of Mr. Orford's rudeness and the quarrel that had followed.

The two elder people were disturbed and considered Elisa's behavior strange, but her manifest agitation caused them to forbear pressing her for an explanation; nor was it any use addressing themselves to Philip, for he went out to his delayed meeting with companions at a coffee-house.

That night Elisa Minden went to bed feeling more emotion than she had ever done in her life; fear and disgust of the man whom hitherto she had placidly regarded as her future husband, and a yearning for the kindly presence of her childhood's companion united in the resolute words she whispered into her pillow during that bitter night.

"I can never marry him now!"

The next day it snowed heavily, yet a strange elation was in Elisa's heart as she descended to the warm parlor, bright from the fire and light from the glow of the snow without.

She was going to tell her father that she could not carry out her engagement with Mr. Orford, and that she did not want ever to go into his house again.

They were all gathered round the breakfast-table when Captain

Hoare came in late (he had been out to get a newsletter) and brought the news that was the most unlooked for they could conceive, and that was soon to startle all London.

Mr. Orford had been found murdered in his cabinet.

These tidings, though broken as carefully as possible, threw the little household into the deepest consternation and agitation; there were shrieks, and cryings, and running to and fro.

Only Miss Minden, though of a ghastly color, made no especial display of grief; she was thinking of Flora Orford.

When the doctor could get away from his agitated womenkind, he went with his nephew to the house of Mr. Orford.

The story of the murder was a mystery. The scholar had been found in his chair in front of his desk with one of his own bread-knives sticking through his shoulders; and there was nothing to throw any light as to how or through whom he had met his death.

The story, sifted from the mazed incoherency of Mrs. Boyd, the hysterics of the maids, the commentaries of the constables, and the chatter of the neighbors, ran thus:

At half-past nine the night before, Mrs. Boyd had sent one of the maids up with her master's supper; it was his whim to have it always thus, served on a tray in the cabinet. There had been wine and meat, bread and cheese, fruit and cakes--the usual plates and silver--among these the knife that had killed Mr. Orford.

When the servant left, the scholar had followed her to the door and locked it after her; this was also a common practice of his, a precaution against any possible interruption, for, he said, he did the

best part of his work in the evening.

It was found next morning that his bed had not been slept in, and that the library door was still locked; as the alarmed Mrs. Boyd could get no answer to her knocks, the man-servant had sent for someone to force the lock, and Humphrey Orford had been found in his chair, leaning forward over his papers with the knife thrust up to the hilt between his shoulders; he must have died instantly, for there was no sign of any struggle, nor any disarrangement of his person or his papers. The first doctor to see him, a passer-by, attracted by the commotion about the house, said he must have been dead some hours--probably since the night before; the candles had all burnt down to the socket, and there were spillings of grease on the desk; the supper tray stood at the other end of the room, most of the food had been eaten, most of the wine drunk, the articles were all there in order excepting only the knife sticking between Mr. Orford's shoulder-blades.

When Captain Hoare had passed the house on his return from buying the newsletter he had seen the crowd and gone in and been able to say that he had been the last person to see the murdered man alive, as he had had his sharp encounter with Mr. Orford about ten o'clock, and he remembered seeing the supper things in the room. The scholar had heard him below, unlocked the door, and called out such impatient resentment of his presence that Philip had come angrily up the stairs and followed him into the cabinet; a few angry words had passed, when Mr. Orford had practically pushed his visitor out, locking the door in his face and bidding him take Miss Minden home.

This threw no light at all on the murder; it only went to prove that at ten o'clock Mr. Orford had been alive in his cabinet.

Now here was the mystery; in the morning the door was still locked,

on the inside, the window was, as it had been since early evening, shuttered and fastened across with an iron bar, on the inside, and, the room being on an upper floor, access would have been in any case almost impossible by the window which gave on to the smooth brickwork of the front of the house.

Neither was there any possible place in the room where anyone might be hidden--it was just the square lined with the shallow bookshelves, the two pictures (that sombre little one looking strange now above the bent back of the dead man), the desk, one or two chairs and side tables; there was not so much as a cupboard or bureau--not a hiding-place for a cat.

How, then, had the murderer entered and left the room?

Suicide, of course, was out of the question, owing to the nature of the wound--but murder seemed equally out of the question; Mr. Orford sat so close to the wall that the handle of the knife touched the panel behind him. For anyone to have stood between him and the wall would have been impossible; behind the back of his chair was not space enough to push a walking-stick.

How, then, had the blow been delivered with such deadly precision and force?

Not by anyone standing in front of Mr. Orford, first because he must have seen him and sprung up; and secondly, because, even had he been asleep with his head down, no one, not even a very tall man, could have leaned over the top of the desk and driven in the knife, for experiment was made, and it was found that no arm could possibly reach such a distance.

The only theory that remained was that Mr. Orford had been murdered in some other part of the room and afterwards dragged to

his present position.

But this seemed more than unlikely, as it would have meant moving the desk, a heavy piece of furniture that did not look as if it had been touched, and also became there was a paper under the dead man's hand, a pen in his fingers, a splutter of ink where it had fallen, and a sentence unfinished. The thing remained a complete and horrid mystery, one that seized the imagination of men; the thing was the talk of all the coffee-houses and clubs.

The murder seemed absolutely motiveless, the dead man was not known to have an enemy in the world, yet robbery was out of the question, for nothing had been even touched.

The early tragedy was opened out. Mrs. Boyd told all she knew, which was just what she had told Elisa Minden--the affair was twenty years ago, and the gallows bird had no kith or kin left.

Elisa Minden fell into a desperate state of agitation, a swift change from her first stricken calm; she wanted Mr. Orford's house pulled down--the library and all its contents burnt; her own wedding-dress did she burn, in frenzied silence, and none dare stop her; she resisted her father's entreaties that she should go away directly after the inquest; she would stay on the spot, she said, until the mystery was solved.

Nothing would content her but a visit to Mr. Orford's cabinet; she was resolved, she said wildly, to come to the bottom of this mystery and in that room, which she had entered once and which had affected her so terribly, she believed she might find some clue.

The doctor thought it best to allow her to go; he and her cousin escorted her to the house that now no one passed without a shudder and into the chamber that all dreaded to enter.

Good Mrs. Boyd was sobbing behind them; the poor soul was quite mated with this sudden and ghastly ending to her orderly life; she spoke all incoherently, explaining, excusing, and lamenting in a breath; yet through all her trouble she showed plainly and artlessly that she had had no affection for her master, and that it was custom and habit that had been wounded, not love.

Indeed, it seemed that there was no one who did love Humphrey Orford; the lawyers were already busy looking for a next-of-kin; it seemed likely that this property and the estates in Suffolk would go into Chancery.

"You should not go in, my dear, you should not go in," sobbed the old woman, catching at Miss Minden's black gown (she was in mourning for the murdered man) and yet peering with a fearful curiosity into the cabinet.

Elisa looked ill and distraught but also resolute.

"Tell me, Mrs. Boyd," said she, pausing on the threshold, "what became of the scoured silk?"

The startled housekeeper protested that she had never seen it again; and here was another touch of mystery--the old peach-colored silk skirt that four persons had observed in Mr. Orford's cabinet the night of his murder, had completely disappeared.

"He must have burnt it," said Captain Hoare, and though it seemed unlikely that he could have consumed so many yards of stuff without leaving traces in the grate, still it was the only possible solution.

"I cannot think why he kept it so long," murmured Mrs. Boyd, "for it could have been no other than Mrs. Orford's best gown."

"A ghastly relic," remarked the young soldier grimly.

Elisa Minden went into the middle of the room and stared about her; nothing in the place was changed, nothing disordered; the desk had been moved round to allow of the scholar being carried away, his chair stood back, so that the long panel on which hung the picture of the gallows, was fuller exposed to view.

To Elisa's agitated imagination this portion of the wall sunk in the surrounding bookshelves, long and narrow, looked like the lid of a coffin.

"It is time that picture came down," she said; "it cannot interest anyone any longer."

"Lizzie, dear," suggested her father gently, "had you not better come away?--this is a sad and awful place."

"No," replied she. "I must find out about it--we must know."

And she turned about and stared at the portrait of Flora Orford.

"He hated her, Mrs. Boyd, did he not? And she must have died of fear--think of that!--died of fear, thinking all the while of that poor body on the gallows. He was a wicked man and whoever killed him must have done it to revenge Flora Orford."

"My dear," said the doctor hastily, "all that was twenty years ago, and the man was quite justified in what he did, though I cannot say I should have been so pleased with the match if I had known this story."

"How did we ever like him?" muttered Elisa Minden. "If I had entered this room before I should never have been promised to him--there is something terrible in it."

"And what else can you look for, my dear," snivelled Mrs. Boyd, "in a room where a man has been murdered."

"But it was like this before," replied Miss Minden; "it frightened me."

She looked round at her father and cousin, and her face quite distorted.

"There is something here now," she said, "something in this room."

They hastened towards her, thinking that her over-strained nerves had given way; but she took a step forward.

Shriek after shriek left her lips.

With a quivering finger she pointed before her at the long panel behind the desk.

At first they could not tell at what she pointed; then Captain Hoare saw the cause of her desperate terror.

It was a small portion of faded, peach-colored silk showing above the ribbed line of the wainscot, protruding from the wall, like a garment of stuff shut in a door.

"She is in there!" cried Miss Minden. "In there!"

A certain frenzy fell on all of them; they were in a confusion, hardly knowing what they said or did. Only Captain Hoare kept some presence of mind and, going up to the panel, discerned a fine crack all round.

"I believe it is a door," he said, "and that explains how the murderer must have struck--from the wall."

He lifted the picture of the hanged man and found a small knob or button, which, as he expected, on being pressed sent the panel back into the wall, disclosing a secret chamber no larger than a cupboard.

And directly inside this hidden room that was dark to the sight and noisome to the nostrils, was the body of a woman, leaning against the inner wall with a white kerchief knotted tightly round her throat, showing how she had died; she wore the scoured silk skirt, the end of which had been shut in the panel, and an old ragged bodice of linen that was like a dirty parchment; her hair was grey and scanty, her face past any likeness to humanity, her body thin and dry.

The room, which was lit only by a window a few inches square looking onto the garden, was furnished with a filthy bed of rags and a stool with a few tattered clothes; a basket of broken bits was on the floor.

Elisa Minden crept closer.

"It is Flora Orford," she said, speaking like one in a dream.

They brought the poor body down into the room, and then it was clear that this faded and terrible creature had a likeness to the pictured girl who smiled from the canvas over the mantelpiece.

And another thing was clear and, for a moment, they did not dare speak to each other.

For twenty years this woman had endured her punishment in the wall chamber in that library that no one but her husband entered; for twenty years he had kept her there, behind the picture of her lover, feeding her on scraps, letting her out only when the household was abed, amusing himself with her torture--she mending the scoured silk she had worn for twenty years, sitting there, cramped in the almost

complete dark, a few feet from where he wrote his elegant poetry.

"Of course she was crazy," said Captain Hoare at length, "but why did she never cry out?"

"For a good reason," whispered Dr. Minden, when he had signed to Mrs. Boyd to take his fainting daughter away. "He saw to that--she has got no tongue."

The coffin bearing the nameplate "Flora Orford" was exhumed, and found to contain only lead; it was substituted by another containing the wasted body of a woman who died by her own hand twenty years after the date on the mural tablet to her memory.

Why or how this creature, certainly become idiotic and dominated entirely by the man who kept her prisoner, had suddenly found the resolution and skill to slay her tyrant and afterwards take her own life (a thing she might have done any time before) was a question never solved.

It was supposed that he had formed the hideous scheme to complete his revenge by leaving her in the wall to die of starvation while he left with his new bride for abroad, and that she knew this and had forestalled him; or else that her poor, lunatic brain had been roused by the sound of a woman's voice as she handled the scoured silk which the captive was allowed to creep out and mend when the library door was locked. But over these matters and the details of her twenty years' suffering, it is but decent to be silent.

Lizzie Minden married her cousin, but not at St. Paul's, Covent Garden. Nor did they ever return to the neighborhood of Humphrey Orford's house.

The Breakdown

The local line had broken down, as it not infrequently did, and the little group of people who had stepped out of the London express, and hurried across the platform to make the connection were left stranded, the half-dozen villages along the Somerset Marshland that were served by the tiny railway were completely cut off; the stationmaster had no consolation or even advice to offer, and it was a forlorn little group that stood irresolute under the glare of the gas-lamp.

John Murdoch left the others and asked the way to Mutchley Towers--only three miles along the high road, and he had an electric torch. The young man at once decided to walk, and leaving his baggage at the station, he struck out into the dark as the scanty conveyances of the village were being mustered for the benefit of his fellow-travellers.

When you are young, robust, contented, and just off for your holidays after a very prosperous year, it is not such a bad thing to step out briskly on a frosty country road with the crystal facets of stars sparkling overhead and a crisp north wind whipping the blood to your face and emphasizing the warmth and comfort of a good overcoat.

It was Christmas Eve, and Murdoch was visiting an old college friend whom, though he had not seen him for some time, he had been very intimate with in his youth. Both the young men had been lucky; Murdoch was a remarkably successful lawyer, and Blanchard had succeeded to an ancient estate that had belonged to a distant kinsman; it was to view this new kingdom that this Christmas gathering had been got together, and Murdoch was looking forward to a really pleasant time in rather novel surroundings, for the busy city man had little time for any but the most conventional of holidays.

As he strode out along the hard road, leaving the lights of the village behind him, he recalled, as he had often recalled during his journey,

the very charming association that he had with Blanchard. It was only a portrait, a delicate pencil drawing, touched with color, of a girl's head with black curls and a lace scarf with "Marie Blanchard" written beneath; Murdoch's youthful fancy had been strangely enthralled by this sketch--so much so that he had always been too self-conscious to ask Blanchard who it was, but the style of the drawing had led him to infer that it must be at least a hundred years old, and that Marie Blanchard had long since been dust. This, however, had not prevented the peculiar haunting loveliness of the pictured countenance from shining fitfully through his secret dreams.

And it was with an instant recollection of his visionary fancy that Murdoch had accepted this invitation.

And now, as he trudged through the star-spangled dark, he was thinking, with a delightful thrill, that he might see again that enchanting drawing or even another portrait or some delightful memorial of the vanished lady.

It was very cold; the deep mid-winter chill began to penetrate even Murdoch's fleecy coat. When he snapped on his torch the acrid sweep of electric light showed only the frozen ridges of the road and the bleak hedges, dry, hard, and lifeless as a bone.

Murdoch began to wonder how much further Mutchley Towers was and how he should find it; as his quick walking brought him no nearer any sign of human habitation. As the wild clouds began to roll over the stars he regretted his impulse to walk and flashed the torch about to discover any place or person where he could ask his way. None such appeared, and when the stars were completely obscured and a bitter sleet was cast in his face by the rising wind, the young man lost his cheerful confidence, and thought with some sharpness of yearning of the car, waiting for him at the station where he would never arrive, and the dinner preparing that would very likely be

spoiled before he could sit down in comfort before it; he had not reckoned on the country being so desolate, and surely the porter's two or three miles was five or six.

As he thought thus with some impatience an upward flash of his torch clove the sleet and showed him, strangely close, a square white house, with a sign hanging in front on which was written in bold characters:

The Wishing Inn.

Murdoch was almost startled to find that he had almost stumbled into a house without being aware of it, but pleased, too, and he went up to the flat home-painted door and knocked.

It was an old-fashioned inn, but rather dreary than picturesque; fluted pilasters relieved the drab front, blinds were drawn in the upper windows, and the only light was a faint glimmer behind the curtains of what was obviously the bar-parlor; the hedge came either side, right up to the house and the rough road directly to the one step. Murdoch was mentally commenting on the cold and inhospitable look of the place when the door was abruptly opened and a repulsive-looking man appeared dimly outlined against a dark passage.

"Can you tell me the way to Mutchley Towers?" asked Murdoch briskly.

"No," replied the man sullenly, "it is a long weary road from here, and no stranger could find it in the dark."

"But I must get there tonight," said Murdoch vexed. "Have you any conveyance or even someone to guide me?"

"Neither one nor the other," replied the innkeeper.

"You've no telephone? Where is the nearest? There must be somewhere a post office--a farm where I could get a trap, something--"

Murdoch looked at the forbidding inn, and then at the forlorn night.

The north wind was mounting higher with every blast, the sleet was changing to icy flakes of snow, every star was now concealed behind the oncoming storm-clouds. The young man considered that he might walk on till he dropped with fatigue and never find his way; it was quite likely that the information given at the station was wrong, or even that he had taken the wrong direction; in either case, to continue to press aimlessly through the darkness seemed foolish; better to trust till daylight to the uninviting hospitality of "The Wishing Inn."

"Can you give me some food and a bed?" he asked dubiously.

"Come inside," was the man's noncommittal reply.

Murdoch stepped across the dingy threshold, glad to be out of the blast, yet reluctant to enter the musty dusk of the passage.

"You have not many travellers here?" he suggested, "nor much custom, perhaps? You seem to be a long way from the village."

"The place is lonely," was the reply.

"Will you wait in the parlor while your room is got ready for you?"

Murdoch followed him into the front room, where the light had glimmered between the folds of the drab curtains; this proved to be a lamp set on the center of a large table covered in dark green cloth that deadened the already feeble illumination; the walls were dark

and dirty, a few obscure oiled prints and a case of lead-colored fish hung amongst this background, a meagre fire burnt on the open hearth; there were a few horse-hair chairs and a dull, locked cabinet.

"Good Lord," thought Murdoch, "who could have dreamt to find such an out-of-the-way place--so near the railway?"

"Are you the landlord?" he asked aloud.

"Yes," replied the queer-looking individual who had opened the door, "the place is mine."

Murdoch looked at him intently; he wore a soiled flowered dressing-gown tied tightly round his lean figure, and carpet slippers that caused him to shuffle; his head was bald, his face yellow and pinched, his look both dejected and repellent.

Murdoch glanced round, not without a shudder.

"You have a curious name," he said. "The Wishing Inn."

"There are old stories about the place," replied the landlord with a shifty glance. "It is said that those who pass Christmas Eve here are allowed the fulfilment of one wish."

"Curious that this should be Christmas Eve!" exclaimed Murdoch. "Well, can you bring me some supper, when perhaps I can think of a wish?"

The man shuffled to the door, paused there, and glanced back.

"There are other travellers here I must consider," he grumbled gruffly, "a lady--a young lady--she must come down and warm herself here. There is no fire in her bedroom."

Murdoch's curiosity was fully roused, a woman that this man called a "young lady," staying in this wretched place on Christmas Eve!

"She is not alone?" he asked.

"She is alone, but she is waiting for someone," replied the man. "That is her wish, that he may come quickly--"

Jarred by the leer in the man's sullen tones, Murdoch turned aside, and, pulling off his dogskin gloves, busied himself warming his hands before the thin blaze.

"Bring what you have to eat at once, please," he said, knowing that it was hopeless to ask for any definite fare.

The door closed, and Murdoch tried to trim the lamp, and then with a squeaking pair of bellows to urge the pale fire; both his efforts were in vain, a cold dimness persisted in the dreary room, and neither fire nor lamp seemed to give either warmth or light!

Murdoch turned up his coat collar and sat shivering on one of the shiny horse-hair chairs. He wondered if the "young lady" upstairs was coming down to warm herself, as the dismal landlord had suggested, and whatever kind of romance it could be that chose such a place and time for its setting! Where was the tardy "he" coming from, and where did he intend to take the girl on such a night?

Christmas Eve, too, when all travel and conveniences would be suspended. The morrow was one of the most impossible days in the year for any kind of action, when the busiest cease their turmoil, and the most wretched have some shelter and peace.

So complete was the silence in which the inn was wrapped that Murdoch began to think that the landlord's tale was a mere fiction.

Who would linger mute in such an icy, bleak bedroom as this place afforded?

Murdoch began to feel drowsy. He had lost the keen appetite that had urged him on the road, and regarded his ordered meal with repugnance. Huddled in the worn horse-hair chair, his mind went idly over the possible tale of the woman lurking upstairs, and then he dwelt, dreamily, on the tale of the wish--the wish on Christmas Eve--Wishing Inn!

"Now what could my wish be?" thought Murdoch, drowsily. "Supposing I was to think of something quite fantastical and foolish? Supposing I was to wish to see, to win, to love, Marie Blanchard!"

As he whispered the name, it seemed to him that a deeper chill took possession of the room that the dreary fire could not warm or the dreary lamp light; he turned round sharply, as if in apprehension.

The door was opened, though he had heard no sound, and a figure stood on the threshold.

The breath of icy air was more penetrating now and Murdoch shivered as he rose.

"Won't you come to the fire?" he said, "though I am afraid it does not give out any heat."

The figure advanced from the shadows of the passage and came to the hearth; it was Marie Blanchard as he had seen her in the delicate sketch that had haunted his secret fancy.

Here was every feature on which his boy's caprice had so fondly dwelt, the straight nose, the level brows, the dark liquid eyes, the fine black ringlets loosely confined with a silver ribbon, the slender neck

and shoulders, the lace scarf and the clinging gown of fine floating muslin; despite the attire and the bitterness of the season she looked as fresh and blooming as if she wandered in a shadowed summer garden.

She looked at him with the petulant, wilful yet beseeching expression that so well became her type of loveliness and that in her portrait had so long haunted Murdoch.

"He has not come," she said, "he has not come--but you will, sir, help me to find him?"

She bent towards him, clasping her hands, and a queer perfume, like the last breath of dying flowers, was wafted to the young man.

"Who am I to find?" he stammered. "Are you not Marie Blanchard?"

"Yes, I am that unfortunate woman. And I am here to meet my lover. If he does not come they will take me back--"

"They call this 'The Wishing Inn,'" said Murdoch. "I wished to see you and you came."

She turned on him her sad, limpid gaze and Murdoch shuddered.

"I used to worship a little picture of you," he continued.

Unheeding she turned towards the door.

"Oh, come, will you not help me find my lover?" she entreated. Murdoch, as if against her entreaties, he had not the full use and power of his faculties, followed her to the door, out into the black passage and then into the road, she gliding before him like a glimmer of white. Snow and wind had alike ceased and the night was one of close darkness through which faintly gleamed the dull

light of two carriage lamps.

"See, my carriage is waiting!" cried Marie Blanchard. "Will you not enter and help me find my lover?"

Murdoch, as his eyes became accustomed to the encompassing gloom, discerned the dim outlines of a carriage.

"Perhaps you can put me on my way to Mutchley Towers," he said as he stepped after the slight figure of Marie Blanchard into the cavernous interior of the lumbering old-fashioned barouche, "for I," he added, vaguely, "am going to see your brother--is he not your brother--young Blanchard?"

The carriage was swinging forward now into the pitchy night; no ray of light penetrated the darkness where Murdoch sat on the chill seat, and where his companion was there was only the faintest blur of light where her white garments showed through the inky blackness.

"Help me to find my lover!" came her voice in continued anguish. "Ah, make haste to find him before it is too late!"

"Who is he, and how can I help you?" answered Murdoch, wildly, "and how can we find him? And where are you driving in this haste?"

For the carriage was bumping and jolting over what appeared to be rough heath strewn with boulders.

Murdoch pressed his face against the glass, and could just visualize whitish objects picked out for a fleeting second by the ghastly chill light of the carriage lamps.

"Where are we?" he cried. "Where are we going?"

And then he was overmastered by an overpowering desire to see his

companion, and, like a lightning inspiration from another world, he thought of the electric torch lying in his overcoat pocket.

"Marie Blanchard!" he cried, as he fumbled with it, "Marie Blanchard!" as he snapped on the powerful ray of light.

The moan, "Oh help me find my lover!" faded in his ear and the torch showed an empty carriage; he saw frayed leather, worn velvet, weather-stained glass, but nothing else; he was alone in the ancient barouche.

With a feeling akin to panic he beat at the door, the crazy fastenings gave way and he was precipitated violently into the darkness.

Again before him flitted the figure of Marie Blanchard; by a kind of bluish glow that appeared to encircle her he could see her plainly; she was moving rapidly and the sound of her lamentations fell sadly on his ear as he followed her wildly, stumbling over hillocks and falling against stones.

"See, I have found him," she cried, and stopped; Murdoch was almost beside her; he could see her standing, smiling archly as in the portrait sketch, fresh and merry and gay. "Through here," she added and struck on what seemed a door. "Come, will you not see him, my dear delight?"

Murdoch hastened eagerly forward; the torch was still grasped in his hand, and without knowing it he pressed the button. A flood of white light spread in front of him, there was no woman, no door; only a heavy stone with a railing round it and frail snow outlining the inscription:

MARIE BLANCHARD AND TOBIAS GRIEVE. 1823.

Murdoch wildly flashed the torch around the hillocks and graves, the

stones were graves; he was in a large churchyard and the snow was falling noiselessly into the dark and silence.

With a shudder of deep and intense horror, Murdoch, keeping his torch lit, fumbled his way towards the church; as he reached the porch he saw a light, heard voices, and from a chaos of movement and darkness he heard a friend speak his name.

"You were pretty well done," grinned young Blanchard the next morning as Murdoch lingered over a late Christmas breakfast. "Why, you crept into the church like a ghost."

"I felt like one," replied Murdoch briefly. "If you hadn't been there--"

"Well, it is just the one night in the year you would have found anyone, and then it was only because we were late with decorations--but I say, old chap, how did you get so far out of your way, and why were you in such a state?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Murdoch sheepishly. "I've been overworking lately--the dark and the cold and no food--I say," he added abruptly, "is there a place here called 'The Wishing Inn'?"

"Used to be--pulled down about a hundred years ago. Why?"

"Oh, I heard someone in the train mention it," said Murdoch. "Any story?"

"Yes. An ancestress of mine, Marie Blanchard, ran away on Christmas Eve to that inn to meet her lover--she chose that spot because a wish uttered there on that evening was supposed to come true! You know the usual tale."

"Well?"

"The poor lady wished that she might never be separated from her lover--but he was found by her brothers on his way to the rendezvous and killed in a scuffle. He was a certain Tobias Grieve, a farmer, much beneath her, the good old days! She did the proper thing and died of a broken heart and then they relented enough to put her in his grave, so her wish came true after all."

Murdoch did not answer; he was looking intently out of the window.

"She isn't altogether a legend," continued Blanchard, "for you can still see the grave with the two names on it--and there is a sketch of her by Cosway; I liked it so I used to have it in my rooms. Do you remember? But as for 'The Wishing Inn'--"

The door opened and a girl stood on the threshold, the exact counterpart of Murdoch's vision of the night, except that she was dressed in furs and a plumed hat.

"You haven't met my sister, Marie? The same name as the lady of the adventure and rather like her, too--"

Murdoch thought of his last night's wish and his heart thrilled as he looked into the fair girl's eyes--"To meet--to--love--to--win--Marie Blanchard!"

One Remained Behind

A Romance A La Mode Gothique

Rudolph quarrelled fiercely with M. Dufours, the antique dealer, but in low tones so as not to be overheard in the street.

"If you do not sell it to me--and cheaply--I shall report you to the police," he whispered, firmly clasping the large book bound in wood

and brass that he had found on a top shelf in the little room at the back of the shop.

"I do not think, M. Rudolph, that you would care to go to the police," retorted the old man, sucking in his toothless mouth with fury. "I would not part with the *grimoire*, no, not for fifty thousand francs."

"You will, however," sneered Rudolph, "sell it to me for fifty francs. I have no objection to informing the police that you are a receiver of stolen goods, a moneylender at an exorbitant rate of interest, a dealer in dangerous drugs, charms and black magic--"

"Ah, indeed," replied the shopkeeper, trying to be sarcastic but really rather uneasy. "And pray what are *you*, M. Rudolph? Unless I am very much mistaken *your* reputation is none too pure."

"Bah! What does it matter about my reputation? The police have nothing against me. I am a poor student, a poet, a philosopher, and I intend to have this treasure that I have discovered on your shelf."

"You admit that it is a treasure!" raged the old man. "And yet you offer me a miserable fifty francs for it!"

"It is no treasure for you," replied Rudolph scornfully. "You are a pitiful dabbler in the black arts. You would never have the courage to proceed far along this dangerous, fascinating road! You do not even understand the secrets concealed here!" He tapped with elegant soiled white fingers the cover of the disputed book. "I doubt if you can even read the title."

Overcome by curiosity, the old man asked:

"What is this volume that you think so highly of, M. Rudolph?"

"Ha! ha! And just now you said you wanted fifty thousand francs for

it!"

"Well, I know that it is an ancient *grimoire*, and therefore valuable."

"It is," sneered the student. "The *Grimoriam Veram*, written by Alibeck the Egyptian and printed at Memphis in 1517--together with this are bound several other treatises exceedingly rare."

"What do you want with these things?" demanded the antique dealer suspiciously. "You have no skill to interpret those signs and wonders--"

"Nor have you, or you would not be living here in this shabby shop, existing by petty crimes!"

"I might say the same of you, M. Rudolph! It is obvious that the study of black magic has not done you much good--your shirt is darned, your coat shiny at the elbows, your trousers are ragged round the hems, and one of your shoes is split!"

The student's eyes gleamed with malice.

"Nevertheless, perhaps I might surprise you, sordid old miser that you are! Please have the goodness to look into this!"

Still retaining the *grimoire* under his arm, the young man whipped out a small mirror that seemed to be of polished metal from his breast and flashed it in front of the reluctant gaze of M. Dufours.

He found, however, that it was impossible to avoid the metallic disc; his bleary eyes, worn by age and counting over the contents of his money-bags, stared, without his volition, into the magic mirror.

On the surface of this appeared a little cloudy figure, curled up like a bird in the nest, that gazed back at the old man with small black eyes

that glittered vindictively.

"There is nothing in my shop," muttered the curio dealer drowsily, "like that--what can it be a reflection of?"

The student laughed and the little figure flew out of the mirror and hung between it and the frightened face of M. Dufours; then, with a buzz like that of an angry insect, it rushed at the curio dealer's nose and pinched it violently until the old man howled with fear and pain. Rudolph laughed and returned the metal disc to his pocket, upon which the spirit vanished.

"It was some wasp or bee flew in," muttered M. Dufours, rubbing his red, smarting nose.

"Was it?" sneered the student. "Kindly look round your filthy shop."

The old man obeyed, fascinated by the brilliant black eyes, pallid face and mocking lips of M. Rudolph.

His jaw dropped and a trembling ran through all his shrunken limbs at what he saw--every object in his shop was transformed into something devilish. The old coats on their pegs waved their sleeves at him, the pawned trousers kicked as if prancing in a polka, grimacing faces peered from the blotched, cracked mirrors, the cupidons on the tarnished candelabra that hung from the cob-webbed rafters began to fly about like pigeons, and a lady in a very bad portrait by Legros, the art student, winked rudely at M. Dufours and shook at him her bouquet of miserably drawn roses which really resembled pickled onions.

M. Dufours rubbed his eyes and when he looked round again everything was normal.

"You see," remarked Rudolph, "that I know a few tricks. I shall keep the *grimoire* and owe you the fifty francs."

With an air of disdain he picked up his dusty, frayed beaver hat, that he thrust on the side of his head jauntily above his long jet-black locks, and strode into the street; M. Dufours shook a lean fist after him, but dare not raise a hue and cry. There was really something Satanic about M. Rudolph--that nip on the nose, now, surely he had not imagined that!

The student went gloomily along the street, the *grimoire* clasped tightly under his arm; the sky was a pale violet color above the roofs that were shining wet from a shower of rain, and a delicate breeze from the hills beyond the town stirred the rubbish in the gutter.

Outside the wineshop several students were sitting over their pints of claret, discussing their work and love affairs, joyously speculating as to their chances of prizes, of kisses, of distinction, and of monies that might be sent from their relatives.

As Rudolph strode past without taking any notice of them, they fell into a silence and stared after him. How poor and proud he was! No one knew much about him and everyone was slightly afraid of him; he was morose, haughty and had no friends--how was it that he could afford to pay for the courses at the University?

He was brilliant at his work, but was not likely, the professors said, to be successful, for he attended so few of the lectures.

How did he spend his time?

The students often asked one another this question and were afraid to answer it; the rumor was that Rudolph wasted his days and imperilled his soul by studying the forbidden arts.

They craned their necks after him in awe and admiration; he was so handsome with his high brow, black hair and cavernous eyes; every Fifi and Mimi in the town was in love with him and he never as much as glanced at any of them.

The other students admired his courage, too; he never concerned himself with any kind of civility and they were envious of his top hat--that *chapeau en haute forme* that he wore instead of the usual college cap.

True, this fashionable headgear was old and had probably been bought secondhand *chez Dufours*, but it had the address of a maker in the *rue St. Honorè* inside the brim and was undoubtedly elegant.

Sourly gratified by these admiring glances that he affected not to notice, Rudolph proceeded to his poor lodgings, which were in an inconvenient part of the town, a long way from the University.

Not only poverty, however, persuaded Rudolph to live in this remote quarter; he liked the solitude of the deserted street where the tumble-down houses huddled beneath the broken walls of the town, where at night it was silent save for the hoot of an owl or so that strayed in from the woods and brooded on the roof-tops, and dark save for the yellow spurts of light from the few dirty street lamps.

Holding the *grimoire* tightly, he mounted the twisting staircase to his attic; he was the sole lodger in the ancient house. An old woman and her grandchild owned the crazy building and dwelt on the ground floor.

Rudolph locked his door (he had fashioned the lock himself and carefully fixed it in place of the rude latch), and seating himself by the window in the lean-to roof, began to read his book eagerly.

There were many curious objects in the attic, stacked away in dark corners and under the dusty chairs and truckle-bed; on a bare table stood a lamp, a desk, on a shelf was a row of books; there were hanging cupboards, pegs for clothes and a number of boxes.

Rudolph read long in the *grimoire*, until the sun declined behind the roofs of the town, dusk filled his garret, and Jeanette, the landlady's grandchild, knocked at the door, crying out, in her thin, piping voice, that she had brought up the supper.

Rudolph, startled from his self-absorption, whispered a malediction, tossed the tangled hair from his eyes, rose and unlocked the door.

The little tin lamp on the stairs had been lit; this feeble light showed the broken banister rails, rotting floor boards and dust everywhere.

Jeanette, who looked like a white rat, hurried timidly into the room and placed Rudolph's supper on the table--a pint of wine, two slices of black bread, a dish of salted ham and pickled onions, and a withering apple; she then lit his lamp.

"Ha, little misery!" exclaimed the student wildly. "How is it that thou canst continue this wretched existence, unworthy of a human being who owns a mortal soul?"

"Indeed, Monsieur, I don't know," stammered the girl, trying to drop a curtsey; her skirts were so scanty that she could not achieve much elegance, and when she bent her knee it stuck through a hole in her rags. "Grandmother says that if you could pay the rent--"

"Begone," scowled Rudolph, waving his elegant hand. "I have my studies awaiting me."

Jeanette hurried away, glad to escape, and Rudolph pondered

deeply on what he had read in the *grimoire*.

It certainly was a treasure, that book! It contained secrets that he had long been seeking to discover and directions for conjurations and divinations that he longed to try immediately. Unfortunately all these required expensive materials, new-born infants, kids, black or white cocks, costly drugs, shew stones, tables of sweet-wood and squares of undyed wool taken from a spotless lamb and woven by a maiden.

Rudolph knew a great deal about black magic, but he had never made any money from either that or the poetry which stood in dusty stacks against the walls; indeed, most of his meagre substance had gone in buying ingredients or articles for his forbidden studies.

He frowned gloomily, staring with disgust at the coarse food on the table. How he longed for luxury, a splendid castle, troops of liveried servants, a carriage with six white horses, a superb mistress clad in Venetian velvet!

Again he opened the *grimoire* and carefully re-read something that had greatly taken his fancy; as he perused the badly printed page his pallid face gradually assumed a diabolical expression, for Rudolph wished evil to all mankind, and all his experiments--mostly taken from the *Clavicle of King Ptolomeus*--had been of the following kinds: "Of hatred and destruction"--"Of mocks and gainful seeking"--"Of experiments extraordinary that be forbidden of good men."

What fascinated him now was the description of certain rites whereby four strangers could be brought to the celebrant's room and one of them forced to do his will--even to the revealing of hidden treasure, the gift of luck at cards and success in a chosen career.

Rudolph nibbled an onion and brooded over this prospect; he decided at once on three of the people whom he would summon in

this manner, so humiliating to them and so gratifying to himself.

First he would force Saint Luc, the arrogant young aristocrat who had so often sneered at him and whom he so greatly detested, to appear in his wretched garret; second he would bring the vicious old professor, Maitre Lachaud, who had so often told him, Rudolph, that he was idle, stubborn and a disgrace to the University; and third he would drag along by his magic spells M. Lecoine, the fat banker who had laughed in his, Rudolph's face, when he had asked for a loan.

But here again expensive materials were required, and the experiment might fail and all the money and effort be wasted.

Rudolph ate his bread and ham, then went to the window and glared out at the sky from which all daylight had now receded. A full moon was appearing above the house-tops and a few dark clouds that might have been witches impatiently flying off for nocturnal delights showed beneath it. As Rudolph gazed a great longing took possession of him to make the experiment of which he had read in the *grimoire*; not only did he earnestly desire to vex and terrify three people whom he detested, he was dazzled by the hope of luck in cards, in his career, and the finding of a hidden treasure.

"I shall be the greatest poet in the world and I shall have more money than any man ever had before."

Such a prospect was worth a large sacrifice.

Rudolph turned back into the room and dragged an ancient carpetbag from under his bed; he opened it, unfastening the cumbrous lock, while he sighed deeply and from swathes of old silk rags he took out a large golden ring set with a pale stone that gave out more light than the dirty lamp fed by cheap oil.

This jewel had been given to Rudolph by his great-grandfather with strict charges never to part with it--"except from the purest motives" the old man had said. He had been a famous roué in his time and had squandered all the family fortune on English jockeys, boxers and Italian dancers.

Rudolph disliked the thought of parting with the ring because the possession of such a gem increased his self-esteem and also because he was afraid of his great-grandfather's curse; he decided, however, to do so, and thrusting the ring in his bosom left the attic and turned to the fashionable part of the town beyond the University buildings that, rising directly in front of the moon, looked as if they were cut out of black paper.

The shutters were just being put up in front of the shop of M. Colcombet, the jeweller, but Rudolph dashed through the door and laid his ring on the counter, on the length of black velvet that covered the glass that contained flashing parures in heart-shaped boxes lined with satin.

"This is a family piece," said the student haughtily. "It is worth a good sum."

M. Colcombet was doubtful, however, both of the ring and the customer; he peered suspiciously, first at the sardonic young man, then at the white jewel which was brighter than any diamond in the shop.

"It is a beryl," he remarked.

"Not an ordinary beryl," replied Rudolph, contemptuously flashing the ring about in his hand so that in the light of the well-trimmed silver lamp the stone cast out flames of blue, green and crimson.

"Well," admitted M. Colcombet, who seemed fascinated by the stone, "I daresay the Comtesse Louise would like it for her wedding *toilette*."

"Ha, is the Comtesse Louise to be married?" asked Rudolph, who remembered with anger this haughty beauty who had stared through him when her carriage has passed him in the street, covering him with mud.

"Yes, to the Prince de C----; it is to be a splendid affair," gossiped the jeweller. "At her father's chateau, you know--the chapel is hung with cloth of gold and there is to be a festival for all the neighborhood. Many of the students have had cards of invitation, and some of them have been in here to buy their presents--M. le Marquis de Saint Luc, for instance. You perhaps yourself, Monsieur?" he added with an inquisitive glance at Rudolph's shabby clothes.

"What do you offer for the ring?" demanded the student fiercely.

"It is white," said the jeweller, "but not, I am sure, a diamond--reset it would look very handsome, perhaps in the center of a tiara or on a corsage ornament--"

"How much? I am in a hurry."

M. Colcombet, who felt rather embarrassed and confused, stammered:

"Two thousand francs, Monsieur."

"It is worth far more, but I was not born to bargain--give me the money."

As Rudolph flung down the ring he disarranged the black cloth over the show case and revealed a set of pearl and diamond ornaments

in cases of pale blue satin.

"It is the wedding parure of the Comtesse Louise," said M. Colcombet as he counted out the notes from his pocket-book; Rudolph took up the money and passed out into the street that, when the shutters were all up in front of the shops, was lit only by the light of the rising moon; the small dark clouds had now disappeared and the sky was pale and pure.

The student returned in a melancholy, bitter mood to his lodgings; although he had two thousand francs in his pocket he felt poorer than when he had been in possession of the beryl ring.

The mention of the Comtesse Louise had considerably vexed him; how he detested that proud girl with her little sneering mouth and large, slightly prominent blue eyes! He had several times seen her driving in the town, and once he had come face to face with her in a bookshop where she was buying foolish novels and he was trying to sell some Aldine volumes with superb sepia-colored initials; on that occasion he had held open the door for her, and she had passed him with the most icy of unspoken rebukes in her lofty carriage and set sweetness of glance.

He had, however, seen her leaning on the arm of Saint Luc, that ostentatious dandy who spent more in a year on his trousers and *gilets* than the whole of Rudolph's annual income.

Hatred and another dark emotion that was almost despair inspired the student with a diabolic plan; absenting himself from all classes and lectures he devoted all his time to carrying out precisely the instructions in the *grimoire* published at Memphis in 1517.

He made his plans carefully and arranged for his great experiment to take place on the evening of the wedding day of the Comtesse

Louise and Prince de C----.

First he provided himself with a magic wand by going into the woods and cutting two twigs, one of hazel and one of elder from trees that had never borne fruit; at the end of these he placed steel caps magnetized with a lodestone; then he took from the carpet-bag some ink made from sprigs of fern gathered on St. John's Eve and vine twigs cut in the March full moon which had been ground to powder and mingled with river water in a fair glazed earthen pot; this mixture had been boiled up over a fire of virgin paper.

Rudolph also possessed a phial of pigeon's blood and a male goose quill and a bloodstone which possessed the virtue of protecting the wearer from evil spirits; he had always found this a very necessary precaution.

On the third day of the new moon Rudolph purchased a black cock and a white cock from the market place and kept them in his garret until nightfall; he then put the birds in a wicker cage, his paraphernalia in the carpet-bag, and set out beyond the town, beyond the woods until he came to an open space that surrounded the ruins of an Abbey reputed to be haunted by the spirits of monks who had been unfaithful to their vows.

Here the grass was short and scarred by stones and rocks; an ancient thorn tree, sacred to heathen deities, stood bleak and twisted by a small pool. The Gothic windows of the Abbey showed a black framework against the luminous sky; the bats flew in and out of the crisp, dark ivy; several noxious fungi grew round the pool, which was covered by a dull red floating weed so that it did not reflect any light.

Rudolph had often visited this place before; it was exactly what the *grimoires* said was required for infernal rites--"a desolate spot free

from interruptions."

With mutterings to himself, while the sweat gathered on his high, pallid brow, the student made the grand Kabbalistic circle. From his carpet-bag he took out his rods, a goatskin, two garlands of Vervain, two candles of virgin wax made by a virgin--Jeanette whose meagre charms guaranteed her chastity--a sword of blue steel, two candle-sticks of massive silver, two flints, tinder, a flask of *eau-de-vie*, some camphor, incense, and four nails from the coffin of a child--which last item Rudolph had paid Pierre, the coffin-maker, very highly for, for it had been necessary to go to the burial vaults of Saint Jean to obtain them.

With this material Rudolph made his grand circle of goatskin, sprinkling the incense and camphor in a wheel shape and kindling his fire of wood (that he fed with the cognac) in the center, then, with his right arm bared to the shoulder, he sacrificed the two cocks, burning them on the fire while he muttered his evocations.

The bats and owls fled from the ruins, the moon veiled in the sky, the earth shook, the red scum of weeds on the lake became agitated; Rudolph pressed the bloodstone to his cheek and muttered an even more powerful spell.

The water was troubled furiously and a lovely boy rose to the surface of the lake and in a pleasant voice demanded of the student what he wished.

Rudolph was not deceived by this civility; he knew that the apparition was Lucifer himself, the most violent of the evil spirits who would tear the celebrant to pieces if he were to step out of the circle or to drop his bloodstone. Astaroth came, Rudolph was well aware, in the shape of a black and white ass, Beelzebub in hideous disguises, Belial seated in a flaming chariot, and Beleth on a white horse

preceded by a company of musicians.

"What is your will?" asked Lucifer gently, but puffing out his red cheeks with rage.

"Monsieur," said the student respectfully, "I am about--at the end of the month, to be exact--to make a great experiment, that described on page twenty-three of the *Grimoire* of Alibeck the magician, published at Memphis in 1517."

"A rare edition," remarked Lucifer. "You were fortunate to find it."

While he spoke he was carefully watching to see if the student made the least mistake, so that he might seize him and pull him to shreds, but Rudolph was prudent and kept well within the center of the magic circle with the bloodstone pressed to his cheek.

"I want to know, Monsieur, if you will assure me that the experiment will be successful?"

"You seem to know a few tricks," smiled the fiend. "No doubt, if you will fulfil all the requirements given in the *grimoire*, the experiment will be successful. You will take the consequences, of course."

"If I can have four strangers in my room to do my bidding, discover a hidden treasure, become a famous poet and lucky at cards, I shall require nothing more," sneered Rudolph, who even when talking to a devil could not for long maintain a submissive tone.

"All that you shall have," promised the lovely child in a sweet voice, but his pretty little eyes were sparkling with fury at this insolence.

"I ask no more!" cried Rudolph, shaking his magic hazel wand at the lake. "Foul fiend begone!"

With a dreadful hiss the boy sank into the lake, the red weed closed over the place where he had been, the moon came to a standstill in the sky, the bats and owls flew back to the ruins, and the student stepped out of the magic circle and began to pack away his materials into the carpet-bag.

When he returned through the town he heard the violinists above the music shop of M. Kuhn practicing for the wedding festivities of the Comtesse Louise.

As the time drew near for the great experiment Rudolph made his final preparations; these had cost him nearly all the money he had received for the beryl ring and the suspicious looks of his fellow students.

He had paid his rent and given Jeanette a present to bribe her to sweep and clean out his chamber so that no dirt remained anywhere; he had then perfumed it with mastic and aloes and hung clean white curtains at the window, furnished the bed with fair linen, woollen coverlets and a mattress of goose down.

He bought also a table and four chairs of plain white wood, four platters of white damask. To rid himself of the curiosity of Jeanette he declared that these preparations were for a visit from his mother and two sisters that he was expecting.

For three days before the date fixed for the wedding of the Comtesse Louise, Rudolph fasted and looked to his room, making sure that there were no hangings, nor indeed any objects, set crosswise, that no clothes were on pegs, that there was not a bird-cage in any corner of the room, and that everything was scrupulously clean.

On the evening of the great day itself the student set his four chairs

round his table, placed out on the fair damask cloth the four platters with a wheaten loaf on each, and the four glass beakers full of clear water. Beside his bed he set his old armchair, and the windows he opened wide onto the moonlit night.

In the center of the table he placed a shaker of goatskin, three black and one white bean, then, everything being in readiness, he cast himself on his knees and uttered the powerful conjuration given in page twenty-three of the *grimoire* of Alibeck. Then he lay down on his bed, wearing a handsome chamber-robe that he had bought for the occasion.

He heard the church clock strike midnight, and then the moonlight in the attic began to quiver a little and Professor Lachaud floated in through the open window, not moving his feet nor looking to right nor left, but stiffly passing along; taking no heed of Rudolph, the dry little *savant* seated himself at the table and gazed in front of him through his silver-rimmed spectacles.

The next arrival was the banker, M. Lecoine; with an expression of surprise on his chubby face he floated in from the outer moonlight, a table napkin tucked under his chin and a pen in his hand; without speaking he seated himself opposite Lachaud. Almost at once the window was darkened again as M. Saint Luc appeared wearing a fashionable evening costume with a superb *gilet* of sky-blue *moiré anglaise*, in silence he occupied the third place at the table.

Rudolph felt ill with excitement; the white curtains blew out in the moonlight and a lady all in white entered--the Comtesse Louise, or rather the Princesse de C----, in her bridal gown of silver and satin with her wreath of myrtle and her parure of diamonds and pearls; on the thumb of her right hand was the beryl ring.

She took the fourth place at the table and the four strangers began to

eat and drink; their movements were stiff and jerky like those of automata, and they were silent, without seeming to notice anything.

"One remains behind," whispered Rudolph from the bed. "One remains behind."

The four strangers ate the wheaten loaves to the last crumb and drank the crystal water to the last drop; then the professor took up the goatskin shaker and put inside it the three black and one white bean, so that they might draw lots as to who should stay behind.

It was the lady who took out the white bean; the three men then rose and, still in silence, floated out of the window one after the other, the professor's robe, the youth's frac coat and the banker's napkin fluttering for a second in the night breeze as they disappeared into the moonlight.

The Comtesse Louise then rose, and crossing the room without moving her feet, seated herself in the armchair beside Rudolph's bed. There were many things that the student would have liked to have asked the bride, but he remembered the danger of deviating from the formula of Alibeck, so he said:

"Confer on me luck at cards."

She slipped the beryl ring off her thumb, handed it to him and replied:

"As long as you wear this you shall have luck at cards."

"Confer on me the gift of fame."

"You shall be the most famous poet alive."

The lady answered clearly and promptly, but she ignored Rudolph as utterly as she had ignored him when she had met him in the

bookshop or the street; this angered him and he made his third demand very haughtily:

"Reveal to me some hidden treasure."

She rose.

"Come with me."

The student left his bed and followed her out of the window, walking on the air as if it had been curdling foam with firm sand beneath it. They passed over the house-tops, Rudolph in his bedgown that floated out behind him and his pearl-grey trousers, the lady in her bridal dress and the long veil that billowed into the moonlight until it seemed part of the silver vapor of night.

When they reached the market square the lady descended like a ray of light and paused before the great iron-studded door of the Church; when she saw that Rudolph was behind her, she passed through the door, and the student found no difficulty in doing the same.

The Church was cold and dim; as these two entered all the lamps before the shrines burnt very low, but the spell held.

The Comtesse Louise paused on a gravestone in the chancel; it sunk beneath her, and Rudolph, who was close behind, descended with her to the vaults.

Here the only light was that which emanated from the brilliant figure of the bride, who hovered over the rows of coffins like a will-o'-the-wisp.

Over one of these that was covered with a rotting pall cloth she hung motionless, and her voice, hollow as an echo in a shell, broke the silence of the vault.

"Here is your treasure."

Rudolph wrenched at the wooden wooden coffin lid, then at the leaden shell beneath, and found that both came away like paper in his hands; the supernatural light cast by the Comtesse Louise enabled him to see a skeleton, livid with the hues of decay, lying in a tattered shroud; under the skull was a cluster of diamonds and sapphires arranged like a pillow; these had been enclosed in a silken case which had frayed to a few faded threads.

The student despoiled the coffin, filling the pockets of his *robe de chambre*, of his waistcoat and trousers with the gems. When he had grubbed up the last of the jewels he harshly told the lady to lead him back to his garret.

She instantly rose through the stone floor of the Church and passed down the aisle, through the wooden door and into the public square; without moving her feet, without speaking, without glancing to right or left, she led him over the roofs to his garret.

Rudolph did not think of her at all until he had packed all the jewels into his carpet-bag and hair-cord trunk; then he looked at her standing immobile in her wedding splendor, gazing in front of her with her blue, slightly prominent eyes, and he felt a twinge of compassion for her.

"You may return to your bridegroom," he said disdainfully.

She did not, however, move, and Rudolph could not recall what the formula of dismissal was in this conjuration.

He searched in the *grimoire* and could find nothing on this point: "One remains behind" was all that was written in the instructions.

The student did not greatly concern himself about this, however; he felt very drowsy and cast himself on his bed. "No doubt she will be gone in the morning."

When Rudolph awoke the sun was bright in his room and Jeanette was at his bedside with coffee and rolls; on the tray was a letter with the Parisian postmark.

The student tore the envelope open and found inside an enthusiastic letter from a publisher to whom he had submitted his poems a year ago. This gentleman had, it seemed, printed the poems without telling the author, and the thin volume had been a *succès fou*. "You are acclaimed as the greatest poet of the century, far beyond Lamartine or Byron."

Rudolph sprang out of bed in an excess of joy, which was checked however when he saw the bride still standing where he had left her last night, erect by the table staring in front of her with her blue, slightly prominent eyes.

He now perceived that she was as transparent as the lace that she wore and that she looked as if sketched with white chalk on the dark background of the room; he saw also that she was perceptible to himself only, since Jeanette had not only taken no notice of her, but, in leaving the room, had walked right through her. Rudolph then realized that the four strangers had been spectres or phantoms, not, as he had thought, the human beings themselves.

He felt that he had humiliated the lady sufficiently--besides, he was becoming bored with her company; so he again commanded her to depart, and, when she took no heed of him, he once more consulted the *grimoire*. This authorative work, however, had one serious defect--it offered no advice on how to be rid of spirits, ghosts, wraiths or supernatural appearances that had outstayed their

welcome.

Rudolph was however too excited and too anxious to put his good fortune to the test to concern himself very much about the phantasm that had already done him such good service.

"Pray please yourself, Madame la Princesse," he said with a sarcastic bow, and hastened into the street, the lady floating behind him with feet that were motionless and with a fixed gaze.

As he passed the University the student saw a knot of his fellows gathered round the steps. One of them hailed him:

"Rudolph, have you heard the news?"

"About the success of my poems?" asked the student haughtily.

"Your poems? No, indeed--poor Professor Lachaud died suddenly last night. He was shut up in his library to study as usual, and this morning he was found stiff in his chair!"

Rudolph passed on in silence; he felt rather disturbed.

M. Colcombet and some friends were gossiping outside his shop.

"Oh, M. Rudolph, have you heard, what a dreadful tragedy? Last night, just as the bride--the Comtesse Louise--was being conducted to the bridal chamber, she fell down dead! Yes, dead as a stone! And what do you think, at the same moment one of the guests, M. Saint Luc, had a stroke of apoplexy, and he too fell dead, with a glass of champagne in his hand!"

Rudolph looked over his shoulder at the phantom, that gazed ahead serenely; he though--"the *grimoire* did not state that the spell would cause the death of the four strangers. But perhaps if it had I should

not have hesitated."

As he passed the Bank he saw the black shutters being put up; in the doorway were clerks fastening black bands to their arms. "Someone dead?" asked Rudolph drily.

"M. Lecoine himself! He retired to his counting-house, as he always does on Friday evenings, at ten minutes to twelve--old Auguste took him in his cup of soup, and he was alive then--this morning he was dead in his chair, with his napkin under his chin and his empty cup on his desk!"

"What a number of deaths in this town!" remarked Rudolph sarcastically. "I hope that it isn't the plague!"

Although at first he had been shocked to learn of the dreadful results of his spell, he soon consoled himself; the four dead people were all detestable--perhaps one might be a little sorry for the bride, until one remembered how cold and haughty she had been, how insulting with her icy looks.

No, everything was as it should be; the only difficulty was how to be rid of this phantom that followed him so closely--"One remains behind."

"Eh, well," thought Rudolph, "no one can see her but myself, and no doubt she will soon tire of following me about or I shall be able to find a spell to dismiss her."

So, being strong-minded as well as hard-hearted, he contrived to forget the filmy-white shape that was the dead bride, and that never left him, day or night. Everywhere that he went she accompanied him, and when he returned home in the evenings she seated herself by his bed in the worn armchair.

The phantom was the last thing he saw at night, the first thing he saw in the morning, and though he searched his whole library through he could not discover any spell to be rid of her; he was also debarred from any magical ceremonies, divinations or conjurations, for it is well-known that the company of a ghost is fatal on these occasions.

His good fortune, however, prevented him from troubling much about this inconvenience; not only had he the treasure taken from the vaults of Saint Jean, but his fame as a poet spread over the entire country, and he found that whenever he played at cards, when wearing the beryl ring he was lucky, so that his winnings at play afforded him a considerable income.

He soon moved to Paris, where he became the center of a crowd of admirers; all the ladies were singing his verses to harps or guitars, all the gentlemen copied his waistcoats and the manner in which he tossed his long black hair off his pallid brow.

The student now enjoyed almost everything that he had ever wished for; he had a handsome apartment, liveried servants, a smart *phaeton*--but he had no mistress.

All the women adored him, but if he tried to make love to any one of them, she seemed repelled, frightened, and always ended by running away.

Rudolph cursed and wished that he had asked for luck in love instead of luck in cards, for the sale of the treasure trove would supply him with all the money he needed. He knew why the women avoided even the slightest intimacy with him--they could not perceive the ghost of the bride, but they felt it, a miasma of death that killed their rising passion, a bitter chill that cooled their warm hearts and withered the kisses on their lips.

The student used all the arts at his command in the hope of destroying the phantom, but nothing was of any avail; sometimes she was so pale as to be scarcely visible, sometimes she was as solid as a living woman; but she was always there and Rudolph's nerves began to quiver every time he looked over his shoulder--"One remains behind" he would mutter, gazing up into her glassy eyes. He tried to argue out the matter with her, to appeal to her compassion, even to make love to her, but she never took any more notice of him than she had taken when she had passed him in the bookshop or in the streets of the University town.

There were other flaws in the student's good fortune; his publisher continually implored him to write some more poems.

"You know there are only ten poems in that little volume, and everyone in France knows them by heart! Soon people will begin to say that you are incapable of writing anything else!"

This was precisely what had happened; whenever Rudolph sat down to write, the spectre of the bride glided round to the other side of the table, and seated there, stared at him with her blue, slightly prominent eyes, and while she gazed at him he found it impossible to compose a single line.

With relief he remembered the sheaves of paper, all covered by verses, that he had, in his excitement, left behind in his garret, so he wrote to Jeanette telling her to send them at once. The girl had, however, used the papers to light the kitchen fire, and the student uttered a bitter malediction when he received the ill-spelt letter in which she gave him this news.

Gradually his popularity waned; the Parisians became tired of his ten poems, of his gloomy, preoccupied airs, and began to laugh at his failures in love. He was too successful at cards, and so found himself

avoided, not only at the gambling parties in private houses, but even at the halls in the *Palais Royal*.

One morning he was seated over his coffee pondering how he should be rid of the phantom when his eye caught a line in the *Gazette* that his English valet had left on the table beside his service of coffee, rolls and fruit.

In the University town of S---- a horrible outrage had been discovered; a sacrilegious robbery had been committed in the Church of Saint Jean--a tomb had been broken open and a vast treasure was stolen.

The student read this account with a good deal of interest.

"I never heard any of this," he commented bitterly, "when I was in that detestable town."

The ancient Church, it seemed, possessed a vast treasure, largely consisting of offerings at the miraculous shrine of Ste. Pelagie, which had been hidden in the coffin of that saint during the dangers of the late revolutions; all record of this had been lost, and for a generation people had searched in vain for the hidden treasure; then a paper found in the sacristy had given them the clue and the coffin with the gems had been discovered.

They had been left there while the Bishop was consulted as to the propriety of moving them; His Grace had not only given his consent to this, but had come in person to see this remarkable discovery--only to learn that the jewels had been stolen by thieves who had broken into the vault. At first the police had kept the matter hushed up in order that they might pursue their investigations more at ease, now they decided to make the matter public.

"Ah, Madame!" cried Rudolph, addressing the phantom that hovered over his breakfast table. "You have deceived me grossly!"

He morosely decided to leave Paris. The jewels might be traced and he did not dare to try to sell those that he had left; on consulting with his major-domo he found that he was short of money--he had been living most extravagantly, spending thousands of francs on horses, dogs, furniture, pictures and other things that he did not care for in the least.

So in order to raise the money for his travelling expenses, he put on the beryl ring and went to one of the worst gambling dives in Paris where accomplished gamblers nightly stripped newcomers to the capital.

Rudolph entered this den of vice. As he threw off his long black cloak there was a murmur of admiration for his superb blue *gilet* in *moiré anglaise*.

He was not, however, very welcome even in that dreadful place, for even these hardened gamblers, coarsened by debauchery, felt uneasy in his presence; the phantom spread a chill about her that surrounded Rudolph like a cold sea mist and caused those who came near him to shiver. These scoundrels, however, could not for long resist the lure of the piles of gold that the student flung down on the long green baize table--these represented the last remnants of his ready money, the rest of his fortune was contained in the stolen treasure that he dare not dispose of in France.

When he had been playing and winning for an hour, a huge pile of gold pieces was massed in front of him, and hellish looks of black hatred were cast on him by the *habitués* of the gambling dive.

Rudolph felt depressed and took little pleasure in his fortune, that

was more than sufficient to take him to Vienna or Rome or some other city where he could sell the stolen gems; his head ached and the flames of the ring of candles above the table seemed to penetrate his brain like hot nails, all the vicious, greedy faces sneering about him seemed to float detached from their bodies in the thick, foul air.

The phantom of the bride had become quite solid; it seemed impossible to Rudolph that she was invisible to the company as she hovered over the piles of dirty cards, her wedding splendor floating about her like a cloud of moonshine.

"Madame," he said between his teeth, "have the goodness to leave me--this is not a fit place for a gentlewoman. But, if you do not cease plaguing me, I shall take you to worse--"

"What are you muttering?" asked his companion, a stout man whose face was covered by carbuncles and whose breath was hot as flame.

"Oh, nothing, I was merely counting my winnings," sneered Rudolph with his hands over the pile of gold.

"Pray," said he of the carbuncles, "have another cast of the dice with this young gentleman," and he nudged the student in the ribs to let him know that here was another pigeon to be plucked.

Rudolph saw a spruce youth with a baby face bowing before him, and he thought: "This is a fool fresh from college, he reminds me of Saint Luc. I may as well have his money."

So he agreed to play with the young stranger, who had a pleasant lisping voice, a cheek as smooth as a girl's and slightly reddened eyes.

"Surely," thought the student, "I have seen him before." He was

tormented by this likeness to someone whom he had once known and so did not observe that the bride had made a movement for the first time since she had followed him; always she had moved through the air in one piece, like a floating statue, now she leaned forward and drew from his finger the beryl ring.

The student played carelessly, certain of his luck, and lost all his winnings to the youth with the baby face.

"Ah!" he shrieked, "I have been deceived!"

He stared closer at the young man who was gathering up the gold; now he recognized him--it was Lucifer who had appeared to him on the weed covered pond outside the ruined abbey.

With a yell echoed in the mocking laughter of the gamblers, Rudolph rushed into the street, the bride floating after him, the great beryl glittering on her pale finger.

When the student reached his luxurious apartment he found that the police were in possession; the stolen jewels had been traced to him. His publisher was also waiting for him in the antechamber.

"You are a cheat as well as thief, M. Rudolph," he declared severely. "I do not believe that you wrote those poems, or you would be able to write others. Ah, he could rob a church, the dead, is capable of anything! Tomorrow I shall publish a statement in the Gazette to the effect that you are not the author of the poems, and you will be the laughing stock of Paris!"

Rudolph did not stay to hear these indignant words; he fled out into the night with the *agents de police* lumbering after him, and reeling along under the moon that shone above the house-tops, reached the river that dark as ink flowed between houses white as paper.

The phantom pressed close to the student, like a cold fog in his lungs. For the first time she spoke:

"You cannot complain. All the promises in the *grimoire* have been fulfilled."

"Do not let us, Madame, waste words," replied Rudolph. "Will you return me my beryl ring?"

"Never!"

"Will you leave me?"

"Never! One remains behind!"

The student then perceived that he had come to the end of his story; he jumped into the river. As he sank he raised his top hat and said politely:

"Goodbye, Madame la Princesse de C----."

The phantom remained hovering over the spot where he had disappeared, then slowly dissolved into air, her pearls and diamonds turning into drops of rain, her veils and laces into wisps of vapor, the beryl ring being caught up into a shaft of moonshine.

This romantic suicide made Rudolph very popular again in Paris; it was believed that he had written the poems after all, and the fashionable color for that season became a faded green named *vert Rudolph*. The police became disliked for their hasty action in raiding the apartments of the sensitive poet, for it was discovered that the so-called gems in his possession were mere paste and had nothing to do with the treasure trove in the vaults of Saint Jean.

M. Dufours travelled to Paris and bought back the *grimoire* from the sale of Rudolph's effects and returned it to the shelf at the back of his shop where it soon became again covered with dust.

The House By The Poppy Field

When Maitland first saw the house the poppies were in full bloom; he had never before seen so many blooming together; the field was a sheet of scarlet flecked with green, right up to the hedge of unclipped yew that divided the garden from the pasture land; also large mauve poppies with a deep stain at the base of each petal rose from the long parterres at the side of the lawn; the property was in tolerable condition but had the melancholy air of a place for long not lived in and only superficially cared for by tired indifferent hands.

Maitland had inherited Bothal from a distant relative who for years had left the estate in the charge of an estate agent and a caretaker, and Maitland now past middle age had himself lived a wandering eccentric life; a solitary man, therefore, gazed at a solitary house; a shade passed over his lined face, cast by the cloud that sailed over the poppy field and gave a darker hue to the waving flowers.

Bothal, built in a Jacobean Baroque style, had three ornate gables, in each of which was set a classic bust of yellow stone; the windows were handsomely finished with stone facings that showed richly against the warm purplish pink of the bricks; round the lower windows and over the white classic porch grew a tangle of small shell-tinted roses; the cloud passed and the sun was brightly over the empty house, the poppy field, the garden where Maitland stood alone.

As he gazed at the roses against the brick, the blank windows, the closed door, an unutterable nostalgia shook him; what was he

regretting, what seeking?

He had pursued his chimera in many parts of the world and never felt so near her hidden presence as now; he glanced at the keys in his hand; "Of course I shall sell," he had told the agent, "the place is much too large and uncouth for me."

And for most people, the agent had hinted; Bothal had been untouched for a good many years, it was not, in any sense of the word, modernized--a desirable, but not a saleable property, though a pretty piece of period architecture, the man of business had said.

Maitland passed under the porch; again the shadow glided over the poppy field, the house, again the cloud passed rapidly and the sun again drew up the hot scent of the box hedge.

The new owner turned the key and entered his mansion; his ancestors had lived there, generation after generation, long before, but Maitland had no sense of coming home; everything seemed strange, yet he was filled by an inexplicable yearning.

Everything within the house was swept and dusted, but this neatness seemed only to accentuate the desolation; the place had not the air of being left to gradual ruin, but rather appeared as if it were being kept trim for someone who would never return, or was very long away. This sad expectancy had to Maitland a deeper sadness than the utter abandonment of hope. The walls of the first room that he entered were, in the fashion of a bygone day, stretched with canvas that was painted with sombre landscapes of purple rocks, shadowed streams, storms blowing up against lonely places and plains strewn with broken pillars. Maitland opened the shutters; as the sunshine streamed into the loneliness, he winced.

"People should not leave houses standing when they no longer

intend living in them," he muttered to himself. "No, every house that is not inhabited should be pulled down."

Yet he would not have said that the place was haunted; it seemed, indeed, intolerably empty even of ghosts; it was that air of waiting that Maitland found so unendurable--waiting for what, for whom?

He walked through all the rooms on the ground floor; they were clean and the house had been kept well repaired; there were no marks of damp or rats, of spiders or decay; the window panes were bright and here and there were some pieces of furniture, a settee covered in red rep, a pair of embroidered chairs protected by canvas covers, a glass-fronted case in which stood rows of leather-backed, polished books, a table or two, a couple of andirons in front of the marble mantlepiece--all as if someone had moved out yesterday or was moving in tomorrow. Maitland went upstairs to the top of the house; in the front was a long gallery, with a sloping floor, and a dais for musicians; this was completely bare; the walls had been painted, on the plaster, with an Italian scene, now utterly faded; only here and there could be discerned the misty azure of a mountain or a lake; the windows were those of the gables; they had deep box seats of mellow colored wood and were unshuttered, through them streamed the sunlight, yellow and rich as rum honey; Maitland felt that if he put his fingers in it and then tasted them, he would savor the sweetness of the entire summer; the back of the house was divided into two large bedrooms; in each was an old-fashioned bed with mattress, tester and coverlet in good repair; the curtains, of thick woollen material strewn with balls of camphor, were lying on the beds.

Maitland opened the window in the slightly large room; he looked onto the field of poppies that encircled the house at the back; here the boundaries of the garden had been broken down and the wild flowers had flowed into what had been the lawn; Maitland thought that he could detect a perfume, like the acrid whiff of a narcotic, on the

air.

He thought, "Why should I not stay here for a while? There is nothing for me to do, no one waiting for me."

It seemed, as if a voice breathed over his shoulder--"no one?" with that rise at the end of the sentence that means a question.

Maitland turned and looked about the room, so neat, so clean, so empty; he felt a mingling of the eternal pangs that torment humanity--a nostalgia for a lost childhood, a yearning to escape life through death, the eager desire for the dreamless sleep.

"Why not stay?" he mused. "Here one could collect one's thoughts, perhaps write some of them down,--perhaps--who knows?--find a clue to the meaning of some of it."

He left the house doors and windows open to the sunlight and went to the lodge at the other end of the park, where the caretaker and his wife lived; after complimenting them on the good condition of Bothal, he told them of his intention of staying there a few days and they came back with him, bringing a few necessaries, bed linen, blankets, a lamp, candles and cutlery; Maitland then asked the man to go down to the inn and order his sparse luggage to be sent up to Bothal.

A few adjustments soon made the bedroom habitable; there was water to be obtained by using a pump in the kitchen, for the rest Bothal was without "conveniences."

"Old-fashioned, as you might say," apologized the caretaker; "but there, no one has lived in the house for so long, and all say it would cost more than the place is worth to put in improvements, though I say that you'd hardly know it with electric light and steam heating, not to mention bathrooms and a telephone."

"A wonder," remarked Maitland, "that it hasn't by now, got the reputation of being haunted--but you have kept it very neat and clean and let in the light every day."

"We've done our best, sir. I won't say but that the garden has got out of hand--it would take more than the labor that we're allowed to keep all that land in order."

"The poppies," smiled Maitland. "They have rather overrun the place."

"I've never seen so many of them as there are this year."

"And you've never heard of any ghost stories? They are usual in a place like this."

The caretaker's wife answered cheerfully.

"There was an old man who used to work in the garden when we first came, sir, he said there were tales of the shade of a little black boy that used to haunt the long gallery--but we've never seen nor heard anything, and I don't, for my part, think that the old fellow knew what he was talking about."

"Quite likely. I see there are no portraits in the place--no personal relics."

"No, sir, old Mr. Maitland used to come on rare occasions, sir, in a big grey car, and take away all the pictures, and things like that."

"Do you remember any of them? The pictures I mean."

"No, sir," the caretaker replied, but his wife was more expansive, she remembered and described vaguely a portrait that used to hang in the top bedroom that Maitland had now chosen as his own--the

likeness of a young man she said it was, in old-fashioned clothes and holding a strange instrument.

It was astonishing how little light either the candles or the lamp gave in the large rooms; Maitland crossed the gallery carrying a single candle and found that he lit only shadows; even in his own, smaller room, the gentle flame was but a faint glow in the twilight. This did not trouble him; it would be long before it was dark and he was quite willing to sleep as soon as that came; the bed with the clean sheets and blankets, and the thick woollen curtains hooked up to the tester, looked comfortable; his own possessions, scattering out of the open valises, gave the room a homely look; he extinguished the candle and sat in the dusk, gazing out onto the field of poppies; when all color else had gone from the scene, blended in one azure, the scarlet of these flowers burned through the twilight; over the landscape brooded, Maitland thought, an air of expectancy similar to that which filled the empty house. Surely some narcotic was really rising now from the poppies, he felt drowsy, as if with every breath he drew in oblivion.

At first the stillness was complete; Maitland considered with a quiet pleasure how far he was from any other human being--the lodge must be a quarter of a mile away; he was enclosed in the deserted park land and fields that belonged to Bothal.

There was a faint disturbance of the silence, a sound familiar to Maitland, yet one that at first he could not name, touched his ear--a gentle swishing, to and fro--was it a trail of creeper, eglantine or convolvulus tapping against a pane of glass?

No--Maitland listened and peered; ah, now he knew what the sound was, someone cutting grass, a man with a scythe. The figure shaped itself out of the formless shadows that were gathering over the poppy fields; a man bending to a scythe cutting the thick, tall, flowered

grass that grew at the edge of the poppies, now moving to the slow regular strokes, now pausing to draw the curved blade over the whetstone.

"How late he is," thought Maitland. "That must be the old gardener whom the caretaker spoke of--after all I suppose it is light enough for another hour--what a soothing sound it is--the swish of the scythe, how drowsy the scent of the poppies."

Maitland sighed, left his window and went downstairs--"the old fellow ought to be able to tell me quite a good deal about the place."

He left the house by one of the french windows that opened onto the back and stepped directly into the tangle of sun-dried grass that grew thickly round the brick wall; the sound of the scythe was louder in his ears but at first he could not see the mower and when he did discern him, on the verge of the poppy field, the old man seemed no more than the thickening of the shadows into a vague shape.

The scene was intangible and dim to Maitland, as if he had, he thought, returned from another world to visit this summer evening--a glimpse from his youth, long since lost.

"That is it," he whispered with some satisfaction, "forward to escape by death--backward to escape by dreams of a childhood that never was."

He approached the mower who did not look up from his task. "You work very steadily," Maitland said to the stooping man. "It grows late."

The mower did not answer; the long swathes of grass fell at his feet and their perfume was stronger than that of the poppies; an echo cast back by the brick wall of the house gave the words--"it grows

late."

Maitland turned away; feeling light-footed and drowsy, he passed round the poppy field, wandered through a grove of trees beyond and found himself in a meadow that dipped to a hollow.

In the hollow stood a small church surrounded by a graveyard; Maitland supposed that it had once belonged to Bothal, but that now it served the scattered parish.

The grass grew thick over the graves; some dark grey crosses slanted forward and sideways; yew trees cast a dense shade; the moon floated above the squat Norman tower to which dark trails of ivy clung. Maitland stood in a vague meditation; he was thinking, not of his surrounding, but of the room waiting for him, the window open on the poppy field where the mower worked in silence, the bare neat house with its air of expectancy, the clean bed clothes piled beneath the faded curtains. He left the little graveyard and passed beyond the church where there was a piece of ground surrounded by a low wall of roughly shaped stones; in the far angle of this wall rose a tall, twisted thorn tree. The moonlight cast its crooked shadow across a solitary stone grave.

"Why," mused Maitland, "does he lie so lonely--away from all the others?" He vaulted the wall and stood by the long, worn stone, the shadow of the thorn now lay over his own body.

There was no name on the grave; deep into the dark stone was cut the rude semblance of a curious instrument, something like, Maitland thought, a pair of compasses with an odd attachment, set in a pentacle.

As he gazed at this he was aware that someone was standing close beside him, for he saw another shadow on the thick grass. He

looked up and beheld a shabby stranger with a book under his arm.

"I see that you take an interest in the antiquities of this neighborhood, sir."

Maitland, annoyed at the intrusion, replied dryly:

"Not any particular interest."

"This grave is, at least, interesting. You know, of course, that this ground is not consecrated?"

"I guessed it. This is a suicide?"

"I don't know. He was one of the owners of Bothal--in fact, the last that lived there--they say--"

"Ah, the usual proviso!" smiled Maitland. "They say these old stories!"

"His name was John Maitland, you can see it in the church register."

Maitland still smiled; odd to stand over the grave of his namesake. "He lived a hundred years ago and investigated the supernatural," said the stranger, moving beside the grave with a noiseless step. "I see that some weeds and thistles are growing here, a pity."

"Do you know any more of him?" asked Maitland; he too noticed tall plants that at first he had not observed, flags and spikes that the moonlight traced in dark shadows over the rough cutting of the instrument.

"He frequently tried to raise spirits," said the stranger, "and one night when he was drunk and goaded by a crowd of roisterers whom he had up at Bothal, he came here--to the churchyard and set his spells

to raise the dead. He said he would have a bride from the grave. There was a girl buried here, she died two hundred years before--one of his own name, Joan Maitland. The fool said that he would have her or no other."

"Why fool?" asked Maitland. "It is delicious to be in love with the dead--yes, of all the manner of loving open to mankind that is, perhaps, the most beautiful."

"But the man was not content with dreams. He tried to bring back the dead. He invited Death to his house--to share his bed and board."

"And the invitation was accepted?" asked Maitland, watching the crooked shadow of a thorn that a light wind was waving to and fro across the rough stone of the grave.

"They treated it as a jest, of course, and they laughed very loudly when nothing happened after the incantation, but when they had returned to Bothal and were at their drink again one came to the door and beckoned Maitland away--they thought that she was one of his mortal fancies, for she seemed no more in her cotton frock and chaplet of wild flowers--he died that night and no one has since slept in Bothal and lived."

"So Death," smiled Maitland, "is the guest that the house is waiting for? 'Swept and garnished,' eh?"

"You may," said the stranger, "believe what you like."

Maitland felt suddenly fatigued; he sat down on the flat stone, and peering at it, perceived for the first time, that it bore his name along the rude cut of the unholy instrument, "John Maitland"--there was nothing else, not even a date.

Maitland looked up; the stranger had gone; had he ever been there?

"Where did I hear that story? In my own heart perhaps--yes, it seems to me that I invented it and that the stranger was but my other self."

He looked round at the church; it seemed small and insignificant, like an ancient shepherd, with his flock gathered around him--yes, the graves huddled close to the holy protection; Maitland thought of the church as full of prayers, hymns, tears and entreaties as a glass is filled with wine; but all this spiritual comfort and nourishment was shut away from him; he had seen the church doors, heavy, clamped with iron, barred against him; he was alone, outside, in the square of unconsecrated ground with the shadow of the cursed, crooked thorn tree over him; the moon, rising higher, appeared smaller, like a ball of white fire thrown into the air--like a silver balloon that Maitland remembered launching into space when he was a child.

As he mused, gazing at the moon that reminded him of a childish toy, and seated on the grave that bore his name, he felt that past and present joined, and that escape by returning to his childhood and by death were resolved into one deliverance.

When he had been a little boy he had tried to sail his balloon to the moon that now itself seemed but a toy. The church, the tomb stones, the low wall, the thorn tree, all appeared now to the brooding man like phantoms evoked from his own brain, as if a sigh would demolish them, or a turn of his head change his dream.

He rose and looked around, peering into the angles of the church that were darkened by shadows.

No, there was nothing there; the place was not haunted--like Bothal--it was empty, long since deserted.

He left the unhallowed ground and returned to the blessed plot where

the dead who had died in the Lord slept under holy sod; he left the churchyard and came out into the meadow land; amid the grove of trees there seemed to be a pale shape, like an altar; he passed between the slim trunks, but there was nothing but a patch of moonlight in the center of the trees; Maitland passed through to the meadow land beyond; he came up out of the hollow and could see Bothal standing clear and sharp in the moonlight, the gables distinct in every detail of bust and florid ornament and sway of fruit; silver lay over the poppy field, subduing the scarlet color to the hue of a faint stain of dried blood; there were the dark outlines of the box hedges, the dense shape of the yew tree; Maitland was glad that he was going to sleep in that lonely house that night. He passed by the poppy field, he skirted the box hedges, he entered the french windows, found the candle where he had left it on the table by the bookcase and lit it with the matches in his pocket.

The clean-swept, handsome room seemed to have lost its air of expectancy, as if whoever the house had been waiting for had arrived; Maitland felt satisfied, as if he, too, had come home--to sleep.

He went upstairs, carefully guarding his gentle light with outspread hand; the paintings on the wall seemed to lengthen into vistas of scenes that he had once known and was now about to visit again--these lakes, these hills, these Woods--these roads winding to the horizon.

As he reached the top of the house his sense of expectancy satisfied, increased; he was now sure that whoever the house was waiting for had arrived; he looked into the long gallery where the moonlight lay in squares on the sloping floor, then turned to his bedroom. "The mower has gone," he thought. "I did not see him--yes, he has gone and no grass seemed to be cut."

On the threshold of his room stood a shadowy figure with wild flowers in her hair, a poppy coronal, surely, floating among her tresses. Maitland blew out his human light, entered his room, moving delicately among the shadows, lay down on his clean bed and slept.

Half-Past Two

The light had been put out on the stairs. Usually, when he returned late to spend the night in his rooms, he found it burning. Now he had to make his way slowly, striking matches as he went up the old dingy enclosed stairs.

It was a long time since he had spent a night in this house, and he did not greatly care about doing so. It was an ancient, inconvenient residence, hidden away in a small square which had been half demolished, and was hemmed in on either side by massive modern buildings. Only when, as now, the young man had been detained so late at a dance that he had missed the last train to his home in the country did he resort to the expedient of spending the night in this makeshift fashion.

Roger Hoby knew that he would be alone in the house, as he always was when he spent the night there, with a great many other empty houses to right and left of him, and there was something in this silence more oppressive than the silence of the open country--so many buildings around him, so busy and crowded in the day, at night so empty and silent; and he blamed the caretaker who had not left the old-fashioned gas (for there was no electric light in the house) burning on the stairs. So heavy was the sense of oppression on him that he decided the next night he had to pass in town would be in a hotel.

He found his own door, opened it, and entered the suite of chambers

he occupied on the second floor, lit the gas in the first room, and passed into the second, which he used as his architect's office.

It was a hateful, raw, cold and foggy night, and Roger Hoby was shuddering and shivering from having passed through the bitter, bleak streets and the damp cold of the dark stairway. He was therefore pleasantly amazed when he felt the genial warmth that met him as he opened the second door and saw the room full of all his own familiar and pleasant possessions, brightly illuminated by the glow of a large fire.

As he had not been there since the afternoon he wondered who could have made up such a large fire to last until this late hour. The caretaker was seldom in the building after six; even as Hoby wondered he noticed that someone was sitting in the large armchair drawn up by the fireplace--a man whose dark shape appeared to be one with that of the chair and was outlined against the bright blaze of the coals.

"Hallo!" cried Hoby, considerably startled, and not without an odd creep of fear in his blood, and more than ordinary amazement.

The figure did not move. One hand was hanging over the edge of the armchair, and Hoby noticed that it was a peculiarly shaped hand, with long splay-ended fingers. Roger Hoby, advancing with considerable effort of will, almost laughed aloud with relief when he saw that the man whom he had seen sitting before the fire was Durant Love-day, who occupied the rooms above his own. He was a man with whom Hoby had no more than the most casual acquaintance, and for whom he did not greatly care. It was more than odd to find him sitting there at this hour.

"Oh, it's you," said Loveday, and he seemed as relieved to see Hoby as Hoby had been to see him.

"What do you want?" asked Roger, briefly. "I didn't know you ever spent the night here. How did you get in?"

"I don't ever spend the night here," replied Durant Loveday, quickly. "This is the first time I have ever been here late. But then, you see, I have an appointment."

"An appointment here at this hour?"

"Yes, it sounds peculiar, doesn't it?"

Roger Hoby thought it sounded very peculiar. He wondered that he had never noticed before that Loveday had such ugly splayed fingers. But then he had never given him more than the most cursory glance on the stairs or in the street. He knew nothing at all about the fellow, and he had never liked the thin dry face, the eyes that were too pale, too deeply cut and deeply set. All he knew of Loveday was that he also was an architect and appeared to have an income independent of his work, which amounted to very little, as far as Hoby knew.

"Well, you didn't make an appointment here, I suppose?" said Hoby, warming himself before the fire which his uninvited guest had kept so generously piled with coal.

"No, it was because I decided not to keep my appointment that I came here," replied the other. "Someone was coming back for me--but I didn't want to see him."

"How did you get in?"

"I slipped in before your clerk went. I hid, and he went and left me locked in."

"Did he?" thought Hoby.

"I'm glad you've come back," said Loveday in a confidential tone, leaning forward from the armchair. "I've been here for hours. I am glad of your company. I kept on piling up the fire to make a bright light, but, still, I am glad of your company."

"Well, I can't keep you company," replied Hoby. "I want to go to bed. It must be two o'clock."

Loveday put up his hand, his thick finger-ends travelled over his thin lips, and those pale, deep-set eyes gazed at Hoby with an expression that the young man had never seen in a human face before--one of absolute terror.

"Why, you're afraid," cried Hoby, involuntarily.

"I've got an appointment," muttered Loveday, "at half-past two."

Hoby went to his cupboard and set out the whisky and soda. "Look here," he said, in a voice he tried to make as practical as possible, "you'd better tell me what this is all about. You seem to have lost your nerve a bit, haven't you? What are you doing here really--hiding?"

"There's someone coming back to see me at half-past two," cried Loveday; "someone whom I have been avoiding for years."

"Then, why on earth," asked Hoby, "did you make an appointment with him in such a place and at such an hour?"

"He forced me," said Loveday, his voice falling to a whimper; "he forced me to it. You don't know what power he's got over me. I met him in the street, and then in a restaurant, but that wouldn't do. He would come here at half-past two. I didn't make the appointment; he did. He told me, 'Half-past two today, and I'll be there.' He came and

went, without saying anything except, I'll be back at half-past two tonight.'"

"How is he going to get in?" asked Hoby. "I closed the door behind me."

"He forced me to give him the passkey," said Loveday. "He'll get in all right. But--" his voice dropped to an accent of cunning--"he'll go upstairs to the offices overhead. He won't think of looking for me here. And I'm locked in, aren't I?"

"Yes, I shut the door," said Hoby doubtfully. He took a drink and gave one to Loveday, who, however, refused it. "You had better tell me what it's all about, hadn't you?"

"It would be a very long story," grinned Loveday. "There's a great deal in it; in fact, there's everything in it." Then, seeing that Hoby had taken up some matches, he cried out, "Don't light the gas; he'll know there's somebody here, then, and he might try to get in."

"But he can't," replied Hoby briefly, "and we're two to one if he does."

"You don't know Stiffkey," said Loveday, still with a grin.

Hoby put down the box of matches. The room was really sufficiently illuminated by the fire, and it occurred to him that if anyone did come he would judge by firelight as easily as by gaslight that the room was occupied. He did not, however, mention this to Loveday. He had come to his own conclusions about him, the usual conclusions that the ordinary man comes to when faced with anything peculiar or extraordinary--he thought that Loveday was ill or out of his mind.

"Well," he remarked soothingly, "you can have a shakedown here all night if you like. I sleep in the other room. There's a sofa there, too, if you would like it."

But Loveday said no, he preferred to sit by the fire. He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, which now showed ten minutes past two.

No one will come, of course, thought Roger Hoby; the man's been badly scared by something, and this is the way it's taken him. He imagines an appointment with an enemy, but no one would come to such a place and at such a time. Observing again that snarl of terror on Loveday's face, he was, however, himself slightly affected by fear, and said, "You had better really tell me something of what it's about if you want me to stand by you in this you know."

"I robbed Stiffkey," confessed Loveday, "years ago when we were in Africa. He entrusted me with something of his to sell--stones, and I brought them over to England and gave them to a jeweller to value, and then I told him that the jeweller had absconded with them. Of course, I had sold them and kept the money. That was the beginning of better times for me. I thought Stiffkey had died in Africa, I didn't hear from him for years...Hush! What was that?" He paused to listen, and Hoby listened, too, but there was no sound in the empty house.

"It sounds a pretty rotten sort of trick," said Hoby, drinking his whisky and soda. "I wonder you care to talk about it."

"There are other things," said Loveday. "We were great enemies, but for years I haven't seen him. I haven't thought about him until I met him just the other day, and he insisted on this appointment--'to settle scores,' he said. I offered him money--a great deal of money--but he said money wouldn't pay for all those years. Hush! I do think that's his step on the stairs."

"It isn't," said Hoby impatiently. "There is no sound of anything. It's too silent." He went to the window. "The fog is quite thick," he added.

"He'll find his way through the fog all right," answered Loveday faintly. "Fie means to have his vengeance."

"Vengeance?" repeated Hoby. "Do you think he'll come here to revenge himself on you?"

"Of course," said Loveday, huddling himself together, "he always said he'd get me in the end."

"Well, I shouldn't have met him in this place and at this time of night," replied Hoby, trying to speak with more confidence than he felt. He also found himself straining his ears to catch the possible sound of a footstep on the stairs, a rap, or a voice at the door. "He would come," whimpered Loveday. "It's his own fault, he would come. Nothing else would do for him, and I was in his power, wasn't I? 'I'll be back,' he said, 'at half-past two tonight.'" Roger Hoby shuddered and drew nearer to the fire. He didn't want to go to bed, after all; he thought he'd prefer to sit up with Loveday, not to leave him anyhow until after half-past two. The clock now showed twenty minutes past that hour.

Hoby had no compassion for him. He had never liked the man, who, on his own showing, deserved no friendship or respect from anyone--a thief, a traitor, and a coward. No, Hoby had no compassion for him, but he was drawn to him by a stronger link than compassion, that of terror. He was infected by the fear that Loveday gave out--fear that was so definite that it seemed another personality in the room, and one that had laid its grip on Hoby, who was seized by this terror that had seized Loveday, and shuddering and dreading--whoever it was--this Stiffkey, who was coming at half-past two. So strongly and suddenly did this terror overwhelm him that he made an impulsive movement towards the clock to stop the hands. Loveday, watching him, grinned: "I thought of that," he said, "but it's no use, there are other clocks outside."

"Look here," said Hoby roughly, trying to keep up his own courage, "this is all nonsense, you know; you're imagining the whole thing; nobody's coming, and even if they did--"

Loveday interrupted, more by his movement and his clutch on the arm of the chair, and the look on his face, than by anything he said, though he did mutter for the third time, "Hush!"

"It sounds like the front door," said Hoby, "opening and closing."

"Can't you hear?" whispered Loveday. "There's someone coming up the stairs."

"No, I can't," said Hoby roughly.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past two.

"Warmth, warmth!" cried Loveday. "I want to get warm." He pulled his chair up to the fire, so closely it seemed that he must scorch.

Hoby went into the outer room and listened; that shivering man was afraid of murder. There certainly was someone coming up the stairs, slowly and deliberately, as if unhindered by the dark. Hoby, moved by some unaccountable impulse of dread, saw that his own door was secure, and then returned to where Loveday crouched lower and lower over the fire. Hoby could still hear the footsteps, slow and deliberate. Had Stiffkey come with the purpose of murder? Hoby looked around--he did not know why--for a weapon, and picked up a heavy stone paperweight, which had been laid carelessly on the chimney piece to hold down a few odd papers beside the clock. He found it was wet. He dropped it, and holding his fingers into the firelight, saw they were red.

"What's this--blood?" cried Hoby.

Loveday began to laugh. "Do you hear a footstep? Half-past two--exactly to his appointment."

Hoby could hear the footsteps. They had passed the door now. He could hear them overhead--tramping to and fro. He had struck a match and was staring at the chimney piece. The papers underneath the paperweight were splashed and spluttered with red. A thin dark line was running down the wall. Hoby, looking up, saw that it was coming from a patch on the plastered ceiling, exactly where it met the wall--a patch that seemed to be spreading as he looked. Loveday's room was exactly overhead, by the dark patch on the plaster.

"Up in your room," whispered Hoby, dropping the flaring match.

"Stiffkey," grinned Loveday, staring, "Stiffkey."

"And who else?" whispered Hoby.

"Only Stiffkey," said Loveday.

The steps were again crossing the room overhead, and coming down the stairs. The two men listened, bending closer together, Loveday farther and farther leaning towards the fire. The footsteps paused at the outer door, and there was a sharp rap.

"I won 't let him in," whispered Hoby.

"It doesn't matter whether you do or not," whimpered Loveday. "The door is open."

"No, I shut the door."

But, even as the young man spoke, he felt a draft of cold outer air.

Driven by panic he went into the outer room. The door, which he was certain he had closed, stood open on the black staircase. The sound of footsteps had departed in the direction of Loveday, but he saw no one. Then he heard Loveday from behind him give a gurgle and a shriek of incredible anguish, and he did not dare go back to the tire. He knew that it was useless to do so, that Loveday was dead.

It was quite a long time before he was able to return to the room, light the gas, and stare at Loveday, rigid in his chair, beneath that red patch on the ceiling.

Hoby had known that he would be there alone.

The fog was now so thick that even with the gaslight everything looked dim, monstrous, and misshapen.

Torn by a fearful curiosity, Roger Hoby went up into Loveday's chambers. They were not locked. Hoby, striking matches, found what he had expected to find--a dead man lying by the wainscot, who had been battered to death by the poker which lay beside him. His watch was staring on the floor beside him--it had stopped at half-past two, which must have been the hour when Loveday murdered him.

The appointment was for half-past two, but in the afternoon--not in the night--he had said he would return.

But, who was the other? For whom had Loveday waited all those hours--first upstairs, and then hiding down in Hoby's room? Stiffkey, returning to keep his second appointment again, the next time the clock was at half-past two?

Elsie's Lonely Afternoon

Elsie was always lonely, but her desolation seemed more poignant

when the day was sunny.

Elsie lived with her grandmother in a large house at Hampstead. She thought that there could not be, anywhere, a house with more rooms, more stairs, more quiet and empty.

There were three servants. They lived in the day downstairs in a large basement, and nightly slept in attics at the top of the house. Both basement and attics were out of Elsie's reach; she was not allowed to speak to the servants. There was not, to Elsie's mind, a single thing in this great house that was cheerful or pleasant. A great many people must have lived there once, there were so many empty rooms. There was an empty schoolroom, the inky, tattered lesson-books still on the shelves round the walls, a globe in one corner, and a tattered map hanging between the windows, and worn cut desks and benches as if quite a number of children had once learnt their lessons there.

There was also an empty study, with a huge bookcase with a glass front, that was always locked; and there was a drawing-room in which no-one ever sat. The shutters were always closed in this room into which Elsie had only, just by chance, once peeped. It was full of mirrors with glass frames and little cabinets lined with quilted silk in which stood china figures.

Then there was the dining-room, so much too large for Elsie, who had her dinner and tea there alone on a little cloth laid at one end of the long, shining mahogany table.

But Grandmamma always had her meals in bed. She suffered from what Elsie had been told was a 'stroke'. When Elsie asked what that was, her grandmother replied, 'The hand of God'.

So Elsie thought of God's hand reaching out of heaven into

Grandmamma's large bedroom and stroking her down one side and leaving that dead.

Elsie did not find Grandmamma's bedroom a pleasant place, either. It was very large and had two windows which looked on to the garden at the back. Between the two windows was a dressing-table, covered in white spotted muslin over stiff pink stuff.

There were a great many engravings on the walls. They seemed to be all very much alike, with a smooth baby face, like a china doll, and each of these pictures had a little story.

One was of a young prince: the Prince Imperial, Grandmamma said, who had recently been killed by blackamoors. Another was of a girl, crying over a dead bird which she held in her hand, and there was a little hole at her feet where the bird was presently to be buried. And another was of a woman tying a scarf on to a man's arm, and Grandmamma explained that if he went out without the scarf he would be murdered.

Grandmamma's bed was very large. Grandpapa used to sleep there, too, before he had died. It had curtains at the back which looped on to the wall. Beside the curtain was Grandmamma's slipper-case and watch-case, made of stiff, white, perforated cardboard, tied up with dark ribbon. There were a great many objects in the room, but Elsie was forbidden to touch any of them. Grandmamma sat up in bed in a little wool jacket and knitted and crocheted all day long. She had on a lace cap with thick, pale mauve, velvet ribbons on it. Sometimes she would be helped to a chair and drawn to the window. The doctor used to come to see her every day; sometimes another man, whom Elsie heard referred to as a lawyer; and whenever these people were there, Elsie was sent out of the way.

Her grandmother used to tell her to 'efface herself', and Elsie soon

became aware that this word meant that she was to act as if she didn't exist. She soon began to understand that she ought never to have existed. Her father, Grandpapa's son, was dead and her mother was poor, therefore neither of them were of any use to Elsie.

She was six years old and could neither read nor write, but she soon understood quite plainly that she ought never to have been born. Indeed, Mrs Parfitt, the cook, had once said as much in her hearing: 'Poor little thing, it was a pity she was ever born.'

Elsie thought so too. She had never enjoyed a moment of her short life, Father being dead and Mother being poor, and Elsie having to suffer for something very wrong which they had evidently both done.

Everything that Elsie did was wrong too. She knew that, and was resigned to the fact. Whenever her grandmother spoke to her it was nearly always to say something beginning with 'don't'.

The few people who ever came to the house and who ever took any notice of her nearly always also said something beginning with 'don't', or else 'run away'.

Elsie liked the servants, Grace and Sarah and Mrs Parfitt. Sometimes she opened the swing door at the top of the basement stairs and sat there listening to their talk and laughter; not that she could hear what they said, but the sound of voices was comforting in the large, empty house, with Grandmamma sleeping or dozing and no other company at all.

When Mrs Parfitt found Elsie one day at the top of the stairs, she too began to talk of 'don't' and 'mustn't'. She said that Elsie was a 'telltale' and a 'spy' and a 'nuisance' and would lose them all their places. Though Elsie did not understand what any of this meant, she realised that she had again done something wrong.

But sometimes, even after that, the servants were kind. Mrs Parfitt once brought her up an apple after her lunch, and on another occasion, in the middle of a long afternoon, some sandwiches. Once, when there was a thunderstorm and Grandmamma had had her sent to bed, the servants allowed Elsie to come down and sit by the kitchen fire. There was a cat on the hearth and a kettle, and rows of shining pots and plates on the walls and red curtains at the windows, and for a little while Elsie felt almost happy, though she shuddered whenever the door was opened to think of the stone passage without, and all the vaults and cellars and closets and presses, which, like the rest of the house, were disused.

But the moment came when Elsie had to go upstairs to her little bed in the dressing-room which opened out of Grandmamma's great room. Cook said it 'was a shame', but Elsie had to go just the same, and lie awake all night in the dark room, listening to the thunder and watching the lightning, her teeth chattering with terror, biting the pillow for fear she cried out.

She lay awake the most part of every night. She had only cried out once. That time she had disturbed Grandmamma and been punished, beaten very hard on the backs of her hands with a hairbrush, by Mary, who looked after Grandmamma, and made to stay in bed all the next day with nothing but bread and water to eat and drink. This diet was no such very great change for the little girl, for her fare was of the plainest and often such as she could not stomach. She was fastidious and preferred to go hungry rather than eat fat cold mutton, coarse boiled potatoes, stiff rice-puddings, and Normandy pippins boiled into a pulp. She did not know why she was living with Grandmamma, but she understood it was very kind of Grandmamma to have her there. Indeed, it was very kind of anybody to endure her at all; nobody wanted her, and of course she must be, she was sure, quite useless and a nuisance.

Once she had contrived to creep into the wide hall when Sarah, who was good-humoured, was washing the black and red tiles, and Sarah began to talk to her. She was evidently smarting under some reprimand from Grandmamma, and Elsie understood from what Sarah said in a low, careful voice, that all Grandmamma's children had been useless and nuisances.

It seemed hard to believe that once that great house had been full of people. Grandmamma had had quite a lot of children, boys and girls. They were all dead or had gone away. None of them, so Elsie understood, was any good. Only Grandmamma remained, powerful and, of course, virtuous, always there and always right.

'Your poor papa was the favourite,' said Sarah. 'I shouldn't be surprised if you was to get the money after all.'

'But Grandmamma hasn't got any money,' said Elsie. 'When she talks to me she always says: "Mind, I haven't got a farthing!"'

At that Sarah laughed, and pushed back a lock of hair from her forehead with her wet hand that still held the scrubbing brush. She said that Grandmamma was very rich, but a miser; that no doubt there was gold hidden all over the house if one only knew where to look for it.

Elsie asked what was the good of it? Sarah said that it was all the good in the world. If you had gold you could do anything. She said that that was what Master Tom used to come about. That's why the old lady had a stroke, quarrelling with him.

Elsie asked who was Master Tom? Sarah said: Why, your uncle of course, silly.' And then Mrs Parfitt called out to Sarah and Elsie had to go away.

After that, she used to look for gold for something to do in the long afternoons--she even ventured into those empty rooms which she held most in horror. One had a large hole in the floor. She used to lean down and bring her little face close to the hole and peer into the darkness and think that she might see gold lying there among the dust. She knew what gold was like--there was a gold clock in the drawing-room and her grandmamma had a gold watch, and her wedding ring, which moved round on her thin, knobby finger, was gold too. And on Grandmamma's kidney-shaped dressing-table were boxes that Grandmamma kept locked. Once, on a wet day, she had let Elsie bring them to the bed, and opened them, and there was this gold too, brooches and chains and earrings, and Elsie had played with them on the down coverlet.

Elsie never found any gold--gold which would do anything, even procure an escape from this house. She frightened herself very much wandering in and out of those empty rooms, some furnished, some unfurnished, but all silent, dusty, and desolate. The whole street, which was full of large houses with pillared porticoes like Grandmamma's, seemed to Elsie to be always silent, desolate. Occasionally a carriage and pair passed, and sometimes, peering from the window in the midst of an afternoon that seemed endless, she would see some woman and child go by and her little heart would be pinched with an odd nostalgia for a happiness she had never known--no, not even the name of, and then for hours and hours the wide street would seem as silent, as empty as the house. Even the sunshine--and that summer there was a great deal of sunshine--could not lighten the tedium of that street and house to Elsie.

Even the flowering trees, lilac, laburnum, and may (for every house had before the basement a little square in which grew such trees and shrubs), could not give an air of cheerfulness and joy to those dreary sunny afternoons.

Every house had striped sunblinds out over the windows and striped curtains hanging in front of the door. The very sight of these awnings, mostly red and white, filled Elsie with an unutterable woe, born of complete loneliness. She had nothing to do, neither work nor play. Mrs Parfitt had said that she was getting a big girl and would soon be sent to school, and Elsie had hoped that as she was such a nuisance and ought to efface herself, she might indeed be sent away somewhere. She did not know what 'school' was; it could not be worse than the great house in Hampstead.

Once Mary turned her into the back garden, shut the door of the schoolroom that gave on to it, and told her to stay there all the afternoon. Elsie hated the garden almost as much as she hated the house. It had a dirty, high brick wall all round it and at the bottom a sloping bank on which were four tall poplar trees. The heart-shaped leaves fluttered continually to the ground; they were dirty and had a disagreeable smell and a harsh texture. The stems of the lilac bushes were thick with soot and the flowers were tarnished and brown almost as soon as they came out.

There were no other flowers in the garden. The square of grass in the middle was rusty and dirty. Everything in the garden was dirty; Elsie never played in it, but she often got a scolding when she came in for having spoiled her pinafore. And this afternoon she began to amuse herself by trying to make a mud pie. The first digging with her fingers brought up some worms, and she left off, sick with disgust, that attempt at diversion.

When at last she was allowed into the house Mary scolded her, as she had expected to be scolded, as a naughty, naughty girl for getting herself into a mess. The servants all seemed rather excited. She was given her tea in the schoolroom, bread-and-butter and milk and a piece of seed cake, and scolded again because she did not like the seeds and tried to pull them out with her unskilful fingers.

When she had finished she tried to creep into the kitchen, with a hope of a sight of the cat or the kettle. She heard the servants talking about Master Tom and how he had been there that afternoon. There had been 'a scene', and Elsie wondered what 'a scene' was. It all seemed even more wrong and unhappy than before. It seemed to Elsie not only a pity that she had ever been born, but that anyone else had.

'He's a regular scapegrace, and will come to a bad end, you mark my words,' said Cook; and Elsie longed to ask what a bad end was, but she did not dare to be seen. She was discovered just the same, and smacked and turned out of the kitchen up into the lonely, empty passage, study, and dining-room, where she roamed at will all day, when she was not sitting by Grandmamma's bed or in her own room, which was quite bare, save for a bed and a tin wash-hand stand. Everything had been taken out of it when Elsie came to live there for fear she should touch something. She quite accepted the justice of this, because everything she touched was either spoilt or broken or soiled, for her hands were never clean and she seemed incredibly clumsy.

Except on those rare trembling expeditions when she had been looking for secret gold in a desperate hope that it might somehow procure her release from her present predicament, Elsie had never ventured up above her grandmother's bedroom, though there were three stories above that floor. The servants slept up there, but that did not seem to give an air of human habitation to those dreadful upper floors. One of them contained a large black oil painting the sight of which had made Elsie sick with terror. Some children, long ago, perhaps her own uncles and aunts, had used the picture for a target, and filled it full of small holes from toy arrows or darts.

It was the portrait of a dark man, and Elsie thought that he scowled in

agony from his many wounds and that he would leap from the canvas to pursue her if she stared at him a second longer. Elsie had never looked into that room again, and besides that there were ghosts upstairs. Mrs Parfitt and Mary and Sarah had all said so.

Once, when she had lain awake listening to Grandmamma's snoring in the other room, she had certainly heard footsteps overhead, and unable at length to bear her torture any longer she had run downstairs in her nightgown and screamed out at the top of the basement stairs that she had heard steps overhead.

Mrs Parfitt had said good-humouredly: 'Nonsense! There's nobody up there.' Words which had filled Elsie with complete terror.

Sarah had laughed and said: 'The ghosts, I dare say.'

Mary had added: 'Of course--the ghosts!'

Mrs Parfitt, meaning to console, had assured Elsie that if she was a good girl and behaved herself and kept out of the way and didn't annoy Grandmamma ghosts would leave her alone.

Elsie had not returned to her own bed that night. She had not enough courage to do so. She had crept, instead, into her grandmother's room, and lain awake, curled, cold and sweating, on the outside of the coverlet, taking what comfort she could from the old lady's heavy snoring. And in the morning, just before Mary came in to bring Grandmamma her tea and wash her and comb her hair and put on her thick lace cap with the heavy, pale-violet, velvet ribbons, Elsie had crept away into her own bed and pretended to sleep.

All the next day she tried to make herself very agreeable to Grandmamma because she wanted to ask her about the ghosts upstairs. She held her wool for her and fetched her scissors and tried

to remember to close the door quietly and not to raise her voice nor to talk too loud nor too fast.

Presently, in the afternoon, holding on her tiny hands the skein of orange wool, she asked: 'Have you ever seen the ghost upstairs, Grandmamma?'

Grandmamma was in a good humour that day. You would hardly have thought she was ill at all. She had been a very handsome woman and she still had an air of energy and vigour.

Propped up against her big pillows she laughed and said: 'I should think there are a good many ghosts in this house, my dear. Think of all the people who have been born and died here, even in my time, and only you and I left, eh, little Elsie!'

'How many people were there, Grandmamma?'

'Eh, I couldn't remember now. You see, this was your grandfather's father's house. He had it when it was first built and there were a lot of children then. They died or scattered. Mostly died, I think. I remember four of them went off in a week with typhus. Then there were my own. Plenty of them, little Elsie. You wouldn't think now, would you, there used to be such a noise here that I often didn't know what to do. Children all over the place, boys and girls--in the schoolroom, running up and down the stairs, playing in the garden--'

She stopped and dropped her knitting needles on to the sheets. 'Plenty of noise then, little Elsie; quiet enough now, isn't it?'

'Are they all ghosts now?' asked Elsie, and she dropped the skein of wool on to her lap.

'Ghosts--or worse,' said Grandmamma, with a sigh; 'most of them seemed to go wrong somehow.'

'Were they nuisances, like I am?'

Grandmamma looked at her sharply, as if she suspected her of an impertinence.

'Never mind what's become of them, Elsie, or whether they're ghosts or not. Pick up that wool--it'll get tangled; and put the pillow straight under my left arm. Mary knows I can't knit like this.'

Though Grandmamma was partially paralysed down one side, she could, by a deft arrangement of pillows propping up one of her elbows, still knit and crochet, which she did for hours every day with a certain ferocity, making thick grey garments for the poor and the heathen and squares and squares of crochet in bright colours, which were going to be sewn together one day into a great quilt.

Elsie thought of the poor and the heathen with horror; she saw armies and armies of them in grey woollen petticoats advancing on her with hostile looks and menacing cries when she woke in the middle of the night.

Cunningly she tried to get more information about the ghosts. 'Are there ghosts in the schoolroom, Grandmamma?'

'Aye, indeed, I should think there are ghosts in there. That's where they learnt their lessons, all of them. Learnt no good, no, not one of them. That's a strange thought, Elsie--all of them down there, learning lessons year after year and not one of them learning anything good.'

'And the ghosts upstairs in the bedroom?' persisted Elsie.

'There'd be ghosts there. That's where a lot of them died. Your grandfather died in this room, but I don't suppose you'll see his ghost. Why are you so interested, little Elsie? It's a funny thing for a child to

talk about, isn't it? Have you been gossiping with the servants?'

Elsie shook her head. She was accustomed to the quick lying of utter fear.

'I thought I heard one last night, Grandmamma. Walking about.' Her child's vivid imagination forced her to add: 'When I got out of bed and opened the door I thought I saw a ghost coming down the stairs and I wondered who it was.'

'Who would you like it to be?' grinned the old lady. 'Who would you like it to be out of all your uncles and aunts and great-uncles and aunts? Well, they weren't any of them any good, as I told you. Except your father, perhaps. Yes, that now, your father.'

'I'd like to see him,' said Elsie. 'Is he a ghost, too?'

Grandmamma was silent for a while. She seemed to be dozing, and Elsie felt even more afraid than she usually did when the old lady went off into one of her half-trances, half-sleeps, sitting propped up against the pillows, with her sharp chin on the little jacket of white Iceland wool she wore across her shoulder and breast.

Elsie began to whimper through fear of the ghosts and of Grandmamma and of loneliness of the great empty house. But Grandmamma was not asleep nor ill. She had only been thinking of the past.

'Your father would be a very pleasant sort of ghost. He was my youngest--the flower of the flock. Yes, if you saw him, Elsie, you would see a very handsome young man. Well, he wouldn't be so young now, I suppose. He died soon after you were born. How old are you, Elsie?'

'Nearly seven years old, Grandmamma.'

'Yes, he wouldn't be such a very young man, but he was handsome. Oh yes, my James was handsome. He had a mole on his left cheekbone.'

'I hope I won't see him,' said Elsie, shuddering, as she sat rigid on her little stool. 'I hope he'll stay upstairs. I wonder where he lived. I expect in that room with the big black picture all full of holes.'

'He used to amuse himself with that old canvas,' said Grandmamma, smiling, as if at a pleasant recollection. 'He used to have his games and sport there. He always was bold and spirited, and very loving to me, whatever they say about him.'

'And Uncle Tom?' asked Elsie. Was he loving too?'

At that name a convulsive spasm passed over Grandmamma's face. She struck out angrily with her strongest hand, missing Elsie, Who shrank back from the bedside.

'You have been gossiping with the servants! You haven't got an Uncle Tom! There's no such person! He doesn't exist! Who told you there was an Uncle Tom?

'Nobody,' said Elsie, 'only you yourself, Grandmamma, the other day when you seemed half asleep you said something about Uncle Tom coming.'

The old woman looked at her dubiously, but was not able to contradict this, for she knew that she had not always full control over her senses.

'Well, perhaps I did, perhaps I did,' she grumbled. 'You shouldn't have taken any notice. I didn't know what I was saying. I dare say I've been

dreaming about the ghosts upstairs, Elsie, just like you have--a lot of nonsense! There's no Uncle Tom. If you ever meet one who says he's your Uncle Tom or says he's any son of mine, you tell him that he's a scoundrel and a liar, Elsie. I've no son, do you hear? Do you hear? All my sons are dead--dead.'

Elsie said 'Yes' obediently and readily. Uncle Tom did not, after all, matter much to her. It was the ghost upstairs who concerned her and about whom she wanted to hear.

One afternoon in that odious June was more dreadful than any other afternoon to Elsie, for she was left quite alone in the house with her Grandmamma. Of course, this should never have happened and was not meant to happen. It occurred like this.

Mary and Sarah were, it seemed, both nieces of Mrs Parfitt, and when an uncle of theirs died all three wanted to go to the funeral. Grandmamma, of course, could not be left alone. Mrs Parfitt said she could easily arrange to send in a friend--a Mrs Skerrell--who would sit with Grandmamma and give Elsie her tea and do anything that was wanted until she, Mrs Parfitt, and the two girls came back about six o'clock, as they easily could, for the funeral was at Highgate.

So Mrs Parfitt told Elsie to be a good girl and Mary said, 'Don't get into mischief; Sarah said, 'Don't you go telling no tales to your grandmother about what you haven't seen or heard'; and Elsie was left alone with Grandmamma and Mrs Skerrell, who was a dreary widow woman in a long black garment and a bonnet with jet flowers.

Elsie had taken advantage of this unusual confusion to get down into the kitchen. She was staring at Mrs Skerrell just untying the strings of the black bonnet when there was a sharp ring at the bell. Both the woman and the child started. Nothing was, as Mrs Parfitt had put it to Mrs Skerrell, 'expected'. All the tradespeople had called and visitors

were rare.

Mrs Skerrell said 'Drat it', retied the strings of her bonnet, and ran up the stairs from the basement into the hall. Elsie remained alone in the kitchen. She wished she had the strength to get down one of the jars full of sultanas or sugar or motley biscuits and spice and eat large handfuls. She was always hungry. She had neither the strength nor the courage, so she remained standing beside the large, scrubbed, white-deal table, and looking up through the kitchen window into the area, she could just see a foot or so of the railings which divided the stone area, with its doors into coal cellars, from the square of garden where grew the ragged laburnum tree and the sooty lilac bushes.

Mrs Skerrell seemed to have been gone a very long time and loneliness increased and crystallised on the small figure of Elsie. She was shut into the desolation like a fly into a lump of amber, not daring to move for fear of finding worse things than loneliness in the other parts of the house. She peered up at the railings. Presently she saw the bottom of Mrs Skerrell's beaded mantle and black skirt going past. Then Elsie ran to the window and, pressing her face to the panes, looked up. Mrs Skerrell was certainly leaving the house. Elsie listened and heard the gate go 'click', the iron tongue of the lock into the iron socket. She knew that sound so well; indeed, she knew every sound in the large empty house in which she had spent her entire life.

She was, then, in the house alone with Grandmamma, who, about this time in the early afternoon, was always asleep. Elsie's first sensation was not one of added fear, but rather of deliverance. She now, given so much time, might be able to climb up on to the dresser and get down some of those canisters of things good to eat. She might be able to make a slow and careful hunt right through the kitchen and find out where the biscuits and the candied peel were

kept; she might be able to tiptoe to the pantry, discover if there was a slice of pie or a portion of cake or a dish of fruit there. All things which she was not allowed and that were not good for Grandmamma, and off which the servants freely feasted.

Then she thought of an even fiercer temptation--an even more resplendent opportunity--the long, darkly gleaming sideboard in the dining-room. There was no speculation about that--there would not need to be any search. Elsie knew exactly where, on the top shelf when the large folding doors underneath the drawers were open, was kept jam, marmalade, and sugar. She was never allowed any of these delicacies. The marmalade used to go on her Grandmamma's breakfast tray, the jam on her afternoon tea tray. There were preserves, too, and cherry and quince, that were brought out for the rare visitors.

It was true that this cupboard, which was large enough to have contained a dozen Elsies, was usually locked, and Grandmamma had the keys. Elsie had seen her take them out of a little box on the table by her bedside and give them to Mary, and seen Mary give them back to her. And once Elsie had found the cupboard open. It was true she had been discovered before she had time to take anything, but perhaps, just perhaps, Mrs Parfitt, in the excitement of her day's outing, had left it open again, then Elsie would be able to help herself.

She would be discovered without doubt. She had little hope of being able to conceal the crime, there would be horrid stickiness on her fingers. When her fingers were sticky, she could, somehow, never get it off, even though she held them under the tap or wiped them on the towels.

But to satisfy her hungry craving for something sweet and delicious and delicate it would be worth enduring the punishment of being

smacked on the backs of both her hands with a hard hairbrush, sent to bed in the daylight, or something worse if Grandmamma and Mrs Parfitt could think of a more severe punishment.

So she crept quietly up the stairs into the large, empty house. It was the very worst part of the afternoon, sunny, silent, with a feeling that it would be hours and hours and hours before the dark fell, as if the world had stopped and all life was in suspension and only she, Elsie, was alive and miserable.

As cautious as if she were certain that she would be overheard, Elsie went down the wide, black and red tiled corridor and into the dining-room, which was shuttered against the sun and full of dusty shadows, which lay in little straight lines of gold from the slats of the Venetian blinds.

Elsie had no luck. She found the sideboard locked. She had become by now reckless and daring; she would go upstairs, she decided, and take the key from the little box beside Grandmamma's bed. Grandmamma would be asleep, and she had heard Mrs Parfitt tell Mrs Skerrell the old lady `had had her medicine and wouldn't give any trouble'.

The sunny, silent afternoon hung like a halter round Elsie's soul. She thought that if she could get the keys and open the cupboard, a pot of jam, yes, a whole pot of jam, eaten slowly and with relish, would do something to mitigate the horrible loneliness of her imprisonment.

Grandmamma was, as she had thought she would be, asleep. The clothes were drawn up over her face as usual, and only the top of her cap with violet ribbons could be seen against the pillow. There were the slippers in the slipper-case, the watch neatly in the watchcase, there was the box standing beside the bottle of medicine with the glasses, the spectacles in their case, the Bible with the bronze clasp,

and the different balls of wool, the various pieces of knitting.

The sunblinds were drawn over Grandmamma's window; the poplars in the garden made a fluttering shadow on them. The little breeze lifted them now and then so that a spurt of golden sunlight would fall into the shadowed room. All the smooth-faced pictures on the wall seemed to be watching Elsie--the girl with the dead bird, the girl tying the bandage on the man's arm, the baby-faced boy who was called the `Prince Imperial'; all these, in their pale, smooth, shining frames, seemed to turn and stare at Elsie, but she did not falter.

She lifted the lid of the key-box and was putting in her hand to take out the key when she heard, overhead, footsteps.

The ghost of course, undoubtedly the ghost, and she alone in the house and at its mercy. On a frantic impulse of terror she turned and tried to rouse her grandmother, even venturing, seldom as she dared to touch the invalid, to shake the gaunt shoulder that heaved up the clothes. Grandmamma was very soundly asleep and did not rouse. The steps came nearer, unmistakably descending the stairs from the upper room. Elsie thought only of hiding, of creeping under the bed or into the huge cupboard where Grandmamma kept hanks and hanks of brightly-coloured wool and skeins and skeins of grey wool. But before she had time to run farther than the length of the bed, the door, which she had left ajar, was pushed open and the ghost walked in.

It was a handsome man with red hair and a mole on the left cheekbone. Elsie remembered what Grandmamma had said about her father and stood still at the end of the bed, staring. The apparition gave her no special feeling of terror; it was, indeed, far less terrible than she had supposed it would be. She even thought that in the warm glint of the eyes, the half curl of the lips, she detected promise of an ally. He was, at least, younger and more attractive than any

creature she had seen for a long time, nay, than she had ever seen before.

'Hullo, little nipper,' said the ghost. 'What are you doing here?' And as Elsie did not answer he advanced into the room and said in a low, steady voice, 'Oh, you're Elsie, I suppose, James's child.'

'And you're James,' said Elsie. 'Grandmother told me about you.'

'James,' said the ghost, 'your father do you mean? He's dead.'

'Yes, I meant that. I meant that you are my father and dead and a ghost. Isn't that right, please?'

The apparition seemed to reflect and gave a frown that made Elsie feel as if she were dwindling away with terror, then he said shortly, in the same low, cautious tone: 'Well, if you like. Come here and let me have a look at you.'

Elsie stood mute, shaking her head in terror. The ghost became at once angry.

'Don't be a little fool. I'm here for your good as well as my own. You don't have much of a life, do you? They've always packed you out of the way when I've been before.'

'Oh, you've been before?' whispered Elsie in a thin tone of curiosity.

'Yes, I don't suppose you heard anything about that. Well, I shan't come again. Come outside, anyway, I might help you. How old are you?'

'Seven,' replied Elsie, who felt that the extra six months gave her added importance. Not for anything would she have admitted to six and a half.

'I see. Well, you're old enough to have some sense. I've come here looking for something. Perhaps you could help me find it.'

'Grandmamma would know where it is,' said Elsie, pointing to the bed.

'I don't want to wake her,' said the man, with a queer look. 'She's asleep. I think she's going to sleep for a long time.'

'Mrs Skerrell ought to be looking after her,' whispered Elsie. 'What happened to Mrs Skerrell?'

'I sent her away with a cock-and-bull story. Never you mind that. I want a little time in this house to myself. I've been looking out for an opportunity for a long while. I had it today when the women went out. Now look here, if you'll help me, I'll do something for you. Is there anything you want?'

Elsie understood nothing of this except the last question. She did not know to what sort of creature she spoke; she was quite bewildered. She felt more confident than she had ever felt before, more happy than she had been since she had been brought, so long ago that she could not remember it, to this house.

'I came up for Grandmamma's keys.'

'Her keys?' asked the other sharply. 'Where are they?'

'In the little box by the bed.'

'What did you want with her keys?'

'I was going to take something out of the sideboard--jam.'

'I see.'

The man looked at her very shrewdly out of narrow eyes.

'I suppose the old miser--God forgive me--keeps you half-starved. Well, you shall have some jam, Elsie, and something else too. What else would you like?'

'Sixpence,' said Elsie, in wild bravado.

The stranger smiled sourly.

'I'll give you a gold sovereign. You could do a lot with that, couldn't you, a child of your age?'

Elsie's senses reeled. On rare occasions Mary or Sarah had taken her for short walks, but she had seen, oh, a long way off, shops in which, the servants had told her, almost anything could be purchased for money. There would not be any limit to what one could get with a golden sovereign.

'What do you want me to do?' she asked. Then her small shrewd face clouded. 'Have you come here looking for gold?'

He seemed startled.

'Gold! What made you think of that? I promised you a sovereign. I didn't say I'd come here looking for gold.'

'I thought perhaps you had, because there isn't any. Grandmamma's only got farthings, she told me so herself. Mrs Parfitt said something about gold hidden in the house, but I looked, and there wasn't any. Grandmamma,' she repeated, 'has only farthings. I think they're hidden under her pillow.'

'No, I haven't come looking for gold. I want to know where your grandmother keeps her writing-desk, her papers. Has she got them here? Or does Furnival, that's the lawyer, have them all?'

Elsie shook head, not understanding.

'Don't be a stupid,' said the man keenly, and with a certain desperation she had thought was impatience. 'How can I put it so that you'll understand? I'm looking for a piece of paper, do you see? And it's very important. It may not be here; but she used to, when I lived here, keep all her papers under her own eye and look at them secretly. Now, have you ever seen her sit up in bed and call for a little desk or a box and turn it over and look at the papers?'

Elsie nodded.

'Yes, she does that sometimes. And I have to fetch them.'

'Good girl.' The man seemed with difficulty to control an intense eagerness. 'Now, if you can find those papers and let me see them, I suppose the key's on the same bunch where the key for your jam cupboard is?'

Elsie nodded again. She began to feel herself important.

At least here was action, a chance to express oneself, to show one's quickness and courage. She opened the box, put her hand in, and took out the bunch of keys. She knew them all, through quick observation and a keen memory.

'This opens the cupboard downstairs, the jam and sugar cupboard. This is the key of the little box that Grandmamma keeps in her wool cupboard underneath her grey wool, and I bring it to her sometimes, and there are papers in it.'

'Give it to me.'

He held the keys in his hand, while Elsie went to the cupboard and quickly found this box of inlaid wood.

'Aren't you afraid she'll wake?' she said, as she came back and laid this on the quilted coverlet.

'No,' he said, tucking up his lips in a peculiar smile. 'I'm not afraid she'll wake. I'm not afraid of her at all.'

He quickly found the right key. His deft, swift fingers turned over the papers in the small box. The child stared at him, her peaked face taut with interest.

'I don't believe you're a ghost,' she said at length. 'I think you're Uncle Tom.'

At that he turned on her with a low snarl. 'Who told you there was an Uncle Tom?'

'Mrs Parfitt talked about him.'

'And she...' The man pointed to the huddled outline of the sleeping woman in the bed. Did she say anything about me?'

'No,' said Elsie; 'she said there was no such person as Uncle Tom.'

'Well, isn't that right? Wouldn't she know? There is no such person. I am James, the ghost of James, your father, as you said just now when you saw me. That's right, isn't it?'

'I suppose so,' said Elsie, 'but I don't seem to be afraid like I should have been if you were a ghost.'

'You've forgotten your pot of jam, my dear,' he said, taking envelope, after envelope out of the box and scanning them keenly. 'Yes, and the golden sovereign I promised you. Ah, here we are. I knew she'd keep it. She was always in two minds about everything.'

He had taken two documents that looked very dull to Elsie and laid them on the bed.

'You can't read, I suppose, my little dear, can you?'

The child shook her head.

'Will you give me the other key and I'll run downstairs and get the jam,' she said. 'If they punish me afterwards you might come back and say you let me take it.'

'They won't punish you. They'll have something else to think about.' He tossed her the keys. 'Bring them back here. You seem sharp and spry. You ought to know your way about.'

'What are those two pieces of paper?'

'Never you mind. I've found what I want. I'll give you two sovereigns, but you're not to tell anybody you saw me. You understand?'

'Oh, why mayn't I say I've seen a ghost? I said the other night I'd seen one and I hadn't really and nobody minded.'

He laughed and the tension of his dark face relaxed.

'Oh, well, you can say you've seen a ghost if you like. That will do very well. Why not?'

'Didn't Mrs Skerrell see you?' asked the child cunningly.

'No she didn't. What's that to you, anyway? Yet I ought to be grateful to you for reminding me. I suppose the hag'll be back soon.'

He stood staring at the two papers in his hand, then put one paper carefully back into the box, locked it, and watched Elsie while she cunningly returned it underneath the piles of grey wool in the cupboard. Then he tore the second piece of paper into small pieces and put them carefully in the inner breast pocket of his coat and followed Elsie downstairs and stood over her in a listening attitude while she unlocked the cupboard and took out a pot of apricot jam.

Her eyes glistened and her mouth watered so at the sight of the jam that she almost forgot about the two sovereigns and her bewilderment as to whether or not the man was an apparition or flesh and blood. Whoever he was, he took two sovereigns out of his pocket and placed them on the end of the shining mahogany table.

'There you are, my dear; you can't say I haven't kept my bargain. Now mind, I am a ghost. If you say anything about me I don't like, I shall come in the middle of the night and give you a fright. Perhaps carry you away to where it's all bogies and blue flames.'

'Oh, please,' said Elsie, nearly dropping the pot of jam in her terror, 'I'll do anything you like. What do you want me to say?'

'Nothing at all. Only that you've just seen a ghost. Better not mention the jam or the keys or those papers I took. See--not a word.'

He frowned and thrust his head forward and made himself look so menacing and hideous that Elsie began to weep.

'There, I know you're a good girl and won't say anything. Now take the jam somewhere you're not likely to be found and remember you've simply seen a ghost this afternoon--the ghost of your father,

James.'

'Are you going away now? Where do you go? Through that stepladder up on to the roof? .I think that's the way the ghosts come.'

'No, I shall go out the back. Do you know who lives next door? Anybody likely to be about just now?'

'One house is empty,' said Elsie, 'there's only a caretaker there, and they don't come until the evening. The other side the people are away. There's never anyone there at all.'

'Good! My lucky day. Now remember what I told you about the ghost.'

Then he was gone.

When Elsie had finished her pot of jam she looked round for the sovereigns, but they had gone too. This caused her to weep bitterly, for it was the vanishing of the brightest dream of her life. Yet in her soul she felt that it was logical. What could a ghost leave but fairy gold? But she cried all the same in pure disappointment at the loss of the golden visions that the two golden coins had conjured up.

Mrs Skerrell, coming back hurried and panting, and out of temper, found her crying in the dining-room.

'Why aren't you up with your grandmother, you naughty girl? You're old enough--you might have been watching of her. What'll happen to me if the old lady's come to some harm while I was away?'

Mrs Skerrell, untying her bonnet and unfastening her cloak, began to mutter about a queer business--a boy had come with a message to say she was wanted at home, a matter of illness, serious and immediate. When she'd rushed back there had been nothing at all. The boy had said that it was a stranger whom he had never seen

before had told him to give the message. He thought the gentleman was a doctor, he was very civil and had given him half a crown.

'All a lot of rubbish,' said Mrs Skerrell, going upstairs, considerably ruffled and discomposed, with Elsie behind her for the sake of company.

'Grandmamma's asleep,' said Elsie, 'Better leave her alone.' Then, because she could not keep her great secret any longer to herself: 'I've seen a ghost. He gave me two sovereigns, and as soon as he went the money went too.'

'Don't be a naughty wicked girl and tell a pack of lies,' scolded Mrs Skerrell. The old lady seems asleep,' she added with a sigh of relief. 'Better leave her, she won't want her tea before five, and by that time Mrs Parfitt will be home.'

Mrs Parfitt was punctual. At the usual appointed hour when she brought up Grandmamma's tea Elsie was sitting on her little stool sobbing to herself at the loss of the fairy gold, trying to wind the yellow wool. When Mrs Parfitt and Mrs Skerrell endeavoured to rouse Grandmamma they found they could not do so.

The old lady was dead.

When the doctor came he said she had been dead for some hours. Of course, it was quite likely that she might have had a sudden stroke. 'She passed away,' as the phrase went on, in her sleep. It was really not worth while making any question or raising any fuss. What else could have happened?

Mrs Skerrell did not admit that she had been decoyed away from the house and Elsie did not even mention the ghost. The doctor had thought that there were queer marks round the old woman's throat,

as if her frail life had been impetuously shaken out of her, but of course, he assured himself, this must have been a delusion.

The lawyer said that Grandmamma had left a recent will leaving everything to Elsie, but as this could not be found he was quite prepared to believe that the old lady, in a capricious mood, had destroyed it. The earlier will, then, which was found quite readily in a box where the old lady kept her important papers hidden under the pile of grey wool which she knitted into petticoats for the poor, was proved.

Grandmamma's only surviving son, Mr Thomas, came into all her money and into the big lonely house at Hampstead. Grandmamma was a much wealthier woman than anyone had thought she was, and Mr Thomas behaved generously towards Elsie.

He paid for her to go into an orphanage for the daughters of decayed gentlefolk.

He did not come near the house at Hampstead himself, so Elsie never saw him.

She left the house with a great feeling of relief. She did not, of course, expect to be happy in the orphanage nor anywhere. She knew that she was a nuisance and not wanted and must always efface herself, but she was glad to get away from the house which was haunted by the ghost of her father, James. Though she had loyally kept her word to him, and never said a word about what he had done when he visited her the day Grandmamma died, she was filled with fear that his angry apparition might return one night under some hideous form.

And another reason for her relief at leaving the great house in Hampstead was the fact that now there was hardly any possibility

that anyone would discover that she had stolen the pot of apricot jam.

The Extraordinary Adventure Of Mr John Proudie

Mr John Proudie kept a chemist's shop in Soho Fields, Monmouth Square; it was a very famous shop, situated at the corner, so that there were two fine windows of leaded glass, one looking on Dean Street and one on the Square, and at the corner the door, with a wooden portico by which two steps descended into the shop.

A wooden counter, polished and old, ran round this shop, and was bare of everything save a pair of gleaming brass scales; behind, the walls were covered from floor to ceiling by shelves which held jars of Delft pottery, blue and white, and Italian majolica, red and yellow, on which were painted the names of the various drugs; in the centre the shelves were broken by a door that led into an inner room.

On a certain night in November when the shop was shut, the old housekeeper abed, and the fire burning brightly in the parlour, Mr John Proudie was busy in his little laboratory compounding some medicines, in particular a mixture of the milky juice of blue flag root and pepper which he had found very popular for indigestion.

He was beginning to feel cold, and, not being a young man (at this time, the year 1690, Mr Proudie was nearly sixty), a little tired, and to think with pleasure of his easy chair, his hot drink of mulled wine on the hearth, his *Gazette* with its exciting news of the war and the Commons and the plots, when a loud peal at the bell caused him to drop the strainer he was holding--not that it was so unusual for Mr Proudie's bell to ring after dark, but his thoughts had been full of these same troubles of plots and counter-plots of the late Revolution, and the house seemed very lonely and quiet.

'Fine times,' thought Mr Proudie indignantly, 'when an honest tradesman feels uneasy in his own home!'

The bell went again, impatiently, and the apothecary wiped his hands, took up a candle, and went through to the dark shop. As he passed through the parlour he glanced up at the clock and was surprised to see that it was nearly midnight. He set the candle in its great pewter stick on the counter, whence the light threw glistening reflections on the rows of jars and their riches, and opened the door. A gust of wind blew thin cold sleet across the, polished floor, and the apothecary shivered as he cried out: 'Who is there?'

Without replying a tall gentleman stepped down into the shop, closing the door behind him.

'Well, sir?' asked Mr Proudie a little sharply.

'I want a doctor,' said the stranger, 'at once.'

He glanced round the shop impatiently, taking no more notice of Mr Proudie than if he had been a servant.

'And why did you come here for a doctor?' demanded the apothecary, not liking his manner and hurt at the insinuation that his own professional services were not good enough.

'I was told,' replied the stranger, speaking in tolerable English, but with a marked foreign accent, 'that a doctor lodged over your shop.'

'So he does,' admitted Mr Proudie grudgingly; 'but he is abed.'

The stranger approached the counter and leant against it in the attitude of a man exhausted; the candlelight was now full on him, but revealed nothing of his features, for he wore a black mask such as

was used for travelling on doubtful rendezvous; a black lace fringe concealed the lower part of his face.

Mr Proudie did not like this; he scented mystery and underhand intrigue, and he stared at the stranger very doubtfully.

He was a tall, graceful man, certainly young, wrapped in a dark blue mantle lined with fur and wearing riding gloves and top boots; the skirts of a blue velvet coat showed where the mantle was drawn up by. his sword, and there was a great deal of fine lace and a diamond brooch at his throat.

'Well,' he said impatiently, and his black eyes flashed through the mask holes, 'how long are you going to keep me waiting? I want Dr Valletort at once.'

'Oh, you know his name?'

'Yes, I was told his name. Now, for God's sake, sir, fetch him--tell him it is a woman who requires his services!'

Mr Proudie turned reluctantly away and picked up the candle, leaving the gentleman in the dark, mounted the stairs to the two rooms above the shop, and roused his lodger.

'You are wanted, Dr Valletort,' he said through the door; 'there is a man downstairs come to fetch you to a lady--a bitter night and he a foreign creature in a mask,' finished the old apothecary in a grumble.

Dr Francis Valletort at once opened the door; he was not in bed, but had been reading by the light of a small lamp. Tall and elegant, with the pallor of a scholar and the grace of a gentleman, the young doctor stood as if startled, holding his open book in his hand.

'Do not go,' said Mr Proudie on a sudden impulse; 'these are

troubled times and it is a bitter night to be abroad.'

The doctor smiled.

'I cannot afford to decline patients, Mr Proudie--remember how much I am in your debt for food and lodging,' he added with some bitterness.

'Tut, tut!' replied Mr Proudie, who had a real affection for the young man. 'But no doubt I am an old fool--come down and see this fellow.'

The doctor took up his shabby hat and cloak and followed the apothecary down into the parlour and from there into the shop.

'I hope you are ready,' said the voice of the stranger from the dark; 'the patient may be dead through this delay.'

Mr Proudie again placed the candle on the counter; the red flame of it illuminated the tall, dark figure of the stranger and the shabby figure of the doctor against the background of the dark shop and the jars--labelled 'Gum Camphor', 'Mandrake Root', 'Dogwood Bark', 'Blue Vervain', 'Tansy', 'Hemlock', and many other drugs, written in blue and red lettering under the glazing.

'Where am I to go and what is the case?' asked Francis Valletort, eyeing the stranger intently.

'Sir, I will tell you all these questions on the way; the matter is urgent.'

'What must I take with me?'

The stranger hesitated.

'First, Dr Valletort,' he said, 'are you skilled in the Italian?'

The young doctor looked at the stranger very steadily. 'I studied medicine at the University of Padua,' he replied.

'Ah! Well, then, you will be able to talk to the patient, an Italian lady who speaks no English. Bring your instruments and some antidotes for poisoning, and make haste.'

The doctor caught the apothecary by the arm and drew him into the parlour. He appeared in considerable agitation.

'Get me my sword and pistols,' he said swiftly, 'while I prepare my case.'

He spoke in a whisper, for the door was open behind them into the shop, and the apothecary, alarmed by his pale look, answered in the same fashion: 'Why are you going? Do you know this man?'

'I cannot tell if I know him or not--what shall I do? God help me!'

He spoke in such a tone of despair and looked so white and ill that Mr Proudie pushed him into a chair by the fire and bade him drink some of the wine that was warming.

'You will not go out tonight,' he said firmly.

'No,' replied the doctor, wiping the damp from his brow, 'I cannot go.'

John Proudie returned to the shop to take this message to the stranger, who, on hearing it, broke into a passionate ejaculation in a foreign language, then thrust his hand into his coat pocket.

'Take this to Francis Valletort,' he answered, 'and then see if he will come.'

He flung on the counter, between the scales and candle, a ring of

white enamel, curiously set with alternate pearls and diamonds very close together, and having suspended from it a fine chain from which hung a large and pure pearl.

Before the apothecary could reply Francis Valletort, who had heard the stranger's words, came from the parlour and snatched at the ring. While he was holding it under the candle flame and gazing at the whiteness of diamond, pearl, and enamel, the masked man repeated his words.

'Now will you come?'

The doctor straightened his thin shoulders, his hollow face was flushed into a strange beauty.

'I will come,' he said; he pushed back the brown locks that had slipped from the black ribbon on to his cheek and turned to pick up his hat and cloak, while he asked Mr Proudie to go up to his room and fetch his case of instruments.

The apothecary obeyed; there was something in the manner of Francis Valletort that told him that he was now as resolute in undertaking this errand as hitherto he had been anxious to avoid it; but he did not care for the adventure. When the stranger had thrust his hand into his pocket to find the ring that had produced such an effect on the doctor, Mr Proudie had noticed something that he considered very unpleasant. The soft doeskin glove had fallen back, caught in the folds of the heavy mantle as the hand was withdrawn, and Mr Proudie had observed a black wrist through the lace ruffles: the masked cavalier was a negro. Mr Proudie had seen few coloured men and regarded them with suspicion and aversion; and what seemed to him so strange was that what he styled a 'blackamoor' should be thus habited in fashionable vestures and speaking with an air of authority.

However, evidently Francis Valletort knew the man or at least his errand--doubtless from some days of student adventure in Italy; and the apothecary did not feel called upon to interfere. He returned with the case of instruments to find the stranger and the doctor both gone, the parlour and the shop both empty, and the candle on the counter guttering furiously in the fierce draught from the half-open door.

Mr Proudie was angry; there had been no need to slip away like that, sending him away by a trick, and still further no need to leave the door open at the mercy of any passing vagabond.

The apothecary went and peered up and down the street; all was wet darkness; a north wind flung the stinging rain in his face; a distant street lamp cast a fluttering flame but no light on the blackness.

Mr Proudie closed the door with a shudder and went back to his fire and his *Gazette*.

'Let him,' he said to himself, still vexed, 'go on his fool's errand.'

He knew very little of Francis Valletort, whose acquaintance he had made a year ago when the young doctor had come to him to buy drugs. The apothecary had found his customer earnest, intelligent, and learned, and a friendship had sprung up between the two men which had ended in the doctor renting the two rooms above the shop, and, under the wing of the apothecary, picking up what he could of the crumbs let fall by the fashionable physicians of this fashionable neighbourhood.

'I hope he will get his fee tonight,' thought Mr Proudie, as he stirred the fire into a blaze; then, to satisfy his curiosity as to whether this were really a medical case or only an excuse, he went to the dispensary to see if the doctor had taken any drugs. He soon discovered that two bottles, one containing an antidote against

arsenic poisoning, composed of oxide of iron and flax seed, the other a mixture for use against lead poisoning, containing oak bark and green tea, were missing.

'So there was someone ill?' cried Mr Proudie aloud, and at that moment the door bell rang again.

'He is soon back,' thought the apothecary, and hastened to undo the door; 'perhaps le was really hurried away and forgot his case.' He opened the door with some curiosity, being eager to question the doctor, but it was another stranger who stumbled down the two steps into the dark shop--a woman, whose head was wrapped in a cloudy black shawl.

The wind had blown out the candle on the counter and the shop was only lit by the illumination, faint and dull, from the parlour; therefore, Mr Proudie could not see his second visitor clearly, but only sufficiently to observe that she was richly dressed and young; the door blew open, and wind and rain were over both of them; Mr Proudie had to clap his hand to his wig to keep it on his head.

'Heaven help us!' he exclaimed querulously. 'What do you want, madam?'

For answer she clasped his free hand with fingers so chill that they struck a shudder to the apothecary's heart, and broke out into a torrent of words in what was to Mr Proudie an incomprehensible language; she was obviously in the wildest distress and grief, and perceiving that the apothecary did not understand her, she flung herself on her knees, wringing her hands and uttering exclamations of despair.

The disturbed Mr Proudie closed the door and drew the lady into the parlour; she continued to speak, rapidly and with many gestures, but

all he could distinguish was the name of Francis Valletort.

She was a pretty creature, fair and slight, with braids of seed pearls in her blonde hair showing through the dark net of her lace shawl, an apple-green silk gown embroidered with multitudes of tiny roses, and over all a black Venetian velvet mantle; long corals were in her ears, and a chain of amber round her throat; her piteously gesticulating hands were weighted with large and strange rings.

'If you cannot speak English, madam,' said Mr Proudie, who was sorry for her distress, but disliked her for her outlandish appearance and because he associated her with the blackamoor, 'I am afraid I cannot help you.'

While he spoke she searched his face with eager haggard brown eyes, and when he finished she sadly shook her head to show that she did not understand. She glanced round the homely room impatiently, then, with a little cry of despair and almost stumbling in her long silken skirts, which she was too absorbed in her secret passion to gather up, she turned back into the shop, making a gesture that Mr Proudie took to mean she wished to leave. The apothecary was not ill-pleased at this; since they could not understand each other her presence was but an embarrassment. He would have liked to have asked her to wait the doctor's return, but saw that she understood no word of English; he thought it was Italian she spoke, but he could not be even sure of that.

As swiftly as she had come she had gone, unbolting the door herself and disappearing into the dark; as far as Mr Proudie could see, she had neither chair nor coach; in which case she must have come from nearby, for there was but little wet on her clothes.

Once more the apothecary returned to his fire, noticing the faint perfume of iris the lady had left on the air to mingle with the odours of

Peruvian bark and camomile, rosemary and saffron, beeswax and turpentine, myrrh and cinnamon that rendered heavy the air of the chemist's shop.

'Well, she knows her own business, I have no doubt,' thought Mr Proudie, 'and as I cannot help her I had better stay quietly here till Francis Valletort returns and elucidates the mystery.'

But he found that he could not fix his thoughts on the *Gazette*, nor, indeed, on anything whatever but the mysterious events of the evening.

He took up an old book of medicine and passed over the pages, trying to interest himself in old prescriptions of blood root, mandrake and valerian, gentian, flax seed and hyssop, alum, poke root and black cherry, which he knew by heart, and which did not now distract him at all from the thought of the woman in her rich foreign finery, her distress and distraction, who had come so swiftly out of the night.

Now she had gone, uneasiness assailed him--where had she disappeared? Was she safe? Ought he not forcibly to have kept her till the return of Francis Valletort, who spoke both French and Italian? Certainly he had been the cause of the lady's visit; she had said, again and again, 'Valletort--Francis Valletort.' The apothecary drank his spiced wine, trimmed and snuffed his candles, warmed his feet on the hearth and his hands over the blaze, and listened for the bell that should tell of the doctor's return.

He began to get sleepy, almost dozed off in his chair, and was becoming angry with these adventures that kept him out of his bed when the bell rang a third time, and he sat up with that start that a bell rung suddenly in the silence of the night never fails to give.

'Of course it will be Francis Valletort back again,' he said, rising and

taking up the candle that had now nearly burnt down to the socket; it was half an hour since the doctor had left the house.

Once again the apothecary opened the door on to the wet, windy night; the candle was blown out in his hand.

'You--must come,' said a woman's voice out of the darkness; he could just distinguish the figure of his former visitor, standing in the doorway and looking down on him; she spoke the three English words with care and difficulty, and with such a foreign accent that the apothecary stared stupidly, not understanding, at which she broke out into her foreign ejaculations, caught at his coat, and dragged at him passionately.

Mr Proudie, quite bewildered, stepped into the street, and stood there hatless and cloakless, the candlestick in his hand.

'If you could only explain yourself, madam!' he exclaimed in despair.

While he was protesting she drew the door to behind him and, seizing his arm, hurried along down Dean Street.

Mr Proudie did not wish to refuse to accompany her, but the adventure was not pleasing to him; he shivered in the night air and felt apprehensive of the darkness; he wished he had had time to bring his hat and cloak.

'Madam,' he said, as he hurried along, 'unless you have someone who can speak English, I fear I shall be no good at all, whatever your plight.'

She made no answer; he could hear her teeth chattering and feel her shivering; now and then she stumbled over the rough stones of the roadway. They had not gone far up the street when she stopped at the door of one of the mansions and pushed it gently open, guiding

Mr Proudie into a hall in absolute silence and darkness. Mr Proudie thought that he knew all the houses in Dean Street, but he could not place this; the darkness had completely confused him.

The lady opened another door and pushed Mr Proudie into a chamber where a faint light burned.

The room was unfurnished, covered with dust and in disrepair; only in front of the shuttered windows hung long, dark blue silk curtains. Against the wall was hung a silver lamp of beautiful workmanship, which gave a gloomy glow over the desolate chamber.

The apothecary was about to speak when the lady, who had been standing in an attitude of listening, suddenly put her hand over his mouth and pushed him desperately behind the curtains. Mr Proudie would have protested, not liking this false position, but there was no mistaking the terrified entreaty in the foreign woman's blanched face, and the apothecary, altogether unnerved, suffered himself to be concealed behind the flowing folds of the voluminous curtains that showed so strangely in the unfurnished room.

A firm step sounded outside and Mr Proudie, venturing in the shadow to peer from behind the curtain, saw his first visitor of the evening enter the room. He was now without mask, hat, or wig, and his appearance caused Mr Proudie an inward shudder.

Tall and superb in carriage, graceful, and richly dressed, the face and head were those of a full-blooded negro; his rolling eyes, his twitching lips, and an extraordinary pallor that rendered greenish his dusky skin showed him to be in some fierce passion. His powerful black hands grasped a martingale of elegant leather, ornamented with silver studs.

With a fierce gesture he pointed to the lady's draggled skirts and wet

shawl, and in the foreign language that she had used questioned her with a flood of invective--or such it seemed to the terrified ears of Mr Proudie.

She seemed to plead, weep, lament, and defy all at once, sweeping up and down the room and wringing her hands, and now and then, it seemed, calling on God and his saints to help her, for she cast up her eyes and pressed her palms together. To the amazed apothecary, to whom nothing exciting had ever happened before, this was like a scene in a stage play; the two brilliant, fantastic figures, the negro and the fair woman, going through this scene of incomprehensible passion in the empty room, lit only by the solitary lamp.

Mr Proudie hoped that there might be no violence in which he would be called upon to interfere on behalf of the lady: neither his age nor his strength would give him any chance with the terrible blackamoor--he was, moreover, totally unarmed.

His anxieties on this score were ended; the drama being enacted before his horrified yet fascinated gaze was suddenly cut short. The negro seized the lady by the wrist and dragged her from the room.

Complete silence fell; the shivering apothecary was staining his ears for some sound, perhaps some call for help, some shriek or cry.

But nothing broke the stillness of the mansion, and presently Mr Proudie ventured forth from his hiding-place.

He left the room and proceeded cautiously to the foot of the stairs. Such utter silence prevailed that he began to think he was alone in the house and that anyhow he might now return--the front door was ajar, as his conductress had left it; the way of escape was easy.

To the end of his days Mr Proudie regretted that he had not taken it; he never could tell what motives induced him to return to the room, take down the lamp, and begin exploring the house. He rather thought, he would say afterwards, that he wanted to find Francis Valletort; he felt sure that he must be in the house somewhere and he had a horrid premonition of foul play; he was sure, in some way, that the house was empty and the lady and the blackamoor had fled, and an intense curiosity got the better of his fear, his bewilderment, and his fatigue.

He walked very softly, for he was startled by the creaking of the boards beneath his feet; the lamp shook in his hand so that the fitful light ran wavering over walls and ceiling; every moment he paused and listened, fearful to hear the voice or step of the blackamoor.

On the first floor all the doors were open, the rooms all empty, shuttered, desolate, covered with dust and damp.

'There is certainly no-one in the house,' thought Mr Proudie, with a certain measure of comfort. 'Perhaps Valletort has gone home while I have been here on this fool's errand.'

He remembered with satisfaction his fire and his bed, the safe, comfortable shop with the rows of jars, the shining counter, and the gleaming scales, and the snug little parlour beyond, with everything to his hand, just as he liked to find it. Yet he went on up the stairs, continuing to explore the desolate, empty house, the chill atmosphere of which caused him to shiver as if he was cold to the marrow.

On the next landing he was brought up short by a gleam of light from one of the back moms. In a panic of terror he put out his own lamp and stood silent and motionless, staring at the long, faint ray of yellow that fell through the door that was ajar.

'There is someone in the house, then,' thought Mr Proudie. 'I wonder if it is the doctor.'

He crept close to the door, but dared not look in; yet could not go away. The silence was complete; he could only hear the thump of his own heart.

Curiosity, a horrible, fated curiosity, urged him nearer, drove him to put his eye to the crack. His gaze fell on a man leaning against the wall; he was dressed in a rich travelling dress and wore neither peruke nor hat; his superb head was bare to the throat, and he was so dark as to appear almost of African blood; his features, however, were handsome and regular, though pallid and distorted by an expression of despair and ferocity.

A candle stuck into the neck of an empty bottle stood on the bare floor beside him and illuminated his sombre and magnificent figure, casting a grotesque shadow on the dark, panelled wall.

At his feet lay a heap of white linen and saffron-coloured brocade, with here and there the gleam of a red jewel. Mr Proudie stared at this; as his sight became accustomed to the waving lights and shades, he saw that he was gazing at a woman.

A dead woman.

She lay all dishevelled, her clothes torn and her black hair fallen in a tangle--the man had his foot on the end of it; her head was twisted to one side and there were dreadful marks on her throat.

Mr John Proudie gave one sob and fled, with the swiftness and silence of utter terror, down the stairs, out into the street, and never ceased running until he reached home.

He had his key in his pocket, and let himself into his house, panting and sighing, utterly spent. He lit every light in the place and sat down over the dying fire, his teeth chattering and his knees knocking together. Like a man bewitched he sat staring into the fire, raking the embers together, rubbing his hands and shivering, with his mind a blank for everything but that picture he had seen through the crack of the door in the empty house in Dean Street.

When his lamp and candles burnt out he drew the curtains and let in the colourless light of the November dawn; he began to move about the shop in a dazed, aimless way, staring at his jars and scales and pestle and mortar as if they were strange things he had never seen before.

Now came a young apprentice with a muffler round his neck, whistling and red with the cold; and as he took down the shutters and opened the dispensary, as the housekeeper came down and bustled about the breakfast and there was a pleasant smell of coffee and bacon in the place, Mr Proudie began to feel that the happenings of last night were a nightmare indeed that had no place in reality; he felt a cowardly and strong desire to say nothing about any of it, but to try to forget the blackamoor, the foreign lady, and that horrible scene in the upper chamber as figments of his imagination.

It was, however, useless for him to take cover in the refuge of silence--old Emily's first remark went to the root of the matter. 'Why, where is the doctor? He has never been out so late before.'

Where, indeed, was Francis Valletort?

With a groan Mr Proudie dragged himself together; his body was stiff with fatigue, his mind amazed, and he wished that he could have got into bed and slept off all memories of the previous night.

Bur he knew the thing must be faced and, snatching up his hat and coat, staggered out into the air, looking by ten years an older man than the comfortable, quiet tradesman of last night.

He went to the nearest magistrate and told his story; he could see that he was scarcely believed, but a couple of watchmen were sent with him to investigate the scene of last night's adventure, which, remarked the magistrate, should be easily found, since there was, it seemed, but one empty house in Dean Street.

The house was reached, the lock forced, and the place searched, room by room.

To Mr Proudie's intense disappointment and amazement absolutely nothing was found: the blue silk curtains had gone, as had the silver lamp the apothecary had dropped on the stairs in his headlong flight; in the upper chamber where he had stared through the crack of the door nothing was to be found--not a stain on the boards, not a mark on the wall. Dusty, neglected, desolate, the place seemed as if it had not been entered for years.

Mr Proudie began to think that he had been the victim of a company of ghosts or truly bewitched. Then, inside the door, was found the pewter candlestick he had held mechanically in his hand when hurried from his shop and as mechanically let fall here as he had afterwards let fall the lamp.

This proved nothing beyond the fact that he had been in the house last night; but it a little reassured him that he was not altogether losing his wits.

The fullest inquiries were made in the neighbourhood, but without result. No-one had seen the foreigners, no-one had heard any noise in the house, and it would have been generally believed that Mr

Proudie had really lost his senses but for one fact--*Francis Valletort never returned*!

There was, then, some mystery, but the solving of it seemed hopeless, No search or inquiries led to the discovery of the whereabouts of the young doctor, and as he was of very little importance and had no friends but the old apothecary, his disappearance was soon forgotten.

But Mr Proudie, who seemed very aged and, the neighbours said, strange since that November night, was not satisfied with any such reasoning. Day and night he brooded over the mystery, and hardly ever out of his mind was the figure of the young scholar in his shabby clothes, with the strange face of one doomed as he stood putting his heavy hair back from his face and staring at the little white ring on the old, polished counter.

As the years went by the rooms over the chemist's shop were occupied by another lodger and Mr Proudie took possession of the poor effects of Francis Valletort--a few shabby clothes, a few shabby books; nothing of value or even of interest. But to the apothecary these insignificant articles had an intense if horrid fascination.

He locked them away in his cabinet and when he was alone he would take them out and turn them over. In between the thick, yellow leaves of a Latin book on medicine he found the thin leaves of what seemed to be the remains of a diary--fragments torn violently from the cover--mostly half-effaced and one torn across and completely blotted with ink.

There was no name, but Mr Proudie recognised the handwriting of Francis Valletort. With pain and difficulty the dim old eyes of the apothecary made out the following entries:

July 15th, 1687--I saw her in the church today--Santa Maria Maggiore. He is her husband, a Calabrere.' Several lines were blotted out, then came these words--'a man of great power; some mystery--his half-brother is an African...children of a slave...that such a woman...

July 27th--I cannot see how this is going to end; her sister is married to the brother--Vittoria, the name--*hers* Elena della Cxxxxxx.

August 3rd--She showed me the ring today. I think she has worn it since she was a child; it only fits her little finger.'

Again the manuscript was indecipherable; then followed some words scratched out, but readable--

As if I would not come to her without this token! But she is afraid of a trick. *He* is capable of anything--they, I mean; the brother is as his shadow. I think she trusts her sister. My little love!

On another page were found further entries:

October 10th--She says that if he discovered us he would kill her--us together. He told her he would kill her if she angered him; showed her a martingale and said they would strangle her. My God, why do I not murder him? Carlo Fxxxxxx warned me today.

October 29th--I must leave Padua. For her sake--while she is safe--if she is in trouble she will send me the ring. I wonder why we go on living--it is over, the farewells.

Mr Proudie could make out nothing more; he put down the pages with a shudder. To what dark and secret tale of wrong and passion did they not refer? Did they not hold the key to the events of that awful night?

Mr Proudie believed that he had seen the husband and brother-in-law of some woman Francis Valletort had loved, who had followed him to England after the lapse of years; having wrung the secret and the meaning of the white ring from the wretched wife, the husband had used it to lure the lover to his fate; in his other visitor the apothecary believed he had seen the sister Vittoria, who, somehow, had escaped and endeavoured to gain help from the house where she knew Francis Valletort lived, only to be silenced again by her husband. And the other woman--and the martingale?

'I saw her, too,' muttered Mr Proudie to himself, shivering over the fire, '*but what did they do with Frank?*'

He never knew, and died a very old man with all the details of this mystery unrevealed; the fragments of diary were burnt by some careless hand for whom they had no interest; the adventure of Mr Proudie passed into the realms of forgotten mystery, and there was no-one to tell of them when, a century later, repairs to the foundations of an old house in Dean Street revealed two skeletons buried deep beneath the bricks. One was that of a man, the other that of a woman, round whose bones still hung a few shreds of saffron-coloured brocade; and between them was a little ring of white enamel and white stones.

ANN MELLOR'S LOVER

I have always been interested in clairvoyance--after all, I hardly know anyone who isn't; but my interest has always been rather overwhelming--a kind of haunting preoccupation, wholly pleasant but teasing, like something you can't place or explain or reason about always must be.

I've never gone in for it scientifically, never had the time or the money--or perhaps, the courage.

But I've studied--well, all that kind of thing, half-furtively, and thought about it a great deal.

Of course, it hasn't helped really--I mean not in explaining the queer things that have happened to me.

This is one of them.

I feel bound to put it down while it is clear in my mind. I find that unless I put these things into words I lose them. They become faded, then confused, and finally disappear altogether. It's a great diversion to me, a great interest, and sometimes a queer sort of pain too.

I haven't very much else in my life. Just an old bookshop that I keep myself and that keeps me quite comfortably. My father kept the shop before me, and I've hardly ever left it--it was through the books that the clairvoyance began, when I was quite a youth.

I say clairvoyance, but that is merely because I don't know the right word or the exact word or a better word--I don't mean crystal-gazing or raising spirits or anything of that kind.

I mean my peculiar affinity with the past. It is like a kind of second sight; but instead of seeing into the future, I can see into the past. Only now and then, of course, and fitfully and not at will.

Little glimpses are offered me now and then--tantalising, sometimes no use at all, sometimes startlingly complete, as this was.

I can't explain it. I've heard it called race memory and cited as proof of reincarnation. I don't know what to believe.

This is the tale.

One day I was undoing a parcel of secondhand books; they had lain in the shop some time, and I rather forgot where they had come from. I buy a great many books and from many strange places. There wasn't much in the parcel, though some of the bindings were good--calf and vellum.

I picked up one of these--a fat volume of an enticing brown colour faintly traced with gold--and was looking for the half-effaced title when a loose sheet fluttered from between the covers on to the floor.

I picked it up and found it was a rubbed pencil drawing of a girl's head. Nothing much in that, yet from that first second I set eyes on the thing I knew it was significant and vital. I knew that it was a clue that I was bound to follow through the labyrinth of the past. The feeling really was that I knew all about it--the whole story, but could not for the moment remember it.

Just a small pencil drawing on a neat square of yellowed paper; no signature or initials or date.

No help in the book, which was merely a volume of outrageously dull Nonconformist sermons printed a hundred and seventy years ago.

No help in the costume (I think I am an expert in that, and can place a period by a bow or ringlet), for the girl's hair flowed unconfined in a perfectly natural fashion, and the sketch stopped at the curve of the bare throat.

She was dark and lively, looked at once wild and weak, and her eyes sought mine with a direct appeal.

'Now who are you?' I asked myself. 'Who are you?'

I felt sure that I knew her and should soon know all about her--not at once and suddenly, but slowly, by the following up of small clues, as

had happened to me before.

There was an old gilt frame in the shop among my lumber of fine old odds and ends, and I put the sketch into this, adjusting it carefully behind the glass, the frame being much too large, and then took it upstairs and hung it in my little parlour.

I was filled with the greatest curiosity and excitement. I felt that what I was going to find out affected me very closely and personally. I was entirely absorbed by this thought as I went about my business that day, and when evening came and the shop was shut I hastened upstairs to make myself comfortable in my old leather chair, fill my pipe, and stare at the pencilled head that hung above my mantelpiece.

I imagined that as I sat and gazed at her the whole thing would come back to me--as it sometimes did, a clear glimpse, a scene flashing out of the darkness of the past.

But this evening nothing came but two words that leapt into my mind and would not go--one was 'Norway' and the other 'Nightingale'.

I was very disappointed, for the words meant nothing to me--no possible clue whatever; I knew nothing of Norway and had never even been attracted to the country; and 'Nightingale' was a mere word to me also, devoid of every association.

Yet I knew they must be connected in some way with my pencil sketch--the first feeble beginnings, as it were, of my fumblings into the past.

For two days nothing happened. For two days that face looked at me--no pencil lines on a bit of yellow paper, but now a warm-coloured human face; she lived before my inner eye, a complete

creature. Her hair was dark brown and it hung in rather fine curls; the carnation of her face was glowing and warm; her expression flashed from resentment to appeal, and was always, bewildered.

In my mind I could not quite see her dress--but I thought that she wore something white, frilled, and that her background had water in it; that is, that she moved or lived in some place where there was water.

On the third day after my discovery of the pencil sketch that had affected me so powerfully, I attended a sale at an old house in rather on out-of-the-way part of London.

There were some fine old books there that I bought very cheaply, and I was quite pleased with my afternoon's work. This satisfaction did not, however, interfere with my absorption in the unknown, dark, troubled creature about whom I felt such excitement. I discovered no further clues to her identity nor anything that explained the words, so persistently in my mind, of 'Norway' and 'Nightingale.'

I turned for home very briskly. It was late December and brightly cold. I took the shortest cut I could to the nearest Tube station, asking my direction as I went, for I was not sure of my way in this neighbourhood, which was one of those fallen from substantial splendour into a kind of gloomy respectability. Heavy stone houses, built about fifty years ago, darkened the streets, and, hemmed in by these, I suddenly came upon an old church and churchyard, railed round neatly and divided by a paved path, which I knew to be my short cut through. I saw at a glance that the restored church was uninteresting and the rows of grey and white tombstones affected me with a sense of mere futile ugliness. I was hurrying on with a sense of the uncomfortable nip in the air and the grey dullness of my surroundings when something brought me to a sudden stop.

I found myself clinging to the railings of the churchyard, staring at a

heavy square stone tomb, which was again surrounded by an iron railing, through which some patches of recent snow had drifted and now lay soiled and frozen.

There was one simple inscription on the flat side of the tomb:

ANN MELLOR
Who died in the 23rd year of her age, 1750
'A broken and contrite heart, O Lord,
Thou wilt not despise.'

There was nothing strange in this, save that no names of relationship or residence were given. The text I had seen before on gravestones, but not often; it had always seemed to me too obvious an appeal to sentiment to be taken quite seriously.

But now I trembled with excitement and curiosity. I knew and felt that this was *she*.

I managed with some difficulty to mount the railings and examine the tomb all round. There was no further inscription--nothing whatever.

Still, I now knew her name, her age, the year she died. Ann Mellor! It was so familiar that I wondered how it was I had not recalled it before. I made my way through the tombs and found a gate near the church door.

It took me very little time to get hold of the verger and receive permission to look at the registers--but there was little reward for my pains. The entry was there accurately enough: 'Ann Mellor, spinster, of this parish, aged twenty-two years.'

The date of the entry was December 24th, 1750.

So she had died in December and been buried on Christmas Eve.

I knew this much more about her, and I went on my way quite elated and shivering with a desperate kind of excitement.

In about another ten minutes in the colourless twilight I wandered round the neighbourhood, knowing quite well how useless it was. How could there be any relics of 1750--a hundred and seventy years ago--among these massive Victorian houses, these wide modern streets?

'Why,' I reflected, 'the place must have been in the country then--that church stood among fields--she used to come here by coach--yes, a small yellow-and-black coach. I can see her in it, with a wide hat and a black lace scarf tied under it, and--'

The picture was blurred again: I only knew that she used to come to this church by coach, a small black-and-yellow coach.

I remembered that the book from which the pencil sketch had fallen had borne the date 1749--probably it had been in Ann Mellor's possession during the last year of her life.

The thought of this book allured me. I was about to decide to get home to scrutinise it further when I found Myself almost running into a wooden hoarding, which in my absorption and the now encroaching darkness I had not noticed, stretched directly across the street, which was one of mean, drab, low-windowed villas that appeared to be mostly untenanted. I perceived that the fence enclosed a piece of waste ground; I placed my eye to a knot-hole in the wood and saw by the dismal white of the electric light given from the street lamp that the ground was covered with builders' rubbish and the skeletons of half-demolished houses.

The sight was very dreary, yet as had the churchyard, it gave me no effect of depression. I stood quite a long time, regardless of the cold,

staring at the heaps of fallen masonry, the scaffolding poles, the patches of shadow, the splotches of bleached light from the electric standard.

At last I turned and retraced my steps down the cul-de-sac.

At the corner I glanced up at the name of the street--'Palmyra Villas.' There was a policeman passing, and I asked him if this atrocious name was also that of the last portion of the street which was being demolished.

'No,' he said; 'they used to call that Nightingale Lane. A nice old slum it was, too. Condemned it, they did, and time too.'

'It wasn't always a slum,' I said.

'Not likely. Fine old houses some of them was; quite a lot of chaps came over here buying knockers and fanlights and other bits. All gone now, though,' he replied.

He evidently took me for a prowling and mercenary antique dealer. I fostered the idea and got from him the name of the firm doing the housebreaking.

Nightingale Lane--*she* had lived there--but not always, because she used to come to church by coach. 'Of this parish'--not *lived*, but *died* there. Nightingale Lane--perhaps the nightingales had sung near here in 1750--one hundred and seventy years ago.

After that I went home and wrote neatly on the edge of my pencil sketch: 'Ann Mellor, who died in Nightingale Lane on Christmas Eve, 1750.'

Though I had found out so much, there seemed no opening for further investigation; yet I was not at all troubled--I knew that soon everything

would be made clear to me.

It was not, of course, a question of coincidence (personally I do believe that there is such a thing), but of finding out, through this peculiar faculty of mine, the story of Ann Mellor.

I knew that this story had something to do with me; I felt such an extraordinary intimacy and interest, such an excitement, nay, palpitation at the thought of Ann Mellor.

I was not in the least distracted by the fact that I had looked at her tomb and read the entry of her death one hundred and seventy years ago. This death seemed to me a mere incident that we, she and I, had long left behind. A visit to the housebreakers of Nightingale Lane, a patient research among the purchasers of the oddments from the old tenements procured little result.

But there was a silver shoe-buckle found buried in the cellar of one of the houses. That I bought at once.

'Why, that was her house, the house at the corner,' I said. 'And I remember going down to the cellar, when...'

It was all blurred again--only just that glimpse when I recalled the house, and going down to the cellar, and losing a shoe-buckle in the dark, and searching a little for it, then giving it up impatiently. This connected me personally with Ann Mellor. I began to feel that we had been together in curious scenes--it was all blurred, dark, troubled, but I knew that I should understand very soon.

The haunting of the word 'Norway' puzzled me very much--it did not seem to fit into the story at all.

That evening I took the pencil sketch, the book from which it had

fallen, the silver buckle, and holding all of them tightly in my hand, concentrated on an effort to find out more of the person or persons to whom they had belonged.

Usually when I did this my second sight, or clairvoyance or whatever you called the faculty I had, rewarded me with distinct visions or pictures.

This time there was nothing.

Instead, I felt there was somewhere I ought to go--impelled as it were, to get up and walk to some given point.

I put on my hat and coat, placed my treasures in my pocket, and hurried out. It was evening, wet and cold, and just at the hour when the theatres are full and the streets empty. Quite automatically and without knowing in the least where I was going, I walked rapidly to Oxford Street, then turned sharply to the left in the direction of the Marble Arch.

I was rather surprised and disappointed, for I thought I had been guided in the direction of Ann Mellor's tomb and the ruins of Nightingale Lane. This part of the world appeared to have no association whatever with the story I was trying to discover.

The great closed opulent shops with the expanses of shining glass looked blank and alien, as did the long glimmer of the polished road, along which the huge and gaudy motorbuses rolled through the murky night splashed with artificial light.

I crossed Park Lane to the Marble Arch, crossed again, and walked along by the Park railings.

'My God!' I said suddenly, 'I've been here before.' A sudden pang of

rage and terror possessed me, and I had a distinct vision of *pine forests, mountains, and a large lake or bay*--flashed, like a photo picture on the screen, across the dark fronts of the heavy houses fronting me.

The road was empty, and I swung across impulsively. In the centre I stopped and put my hand to my throat. I knew that I had reached the end of my journey.

Under my feet was the metal triangle let into the pavement to mark the site of Tyburn gallows.

I turned away very quickly, shuddering under the drizzling rain.

How did this sinister place enter into the story of Ann Mellor? And what was the meaning of that clearcut little vision of pines and mountains and lake?

I fell into an extreme agitation, and the material objects about me became unreal; they seemed to wane and roll away as if they were painted on a curtain that was being pulled aside.

I thought of what I had heard and read of the fourth dimension. That night when I went to bed I put the book, the buckle and the sketch under my pillow.

I knew what was going to happen and half dreaded it, yet deliberately prepared for it.

I was going to meet Ann Mellor. As I closed my eyes and lost all sensation of time and space, there seemed a second's black unconsciousness. When I opened my eyes, I was standing at a little window that looked down from some height on to the Thames. There were ice-floes on the grey water, and the air was chill. By looking up

the river I could see a vast amount of shipping; great masted vessels crowding together in the broad reach of the river.

A few seagulls swooped and swerved in front of me--gleaming, yet white and grey, like the river and the ice-floes.

I turned to face the room, which was completely panelled in plain wood. The floor sloped a little and the door was low; a tea equipage stood on the table; the fireplace had Dutch tiles with little figures in blue.

The room affected me with a delicious sense of home, and yet--something poignant and heart-searching.

The low door opened. And she entered.

She wore a white muslin dress all frilled, and carried a calf-bound book.

'You like to keep me waiting,' I said, speaking English awkwardly. Ann Mellor went to the tea-table.

'Mrs Briscoe says you come too often,' she said. 'Do you come too often, Eric--do you?'

I faced her. 'You are a hussy and lead me on. You will not let me stay away.'

She gave me a looks half smile, half frown, of wayward passion. 'Ay, bully me,' she said. 'That is my thanks and my reward. My aunt scolds because you come--and this is your gratitude.'

'You'll marry me, you pretty little wretch, and then there will be an end of these quarrels,' I said.

'God helping me, no,' she answered; 'I'll not marry you.'

'You will,' I swore.

I was close to her now, only the table between us, and her provoking face was a short space from mine.

The delicious magic of that moment seemed intolerable; when I held and kissed her, the joy of it seemed unbearable. It was supreme, but more a supreme pain than a supreme satisfaction. She had played fast and loose with me for so long--now yes, now no, denying, provoking--and I looked back on a life that had held very little denial or provocation.

'You have got to marry me,' I said. 'You are nothing but a girl, and I'll make you.'

'I'll not marry a foreigner,' she pouted.

'A penniless jade like you to choose! I am a rich man,' I boasted. 'I could put three thousand pounds into your English bank tomorrow.'

An elderly woman joined us and my chance was over. She looked on me with disfavour, and scolded Ann for trifles.

I was bored, but would not go for fear of missing another opportunity of talking to Ann alone. I picked up the book she had brought in and took it to the window. It was a dull volume of sermons, very new and stiff in the binding.

I yawned.

I took out my pocket-book and pencil and under cover of the open book made a pencil sketch of Ann as she sat at the tea-table bickering with Mrs Briscoe. When I had finished the sketch I idly shut

it up in the book and put the book on the windowsill. For another half-hour I sat there listening to the women gossiping and scolding, then I rose.

I looked at Ann insolently, tormented by the thought of her crushed in my arms, angry with her for ignoring me.

'Will you come to church this Sunday, as usual, Ann?' I asked.

'Leave her at peace in church, do, Mr Ericson!' cried the aunt. 'And we will not go to the Nightingale Lane Church tomorrow--it is too far.'

'Yes, we will go,' said Ann. 'Hike the preacher and the coach ride.'

She looked at me as she spoke, and I went straight up to her and took her by the shoulders, regardless of the other woman.

'My little love,' I said, 'do not deny me any more. Have you ever thought of death? We might be dead and cold--think how cold, these hearts of ours--before the spring is in flower--'

'Dead,' she laughed--'dead!'

'Dead and love frustrate.'

Mrs Briscoe drew her away from me. 'God save us from these foreign manners,' she shrilled. 'You are nothing but a North Sea rover--'

I laughed very heartily at this, for I was one of the richest timber merchants in Kristiansund, and I swaggered away, fingering the sword on my hip.

As I walked through the streets of Wapping I was making plans to abduct the girl and marry her by force.

First I went to Nightingale Lane, looking for lodgings, and found them at the house of Mrs Porter. Then I went to the Black Bull in Holborn and picked up with some town bullies of my acquaintance, and arranged matters with them over a bottle of Tokay.

Two sham bailiffs were to arrest her for an imaginary debt on her way to church--to bring her to me at the Black Bull, where we should be married, I having my clergyman ready, and then I would take her to Nightingale Lane, near the church she so loved.

Here I cannot very well remember sequences--all is blurred, as by the haste and excitement of violent action.

I knew that for several hours I was moving about hastily in great agitation and temper from one place to another, chiefly between Wapping, the Black Bull, and Nightingale Lane.

Always was the cold, the rain, the scatters of snow, the iron-coloured river, the lead-coloured sky.

My schemes succeeded perfectly.

The sham bailiffs stopped the coach and forced out Ann Mellor, leaving Mrs Briscoe shrieking vainly in the grey silence of the wet Sunday morning, and brought her to me where I waited in the private room at the Black Bull.

My darling was brought in, not without indignity. I did not wish to spare her; I felt all the cruelty that passionate love will often show towards the beloved object.

'I knew that it was you,' she said.

'Of course you knew it was I,' I replied--what other man was there

who would so dare to mishandle her?

I thought that she would appeal to my rascal clergyman or my ruffian witnesses, but she did not.

And we were married and left alone.

'Take me away from here,' she said; 'anywhere from this vile tavern.'

'I've lodgings,' I said, 'in Nightingale Lane.'

She turned her head away when I came near her, only repeating, 'Take me away.'

'You must watch your temper now, madam,' I smiled. 'You are my wife.'

At that she broke into violent weeping, like a little child, and gave me a deal of trouble to get her away into the coach.

When we reached our lodgings, which seemed the dearest place in the world to me, my wife fell from tears to abuse and railed incoherently. I tried to humour her.

'Why, Ann,' I said, 'you know this is the best manner in which to deal with your tiresome relatives--come, look up and kiss me. You know that you love me.'

'And if I do,' she answered, with the foolish inconsistency of women, 'does not that make it worse?'

So we quarrelled, she tragic, I smiling, till the landlady brought up the supper.

I asked her for some of the wine I had had sent in from the Black Bull

yesterday, and she, grumbling, said it was in the cellar and had no mind to go there in the dark. So I took the key and the candle and went myself.

One of the buckles was loose and slipped on my shoe. I smiled to see it, thinking of Ann sewing it on for me, and laughing over the thread.

I stood awhile in the cellar, forgetful of my errand, thinking that this was my wedding night and how I loved my darling.

I thought of my own home, and how I would take her there, and the great joy and contentment we should have together.

When I had selected my wine, I noticed, in stooping, that the loose buckle was lost. As I searched for it, a draught blew my candle out, and being in the dark I gave up the business and went upstairs.

I found the house full of strangers; Mrs Briscoe was there with two of my wife's uncles and four constables. I understood amid the noise and confusion (I could not understand the English so very well) that I was to be arrested on a charge of abduction.

I laughed in their faces. I was so sure of Ann. 'The lady will tell you herself,' I said, 'that she is very willingly my wife.'

'Swagger away, my fine young man,' sneered Mrs Briscoe; 'you are nowt but a foreign bully.'

'Ann will tell you what she thinks of me,' I answered.

We all went into the little room where she was. She must have heard us coming, for she stood ready, against the table. She still wore her hat with the black lace under it round her chin, and her dark cape over her white dress.

When she saw her relatives and the constables crowding in, she crossed instantly over to me and put her hand in mine.

I felt as if I should suffocate with the glad leap my heart gave. I placed my bottle of wine on the table.

'You see,' I said, 'my wife stands by me.'

Ann took her hand away. They asked her formally if she was a willing party to her elopement and marriage.

'Cannot you see,' she cried, 'by the way you find me that I am here by outrage and deceit?'

'Girl,' I asked aghast, 'do you deny your husband?'

'Had I had my will you would have been no husband of mine,' she said bitterly.

I could afford to laugh at this, knowing how she loved me, but the others seized on her statement and made her swear to it, which the passionate girl did.

'I'll hurt you as you hurt me,' she cried. 'This shall be a black day's work for you.'

I let them disarm and arrest me; I did not know much of the English laws, and I asked what my punishment would be.

One of the uncles answered me. 'The girl's an heiress. In stealing her you've stolen property.'

'Twenty pounds a year and a thousand in the Government!' I answered. 'What is that to me? I am a rich man.'

'No matter. You've committed a felony. We look after property in this country. If you are found guilty, it is the gallows.'

Ann and I looked at each other. 'See how you frustrate love,' I said. 'I did not mean what I said,' she stammered; 'I married him willingly--'

'The girl speaks in pity,' said Mrs Briscoe; 'I can prove how she was forced away--'

The girl tried to get at me now, but was forced back.

'This is a bitter marriage night,' I said. As they took me away, I heard her laughing like a maniac.

So I last saw her, down on her knees, holding them all at bay, laughing like a maniac.

I woke up in my little bedroom above the bookshop, and took from under the pillow the pencil sketch I had made so long ago, the book Ann was reading that day, and the buckle I had lost on my marriage day in the cellar in Nightingale Lane. It was all absolutely clear now; I remembered the trial, the walk to Tyburn, that devastating vision of my own land that had come upon me as I reached the fatal spot.

Two sentences of my dying speech stuck in my mind. I said, 'I die for transgressing a law I knew not or; and again, 'I am so much in charity with my wife, that I believe she had no hand in this.'

I was rather curious to see what history had said of my case, so, that day being a Saturday, I went to the British Museum as soon as the shop was shut and looked up the trials for the year 1750. I could not find any full report here, nor did I trouble to search for it. The brief record was sufficient.

At Tyburn, in December 1750, was hanged Eric Ericson, a wealthy young Norwegian of good family, for the abduction and marriage of Ann Mellor, heiress of the late William Mellor, a merchant, of Wapping. He pleaded the complicity of the girl, but she denied him at first, retracting too late. Her relatives obtained permission to annul the marriage and for the girl to retain the name of Mellor.

I felt very exultant and triumphant.

'She died of it,' I said, as I closed the book, 'in Christmas week my darling died. She went back to the lodgings I had taken for her. They could not do anything with her. She turned away from them all and died.'

I hurried home through the iron December twilight as I had hurried before to Nightingale Lane. At last I was going to be happy with Ann Mellor.

THE END