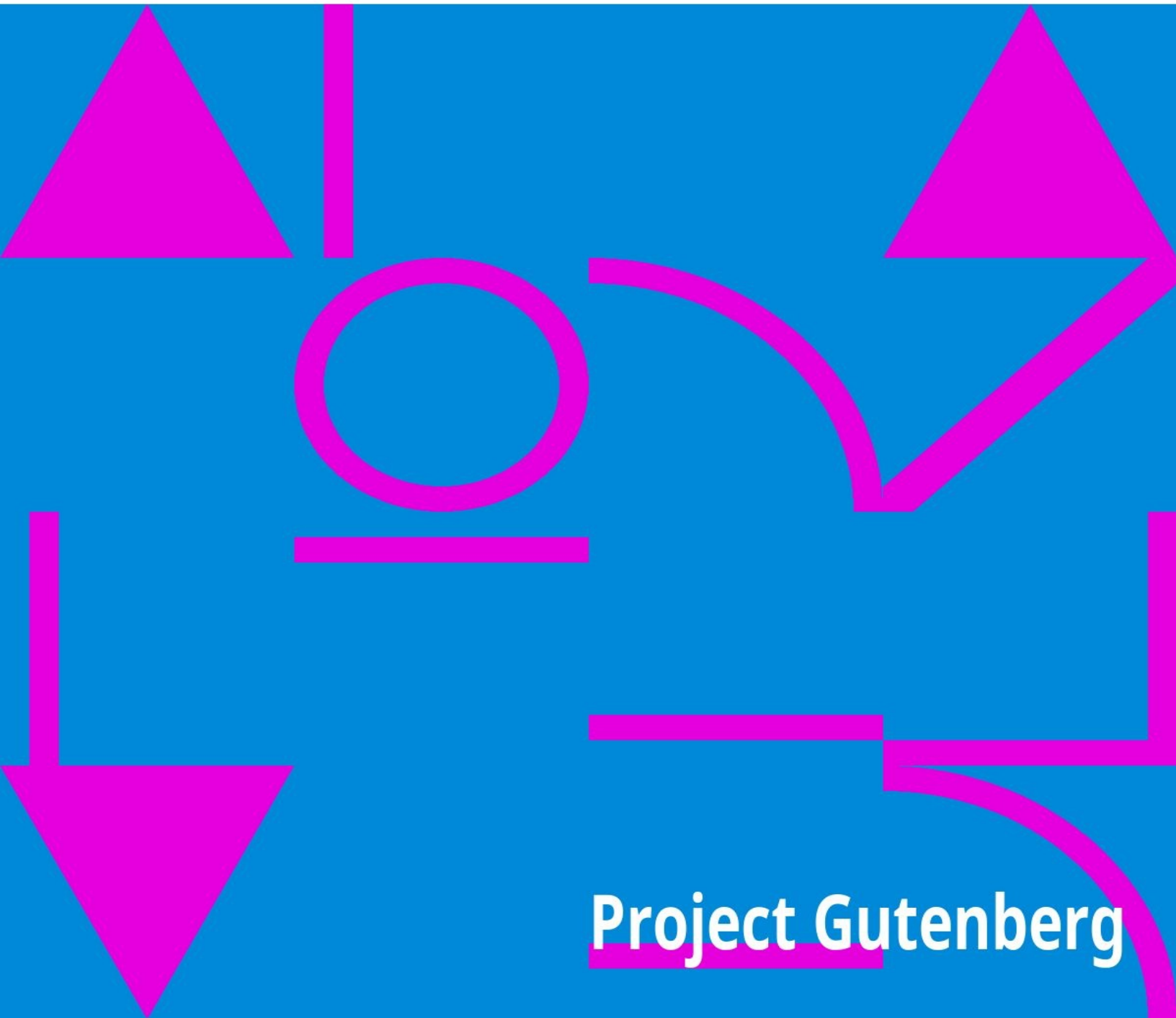
At a Winter's Fire

Bernard Edward Joseph Capes



Title: At a Winter's Fire

Author: Bernard Edward J. Capes

Release Date: November 14, 2004 [eBook #14045]

Language: English

AT A WINTER'S FIRE

by

BERNARD CAPES

Author of *The Lake of Wine*, etc.

1899

All except three of the following Tales have already appeared in English or American Magazines. The best thanks of the author are due to the Editors of the "Cornhill," "Macmillan's," "Lippincott's" and "Pearson's" Magazines, and to the Editor of the "Sketch," for permission to reprint such of the stories as have been published in their pages.

Contents

THE MOON STRICKEN

It so fell that one dark evening in the month of June I was belated in the Bernese Oberland. Dusk overtook me toiling along the great Chamounix Road, and in the heart of a most desolate gorge, whose towering snow-flung walls seemed—as the day sucked inwards to a point secret as a leech's mouth—to close about me like a monstrous amphitheatre of ghosts. The rutted road, dipping and climbing toilfully against the shouldering of great tumbled boulders, or winning for itself but narrow foothold over slippery ridges, was thawed clear of snow; but the cold soft peril yet lay upon its flanks thick enough for a wintry plunge of ten feet, or may be fifty where the edge of the causeway fell over to the lower furrows of the ravine. It was a matter of policy to go with caution, and a thing of some moment to hear the thud and splintering of little distant icefalls about one in the darkness. Now and again a cold arrow of wind would sing down from the frosty peaks above or jerk with a squiggle of laughter among the fallen slabs in the valley. And these were the only voices to prick me on through a dreariness lonely as death.

I knew the road, but not its night terrors. Passing along it some days before in the glory of sunshine, broad paddocks and islands of green had comforted the shattered white ruin of the place, and I had traversed it merely as a magnificent episode in the indifferent history of my life. Now, as it seemed, I became one with it—an awful waif of solemnity, a thing apart from mankind and its warm intercourse and ruddy inn doors, a spectral anomaly, whose austere epitaph was once writ upon the snow coating some fallen slab of those glimmering about me. I thought the whole gorge smelt of tombs, like the vault of a cathedral. I thought, in the incomprehensible low moaning sound that ever and again seemed to eddy about me when the wind had swooped and passed, that I recognised the forlorn voices of brother spirits long since dead and forgotten of the world.

Suddenly I felt the sweat cold under the knapsack that swung upon my back; stopped, faced about and became human again. Ridge over ridge to my right the

mountain summits fell away against a fathomless sky; and topping the furthermost was a little paring of silver light, the coronet of the rising moon. But the glory of the full orb was in the retrospect; for, closing the savage vista of the ravine, stood up far away a cluster of jagged pinnacles—opal, translucent, lustrous as the peaks of icebergs that are the frozen music of the sea.

It was the toothed summit of the Aiguille Verte, now prosaically bathed in the light of the full moon; but to me, looking from that grim and passionless hollow, it stood for the white hand of God lifted in menace to the evil spirits of the glen.

I drank my fill of the good sight, and then turned me to my tramp again with a freshness in my throat as though it had gulped a glass of champagne. Presently I knew myself descending, leaving, as I felt rather than saw, the stark horror of the gorge and its glimmering snow patches above me. Puffs of a warmer air purred past my face with little friendly sighs of welcome, and the hum of a far-off torrent struck like a wedge into the indurated fibre of the night. As I dropped, however, the mountain heads grew up against the moon, and withheld the comfort of her radiance; and it was not until the whimper of the torrent had quickened about me to a plunging roar, and my foot was on the striding bridge that took its waters at a step, that her light broke through a topmost cleft in the hills, and made glory of the leaping thunder that crashed beneath my feet.

Thereafter all was peace. The road led downwards into a broadening valley, where the smell of flowers came about me, and the mountain walls withdrew and were no longer overwhelming. The slope eased off, dipping and rising no more than a ground swell; and by-and-by I was on a level track that ran straight as a stretched ribbon and was reasonable to my tired feet.

Now the first dusky châlets of the hamlet of Bel-Oiseau straggled towards me, and it was music in my ears to hear the cattle blow and rattle in their stalls under the sleeping lofts as I passed outside in the moonlight. Five minutes more, and the great zinc onion on the spire of the church glistened towards me, and I was in the heart of the silent village.

From the deep green shadow cast by the graveyard wall, heavily buttressed against avalanches, a form wriggled out into the moonlight and fell with a dusty thud at my feet, mowing and chopping at the air with its aimless claws. I started back with a sudden jerk of my pulses. The thing was horrible by reason of its inarticulate voice, which issued from the shapeless folds of its writhings like the

wet gutturizing of a back-broken horse. Instinct with repulsion, I stood a moment dismayed, when light flashed from an open doorway a dozen yards further down the street, and a woman ran across to the prostrate form.

"Up, graceless one!" she cried; "and carry thy seven devils within doors!"

The figure gathered itself together at her voice, and stood in an angle of the buttresses quaking and shielding its eyes with two gaunt arms.

"Can I not exchange a word with Mère Pettit," scolded the woman, "but thou must sneak from behind my back on thy crazed moon-hunting?"

"Pity, pity," moaned the figure; and then the woman noticed me, and dropped a curtsy.

"Pardon," she said; "but he has been affronting Monsieur with his antics?"

"He is stricken, Madame?"

"Ah, yes, Monsieur. Holy Mother, but how stricken!"

"It is sad."

"Monsieur knows not how sad. It is so always, but most a great deal when the moon is full. He was a good lad once."

Monsieur puts his hand in his pocket. Madame hears the clink of coin and touches the enclosed fingers with her own delicately. Monsieur withdraws his hand empty.

"Pardon, Madame."

"Monsieur has the courage of a gentleman. Come, Camille, little fool! a sweet good-night to Monsieur."

"Stay, Madame. I have walked far and am weary. Is there an hotel in Bel-Oiseau?"

"Monsieur is jesting. We are but a hundred of poor châlets."

"An auberge, then—a cabaret—anything?"

"*Les Trois Chèvres*. It is not for such as you."

"Is it, then, that I must toil onwards to Châtelard?"

"Monsieur does not know? The *Hôtel Royal* was burned to the walls six months since."

"It follows that I must lie in the fields."

Madame hesitates, ponders, and makes up her mind.

"I keep Monsieur talking, and the night wind is sharp from the snow. It is ill for a heated skin, and one should be indoors. I have a bedroom that is at Monsieur's disposition, if Monsieur will condescend?"

Monsieur will condescend. Monsieur would condescend to a loft and a truss of straw, in default of the neat little chilly chamber that is allotted him, so sick are his very limbs with long tramping, and so uninviting figures the further stretch in the moonlight to Châtelard, with its burnt-out carcase of an hotel.

This is how I came to quarter myself on Madame Barbière and her idiot son, and how I ultimately learned from the lips of the latter the strange story of his own immediate fall from reason and the dear light of intellect.

* * * * *

By day Camille Barbière proved to be a young man, some five and twenty years of age, of a handsome and impressive exterior. His dark hair lay close about his well-shaped head; his features were regular and cut bold as an Etruscan cameo; his limbs were elastic and moulded into the supple finish of one whose life has not been set upon level roads. At a speculative distance he appeared a straight specimen of a Burgundian youth—sinewy, clean-formed, and graceful, though slender to gauntness; and it was only on nearer contact that one marvelled to see the soul die out of him, as a face set in the shadow of leafage resolves itself into some accident of twisted branches as one approaches the billowing tree that presented it.

The soul of Camille, the idiot, had warped long after its earthly tabernacle had grown firm and fair to look upon. Cause and effect were not one from birth in him; and the result was a most wistful expression, as though the lost intellect

were for ever struggling and failing to recall its ancient mastery. Mostly he was a gentle young man, noteworthy for nothing but the uncomplaining patience with which he daily observed the monotonous routine of simple duties that were now all-sufficient for the poor life that had "crept so long on a broken wing." He milked the big, red, barrel-bodied cow, and churned industriously for butter; he kept the little vegetable garden in order and nursed the Savoys into fatness like plumping babies; he drove the goats to pasture on the mountain slopes, and all day sat among the rhododendrons, the forgotten soul behind his eyes conning the dead language of fate, as a foreigner vainly interrogates the abstruse complexity of an idiom.

By-and-by I made it an irregular habit to accompany him on these shepherdings; to join him in his simple midday meal of sour brown bread and goat-milk cheese; to talk with him desultorily, and study him the while, inasmuch as he wakened an interest in me that was full of speculation. For his was not an imbecility either hereditary or constitutional. From the first there had appeared to me something abnormal in it—a suspension of intelligence only, a frost-bite in the brain that presently some April breath of memory might thaw out. This was not merely conjectural, of course. I had the story of his mental collapse from his mother in the early days of my sojourn in Bel-Oiseau; for it came to pass that a fitful caprice induced me to prolong my stay in the swart little village far into the gracious Swiss summer.

The "story" I have called it; but it was none. He was out on the hills one moonlight night, and came home in the early morning mad. That was all.

This had happened some eight years before, when he was a lad of seventeen—a strong, beautiful lad, his mother told me; and with a dreamy "poet's corner" in his brain, she added, but in her own better way of putting it. She had no shame that her shepherd should be an Endymion. In Switzerland they still look upon Nature as a respectable pursuit for a young man.

Well, they had thought him possessed of a devil; and his father had at first sought to exorcise it with a chamois-hide thong, as Munchausen flogged the black fox out of his skin. But the counter-irritant failed of its purpose. The devil clung deep, and rent poor Camille with periodic convulsions of insanity.

It was noted that his derangement waxed and waned with the monthly moon; that it assumed a virulent character with the passing of the second quarter, and

culminated, as the orb reached its fulness, in a species of delirium, during which it was necessary to carefully watch him; that it diminished with the lessening crescent until it fell away into a quiet abeyance of faculties that was but a step apart from the normal intelligence of his kind. At his worst he was a stricken madman acutely sensitive to impressions; at his best an inoffensive peasant who said nothing foolish and nothing wise.

When he was twenty, his father died, and Camille and his mother had to make out existence in company.

Now, the veil, in my first knowledge of him, was never rent; yet occasionally it seemed to me to gape in a manner that let a little momentary finger of light through, in the flashing of which a soul kindled and shut in his eyes, like a hard-dying spark in ashes. I wished to know what gave life to the spark, and I set to pondering the problem.

"He was not always thus?" I would say to Madame Barbière.

"But no, Monsieur, truly. This place—bah! we are here imbeciles all to the great world, without doubt; but Camille!—*he* was by nature of those who make the history of cities—a rose in the wilderness. Monsieur smiles?"

"By no means. A scholar, Madame?"

"A scholar of nature, Monsieur; a dreamer of dreams such as they become who walk much with the spirits on the lonely mountains."

"Torrents, and avalanches, and the good material forces of nature, Madame means."

"Ah! Monsieur may talk, but he knows. He has heard the *föhn* sweep down from the hills and spin the great stones off the house-roofs. And one may look and see nothing, yet the stones go. It is the wind that runs before the avalanche that snaps the pine trees; and the wind is the spirit that calls down the great snow-slips."

"But how may Madame who sees nothing; know then a spirit to be abroad?"

"My faith; one may know one's foot is on the wild mint without shifting one's sole to look."

"Madame will pardon me. No doubt also one may know a spirit by the smell of sulphur?"

"Monsieur is a sceptic. It comes with the knowledge of cities. There are even such in little Bel-Oiseau, since the evil time when they took to engrossing the contracts of good citizens on the skins of the poor jew-beards that give us flesh and milk. It is horrible as the Tannery of Meudon. In my young days, Monsieur, such agreements were inscribed upon wood."

"Quite so, Madame, and entirely to the point. Also one may see from whom Camille inherited his wandering propensities. But for his fall—it was always unaccountable?"

"Monsieur, as one trips on the edge of a crevasse and disappears. His soul dropped into the frozen cleft that one cannot fathom."

"Madame will forgive my curiosity."

"But surely. There was no dark secret in my Camille's life. If the little head held pictures beyond the ken of us simple women, the angels painted them of a certainty. Moreover, it is that I willingly recount this grief to the wise friend that may know a solution."

"At least the little-wise can seek for one."

"Ah, if Monsieur would only find the remedy!"

"It is in the hands of fate."

Madame crossed herself.

"Of the *Bon Dieu*, Monsieur."

At another time Madame Barbière said:—

"It was in such a parched summer as this threatens to be that my Camille came home in the mists of the morning possessed. He was often out on the sweet hills all night—that was nothing. It had been a full moon, and the whiteness of it was on his face like leprosy, but his hands were hot with fever. Ah, the dreadful summer! The milk turned sour in the cows' udders and the tufts of the stone

pines on the mountains fell into ashes like Dead Sea fruit. The springs were dried, and the great cascade of Buet fell to half its volume."

"This cascade; I have never seen it. Is it in the neighbourhood?"

"Of a surety. Monsieur must have passed the rocky ravine that vomits the torrent, on his way hither."

"I remember. I will explore it. Camille shall be my guide."

"Never."

"And why?"

Madame shrugged her plump shoulders.

"Who may say? The ways of the afflicted are not our ways. Only I know that Camille will never drive his flock to pasture near the lip of that dark valley."

"That is strange. Can the place have associations for him connected with his malady?"

"It is possible. Only the good God knows."

But *I* was to know later on, with a little reeling of the reason also.

* * * * *

"Camille, I want to see the Cascade de Buet."

The hunted eyes of the stricken looked into mine with a piercing glance of fear.

"Monsieur must not," he said, in a low voice.

"And why not?"

"The waters are bad—bad—haunted!"

"I fear no ghosts. Wilt thou show me the way, Camille?"

"I!" The idiot fell upon the grass with a sort of gobbling cry. I thought it the

prelude to a fit of some sort, and was stepping towards him, when he rose to his feet, waved me off and hurried away down the slope homewards.

Here was food for reflection, which I mumbled in secret.

A day or two afterwards I joined Camille at midday on the heights where he was pasturing his flocks. He had shifted his ground a little distance westwards, and I could not find him at once. At last I spied him, his back to a rock, his hand dabbled for coolness in a little runnel that trickled at his side. He looked up and greeted me with a smile. He had conceived an affection for me, this poor lost soul.

"It will go soon," he said, referring to the miniature streamlet. "It is safe in the woods; but to-morrow or next day the sun will lap it up ere it can reach the skirt of the shadow above there. A farewell kiss to you, little stream!"

He bent and sipped a mouthful of the clear water. He was in a more reasonable state than he had shown for long, though it was now close on the moon's final quarter, a period that should have marked a more general tenor of placidity in him. The summer solstice, was, however, at hand, and the weather sultry to a degree—as it had been, I did not fail to remember, the year of his seizure.

"Camille," I said, "why to-day hast thou shifted thy ground a little in the direction of the Buet ravine?"

He sat up at once, with a curious, eager look in his face.

"Monsieur has asked it," he said. "It was to impel Monsieur to ask it that I moved. Does Monsieur seek a guide?"

"Wilt thou lead me, Camille?"

"Monsieur, last night I dreamed and one came to me. Was it my father? I know not, I know not. But he put my forehead to his breast, and the evil left it, and I remembered without terror. 'Reveal the secret to the stranger,' he said; 'that he may share thy burden and comfort thee; for he is strong where thou art weak, and the vision shall not scare him.' Monsieur, wilt thou come?"

He leaped to his feet, and I to mine.

"Lead on, Camille. I follow."

He called to the leader of his flock: "Petitjean! stray not, my little one. I shall be back sooner than the daisies close." Then he turned to me again. I noticed a pallid, desperate look in his face, as though he were strung to great effort; but it was the face of a mindless one still.

"Do you not fear?" he said, in a whisper; and the apple in his throat seemed all choking core.

"I fear nothing," I answered with a smile; yet the still sombreness of the woods found a little tremor in my breast.

"It is good," he answered, regarding me. "The angel spoke truth. Follow, Monsieur."

He went off through the trees of a sudden, and I had much ado to keep pace with him. He ran as one urged on by a sure sense of doom, looking neither to right nor left. His mountain instincts had remained with him when memory itself had closed around like a fog, leaving him face to face and isolated with his one unconfessed point of terror. Swiftly we made our way, ever slightly climbing, along the rugged hillside, and soon broke into country very wild and dismal. The pastoral character of the scene lessened and altogether disappeared. The trees grew matted and grotesquely gnarled, huddling together in menacing battalions —save where some plunging rock had burst like a shell, forcing a clearing and strewing the black moss with a jagged wreck of splinters. Here no flowers crept for warmth, no sentinel marmot turned his little scut with a whistle of alarm to vanish like a red shadow. All was melancholy and silence and the massed defiance of ever-impending ruin. Storm, and avalanche, and the bitter snap of frost had wrought their havoc year by year, till an uncrippled branch was a rare distinction. The very saplings, of stunted growth, bore the air of thieves reared in a rookery of crime.

We strode with difficulty in an inhuman twilight through this great dark quickset of Nature, and had paused a moment where the thronging trunks thinned somewhat, when a little mouthing moan came towards us on the crest of a ripple of wind. My companion stopped on the instant, and clutched my arm, his face twisting with panic.

"The Cascade, Monsieur!" he shook out in a terrified whisper.

"Courage, my friend! It is that we come to seek."

"Ah! My God, yes—it is that! I dare not—I dare not!"

He drew back livid with fear, but I urged him on.

"Remember the dream, Camille!" I cried.

"Yes, yes—it was good. Help me, Monsieur, and I will try—yes, I will try!"

I drew his arm within mine, and together we stumbled on. The undergrowth grew denser and more fantastic; the murmur filled out, increased and resolved itself into a sound of falling water that ever took shape, and volume, and depth, till its crash shook the ground at our feet. Then in a moment a white blaze of sky came at us through the trunks, and we burst through the fringe of the wood to find ourselves facing the opposite side of a long cleft in the mountain and the blade's edge of a roaring cataract.

It shot out over the lip of the fall, twenty feet above us, in a curve like a scimitar, passed in one sheet the spot where we stood, and dived into a sunless pool thirty feet below with a thunderous boom. What it may have been in full phases of the stream, I know not; yet even now it was sufficiently magnificent to give pause to a dying soul eager to shake off the restless horror of the world. The flat of its broad blade divided the lofty black walls of a deep and savage ravine, on whose jagged shelves some starved clumps of rhododendron shook in the wind of the torrent. Far down the narrow gully we could see the passion of water tossing, champed white with the ravening of its jaws, until it took a bend of the cliffs at a leap and rushed from sight.

We stood upon a little platform of coarse grass and bramble, whose fringe dipped and nodded fitfully as the sprinkle caught it. Beyond, the sliding sheet of water looked like a great strap of steel, reeled ceaselessly off a whirling drum pivoted between the hills. The midday sun shot like a piston down the shaft of the valley, painting purple spears and angles behind its abutting rocks, and hitting full upon the upper curve of the fall; but half-way down the cataract slipped into shadow.

My brain sickened with the endless gliding and turmoil of descent, and I turned aside to speak to my companion. He was kneeling upon the grass, his eyes fixed and staring, his white lips mumbling some crippled memory of a prayer. He

started and cowered down as I touched him on the shoulder.

"I cannot go, Monsieur; I shall die!"

"What next, Camille? I will go alone,"

"My God, Monsieur! the cave under the fall! It is there the horror is."

He pointed to a little gap in the fringing bushes with shaking finger. I stole gingerly in the direction he indicated. With every step I took the awful fascination of the descending water increased upon me. It seemed hideous and abnormal to stand mid-way against a perpendicularly-rushing torrent. Above or below the effect would have been different; but here, to look up was to feel one's feet dragging towards the unseen—to look down and pass from vision of the lip of the fall was to become the waif of a force that was unaccountable.

I had a battle with my nerves, and triumphed. As I approached the opening in the brambles I became conscious of a certain relief. At a little distance the cataract had seemed to actually wash in its descent the edge of the platform. Now I found it to be further away than I had imagined, the ground dropping in a sharp slope to a sort of rocky buttress which lay obliquely on the slant of the ravine, and was the true margin of the torrent. Before I essayed the descent, I glanced back at my companion. He was kneeling where I had left him, his hands pressed to his face, his features hidden; but looking back once again, when I had with infinite caution accomplished the downward climb, I saw that he had crept to the edge of the slope, and was watching me with wide, terrified eyes. I waved my hand to him and turned to the wonderful vision of water that now passed almost within reach of my arm. I stood near the point where the whole glassy breadth glided at once from sunlight into shadow. It fell silently, without a break, for only its feet far below trod the thunder.

Now, as I peered about, I noticed a little cleft in the rocky margin, a minute's climb above me. I was attracted to this by an appearance of smoke or steam that incessantly emerged from it, as though some witch's caldron were simmering alongside the fall. Spray it might be, or the condensing of water splashed on the granite; but of this I might not be sure. Therefore I determined to investigate, and straightway began climbing the rocks—with my heart in my mouth, it must be confessed, for the foothold was undesirable and the way perilous. And all the time I was conscious that the white face of Camille watched me from above. As

I reached the cleft I fancied I heard a queer sort of gasping sob issue from his lips, but to this I could give no heed in the sudden wonder that broke upon me. For, lo! it appeared that the cleft led straight to a narrow platform or ledge of rock right underneath the fall itself, but extending how far I could not see, by reason of the steam that filled the passage, and for which I was unable to account. Footing it carefully and groping my way, I set step in the little water-curtained chamber and advanced a pace or two. Suddenly, light grew about me, and a beautiful rose of fire appeared on the wall of the passage in the midst of what seemed a vitrified scoop in the rock.

Marvelling, I put out my hand to touch it, and fell back on the narrow floor with a scream of anguish. An inch farther, and these lines had not been written. As it was, the fall caught me by the fingers with the suck of a cat-fish, and it was only a gigantic wrench that saved me from slipping off the ledge. The jerk brought my head against the rock with a stunning blow, and for some moments I lay dizzy and confused, daring hardly to breathe, and conscious only of a burning and blistering agony in my right hand.

At length I summoned courage to gather my limbs together and crawl out the way I had entered. The distance was but a few paces, yet to traverse these seemed an interminable nightmare of swaying and stumbling. I know only one other occasion upon which the liberal atmosphere of the open earth seemed sweeter to my senses when I reached it than it did on this.

I tumbled somehow through the cleft, and sat down, shaking, upon the grass of the slope beyond; but, happening to throw myself backwards in the reeling faintness induced by my fright and the pain of my head, my eyes encountered a sight that woke me at once to full activity.

Balanced upon the very verge of the slope, his face and neck craned forward, his jaw dropped, a sick, tranced look upon his features, stood Camille. I saw him topple, and shouted to him; but before my voice was well out, he swayed, collapsed, and came down with a running thud that shook the ground. Once he wheeled over, like a shot rabbit, and, bounding thwack with his head against a flat boulder not a dozen yards from me, lay stunned and motionless.

I scrambled to him, quaking all over. His breath came quick, and a spirt of blood jerked from a sliced cut in his forehead at every pump of his heart.

I kicked out a wad of cool moist turf, and clapped it in a pad over the wound, my handkerchief under. For his body, he was shaken and bruised, but otherwise not seriously hurt.

Presently he came to himself; to himself in the best sense of the word—for Camille was sane.

I have no explanation to offer. Only I know that, as a fall will set a long-stopped watch pulsing again, the blow here seemed to have restored the misplaced intellect to its normal balance.

When he woke, there was a new soft light of sanity in his eyes that was pathetic in the extreme.

"Monsieur," he whispered, "the terror has passed."

"God be thanked! Camille," I answered, much moved.

He jerked his poor battered head in reverence.

"A little while," he said, "and I shall know. The punishment was just."

"What punishment, my poor Camille?"

"Hush! The cloud has rolled away. I stand naked before *le bon Dieu*. Monsieur, lift me up; I am strong."

I winced as I complied. The palm of my hand was scorched and blistered in a dozen places. He noticed at once, and kissed and fondled the wounded limb as softly as a woman might.

"Ah, the poor hand!" he murmured. "Monsieur has touched the disc of fire."

"Camille," I whispered, "what is it?"

"Monsieur shall know—ah! yes, he shall know; but not now. Monsieur, my mother."

"Thou art right, good son."

I bound up his bruised forehead and my own burnt hand as well as I was able,

and helped him to his feet. He stood upon them staggering; but in a minute could essay to stumble on the homeward journey with assistance. It was a long and toilsome progress; but in time we accomplished it. Often we had to sit down in the blasted woods and rest awhile; often moisten our parched mouths at the runnels of snow-water that thridded the undergrowth. The shadows were slanting eastwards as we reached the clearing we had quitted some hours earlier, and the goats had disappeared. Petitjean was leading his charges homewards in default of a human commander, and presently we overtook them browsingly loitering and desirous of definite instructions.

I pass over Camille's meeting with his mother, and the wonder, and fear, and pity of it all. Our hurts were attended to, and the battery of questions met with the best armour of tact at command. For myself, I said that I had scorched my hand against a red-hot rock, which was strictly true; for Camille, that it were wisest to take no early advantage of the reason that God had restored to him. She was voluble, tearful, half-hysterical with joy and the ecstasy of gratitude.

"That a blow should effect the marvel! Monsieur, but it passes comprehension."

All night long I heard her stirring and sobbing softly outside his door, for I slept little, owing to pain and the wonder in my mind. But towards morning I dozed, and my dreams were feverish and full of terror.

The next day Camille kept his bed and I my room. By this I at least escaped the first onset of local curiosity, for the villagers naturally made of Camille's restoration a nine-days' wonder. But towards evening Madame Barbière brought a message from him that he would like to see Monsieur alone, if Monsieur would condescend to visit him in his room. I went at once, and found him, as Haydon found Keats, lying in a white bed, hectic, and on his back. He greeted me with a smile peculiarly sweet and restful.

"Does Monsieur wish to know?" he said in a low voice.

"If it will not hurt thee, Camille."

"Not now—not now; the good God has made me sound. I remember, and am not terrified."

I closed the door and took a seat by his bedside. There, with my hand shading my eyes from the level glory of sunset that flamed into the room, I listened to the

strange tale of Camille's seizure.

* * * * *

"Once, Monsieur, I lived in myself and was exultant with a loneliness of fancied knowledge. My youth was my excuse; but God could not pardon me all. I read where I could find books, and chance put an evil choice in my way, for I learned to sneer at His name, His heaven, His hell. Each man has his god in self-will, I thought in my pride, and through it alone he accepts the responsibility of life and death. He is his own curse or blessing here and hereafter, inheriting no sin and earning no doom but such as he himself inflicts upon himself. I interpret this from the world about me, and knowing it, I have no fear and own no tyrant but my own passions. Monsieur, it was through fear the most terrible that God asserted Himself to me."

The light was fading in the west, and a lance of shadow fell upon the white bed, as though the hushed day were putting a finger to its lips as it withdrew.

"I was no coward then, Monsieur—that at least I may say. I lived among the mountains, and on their ledges the feet of my own goats were not surer. Often, in summer, I spent the night among the woods and hills, reading in them the story of the ages, and exploring, exploring till my feet were wearier than my brain. Strangers came from far to see the great cascade; but none but I—and you, too, Monsieur, now—know the track through the thicket that leads to the cave under the waters. I found it by chance, and, like you, was scorched by the fire, though not badly."

"Camille—the cause?"

"Monsieur, I will tell you a wonderful thing. The falling waters there make a monstrous burning glass, when the hot sun is upon them, which has melted the rock behind like wax."

"Can that be so?"

"It is true—dear Jesus, I have fearful reason to know it."

He half rose on his elbow, his face, crossed by the bandage, grey as stone in the gathering dusk. Hereafter he spoke in an awed whisper.

"When the knowledge broke upon me, I grew great to myself in the possession of a wonderful secret. Day after day I visited the cave and examined this phenomenon—and yet another more marvellous in its connection with the first. The huge lens was a simple accident of curved rocks and convex water, planed smooth as crystal. In other than a droughty summer it would probably not exist; the spouting torrent would overwhelm it—but I know not. Was not this astonishing enough? Yet Nature had worked a second miracle to mock in anticipation the self-sufficient plagiarism of little man. I noticed that the rays of the sun concentrated in the lens only during the half-hour of the orb's apparent crossing of the ravine. Then the light smote upon a strange curved little fan of water, that spouted from a high crevice at the mouth of the shallow vitrified tunnel, and devoured it, and played upon the rocks behind, that hissed and sputtered like pitch, and the place was blind with steam. But when the tooth of fire was withdrawn, the tiny inner cascade fell again and wrought coolness with its sprinkling.

"I did not discover this all at once, for at first fright took me, and it was enough to watch for the moment of the light's appearance and then flee with a little laughter. But one day I ventured back into the cave after the sun had crossed the valley, and the steam had died away, and the rock cooled behind the miniature cascade.

"I looked through the lens, and it seemed full of a great white light that blazed into my eyes, so that I fell back through the inner fan of water and was well soused by it; but my sight presently recovering, I stood forward in the scoop of rock admiring the dainty hollow curve the fan took in its fall. By-and-by I became aware that I was looking out through a smaller lens upon the great one, and that strange whirling mists seemed to be sweeping across a huge disc, within touch of my hand almost.

"It was long before I grasped the meaning of this; but, in a flash, it came upon me. The great lens formed the object glass, the small, the eyeglass, of a natural telescope of tremendous power, that drew the high summer clouds down within seeming touch and opened out the heavens before my staring eyes.

"Monsieur, when this dawned upon me I was wild. That so astonishing a discovery should have been reserved for a poor ignorant Swiss peasant filled me with pride wicked in proportion with its absence of gratitude to the mighty dispenser of good. I came even to think my individuality part of the wonder and

necessary to its existence. 'Were it not for my courage and enterprise,' I cried, 'this phenomenon would have remained a secret of the Nature that gave birth to it. She yields her treasures to such only as fear not.'

"I had read in a book of Huyghens, Guinand, Newton, Herschel—the great high-priests of science who had striven through patient years to read the hieroglyphics of the heavens. 'The wise imbeciles,' I thought. 'They toiled and died, and Nature held no mirror up to them. For me, the poor Camille, she has worked in secret while they grew old and passed unsatisfied.'

"Brilliant projects of astronomy whirled in my brain. The evening of my last discovery I remained out on the hills, and entered the cave as it grew dusk. A feeling of awe surged in me as dark fell over the valley, and the first stars glistened faintly. I dipped under the fan of water and took my stand in the hollow behind it. There was no moon, but my telescope was inclined, as it were, at a generous angle, and a section of the firmament was open before me. My heart beat fast as I looked through the lens.

"Shall I tell you what I saw then and many nights after? Rings and crosses in the heavens of golden mist, spangled, as it seemed, with jewels; stars as big as cart-wheels, twinkling points no longer, but round, like great bosses of molten fire; things shadowy, luminous, of strange colours and stranger forms, that seemed to brush the waters as they passed, but were in reality vast distances away.

"Sometimes the thrust of wind up the ravine would produce a tremulous motion in the image at the focus of the mirror; but this was seldom. For the most part the wonderful lenses presented a steady curvature, not flawless, but of magnificent capacity.

"Now it flashed upon me that, when the moon was at the full, she would top the valley in the direct path of my telescope's range of view. At the thought I grew exultant. I—I, little Camille, should first read aright the history of this strange satellite. The instrument that could give shape to the stars would interpret to me the composition of that lonely orb as clearly as though I stood upon her surface.

"As the time of her fulness drew near I grew feverish with excitement. I was sickening, as it were, to my madness, for never more should I look upon her willingly, with eyes either speculative or insane."

At this point Camille broke off for a little space, and lay back on his pillow.

When he spoke again it was out of the darkness, with his face turned to the wall.

"Monsieur, I cannot dwell upon it—I must hasten. We have no right to peer beyond the boundary God has drawn for us. I saw His hell—I saw His hell, I tell you. It is peopled with the damned—silent, horrible, distorted in the midst of ashes and desolation. It was a memory that, like the snake of Aaron, devoured all others till yesterday—till yesterday, by Christ's mercy."

* * * * *

It seemed to me, as the days wore on, that Camille had but recovered his reason at the expense of his life; that the long rest deemed necessary for him after his bitter period of brain exhaustion might in the end prove an everlasting one. Possibly the blow to his head had, in expelling the seven devils, wounded beyond cure the vital function that had fostered them. He lay white, patient, and sweet-tempered to all, but moved by no inclination to rise and re-assume the many-coloured garment of life.

His description of the dreadful desert in the sky I looked upon, merely, as an abiding memory of the brain phantasm that had finally overthrown a reason, already tottering under the tremendous excitement induced by his discovery of the lenses, and the magnified images they had presented to him. That there was truth in the asserted fact of the existence of these, my own experience convinced me; and curiosity as to this alone impelled me to the determination of investigating further, when my hand should be sufficiently recovered to act as no hindrance to me in forcing my way once more through the dense woods that bounded the waterfall. Moreover, the dispassionate enquiry of a mind less sensitive to impressions might, in the result, do more towards restoring the warped imagination of my friend to its normal state than any amount of spoken scepticism.

To Camille I said nothing of my resolve; but waited on, chafing at the slow healing of my wounds. In the meantime the period of the full moon approached, and I decided, at whatever cost, to make the venture on the evening she topped her orbit, if circumstances at the worst should prevent my doing so sooner—and thus it turned out.

On the eve of my enterprise, the first fair spring of rain in a drought of two months fell, to my disappointment, among the hills; for I feared an increase of

the torrent and the effacement of the mighty lens. I set off, however, on the afternoon of the following day, in hot sunshine, mentally prognosticating a favourable termination to my expedition, and telling Madame Barbière not to expect me back till late.

In leisurely fashion I made my way along the track we had previously traversed, risking no divergence through overhaste, and carefully examining all landmarks before deciding on any direction. Thus slowly proceeding, I had the good fortune to come within sound of the cataract as the sun was sinking behind the mountain ridges to my front; and presently emerged from the woods at the very spot we had struck in our former journey together.

A chilly twilight reigned in the ravine, and the noise that came up from the ruin of the torrent seemed doubly accented by reason of it. The sound of water moving in darkness has always conveyed to me an impression of something horrible and deadly, be it nothing of more moment than the drip and hollow tinkle of a gutter pipe. But the crash in this echoing gorge was appalling indeed.

For some moments I stood on the brink of the slope, looking across at the great knife of the fall, with a little shiver of fear. Then I shook myself, laughed, and without further ado took my courage in hand, and scrambled down the declivity and up again towards the cleft in the rocks.

Here the chill of heart gripped me again—the watery sliding tunnel looked so evil in the contracting gloom. A false step in that humid chamber, and my bones would pound and crackle on the rocks forty feet below. It must be gone through with now, however; and, taking a long breath, I set foot in the passage under the curving downpour that seemed taut as an arched muscle.

Reaching the burnt recess, a few moments sufficed to restore my self-confidence; and without further hesitation I dived under the inner little fan-shaped fall—which was there, indeed, as Camille had described it—and recovered my balance with pulses drumming thicker than I could have desired.

In a moment I became conscious that some great power was before me. Across a vast, irregular disc filled with the ashy whiteness of the outer twilight, strange, unaccountable forms, misty and undefined, passed, and repassed, and vanished. Cirrus they might have been, or the shadows flung by homing flights of birds; but of this I could not be certain. As the dusk deepened they showed no more,

and presently I gazed only into a violet fathomless darkness.

My own excitement now was great; and I found some difficulty in keeping it under control. But for the moment, it seemed to me, I pined greatly for free commune with the liberal atmosphere of earth. Therefore, I dipped under the little fall and made my cautious way to the margin of the cataract.

I was surprised to find for how long a time the phenomenon had absorbed me. The moon was already high in the heavens, and making towards the ravine with rapid steps. Far below, the tumbling waters flashed in her rays, and on all sides great tiers of solemn, trees stood up at attention to salute her.

When her disc silvered the inner rim of the slope I had descended, I returned to my post of observation with tingling nerves. The field of the great object lens was already suffused with the radiance of her approach.

Suddenly my pupils shrank before the apparition of a ghastly grey light, and all in a moment I was face to face with a segment of desolation more horrible than any desert. Monstrous growths of leprosy that had bubbled up and stiffened; fields of ashen slime—the sloughing of a world of corruption; hills of demon, fungus swollen with the fatness of putrefaction; and, in the midst of all, dim, convulsed shapes wallowing, protruding, or stumbling aimlessly onwards, till they sank and disappeared.

* * * * *

Madame Barbière threw up her hands when she let me in at the door. My appearance, no doubt, was ghastly. I knew not the hour nor the lapse of time covered by my wanderings about the hills, my face hidden in my palms, a drawn feeling about my heart, my lips muttering—muttering fragments of prayers, and my throat jerking with horrible laughter.

For hours I lay face downwards on my bed.

"Monsieur has seen it?"

"I have seen it."

"I heard the rain on the hills. The lens will have been blurred. Monsieur has been spared much."

"God, in His mercy, pity thee! And me—oh, Camille, and me too!"

"He has held out His white hand to me. I go, when I go, with a safe conduct."

* * * * *

He went before the week was out. The drought had broken and for five days the thunder crashed and the wild rain swept the mountains. On the morning of the sixth a drenched shepherd reported in the village that a landslip had choked the fall of Buet, and completely altered its shape. Madame Barbière broke into the room where I was sitting with Camille, big with the news. She little guessed how it affected her listeners.

"The *bon Dieu*" said Camille, when she had gone, "has thundered His curse on Nature for revealing His secrets. I, who have penetrated into the forbidden, must perish."

"And I, Camille?"

He turned to me with a melancholy sweet smile, and answered, paraphrasing the dying words of certain noble lips,—

"Be good, Monsieur; be good."

JACK AND JILL

My friend, Monsieur ——, absolutely declines to append his name to these pages, of which he is the virtual author. Nevertheless, he permits me to publish them anonymously, being, indeed, a little curious to ascertain what would have been the public verdict as to his sanity, had he given his personal imprimatur to a narrative on the face of it so incredible.

"How!" he says. "Should I have believed it of another, when I have such astonishing difficulty at this date in realizing that it was I—yes, I, my friend—this same little callow *poupon*—that was an actual hero of the adventure? Fidèle" (by which term we cover the identity of his wife)—"Fidèle will laugh in my face sometimes, crying, 'Not thou, little cabbage, nor yet thy faithful, was it that dived through half the world and came up breathless! No, no—I cannot believe it. We folk, so matter-of-fact and so comical. It was of Hansel and Gretel we had been reading hand-in-hand, till we fell asleep in the twilight and fancied this thing.' And then she will trill like a bird at the thought of how solemn Herr Grabenstock, of the Hôtel du Mont Blanc, would have stared and edged apart, had we truly recounted to him that which had befallen us between the rising and the setting of a sun. We go forth; it rains—my faith! as it will in the Chamounix valley—and we return in the evening sopped. Very natural. But, for a first cause of our wetting. Ah! there we must be fastidious of an explanation, or we shall find ourselves in peril of restraint.

"Now, write this for me, and believe it if you can. We are not in a conspiracy of imagination—I and the dear courageous."

Therefore I *do* write it, speaking in the person of Monsieur ——, and largely from his dictation; and my friend shall amuse himself over the nature of its reception.

* * * * *

"One morning (it was in late May)," says Monsieur ——, "my Fidèle and I left the Hôtel du Mont Blanc for a ramble amongst the hills. We were a little adventurous, because we were innocent. We took no guide but our commonsense; and that served us very ill—or very well, according to the point of view. Ours was that of the birds, singing to the sky and careless of the snake in the grass so long as they can pipe their tune. Of a surety that is the only course. If one would make provision against every chance of accident, one must dematerialize. To die is the only way to secure oneself from fatality.

"Still, it is a wise precaution, I will admit, not to eat of all hedge fruit because blackberries are sweet. Some day, after the fiftieth stomach-ache, we shall learn wisdom, my Fidèle and I.

"'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.' That, I know, comes into the English gospel.

"Well, I will tell you, I am content to be considered of the first; and my Fidèle is assuredly of the second. Yet did she fear, or I rush in? On the contrary, I have a little laughing thought that it was the angel inveighed against the dulness of caution when the fool would have hesitated.

"Now, it was before the season of the Alps; and the mountain aubergistes were, for the most part, not arrived at their desolate hill-taverns. Nor were guides at all in evidence, being yet engaged, the sturdy souls, over their winter occupations. One, no doubt, we could have procured, had we wished it; but we did not. We would explore under the aegis of no cicerone but our curiosity. That was native to us, if the district was strange.

"Following, at first, the instructions of Herr Baedeker, we travelled and climbed, chattering and singing as we went, in the direction of the Montenvert, whence we were to descend upon the Mer de Glace, and enjoy the spectacle of a stupendous glacier.

"'And that, I am convinced,' said Fidèle, 'is nothing more nor less than one of those many windows that give light to the monsters of the under-earth.'

"'Little imbecile! In some places this window is six hundred feet thick.'

"'So?' she said. 'That is because their dim eyes could not endure the full light of the sun.'

"We had brought a tin box of sandwiches with us; and this, with my large pewter flask full of wine, was slung upon my back. For we had been told the Hôtel du Montenvert was yet closed; and, sure enough when we reached it, the building stood black in a pool of snow, its shuttered windows forlorn, and long icicles hung from the eaves.

"The depression induced by this sight was momentary. We turned from it to the panorama of majestic loveliness that stretched below and around us. The glacier —that rolling sea of glass—descended from the enormous gates of the hills. Its source was the white furnace of the skies; its substance the crystal refuse of the stars; and from its margins the splintered peaks stood up in a thousand forms of beauty. Right and left, in the hollows of the mountains, the mist lay like ponds, opal and translucent; and the shafts of the pine trees standing in it looked like the reflections of themselves.

"It made the eyes ache—this silence of greatness; and it became a relief to shift one's gaze to the reality of one's near neighbourhood—the grass, and the rhododendron bushes, and even the dull walls of the deserted auberge.

"A narrow path dipped over the hill-side and fled into the very jaws of the moraine. Down the first of this path we raced, hand in hand; but soon, finding the impetus overmastering us, we pulled up with difficulty, and descended the rest of the way circumspectly.

"At the foot of the steep slope we came upon the little wooden hutch where, ordinarily, one may procure a guide (also rough socks to stretch over one's boots) for the passage of the glacier. Now, however, the shed was closed and tenantless; and we must e'en dispense with a conductor, should we adventure further.

"Herr Baedeker says, 'Guide unnecessary for the experienced.'

"'Fidèle, are we experienced?'

"'We shall be, *mon ami*, when we have crossed. A guide could not alter that.'

"'But it is true, *ma petite*. Come, then!'

"We clambered down amongst huge stones. Fidèle's little feet went in and out of the crannies like sand-martins. Suddenly, before we realized it, we were on the glacier.

"Fidèle exclaimed.

"'*Mon Dieu*! Is this ice—these blocks of dirty alabaster?'

"Alas! she was justified. This torrent of majestic crystal—seen from above so smooth and bountiful—a flood of the milk of Nature dispensed from the white bosom of the hills! Now, near at hand, what do we find it? A medley of opaque blocks, smeared with grit and rubbish; a vast ruin of avalanches hurled together and consolidated, and of the colour of rock salt.

"'*Peste!*' I cried. 'We must get to the opposite bank, for all that.

"*Mignonne, allons voir si la rose, Qui ce matin avoit desclose*….'"

"We clasped hands and set forth on our little traversée, our landmark an odd-shaped needle of spar on the further side. My faith! it was simple. The *paveurs* of Nature had left the road a trifle rough, that was all. Suddenly we came upon a wide fissure stretched obliquely like the mouth of a sole. Going glibly, we learnt a small lesson of caution therefrom. Six paces, and we should have tumbled in.

"We looked over fearfully. Here, in truth, was real ice at last—green as bottle-glass at the edges, and melting into unfathomable deeps of glowing blue.

"In a moment, with a shriek like that of escaping steam, a windy demon leapt at us from the underneath. It was all of winter in a breath. It seemed to shrivel the skin from our faces—the flesh from our bones. We staggered backwards.

"'*Mon ami! mon ami*!' cried Fidèle, 'my heart is a stone; my eyes are two blisters of water!'

"We danced as the blood returned unwilling to our veins. It was minutes before we could proceed.

"Afterwards I learned that these hellish eruptions of air betoken a change of temperature. It was coming then shortly in a dense rainfall.

"When we were recovered, we sought about for a way to circumambulate the crevasse. Then we remarked that up a huge boulder of ice that had seemed to block our path recent steps, or toe-holes, had been cut. In a twinkling we were over. Fidèle—no, a woman never falls.

"'For all this,' she says, shaking her head, 'I maintain that a guide here is a sinecurist.'

"Well, we made the passage safely, and toiled up the steep, loose moraine beyond—to find the track over which was harder than crossing the glacier. But we did it, and struck the path along the hillside, which leads by the *Mauvais Pas* (the *mauvais quart d'heure*) to the little cabaret called the *Chapeau*. This tavern, too, was shut and dismal. It did not matter. We sat like sparrows on a railing, and munched our egg-sandwiches and drank our wine in a sort of glorious stupefaction. For right opposite us was the vast glacier-fall, whose crashing foam was towers and parapets of ice, that went over and rolled into the valley below, a ruin of thunder.

"Far beyond, where the mouth of the gorge spread out littered with monstrous destruction, we saw the hundred threads of the glacier streams collect into a single rope of silver, that went drawn between the hills, a highway of water. It was all a majestic panorama of grey and pearly white—the sky, the torrents, the mountains; but the blue and rusty green of the stone pines, flung abroad in hanging woods and coppices, broke up and distributed the infinite serenity of the snow fields.

"Presently, having drunk deep of rich content, we rose to retrace our steps. For, spurred by vanity, we must be returning the way we had come, to show our confident experience of glaciers.

"All went well. Actually we had passed over near two-thirds of the ice-bed, when a touch on my arm stayed me, and *ma mie* looked into my eyes, very comical and insolent.

"'Little cabbage,' she said; 'will you not put your new knowledge to account?'

"'But how, my soul?'

"She laughed and pressed my arm to her side. Her heart fluttered like a nestling after its first flight.

"'To rest on the little prowess of a small adventure! No, no! Shall he who has learnt to swim be always content to bathe in shallow water?'

"I was speechless as I gazed on her.

"'Behold, then!' she cried. 'We have opposed ourselves to this problem of the ice, and we have mastered it. See how it rears itself to the inaccessible peaks, the which to reach the poor innocents expend themselves over rocks and drifts. But why should one not climb the mountain by way of the glacier?'

"'Fidèle!' I gasped.

"'Ah!' she exclaimed, nodding her head; 'but poor men! They are mules. They spill their blood on the scaling ladders when the town gate is open.'

"Again I cried 'Fidèle!'

"'But, yes,' she said, 'it needs a woman to see. It is but two o'clock. Let us ascend the glacier, like a staircase; and presently we shall stand upon the summit of the mountain. Those last little peaks above the ice can be of no importance.'

"I was touched, astounded by the sublimity of her idea. Had no one, then, ever thought of this before?

"We began the ascent.

"I swear we must have toiled upwards half a mile, when the catastrophe took place.

"It was raining then—a dense small mist; and the ice was as if it had been greased. We were proceeding with infinite care, arm in arm, tucked close together. A little doubt, I think, was beginning to oppress us. We could move only with much caution and difficulty; and there were noises—sounds like the clapping of great hands in those rocky attics above us. Then there would come a slamming report, as if the window of the unknown had been burst open by demons; and the moans of the lost would issue, surging down upon the world.

"These thunders, as we were afterwards told, are caused by the splitting of the ice when there comes a fall in the barometer. Then the glacier will yawn like a sliced junket.

"My faith! what a simile! But again the point of view, my friend.

"All in a moment I heard a little cluck. I looked down. Alas! the fine spirit was obscured. Fidèle was weeping.

'"*Chut! chut!*' I exclaimed in consternation. 'We will go back at once.'

"She struggled to smile, the poor *mignonne*.

"'It is only that my knees are sick,' she said piteously.

"I took her in my strong arms tenderly.

"We had paused on a ridge of hard snow.

"There came a tearing clang—an enormous sucking sound, as of wet lips opening. The snow sank under our feet.

"'My God!' shrieked Fidèle.

"I held her convulsively. It happened in an instant, before one could leap aside. The bed of snow on which we were standing broke down into the crevasse it had bridged, and let us through to the depths.

"Will you believe what follows? Pinch your nose and open your mouth. You shall take the whole draught at a breath. *The ice at the point where we entered was five hundred feet thick; and we fell to the very bottom of it.*

"Ha! ha! Is it difficult to swallow? But it is true—it is quite true. Here I sit, sound and safe, and eminently sane, and that after a fall of five hundred feet.

"Now, listen.

"We went down, welded together, with a rush and a buzz like a cannon-ball. Thoughts? Ah! my friend, I had none. Who can think even in a high wind? And here the wind of our going would have brained an ox. Only one desperate instinct I had, one little forlorn remnant of humanity—to shield the love of my heart. So my arms never left her; and we fell together. I dreaded nothing, feared nothing, foresaw no terror in the inevitable mangling crash of the end. For time, that is necessary to emotion, was annihilated. We had outstripped it, and left sense and reason sluggishly following in our wake.

"Sense, yes; but not altogether sensation. Flashingly I was conscious here of incredibly swift transitions, from cold to deeper wells of frost; thence down through a stratum of death and negation, between mere blind walls of frigid

inhumanity, to have been stayed a moment by which would have pointed all our limbs as stiff as icicles, as stiff as those of frogs plunged into boiling water. But we passed and fell, still crashing upon no obstruction; and thought pursued us, tailing further behind.

"It was the passage of the eternal night—frozen, self-contained; awful as any fancied darkness that is without one tradition of a star. Yet, struggling hereafter to, in some shadowy sense, renew my feelings of the moment, it seemed to me that I had not fallen through darkness at all; but rather that the friction of descent had kindled an inner radiance in me that was independent of the vision of the eyes, and full of promise of a sudden illumination of the soul.

"Now, after falling what depths God knows, I become numbly aware of a little griding sensation at my back, that communicated a whistling small vibration to my whole frame. This intensified, became more pronounced. Perceptibly, in that magnificent refinement of speed, our enormous pace I felt to decrease ever so little. Still we had so far outstripped intelligence as that I was incapable of considering the cause of the change.

"Suddenly, for the first time, pain made itself known; and immediately reason, plunging from above, overtook me, and I could think.

"Then it was I became conscious that, instead of falling, we were rising, rising with immense swiftness, but at a pace that momently slackened—rising, slipping over ice and in contact with it,

"The muscles of my arms, clasped still about Fidèle, involuntarily swelled to her. My God! there was a tiny answering pressure. I could have screamed with joy; but physical anguish overmastered me. My back seemed bursting into flame.

"The suffering was intolerable. When, at last, I thought I should go mad, in a moment we took a surging swoop, shot down an easy incline, and *stopped*.

"There had been noise in our descent, as only now I knew by its cessation—a hissing sound as of wire whirring from a draw-plate. In the profound enormous silence that, at last, enwrapped us, the bliss of freedom from that metallic accompaniment fell on me like a balm. My eyelids closed. Possibly I fainted.

"All in a moment I came to myself, to an undefinable sense of the tremendous pressure of nothingness. Darkness! it was not that; yet it was as little light. It was

as if we lay in a dim, luminous chaos, ourselves an integral part of its self-containment. I did not stir; but I spoke: and my strange voice broke the enchantment. Surely never before or since was speech exchanged under such conditions.

"'Fidèle!'

"'I can speak, but I cannot look. If I hide so for ever I can die bravely.'

"'*Ma petite!* oh, my little one! Are you hurt?'

"'I don't know. I think not.'

"Her voice, her dear voice was so odd; but, *Mon Dieu*! how wonderful in its courage! That, Heaven be praised! is no monopoly of intellect. Indeed, it is imagination that makes men cowards; and to the lack of this possibly we owed our salvation.

"Now, calm and freed of that haunting jar of descent, I became conscious that a sound, that I had at first taken for the rush of my own arteries, had an origin apart from us. It was like the wash and thunder of waters in a deep sewer.

"'Fidèle!' I said again.

"'I am listening.'

"'Hear, then! Canst thou free my right arm, that I may feel for the lucifers in my pocket?'

"She moved at once, never raising her face from my breast. I groped for the box, found it; and manipulating with one hand, succeeded in striking a match. It flamed up—a long wax vesta.

"A glory of sleek fires sprang on the instant into life. We lay imprisoned in a house of glass at the foot of a smooth incline rising behind us to unknown heights. A wall of porous and opaque ice-rubbish, into which our feet had plunged deep, had stayed our progress.

"I placed the box by my side ready for use. Our last moments should be lavish of splendour. Stooping for another match, to kindle from the flame of the near-expired one, a thought struck me. Why had we not been at once frozen to death? Yet we lay where we had brought up, as snug and glowing as if we were wrapped in bedclothes.

"The answer came to me in a flash. We had fallen sheer to the glacier bed, which, warmed by subterraneous heat, was ever in process of melting. Possibly, but a comparatively thin curtain of perforated ice separated us from the under torrent.

"The enforced conclusion was astounding; but as yet it inspired no hope. We were none the less doomed and buried.

"I lit a second match, turned about, and gave a start of terror. There, imbedded in the transparent wall at my very shoulder, was something—the body of a man.

"A horrible sight—a horrible, horrible sight—crushed, flattened—a caricature; the very gouts of blood that had burst from him held poised in the massed congelations of water.

"For how long ages had he been travelling to the valley, and from what heights? He was of a bygone generation, by his huge coat cuffs, his metal buttons, by his

shoe buckles and the white stockings on his legs, which were pressed thin and sharp, as if cut out of paper. Had he been a climber, an explorer—a contemporary, perhaps, of Saussure and a rival? And what had been his unrecorded fate? To slip into a crevasse, and so for the parted ice to snap upon him again, like a hideous jaw? Its work done, it might at least have opened and dropped him through—not held him intact to jog us, out of all that world of despair, with his battered elbow!

"Perhaps to witness in others the fate he had himself suffered!

"I dropped the match I was holding. I tightened my clasp convulsively about Fidèle. Thank God she, at any rate, was blind to this horror within a horror!

"All at once—was it the start I had given, or the natural process of dissolution beneath our feet?—we were moving again. Swift—swifter! Fidèle uttered a little moaning cry. The rubbish of ice crashed below us, and we sank through.

"I knew nothing, then, but that we were in water—that we had fallen from a little height, and were being hurried along. The torrent, now deep, now so shallow that my feet scraped its bed, gushed in my ears and blinded my eyes.

"Still I hugged Fidèle, and I could feel by her returning grasp that she lived. The water was not unbearably cold as yet. The air that came through cracks and crevasses had not force to overcome the under warmth.

"I felt something slide against me—clutched and held on. It was a brave pine log. Could I recover it at this date I would convert it into a flagstaff for the tricolour. It was our raft, our refuge; and it carried us to safety.

"I cannot give the extravagant processes of that long journey. It was all a rushing, swirling dream—a mad race of mystery and sublimity, to which the only conscious periods were wild, flitting glimpses of wonderful ice arabesques, caught momentarily as we passed under fissures that let the light of day through dimly.

"Gradually a ghostly radiance grew to encompass us; and by a like gradation the water waxed intensely cold. Hope then was blazing in our hearts; but this new deathliness went nigh to quench it altogether. Yet, had we guessed the reason, we could have foregone the despair. For, in truth, we were approaching that shallower terrace of the glacier beyond the fall, through which the light could

force some weak passage, and the air make itself felt, blowing upon the beds of ice.

"Well, we survived; and still we survive. My faith, what a couple! Sublimity would have none of us. The glacier rejected souls so commonplace as not to be properly impressed by its inexorability.

"This, then, was the end. We swept into a huge cavern of ice—through it—beyond it, into the green valley and the world that we love. And there, where the torrent splits up into a score of insignificant streams, we grounded and crawled to dry land and sat down and laughed.

"Yes, we could do it—we could laugh. Is that not bathos? But Fidèle and I have a theory that laughter is the chief earnest of immortality.

"To *dry* land I have said. *Mon Dieu!* the torrent was no wetter. It rains in the Chamounix valley. We looked to see whence we had fallen, and not even the *Chapeau* was visible through the mist.

"But, as I turned, Fidèle uttered a little cry.

"'The flask, and the sandwich-box, and your poor coat!'

"'*Comment?*' I said; and in a moment was in my shirt-sleeves.

"I stared, and I wondered, and I clucked in my throat.

"Holy saints! I was adorned with a breastplate on my back. The friction of descent, first welding together these, the good ministers to our appetite, had worn the metal down in the end to a mere skin or badge, the heat generated from which had scorched and frizzled the cloth beneath it.

"I needed not to seek further explanation of the pain I had suffered—was suffering then, indeed, as I had reason to know when ecstasy permitted a return of sensation. My back bears the scars at this moment.

"'It shall remain there for ever!' I cried, 'like the badge of a *cocher de fiacre*, who has made the fastest journey on record. 'Coachman! from the glacier to the valley.' '*Mais oui, monsieur*. Down this crevasse, if you please.'

"And that is the history of our adventure.

"Why we were not dashed to pieces? But that, as I accept it, is easy of elucidation. Imagine a vast crescent moon, with a downward nick from the end of the tail. This form the fissure took, in one enormous sweep and drop towards the mouth of the valley. Now, as we rushed headlong, the gentle curve received us from space to substance quite gradually, until we were whirring forward wholly on the latter, my luggage suffering the brunt of the friction. The upward sweep of the crescent diminished our progress—more and yet more—until we switched over the lower point and shot quietly down the incline beyond. And all this in ample room, and without meeting with a single unfriendly obstacle.

'"*Voilà, mes chers amis, ce qui me met en peine*.'

"Fidèle laughs, the rogue!

'"Ta, ta, ta!' she says. 'But they will not believe a word of it all.'"

THE VANISHING HOUSE

"My grandfather," said the banjo, "drank 'dog's-nose,' my father drank 'dog's-nose,' and I drink 'dog's-nose.' If that ain't heredity, there's no virtue in the board schools."

"Ah!" said the piccolo, "you're always a-boasting of your science. And so, I suppose, your son'll drink 'dog's-nose,' too?"

"No," retorted the banjo, with a rumbling laugh, like wind in the bung-hole of an empty cask; "for I ain't got none. The family ends with me; which is a pity, for I'm a full-stop to be proud on."

He was an enormous, tun-bellied person—a mere mound of expressionless flesh, whose size alone was an investment that paid a perpetual dividend of laughter. When, as with the rest of his company, his face was blackened, it looked like a specimen coal on a pedestal in a museum.

There was Christmas company in the Good Intent, and the sanded tap-room, with its trestle tables and sprigs of holly stuck under sooty beams reeked with smoke and the steam of hot gin and water.

"How much could you put down of a night, Jack?" said a little grinning man by the door.

"Why," said the banjo, "enough to lay the dustiest ghost as ever walked."

"Could you, now?" said the little man.

"Ah!" said the banjo, chuckling. "There's nothing like settin' one sperit to lay another; and there I could give you proof number two of heredity."

"What! Don't you go for to say you ever see'd a ghost!"

"Haven't I? What are you whisperin' about, you blushful chap there by the winder?"

"I was only remarking sir, 'twere snawin' like the devil."

"*Is* it? Then the devil has been misjudged these eighteen hundred and ninety odd years."

"But *did* you ever see a ghost?" said the little grinning man, pursuing his subject.

"No, I didn't, sir," mimicked the banjo, "saving in coffee grounds. But my grandfather in *his* cups see'd one; which brings us to number three in the matter of heredity."

"Give us the story, Jack," said the "bones," whose agued shins were extemporizing a rattle on their own account before the fire.

"Well, I don't mind," said the fat man. "It's seasonable; and I'm seasonable, like the blessed plum-pudden, I am; and the more burnt brandy you set about me, the richer and headier I'll go down."

"You'd be a jolly old pudden to digest," said the piccolo.

"You blow your aggrawation into your pipe and sealing-wax the stops," said his friend.

He drew critically at his "churchwarden" a moment or so, leaned forward, emptied his glass into his capacious receptacles, and, giving his stomach a shift, as if to accommodate it to its new burden, proceeded as follows:—

"Music and malt is my nat'ral inheritance. My grandfather blew his 'dog's-nose,' and drank his clarinet like a artist and my father—"

"What did you say your grandfather did?" asked the piccolo.

"He played the clarinet."

"You said he blew his 'dog's-nose.'"

"Don't be a ass, Fred!" said the banjo, aggrieved. "How the blazes could a man blow his dog's nose, unless he muzzled it with a handkercher, and then twisted its tail? He played the clarinet, I say; and my father played the musical glasses, which was a form of harmony pertiklerly genial to him. Amongst us we've piped out a good long century—ah! we have, for all I look sich a babby bursting on sops and spoon meat."

"What!" said the little man by the door. "You don't include them cockt hatses in your expeerunce?"

"My grandfather wore 'em, sir. He wore a play-actin' coat, too, and buckles to his shoes, when he'd got any; and he and a friend or two made a permanency of 'waits' (only they called 'em according to the season), and got their profit goin' from house to house, principally in the country, and discoursin' music at the low rate of whatever they could get for it."

"Ain't you comin' to the ghost, Jack?" said the little man hungrily.

"All in course, sir. Well, gentlemen, it was hard times pretty often with my grandfather and his friends, as you may suppose; and never so much as when they had to trudge it across country, with the nor'-easter buzzin' in their teeth and the snow piled on their cockt hats like lemon sponge on entry dishes. The rewards, I've heard him say—for he lived to be ninety, nevertheless—was poor compensation for the drifts, and the inflienza, and the broken chilblains; but now and again they'd get a fair skinful of liquor from a jolly squire, as 'd set 'em up like boggarts mended wi' new broomsticks."

"Ho-haw!" broke in a hurdle-maker in a corner; and then, regretting the publicity of his merriment, put his fingers bashfully to his stubble lips.

"Now," said the banjo, "it's of a pertikler night and a pertikler skinful that I'm a-going to tell you; and that night fell dark, and that skinful were took a hundred years ago this December, as I'm a Jack-pudden!"

He paused a moment for effect, before he went on:—

"They were down in the sou'-west country, which they little knew; and were anighing Winchester city, or should 'a' been. But they got muzzed on the ungodly downs, and before they guessed, they was off the track. My good hat! there they was, as lost in the snow as three nutshells a-sinkin' into a hasty pudden. Well,

they wandered round; pretty confident at first, but getting madder and madder as every sense of their bearings slipped from them. And the bitter cold took their vitals, so as they saw nothing but a great winding sheet stretched abroad for to wrap their dead carcasses in.

"At last my grandfather he stopt and pulled hisself together with an awful face, and says he: 'We're Christmas pie for the carrying-on crows if we don't prove ourselves human. Let's fetch out our pipes and blow our trouble into 'em.' So they stood together, like as if they was before a house, and they played 'Kate of Aberdare' mighty dismal and flat, for their fingers froze to the keys.

"Now, I tell you, they hadn't climbed over the first stave, when there come a skirl of wind and spindrift of snow as almost took them off of their feet; and, on the going down of it, Jem Sloke, as played the hautboy, dropped the reed from his mouth, and called out, 'Sakes alive! if we fools ain't been standin' outside a gentleman's gate all the time, and not knowin' it!'

"You might 'a' knocked the three of 'em down wi' a barley straw, as they stared and stared, and then fell into a low, enjoyin' laugh. For they was standin' not six fut from a tall iron gate in a stone wall, and behind these was a great house showin' out dim, with the winders all lighted up.

"'Lord!' chuckled my grandfather, 'to think o' the tricks o' this vagarious country! But, as we're here, we'll go on and give 'em a taste of our quality.'

"They put new heart into the next movement, as you may guess; and they hadn't fair started on it, when the door of the house swung open, and down the shaft of light that shot out as far as the gate there come a smiling young gal, with a tray of glasses in her hands.

"Now she come to the bars; and she took and put a glass through, not sayin' nothin', but invitin' some one to drink with a silent laugh.

"Did any one take that glass? Of course he did, you'll be thinkin'; and you'll be thinkin' wrong. Not a man of the three moved. They was struck like as stone, and their lips was gone the colour of sloe berries. Not a man took the glass. For why? The moment the gal presented it, each saw the face of a thing lookin' out of the winder over the porch, and the face was hidjus beyond words, and the shadder of it, with the light behind, stretched out and reached to the gal, and made her hidjus, too.

"At last my grandfather give a groan and put out his hand; and, as he did it, the face went, and the gal was beautiful to see agen.

"'Death and the devil!' said he. 'It's one or both, either way; and I prefer 'em hot to cold!'

"He drank off half the glass, smacked his lips, and stood staring a moment.

"'Dear, dear!' said the gal, in a voice like falling water, 'you've drunk blood, sir!'

"My grandfather gave a yell, slapped the rest of the liquor in the faces of his friends, and threw the cup agen the bars. It broke with a noise like thunder, and at that he up'd with his hands and fell full length into the snow."

There was a pause. The little man by the door was twisting nervously in his chair.

"He came to—of course, he came to?" said he at length.

"He come to," said the banjo solemnly, "in the bitter break of dawn; that is, he come to as much of hisself as he ever was after. He give a squiggle and lifted his head; and there was he and his friends a-lyin' on the snow of the high downs."

"And the house and the gal?"

"Narry a sign of either, sir, but just the sky and the white stretch; and one other thing."

"And what was that?"

"A stain of red sunk in where the cup had spilt."

There was a second pause, and the banjo blew into the bowl of his pipe.

"They cleared out of that neighbourhood double quick, you'll bet," said he. "But my grandfather was never the same man agen. His face took purple, while his friends' only remained splashed with red, same as birth marks; and, I tell you, if he ever ventur'd upon 'Kate of Aberdare,' his cheeks swelled up to the reed of his clarinet, like as a blue plum on a stalk. And forty year after, he died of what they call solution of blood to the brain."

"And you can't have better proof than that," said the little man.

"That's what *I* say," said the banjo. "Next player, gentlemen, please."

DARK DIGNUM

"I'd not go higher, sir," said my landlady's father. I made out his warning through the shrill piping of the wind; and stopped and took in the plunging seascape from where I stood. The boom of the waves came up from a vast distance beneath; sky and the horizon of running water seemed hurrying upon us over the lip of the rearing cliff.

"It crumbles!" he cried. "It crumbles near the edge like as frosted mortar. I've seen a noble sheep, sir, eighty pound of mutton, browsing here one moment, and seen it go down the next in a puff of white dust. Hark to that! Do you hear it?"

Through the tumult of the wind in that high place came a liquid vibrant sound, like the muffled stroke of iron on an anvil. I thought it the gobble of water in clanging caves deep down below.

"It might be a bell," I said.

The old man chuckled joyously. He was my cicerone for the nonce; had come out of his chair by the ingle-nook to taste a little the salt of life. The north-easter flashed in the white cataracts of his eyes and woke a feeble activity in his scrannel limbs. When the wind blew loud, his daughter had told me, he was always restless, like an imprisoned sea-gull. He would be up and out. He would rise and flap his old draggled pinions, as if the great air fanned an expiring spark into flame.

"It is a bell!" he cried—"the bell of old St. Dunstan's, that was swallowed by the waters in the dark times."

"Ah," I said. "That is the legend hereabouts."

"No legend, sir—no legend. Where be the tombstones of drownded mariners to

prove it such? Not one to forty that they has in other sea-board parishes. For why? Dunstan bell sounds its warning, and not a craft will put out."

"There is the storm cone," I suggested.

He did not hear me. He was punching with his staff at one of a number of little green mounds that lay about us.

"I could tell you a story of these," he said. "Do you know where we stand?"

"On the site of the old churchyard?"

"Ay, sir; though it still bore the name of the new yard in my first memory of it."

"Is that so? And what is the story?"

He dwelt a minute, dense with introspection. Suddenly he sat himself down upon a mossy bulge in the turf, and waved me imperiously to a place beside him.

"The old order changeth," he said. "The only lasting foundations of men's works shall be godliness and law-biding. Long ago they builded a new church—here, high up on the cliffs, where the waters could not reach; and, lo! the waters wrought beneath and sapped the foundations, and the church fell into the sea."

"So I understand," I said.

"The godless are fools," he chattered knowingly. "Look here at these bents—thirty of 'em, may be. Tombstones, sir; perished like man his works, and the decayed stumps of them coated with salt grass."

He pointed to the ragged edge of the cliff a score paces away.

"They raised it out there," he said, "and further—a temple of bonded stone. They thought to bribe the Lord to a partnership in their corruption, and He answered by casting down the fair mansion into the waves."

I said, "Who—who, my friend?"

"They that builded the church," he answered.

"Well," I said. "It seems a certain foolishness to set the edifice so close to the

margin."

Again he chuckled.

"It was close, close, as you say; yet none so close as you might think nowadays. Time hath gnawed here like a rat on a cheese. But the foolishness appeared in setting the brave mansion between the winds and its own graveyard. Let the dead lie seawards, one had thought, and the church inland where we stand. So had the bell rung to this day; and only the charnel bones flaked piecemeal into the sea."

"Certainly, to have done so would show the better providence."

"Sir, I said the foolishness *appeared*. But, I tell you, there was foresight in the disposition—in neighbouring the building to the cliff path. *For so they could the easier enter unobserved, and store their Tcegs of Nantes brandy in the belly of the organ*."

"They? Who were they?"

"Why, who—but two-thirds of all Dunburgh?"

"Smugglers?"'

"It was a nest of 'em—traffickers in the eternal fire o' weekdays, and on the Sabbath, who so sanctimonious? But honesty comes not from the washing, like a clean shirt, nor can the piety of one day purge the evil of six. They built their church anigh the margin, forasmuch as it was handy, and that they thought, 'Surely the Lord will not undermine His own?' A rare community o' blasphemers, fro' the parson that took his regular toll of the organ-loft, to him that sounded the keys and pulled out the joyous stops as if they was so many spigots to what lay behind."

"Of when do you speak?"

"I speak of nigh a century and a half ago. I speak of the time o' the Seven Years' War and of Exciseman Jones, that, twenty year after he were buried, took his revenge on the cliff side of the man that done him to death."

"And who was that?"

"They called him Dark Dignum, sir—a great feat smuggler, and as wicked as he was bold,"

"Is your story about him?"

"Ay, it is; and of my grandfather, that were a boy when they laid, and was glad to lay, the exciseman deep as they could dig; for the sight of his sooty face in his coffin was worse than a bad dream."

"Why was that?"

The old man edged closer to me, and spoke in a sibilant voice.

"He were murdered, sir, foully and horribly, for all they could never bring it home to the culprit."

"Will you tell me about it?"

He was nothing loth. The wind, the place of perished tombs, the very wild-blown locks of this 'withered apple-john', were eerie accompaniments to the tale he piped in my ear:—

"When my grandfather were a boy," he said, "there lighted in Dunburgh Exciseman Jones. P'r'aps the village had gained an ill reputation. P'r'aps Exciseman Jones's predecessor had failed to secure the confidence o' the exekitive. At any rate, the new man was little to the fancy of the village. He was a grim, sour-looking, brass-bound galloot; and incorruptible—which was the worst. The keg o' brandy left on his doorstep o' New Year's Eve had been better unspiled and run into the gutter; for it led him somehow to the identification of the innocent that done it, and he had him by the heels in a twinkling. The squire snorted at the man, and the parson looked askance; but Dark Dignum, he swore he'd be even with him, if he swung for it. They was hurt and surprised, that was the truth, over the scrupulosity of certain people; and feelin' ran high against Exciseman Jones.

"At that time Dark Dignum was a young man with a reputation above his years for profaneness and audacity. Ugly things there were said about him; and amongst many wicked he was feared for his wickedness. Exciseman Jones had his eye on him; and that was bad for Exciseman Jones.

"Now one murk December night Exciseman Jones staggered home with a bloody long slice down his scalp, and the red drip from it spotting the cobble-stones.

"'Summut fell on him from a winder,' said Dark Dignum, a little later, as he were drinkin' hisself hoarse in the Black Boy. 'Summut fell on him retributive, as you might call it. For, would you believe it, the man had at the moment been threatenin' me? He did. He said, "I know damn well about you, Dignum; and for all your damn ingenuity, I'll bring you with a crack to the ground yet."'

"What had happened? Nobody knew, sir. But Exciseman Jones was in his bed for a fortnight; and when he got on his legs again, it was pretty evident there was a hate between the two men that only blood-spillin' could satisfy.

"So far as is known, they never spoke to one another again. They played their game of death in silence—the lawful, cold and unfathomable; the unlawful, swaggerin' and crool—and twenty year separated the first move and the last.

"This were the first, sir—as Dark Dignum leaked it out long after in his cups. This were the first; and it brought Exciseman Jones to his grave on the cliff here.

"It were a deep soft summer night; and the young smuggler sat by hisself in the long room of the Black Boy. Now, I tell you he were a fox-ship intriguer—grand, I should call him, in the aloneness of his villainy. He would play his dark games out of his own hand; and sure, of all his wickedness, this game must have seemed the sum.

"I say he sat by hisself; and I hear the listening ghost of him call me a liar. For there were another body present, though invisible to mortal eye; and that second party were Exciseman Jones, who was hidden up the chimney.

"How had he inveigled him there? Ah, they've met and worried that point out since. No other will ever know the truth this side the grave. But reports come to be whispered; and reports said as how Dignum had made an appointment with a bodiless master of a smack as never floated, to meet him in the Black Boy and arrange for to run a cargo as would never be shipped; and that somehow he managed to acquent Exciseman Jones o' this dissembling appointment, and to secure his presence in hidin' to witness it.

"That's conjecture; for Dignum never let on so far. But what is known for certain is that Exciseman Jones, who were as daring and determined as his enemy—

p'r'aps more so—for some reason was in the chimney, on to a grating in which he had managed to lower hisself from the roof; and that he could, if given time, have scrambled up again with difficulty, but was debarred from going lower. And, further, this is known—that, as Dignum sat on, pretendin' to yawn and huggin' his black intent, a little sut plopped down the chimney and scattered on the coals of the laid fire beneath.

"At that—'Curse this waitin'!' said he. 'The room's as chill as a belfry'; and he got to his feet, with a secret grin, and strolled to the hearthstone.

"'I wonder,' said he, 'will the landlord object if I ventur' upon a glint of fire for comfort's sake?' and he pulled out his flint and steel, struck a spark, and with no more feelin' than he'd express in lighting a pipe, set the flame to the sticks.

"The trapt rat above never stirred or give tongue. My God! what a man! Sich a nature could afford to bide and bide—ay, for twenty year, if need be.

"Dignum would have enjoyed the sound of a cry; but he never got it. He listened with the grin fixed on his face; and of a sudden he heard a scrambling struggle, like as a dog with the colic jumping at a wall; and presently, as the sticks blazed and the smoke rose denser, a thick coughin', as of a consumptive man under bed-clothes. Still no cry, nor any appeal for mercy; no, not from the time he lit the fire till a horrible rattle come down, which was the last twitches of somethin' that choked and died on the sooty gratin' above.

"When all was quiet, Dignum he knocks with his foot on the floor and sits hisself down before the hearth, with a face like a pillow for innocence.

"'I were chilled and lit it,' says he to the landlord. 'You don't mind?'

"Mind? Who would have ventur'd to cross Dark Dignum's fancies?

"He give a boisterous laugh, and ordered in a double noggin of humming stuff.

"'Here,' he says, when it comes, 'is to the health of Exciseman Jones, that swore to bring me to the ground.'

"'To the ground,' mutters a thick voice from the chimney.

"'My God!' says the landlord—'there's something up there!'

"Something there was; and terrible to look upon when they brought it to light. The creature's struggles had ground the sut into its face, and its nails were black below the quick.

"Were those words the last of its death-throe, or an echo from beyond? Ah! we may question; but they were heard by two men.

"Dignum went free. What could they prove agen him? Not that he knew there was aught in the chimney when he lit the fire. The other would scarcely have acquent him of his plans. And Exciseman Jones was hurried into his grave alongside the church up here.

"And therein he lay for twenty year, despite that, not a twelvemonth after his coming, the sacrilegious house itself sunk roaring into the waters. For the Lord would have none of it, and, biding His time, struck through a fortnight of deluge, and hurled church and cliff into ruin. But the yard remained, and, nighest the seaward edge of it, Exciseman Jones slept in his fearful winding sheet and bided *his* time.

"It came when my grandfather were a young man of thirty, and mighty close and confidential with Dark Dignum. God forgive him! Doubtless he were led away by the older smuggler, that had a grace of villainy about him, 'tis said, and used Lord Chesterfield's printed letters for wadding to his bullets.

"By then he was a ramping, roaring devil; but, for all his bold hands were stained with crime, the memory of Exciseman Jones and of his promise dwelled with him and darkened him ever more and more, and never left him. So those that knew him said.

"Now all these years the cliff edge agen the graveyard, where it was broke off, was scabbing into the sea below. But still they used this way of ascent for their ungodly traffic; and over the ruin of the cliff they had drove a new path for to carry up their kegs.

"It was a cloudy night in March, with scud and a fitful moon, and there was a sloop in the offing, and under the shore a loaded boat that had just pulled in with muffled rowlocks. Out of this Dark Dignum was the first to sling hisself a brace of rundlets; and my grandfather followed with two more. They made softly for the cliff path—began the ascent—was half-way up.

"Whiz!—a stone of chalk went by them with a skirl, and slapped into the rubble below.

"'Some more of St. Dunstan's gravel!' cried Dignum, pantin' out a reckless laugh under his load; and on they went again.

"Hwish!—a bigger lump came like a thunderbolt, and the wind of it took the bloody smuggler's hat and sent it swooping into the darkness like a bird.

"'Thunder!' said Dignum; 'the cliff's breaking away!'

"The words was hardly out of his mouth, when there flew such a volley of chalk stones as made my grandfather, though none had touched him, fall upon the path where he stood, and begin to gabble out what he could call to mind of the prayers for the dying. He was in the midst of it, when he heard a scream come from his companion as froze the very marrow in his bones. He looked up, thinkin' his hour had come.

"My God! What a sight he saw! The moon had shone out of a sudden, and the light of it struck down on Dignum's face, and that was the colour of dirty parchment. And he looked higher, and give a sort of sob.

"For there, stickin' out of the cliff side, was half the body of Exciseman Jones, with its arms stretched abroad, *and it was clawin' out lumps of chalk and hurling them down at Dignum*!

"And even as he took this in through his terror, a great ball of white came hurtling, and went full on to the man's face with a splash—and he were spun down into the deep night below, a nameless thing."

The old creature came to a stop, his eyes glinting with a febrile excitement.

"And so," I said, "Exciseman Jones was true to his word?"

The tension of memory was giving—the spring slowly uncoiling itself.

"Ay," he said doubtfully. "The cliff had flaked away by degrees to his very grave. They found his skelington stickin' out of the chalk."

"His *skeleton?"* said I, with the emphasis of disappointment.

"The first, sir, the first. Ay, his was the first. There've been a many exposed since. The work of decay goes on, and the bones they fall into the sea. Sometimes, sailing off shore, you may see a shank or an arm protrudin' like a pigeon's leg from a pie. But the wind or the weather takes it and it goes. There's more to follow yet. Look at 'em! look at these bents! Every one a grave, with a skelington in it. The wear and tear from the edge will reach each one in turn, and then the last of the ungodly will have ceased from the earth."

"And what became of your grandfather?"

"My grandfather? There were something happened made him renounce the devil. He died one of the elect. His youth were heedless and unregenerate; but, 'tis said, after he were turned thirty he never smiled agen. There was a reason. Did I ever tell you the story of Dark Dignum and Exciseman Jones?"

WILLIAM TYRWHITT'S "COPY"

This is the story of William Tyrwhitt, who went to King's Cobb for rest and change, and, with the latter, at least, was so far accommodated as for a time to get beyond himself and into regions foreign to his experiences or his desires. And for this condition of his I hold myself something responsible, inasmuch as it was my inquisitiveness was the means of inducing him to an exploration, of which the result, with its measure of weirdness, was for him alone. But, it seems, I was appointed an agent of the unexplainable without my knowledge, and it was simply my misfortune to find my first unwitting commission in the selling of a friend.

I was for a few days, about the end of a particular July, lodged in that little old seaboard town of Dorset that is called King's Cobb. Thither there came to me one morning a letter from William Tyrwhitt, the polemical journalist (a queer fish, like the cuttle, with an ink-bag for the confusion of enemies), complaining that he was fagged and used up, and desiring me to say that nowhere could complete rest be obtained as in King's Cobb.

I wrote and assured him on this point. The town, I said, lay wrapped in the hills as in blankets, its head only, winking a sleepy eye, projecting from the top of the broad steep gully in which it was stretched at ease. Thither few came to the droning coast; and such as did, looked up at the High Street baking in the sun, and, thinking of Jacob's ladder, composed them to slumber upon the sand and left the climbing to the angels. Here, I said, the air and the sea were so still that one could hear the oysters snoring in their beds; and the little frizzle of surf on the beach was like to the sound to dreaming ears of bacon frying in the kitchens of the blest.

William Tyrwhitt came, and I met him at the station, six or seven miles away. He was all strained and springless, like a broken child's toy—"not like that William who, with lance in rest, shot through the lists in Fleet Street." A disputative

galley-puller could have triumphed over him morally; a child physically.

The drive in the inn brake, by undulating roads and scented valleys, shamed his cheek to a little flush of self-assertion.

"I will sleep under the vines," he said, "and the grapes shall drop into my mouth."

"Beware," I answered, "lest in King's Cobb your repose should be everlasting. The air of that hamlet has matured like old port in the bin of its hills, till to drink of it is to swoon."

We alighted at the crown of the High Street, purposing to descend on foot the remaining distance to the shore.

"Behold," I exclaimed, "how the gulls float in the shimmer, like ashes tossed aloft by the white draught of a fire! Behold these ancient buildings nodding to the everlasting lullaby of the bay waters! The cliffs are black with the heat apoplexy; the lobster is drawn scarlet to the surface. You shall be like an addled egg put into an incubator."

"So," he said, "I shall rest and not hatch. The very thought is like sweet oil on a burn."

He stayed with me a week, and his body waxed wondrous round and rosy, while his eye acquired a foolish and vacant expression. So it was with me. We rolled together, by shore and by road of this sluggard place, like spent billiard balls; and if by chance we cannoned, we swerved sleepily apart, until, perhaps, one would fall into a pocket of the sand, and the other bring up against a cushion of sea-wall.

Yet, for all its enervating atmosphere, King's Cobb has its fine traditions of a sturdy independence, and a slashing history withal; and its aspect is as picturesque as that of an opera bouffe fishing-harbour. Then, too, its High Street, as well as its meandering rivulets of low streets, is rich in buildings, venerable and antique.

We took an irresponsible, smiling pleasure in noting these advantages—particularly after lunch; and sometimes, where an old house was empty, we would go over it, and stare at beams and chimneypieces and hear the haunted

tale of its fortunes, with a faint half-memory in our breasts of that one-time bugbear we had known as "copy." But though more than once a flaccid instinct would move us to have out our pencils, we would only end by bunging our foolish mouths with them, as if they were cigarettes, and then vaguely wondering at them for that, being pencils, they would not draw.

By then we were so sinewless and demoralized that we could hear in the distant strains of the European Concert nothing but an orchestra of sweet sounds, and would have given ourselves away in any situation with a pound of tea. Therefore, perhaps, it was well for us that, a peremptory summons to town reaching me after seven days of comradeship with William, I must make shift to collect my faculties with my effects, and return to the more bracing climate of Fleet Street.

And here, you will note, begins the story of William Tyrwhitt, who would linger yet a few days in that hanging garden of the south coast, and who would pull himself together and collect matter for "copy."

He found a very good subject that first evening of his solitude.

I was to leave in the afternoon, and the morning we spent in aimlessly rambling about the town. Towards mid-day, a slight shower drove us to shelter under the green verandah of a house, standing up from the lower fall of the High Street, that we had often observed in our wanderings. This house—or rather houses, for it was a block of two—was very tall and odd-looking, being all built of clean squares of a whitish granite; and the double porch in the middle base—led up to by side-going steps behind thin iron railings—roofed with green-painted zinc. In some of the windows were jalousies, but the general aspect of the exterior was gaunt and rigid; and the whole block bore a dismal, deserted look, as if it had not been lived in for years.

Now we had taken refuge in the porch of that half that lay uppermost on the slope; and here we noticed that, at a late date, the building was seemingly in process of repair, painters' pots and brushes lying on a window-sill, and a pair of steps showing within through the glass.

"They have gone to dinner," said I. "Supposing we seize the opportunity to explore?"

We pushed at the door; it yielded. We entered, shut ourselves in, and paused to

the sound of our own footsteps echoing and laughing from corners and high places. On the ground floor were two or three good-sized rooms with modern grates, but cornices, chimney-pieces, embrasures finely Jacobean. There were innumerable under-stair and over-head cupboards, too, and pantries, and closets, and passages going off darkly into the unknown.

We clomb the stairway—to the first floor—to the second. Here was all pure Jacobean; but the walls were crumbling, the paper peeling, the windows dim and foul with dirt.

I have never known a place with such echoes. They shook from a footstep like nuts rattling out of a bag; a mouse behind the skirting led a whole camp-following of them; to ask a question was, as in that other House, to awaken the derisive shouts of an Opposition. Yet, in the intervals of silence, there fell a deadliness of quiet that was quite appalling by force of contrast.

"Let us go down," I said. "I am feeling creepy."

"Pooh!" said William Tyrwhitt; "I could take up my abode here with a feather bed."

We descended, nevertheless. Arrived at the ground floor, "I am going to the back," said William.

I followed him—a little reluctantly, I confess. Gloom and shadow had fallen upon the town, and this old deserted hulk of an abode was ghostly to a degree. There was no film of dust on its every shelf or sill that did not seem to me to bear the impress of some phantom finger feeling its way along. A glint of stealthy eyes would look from dark uncertain corners; a thin evil vapour appear to rise through the cracks of the boards from the unvisited cellars in the basement.

And here, too, we came suddenly upon an eccentricity of out-building that wrought upon our souls with wonder. For, penetrating to the rear through what might have been a cloak-closet or butler's pantry, we found a supplementary wing, or rather tail of rooms, loosely knocked together, to proceed from the back, forming a sort of skilling to the main building. These rooms led direct into one another, and, consisting of little more than timber and plaster, were in a woeful state of dilapidation. Everywhere the laths grinned through torn gaps in the ceilings and walls; everywhere the latter were blotched and mildewed with

damp, and the floor-boards rotting in their tracks. Fallen mortar, rusty tins, yellow teeth of glass, whitened soot—all the decay and rubbish of a generation of neglect littered the place and filled it with an acrid odour. From one of the rooms we looked forth through a little discoloured window upon a patch of forlorn weedy garden, where the very cats glowered in a depression that no surfeit of mice could assuage.

We went on, our nervous feet apologetic to the grit they crunched; and, when we were come to near the end of this dreary annexe, turned off to the left into a short gloom of passage that led to a closed door.

Pushing this open, we found a drop of some half-dozen steps, and, going gingerly down these, stopped with a common exclamation of surprise on our lips.

Perhaps our wonder was justified, for we were in the stern cabin of an ancient West Indiaman.

Some twenty feet long by twelve wide—there it all was, from the deck transoms above, to the side lockers and great curved window, sloping outwards to the floor and glazed with little panes in galleries, that filled the whole end of the room. Thereout we looked, over the degraded garden, to the lower quarters of the town—as if, indeed, we were perched high up on waves—and even to a segment of the broad bay that swept by them.

But the room itself! What phantasy of old sea-dog or master-mariner had conceived it? What palsied spirit, condemned to rust in inactivity, had found solace in this burlesque of shipcraft? To renew the past in such a fixture, to work oneself up to the old glow of flight and action, and then, while one stamped and rocked maniacally, to feel the refusal of so much as a timber to respond to one's fervour of animation! It was a grotesque picture.

Now, this cherished chamber had shared the fate of the rest. The paint and gilding were all cracked and blistered away; much of the glass of the stern-frame was gone or hung loose in its sashes; the elaborately carved lockers mouldered on the walls.

These were but dummies when we came to examine them—mere slabs attached to the brickwork, and decaying with it.

"There should be a case-bottle and rummers in one, at least," said William Tyrwhitt.

"There are, sir, at your service," said a voice behind us.

We started and turned.

It had been such a little strained voice that it was with something like astonishment I looked upon the speaker. Whence he had issued I could not guess; but there he stood behind us, nodding and smiling—a squab, thick-set old fellow with a great bald head, and, for all the hair on his face, a tuft like a teasel sprouting from his under lip.

He was in his shirt-sleeves, without coat or vest; and I noticed that his dirty lawn was oddly plaited in front, and that about his ample paunch was buckled a broad belt of leather. Greased hip-boots encased his lower limbs, and the heels of these were drawn together as he bowed.

William Tyrwhitt—a master of nervous English—muttered "Great Scott!" under his breath.

"Permit me," said the stranger—and he held out to us a tin pannikin (produced from Heaven knows where) that swam with fragrance.

I shook my head. William Tyrwhitt, that fated man, did otherwise. He accepted the vessel and drained it.

"It smacks of all Castille," he said, handing it back with a sigh of ecstasy. "Who the devil are you, sir?"

The stranger gave a little crow.

"Peregrine Iron, sir, at your service—Captain Penegrine Iron, of the *Raven* sloop amongst others. You are very welcome to the run of my poor abode."

"Yours?" I murmured in confusion. "We owe you a thousand apologies."

"Not at all," he said, addressing all his courtesy to William. Me, since my rejection of his beaker, he took pains to ignore.

"Not at all," he said. "Your intrusion was quite natural under the circumstances. I take a pleasure in being your cicerone. This cabin (he waved his hand pompously)—a fancy of mine, sir, a fancy of mine. The actual material of the latest of my commands brought hither and adapted to the exigencies of shore life. It enables me to live eternally in the past—a most satisfying illusion. Come to-night and have a pipe and a glass with me."

I thought William Tyrwhitt mad.

"I will come, by all means," he said.

The stranger bowed us out of the room.

"That is right," he exclaimed. "You will find me here. Good-bye for the present."

As we plunged like dazed men into the street, now grown sunny, I turned on my friend.

"William," I said, "did you happen to look back as we left the cabin?"

"No."

"I did."

"Well?"

"There was no stranger there at all. The place was empty."

"Well?"

"You will not go to-night?"

"You bet I do."

I shrugged my shoulders. We walked on a little way in silence. Suddenly my companion turned on me, a most truculent expression on his face.

"For an independent thinker," he said, "you are rather a pusillanimous jackass. A man of your convictions to shy at a shadow! Fie, sir, fie! What if the room *were* empty? The place was full enough of traps to permit of Captain Iron's immediate withdrawal."

Much may be expressed in a sniff. I sniffed.

That afternoon I went back to town, and left the offensive William to his fate.

* * * * *

It found him at once.

The very day following that of my retreat, I was polishing phrases by gaslight in the dull sitting-room of my lodgings in the Lambeth Road, when he staggered in upon me. His face was like a sheep's, white and vacant; his hands had caught a trick of groping blindly along the backs of chairs.

"You have obtained your 'copy'?" I said.

I made him out to murmur "yes" in a shaking under-voice. He was so patently nervous that I put him in a chair and poured him out a wine-glassful of London brandy. This generally is a powerful emetic, but it had no more effect upon him than water. Then I was about to lower the gas, to save his eyes, but he stopped me with a thin shriek.

"Light, light!" he whispered. "It cannot be too light for me!"

"Now, William Tyrwhitt," I said, by-and-by, watchful of him, and marking a faint effusion of colour soak to his cheek, "you would not accept my warning, and you were extremely rude to me. Therefore you have had an experience—"

"An awful one," he murmured.

"An awful one, no doubt; and to obtain surcease of the haunting memory of it, you must confide its processes to me. But, first, I must put it to you, which is the more pusillanimous—to refuse to submit one's manliness to the tyranny of the unlawful, or to rush into situations you have not the nerve to adapt yourself to?"

"I could not foresee, I could not foresee."

"Neither could I. And that was my very reason for declining the invitation. Now proceed."

It was long before he could. But presently he essayed, and gathered voice with

the advance of his narrative, and even unconsciously threw it into something the form of "copy." And here it is as he murmured it, but with a gasp for every full-stop.

"I confess I was so far moved by the tone of your protest as, after your departure, to make some cautious inquiries about the house we had visited. I could discover nothing to satisfy my curiosity. It was known to have been untenanted for a great number of years; but as to who was the landlord, whether Captain Iron or another, no one could inform me; and the agent for the property was of the adjacent town where you met me. I was not fortunate, indeed, in finding that any one even knew of the oddly appointed room; but considering that, owing to the time the house had remained vacant, the existence of this eccentricity could be a tradition only with some casual few, my failure did not strike me as being at all bodeful. On the contrary, it only whetted my desire to investigate further in person, and penetrate to the heart of a very captivating little mystery. But probably, I thought, it is quite simple of solution, and the fact of the repairers and the landlord being in evidence at one time, a natural coincidence.

"I dined well, and sallied forth about nine o'clock. It was a night pregnant with possibilities. The lower strata of air were calm, but overhead the wind went down the sea with a noise of baggage-wagons, and there was an ominous hurrying and gathering together of forces under the bellying standards of the clouds.

"As I went up the steps of the lonely building, the High Street seemed to turn all its staring eyes of lamps in my direction. 'What a droll fellow!' they appeared to be saying; 'and how will he look when he reissues?'

"'There ain't nubbudy in that house,' croaked a small boy, who had paused below, squinting up at me.

"'How do you know?' said I. 'Move on, my little man.'

"He went; and at once it occurred to me that, as no notice was taken of my repeated knockings, I might as well try the handle. I did, found the door unlatched, as it had been in the morning, pushed it open, entered, and swung it to behind me.

"I found myself in the most profound darkness—that darkness, if I may use the paradox, of a peopled desolation that men of but little nerve or resolution find

insupportable. To me, trained to a serenity of stoicism, it could make no demoralizing appeal. I had out my matchbox, opened it at leisure, and, while the whole vaulting blackness seemed to tick and rustle with secret movement, took a half-dozen vestas into my hand, struck one alight, and, by its dim radiance, made my way through the building by the passages we had penetrated in the morning. If at all I shrank or perspired on my spectral journey, I swear I was not conscious of doing so.

"I came to the door of the cabin. All was black and silent.

"'Ah!' I thought, 'the rogue has played me false.'

"Not to subscribe to an uncertainty, I pushed at the door, saw only swimming dead vacancy before me, and tripping at the instant on the sill, stumbled crashing into the room below and slid my length on the floor.

"Now, I must tell you, it was here my heart gave its first somersault. I had fallen, as I say, into a black vault of emptiness; yet, as I rose, bruised and dazed, to my feet, there was the cabin all alight from a great lanthorn that swung from the ceiling, and our friend of the morning seated at a table, with a case-bottle of rum and glasses before him.

"I stared incredulous. Yes, there could be no doubt it was he, and pretty flushed with drink, too, by his appearance.

"'Incandescent light in a West Indiaman!' I muttered; for not otherwise could I account for the sudden illumination. 'What the deuce!'

"'Belay that!' he growled. He seemed to observe me for the first time.

"'A handsome manner of boarding a craft you've got, sir,' said he, glooming at me.

"I was hastening to apologize, but he stopped me coarsely.

"'Oh, curse the long jaw of him! Fill your cheek with that, you Barbary ape, and wag your tail if you can, but burn your tongue.'

"He pointed to the case-bottle with a forefinger that was like a dirty parsnip. What induced me to swallow the insult, and even some of the pungent liquor of

his rude offering? The itch for 'copy' was, no doubt, at the bottom of it.

"I sat down opposite my host, filled and drained a bumper. The fire ran to my brain, so that the whole room seemed to pitch and courtesy.

"'This is an odd fancy of yours,' I said.

"'What is?' said he.

"'This,' I answered, waving my hand around—'this freak of turning a back room into a cabin.'

"He stared at me, and then burst into a malevolent laugh.

"'Back room, by thunder!' said he. 'Why, of course—just a step into the garden where the roses and the buttercupses be agrowing.'

"Now I pricked my ears.

"'Has the night turned foul?' I muttered. 'What a noise the rain makes beating on the window!'

"'It's like to be a foul one for you, at least,' said he. 'But, as for the rain, it's blazing moonlight.'

"I turned to the broad casement in astonishment. My God! what did I see? Oh, my friend, my friend! will you believe me? By the melancholy glow that spread therethrough I saw that the whole room was rising and sinking in rhythmical motion; that the lights of King's Cobb had disappeared, and that in their place was revealed a world of pale and tossing water, the pursuing waves of which leapt and clutched at the glass with innocuous fingers.

"I started to my feet, mad in an instant.

"'Look, look!' I shrieked. 'They follow us—they struggle to get at you, you bloody murderer!'

"They came rising on the crests of the billows; they hurried fast in our wake, tumbling and swaying, their stretched, drowned faces now lifted to the moonlight, now over-washed in the long trenches of water. They were rolled

against the galleries of glass, on which their hair slapped like ribbons of seaweed —a score of ghastly white corpses, with strained black eyes and pointed stiff elbows crookt up in vain for air.

"I was mad, but I knew it all now. This was no house, but the good, ill-fated vessel *Rayo*, once bound for Jamaica, but on the voyage fallen into the hands of the bloody buccaneer, Paul Hardman, and her crew made to walk the plank, and most of her passengers. I knew that the dark scoundrel had boarded and mastered her, and—having first fired and sunk his own sloop—had steered her straight for the Cuban coast, making disposition of what remained of the passengers on the way, and I knew that my great-grandfather had been one of these doomed survivors, and that he had been shot and murdered under orders of the ruffian that now sat before me. All this, as retailed by one who sailed for a season under Hardman to save his skin, is matter of old private history; and of common report was it that the monster buccaneer, after years of successful trading in the ship he had stolen, went into secret and prosperous retirement under an assumed name, and was never heard of more on the high seas. But, it seemed, it was for the great-grandson of one of his victims to play yet a sympathetic part in the grey old tragedy.

"How did this come to me in a moment—or, rather, what was that dream buzzing in my brain of 'proof' and 'copy' and all the tame stagnation of a long delirium of order? I had nothing in common with the latter. In some telepathic way—influenced by these past-dated surroundings—dropped into the very den of this Procrustes of the seas, I was there to re-enact the fearful scene that had found its climax in the brain of my ancestor.

"I rushed to the window, thence back to within a yard of the glowering buccaneer, before whom I stood, with tost arms, wild and menacing.

'"They follow you!' I screamed. 'Passive, relentless, and deadly, they follow in your wake and will not be denied. The strong, the helpless, the coarse and the beautiful—all you have killed and mutilated in your wanton devilry—they are on your heels like a pack of spectre-hounds, and sooner or later they will have you in their cold arms and hale you down to the secret places of terror. Look at Beston, who leads, with a fearful smile on his mouth! Look at that pale girl you tortured, whose hair writhes and lengthens—a swarm of snakes nosing the hull for some open port-hole to enter by! Dog and devil, you are betrayed by your own hideous cruelty!'

"He rose and struck at me blindly; staggered, and found his filthy voice in a shriek of rage.

"'Jorinder! make hell of the galley-fire! Heat some irons red and fetch out a bucket of pitch. We'll learn this dandy galloot his manners!'

"Wrought to the snapping-point of desperation, I sprang at and closed with him; and we went down on the floor together with a heavy crash. I was weaponless, but I would choke and strangle him with my hands. I had him under, my fingers crookt in his throat. His eyeballs slipped forward, like banana ends squeezed from their skins; he could not speak or cry, but he put up one feeble hand and flapped it aimlessly. At that, in the midst of my fury, I glanced above me, and saw a press of dim faces crowding a dusk hatch; and from them a shadowy arm came through, pointing a weapon; and all my soul reeled sick, and I only longed to be left time to destroy the venomous horror beneath me before I passed.

"It was not to be. Something, a physical sensation like the jerk of a hiccup, shook my frame; and immediately the waters of being seemed to burst their dam and flow out peaceably into a valley of rest."

William Tyrwhitt paused, and "Well?" said I.

"You see me here," he said. "I woke this morning, and found myself lying on the floor of that shattered and battered closet, and a starved demon of a cat licking up something from the boards. When I drove her away, there was a patch there like ancient dried blood."

"And how about your head?"

"My head? Why, the bullet seemed stuck in it between the temples; and there I am afraid it is still."

"Just so. Now, William Tyrwhitt, you must take a Turkish, bath and some cooling salts, and then come and tell me all about it again."

"Ah! you don't believe me, I see. I never supposed you would.
Good-night!"

But, when he was gone, I sat ruminating.

"That Captain Iron," I thought, "walked over the great rent in the floor without falling through. Well, well!"

A LAZY ROMANCE

I had slept but two nights at King's Cobb, when I saw distinctly that the novel with which I was to revolutionize society and my own fortunes, and with the purpose of writing which in an unvexed seclusion I had buried myself in this expedient hamlet on the South Coast, was withered in the bud beyond redemption. To this lamentable canker of a seedling hope the eternal harmony of the sea was a principal contributor; but Miss Whiffle confirmed the blight. I had fled from the jangle of a city, and the worries incidental to a life of threepenny sociabilities; and the result was—

I had rooms on the Parade—a suggestive mouthful. But then the Parade is such a modest little affair. The town itself is flung down a steep hill, at the mouth of a verdurous gorge; and lies pitched so far as the very waterside, a picturesque jumble of wall and roof. Its banked edges bristle and stand up in the bight of a vaster bay, with a crooked breakwater, like a bent finger, beckoning passing sails to its harbourage—an invitation which most are coy of accepting. For the attractions of King's Cobb are—comparatively—limited, and its nearest station is a full six miles distant along a switchback road.

Possibly this last fact may have militated against the popularity of King's Cobb as a holiday resort. If so, all the better; and may enterprise for ever languish in the matter. For vulgarity can claim no commoner purpose with fashion than is shown in that destruction of ancient landmarks and double gilding of new which follows the "opening out" of some unsophisticated colony of simple souls.

King's Cobb, if "remote and unfriended," is neither "melancholy" nor "slow"; but it is small, and all its fine little history—for it has had a stirring one—has ruffled itself out on a liliputian platform.

Than this, its insignificance, I desired nothing better. I wished to feel the comparative importance of the individual, which one cannot do in crowded

colonies. I coveted surroundings that should be primitive—an atmosphere in which my thoughts could speak to me coherent. I would be as one in a cave, looking forth on sea, and sky, and the buoyant glory of Nature; unvexed of conventions; untrammelled by social observances; building up my enchanted palace of the imagination against such a background as only the unsullied majesty of sky and ocean could present. For the result was to crown with my name an epoch in literature; and hither in future ages should the pilgrim stand at gaze, murmuring to himself, 'And here he wrote it!'

I laid my head on my pillow, that first night of my stay, with a brimming brain and a heart of high resolve. The two little windows, under a thatched roof, of my sleeping place (*that* lay over my sitting-room, and both looked oceanwards) were open to the inpour of sweet hot air; and only the regular wash of the sea below broke the close stillness of the night. I say this was all; and, with the memory upon me, I could easily, at any time, break the second commandment.

I had thought myself fortunate in my lodgings. They were in a most charming old-world cottage—as I have said on the Parade—and at high tide I could have thrown a biscuit into the sea with merely a lazy jerk. My sitting-room put forth a semi-circular window—like a lighthouse lantern—upon the very pathway, and it had been soothing during the afternoon to look from out this upon the little world of sea and sky and striding cliff that was temporarily mine. From the Parade four feet of stone wall dipped to a second narrow terrace, and this, in its turn, was but a step above a slope of shingle that ran down to the water.

Veritably had I pitched my tent on the wide littoral of rest. So I thought with a smile, as I composed myself for slumber.

I slept, and I woke, and I lay awake for hours. Every vext problem of my life and of the hereafter presented itself to me, and had to be argued out and puzzled over with maddening reiteration. The reason for this was evident and flagrant. It had woven itself into the tissue of my brief unconsciousness, and was now recognised as, ineradicably, part of myself.

The tide was incoming, that was all, and the waves currycombed the beach with a swishing monotony that would have dehumanized an ostler.

This rings like the undue inflation of a little theme. I ask no pity for it, nor do I make apology for my weakness. Men there may be, no doubt, to whom the

unceasing recurrent thump and scream of a coasting tide on shingle speaks, even in sleep, of the bountiful rhythm of Nature. I am not one of them—at least, since I visited King's Cobb. The noise of the waters got into my brain and stayed there. It turned everything else out—sleep, thought, faith, hope, and charity. From that first awakening my skull was a mere globe of stagnant fluid, for any disease germs that listed to propagate in.

Perhaps I was too near the coast-line. The highest appreciations of Nature's thunderous forces are conceived, I believe, in the muffled seclusion of the study. I had heard of still-rooms. I did not quite know what they were; but they seemed to me an indispensable part of seaside lodgings, and for the rest of that night I ardently and almost tearfully longed to be in one.

I came down in the morning jaded and utterly unrefreshed. It was patent that I was in no state to so much as outline the preliminaries of my great undertaking. "Use shall accustom me," I groaned. "I shall scarcely notice it to-night."

And it was at this point that Miss Whiffle walked like a banshee into the disturbed chambers of my life, and completed my demoralization.

I must premise that I am an exquisitively nervous man—one who would accept almost ridiculous impositions if the alternative were a "scene." Strangers, I fancy, are quick to detect the signs of this weakness in me; but none before had ever ventured to take such outrageous advantage of it as did Miss Whiffle, with the completest success.

This lady had secured me for a month. My rights extended over the lantern-windowed sitting-room and the bedroom above it. They were to include, moreover, board of a select quality.

"Select" represented Miss Whiffle's brazen mean of morality; and, indeed, it is an elastic and accommodating word. One, for instance, may select an aged gander for its wisdom, knowing that the youthful gosling is proverbially "green." Miss Whiffle selected the aged gander for me, and I gnawed its sinewy limbs without a protest. On a similar principle she appeared to ransack the town shops for prehistoric joints (the locality was rich in fossils), and vegetables that, like eggs, only grew harder the more they were boiled.

I submitted, of course; and should have done no less by a landlady not so obstreperously constituted. But this terrible person gauged and took me in hand

from the very morning following my arrival.

She came to receive my *orders* after breakfast (tepid chicory and an omelette like a fragment of scorched blanket) with her head wrapped up in a towel. Thus habited she had the effrontery to trust the meal had been to my liking. I gave myself away at once by weakly answering, "Oh, certainly!"

"As to dinner, sir," she said faintly, "it is agreed, no kitching fire in the hevening. That is understood."

I said, "Oh, certainly!" again.

"What I should recommend," she said—and she winced obtrusively at every sixth word—"is an 'arty meal at one, and a light supper at height."

"That will suit me admirably," I said.

She tapped her fingers together indulgently.

"So I thought," she murmured. "Now, what do you fancy, sir?"

"Dear me!" I exclaimed, for her face was horribly contorted. "Are you in pain?"

"Agonies!" said Miss Whiffle.

"Toothache?"

"Neuralgia, sir, for my sins."

"Is there—is there no remedy?"

She was taken with a sharp spasm of laughter, mirthless, but consciously expressive of all the familiar processes of self-effacement under torture.

"I arks nothing but my duty, sir," she said. "That is the myrrh and balsam to a racking 'ed. Not but what I owns to a shrinking like unto death over the thought of what lays before me this very morning. Rest and quiet is needful, but it's little I shall get of either out of a kitching fire in the dog days. And what would you fancy for your dinner, sir?"

"I am sorry," I murmured, "that you should suffer on my account. I suppose there

is nothing cold—"

"Not enough, sir, in all the 'ouse to bait a mousetrap. Nor would I inconvenience you, if not for your own kind suggestion. But potted meats is 'andy and ever sweet, and if I might make bold to propose a tin—"

"Very well. Get me what you like, Miss Whiffle."

"I must arks your pardin, sir. But to walk out in this 'eat, and every rolling pebble under my foot a knife through my 'ed—no, sir. I make bold to claim that consideration for myself."

"Leave it to me, then. I will do my own catering this morning."

Then I added, in the forlorn hope of justifying my moral ineptitude to myself, "If you take my advice, you will lie down."

"And where, sir?" she answered, with a particularly patient smile. "The beds is unmade as yet, sir," she went on, in a suffering decline, "and rumpled sheets is thorns to a bursting brain."

Then she looked meaningly at the sitting-room sofa.

"I made bold to think, if you *'ad* 'appened to been a-going to bathe, the only quiet place in the 'ouse—" she murmured, in semi-detached sentences, and put her hand to her brow.

Five minutes later (I fear no one will credit it) I was outside the house, and Miss Whiffle was installed, towel and all, upon my sofa.

For a moment I really think the outrageous absurdity of the situation did goad me to the tottering point of rebellion. I had not the courage, however, to let myself go, and, as usual, succumbed to the tyranny of circumstances.

It was a blazing morning. The flat sea lay panting on its coasts, as if, for all its liquid sparkle, it were athirst; and the town, under the oven of its hills, burned red-hot, like pottery in a kiln.

I went and bought my tinned meat (a form of preserve quite odious to me) and strolled back disconsolately to the Parade. Occasionally, flitting past the lantern

window, I would steal a side glance into the cool luminosity of my own inaccessible parlour; and there always, reclining at her ease upon my sofa, was the ineradicable presentment of Miss Whiffle.

At one o'clock I ventured to reclaim my own, and sat me down at table, a scorched and glutinous wreck, too overcome with lassitude to tackle the obnoxious meal of my own providing. And to the sofa, already made familiar of that dishonoured towel, I was fain presently to confide the empty problem of my own aching head.

All this was but the forerunner and earnest of a month's long martyrdom. That night the sea had me by the nerves again, and for many nights after; and, although I grew in time to a certain tolerance of the booming monotony, it was the tolerance of a dully resigned, not an indifferent, brain.

When it came to the second morning, not only the novel, but the mere idea of my ever having contemplated writing one, was a thing with me to feebly marvel over. And from that time I set myself down to exist and broil only, doling out a languid interest to the locality, the shimmer of whose baking hill-sides made all life a quivering, glaring phantom of itself.

Miss Whiffle tyrannized over me more or less according to her mood; but she did not usurp my sitting-room again. I used to sit by the hour at the lantern window, in a sort of greasy blankness, like a meat pudding, and vacantly scrutinize the loiterers who passed by on the hot asphalt of the Parade. Screened by the window curtains, I could see and hear without endangering my own privacy; and many were the odd interchanges of speech that fell from strangers unconscious of a listener.

One particularly festering day after dinner I had the excitement of quite a pretty little quarrel for dessert. Miss Whiffle had stuffed me with suet, in meat and pudding, to a point of stupefaction that stopped short only of absolute insensibility; and in this state I took up my usual post at the window, awaiting in swollen vacuity the possibilities of the afternoon.

On the horizon violet-hot sea and sky showed scarce a line of demarcation between them. Nearer in the waves snored stertorously from exhausted lungs, as if the very tide were in extremis. Not a breath of air fanned the pitiless Parade, and the sole accent on life came from a droning, monotonous voice pitched from

somewhere in querulous complaint.

"Frarsty!" it wailed, "Frarsty! I warnt thee!" and again, "I warnt thee, Frarsty! Frarsty! Frar—r—r—rsty!" drawn out in an inconceivable passionlessness of desire again and again, till I felt myself absorbing the ridiculous yearning for an absurd person and inclined to weep hysterical tears at his unresponsiveness.

Then through the suffocating miasma thridded another sound—the whine of a loafing tramp slowly pleading along the house fronts—vainly, too, as it appeared.

"Friends," went his formula, nasal and forcibly spasmodic in the best gull-catcher style, "p'raps you will ask why I, a able-bodied man, are asking for ass—ist—ance in your town. Friends, I answer, becorse I cannot get work and becorse I cannot starve. Any honest work I would be thankful for; but no one will give it to me."

Then followed an elaborate presentation, in singsong verse, of his own undeserved indigence and the brutality of employers, and so the recitation again:—

"Friends, the least ass—ist—ance would be welcome. I am a honest British workman, and employ—ment I cannot ob—tain. You sit in your com—for—ta—ble 'ouses, and I ask you to ass—ist a fellow creature, driven to this for no fault of his own—for many can 'elp one where one cannot 'elp many."

Then he hove into sight—a gastropodous tub of a fellow, with a rascally red eye; and I shrank behind my curtains, for I never court parley with such gentlemen.

He spotted me, of course,—rogues of his feather have a hawk's eye for timid quarry,—and his bloated face appeared at the window.

"Sir—friend," he said, in a confidential, hoarse whisper, "won't you 'elp a starvin' British workman?"

I gave him sixpence, cursing inwardly this my concession to pure timorousness, and the bestial mask of depravity vanished with a grin.

After that I was left to myself, heat and haze alone reigning without; and presently, I think, I must have fallen into a suetty doze, for I was semi-conscious

of voices raised in dispute for a length of time, before I roused to the fact that two people were quarrelling just outside my window.

They were a young man—almost a boy—and a girl of about his own age; and both evidently belonged to the labouring classes.

She was, I took occasion to notice, aggressively pretty in that hot red and black style that finds its warmest admirers in a class cultivated above that to which she belonged; and she was scorning and flouting her slow, perplexed swain with that over-measure of vehemence characteristic of a sex devoid of the sense of proportion.

"Aw!" she was saying, as I came into focus of their dispute. "That's the moral of a mahn, it is. Yer ter work when ye like an' ter play when ye like, and the girls hahs ter sit and dangle their heels fer yer honours' convenience."

"I doan't arlays get my likes, Jenny, or I shud a' met you yesterday."

"Ay, as yer promused."

"We worked ower late pulling the lias, I tell yer. 'Twould 'a' meant half a day's wages garn if I'd com', and theer, my dear, 'ud been reason for another delay in oor getting spliced."

"You're fine and vulgar, upon my word! A little free, too, and a little mistook. I've no mind ter get spliced, as yer carls it, wi' a chap as cannot see's way ter keep tryst."

"Yer doan't mean thart?"

"Doan't I? Yer'll answer fer me in everything, 't seems. But yer've got enough ter answer fer yerself, Jack Curtice. I'm none of the sort ter go or stay at anny mahn's pleasure. There's kerps and dabs in the sea yet, Jack Curtice; and fatter ones ter fish fer, too."

"But yer doan't understand."

"I understand my own vally; and that isn't ter be kep' drarging my toes on the Parade half an a'rtenoon fer a chap as thinks he be better engaged summer else."

"And yer gone ter break wi' me fer thart?"

"Good-bye, Mr. Curtice," she said, and jerked her nose high and walked off.

Now here was an inconsistent jade, and I felt sorry and relieved for the sake of the young fellow.

He stood, after the manner of his kind, amazed and speechless. Man's saving faculty of logic was in him, but tongue-tied; and he could not express his intuitive recognition of the self-contradictory. Such natures frequently make reason articulate through a blow—a rough way of knocking her into shape, but commonly effectual. Jack, however, was evidently a large gentle swain of the dumb-suffering type—one of those unresisting leviathans of good-humour, upon whom a woman loves to vent that passion of the illogical which an antipathetic sex has vainly tried to laugh her out of conceit with.

I peered a little longer, and presently saw Mr. Curtice walk off in a state compound of bewilderment and abject depression.

This was the beginning to me of an interest apart from that which had brought me to King's Cobb. A real nutshell drama had usurped the place of that fictitious one that had as yet failed to mark an epoch by so much as a scratch. I accepted the former as some solace for the intolerable wrong inflicted upon me by the sea and Miss Whiffle.

I happened across my unconscious friends fairly frequently after that my first introduction to them; so often, indeed, that, judged by what followed, it would almost seem as if Fate, desiring record of an incident in the lives of these two, had intentionally worked to discomfit me from a task more engrossing.

Apart, and judged on their natural merits, I took Jack for a good stolid fellow, innately and a little aggravatingly virtuous, and perhaps a trifle more just than generous.

Jenny, I felt, had the spurious brilliancy of that division of her sex that claims as intuition an inability to master the processes of thought, and attributes to this faculty all fortunate conclusions, but none that is faulty. I thought, with some commiseration for him, that at bottom her manner showed some real leaning towards the lover she had discarded—that she felt the need of a pincushion, as it were, into which to stick the little points of her malevolence. I think I was

inclined to be hard on her. I have felt the same antagonism many times towards beauty that was unattainable by me. For she was richly pretty, without doubt.

When in the neighbourhood of one another, however, they were wont to assume an elaborate artificiality of speech and manner in communion with their friends, that was designed with each to point the moral of a complete indifference and forgetfulness. But the girl was by far the better actor; and not only did she play her own part convincingly, but she generally managed to show up in her rival that sense of mortification that it was his fond hope he was effectually concealing.

A fortnight passed; and, lo! there came the end of the lovers' quarrel in all dramatic appropriateness.

By that time the doings of Jack and Jenny had come to be my mind's only refuge from such a vacancy of outlook as I had never before experienced. "All down the coast," that summer, "the languid air did swoon." The earth broiled, and very thought perspired; and Miss Whiffle's voice was like a steam-whistle.

One day, as I was exhaustedly trifling with my meridian meal, and balancing the gratification against the trouble of eating lumpy tapioca pudding, a muffled, rolling thud broke upon my ears, making the window and floor vibrate slightly. It seemed so distant and unimportant that I took no notice of it; and it was only when, ten minutes later, I became aware that certain excited townsfolk were scurrying past outside that I roused slowly to the thought that here was something unusual toward. Then, indeed, a sort of insane *abandon* flashed into life in me, and I leapt to my feet with maniac eyes. Something stirring in King's Cobb! I should have thought nothing less than the last trump could have pricked it out of its accustomed grooves; and that even then it would have slipped back into them with a sluggish sense of grievance after the first flourish.

I left my congealing dish, snatched up my hat, and joined the attenuated chase. It was making in one direction—a point, apparently, to the east of the town. As I sped excited through the narrow and tortuous streets, a great bulge of acrid dust bellied upon me suddenly at a corner; and, turning the latter, I plunged into a perfect fog of the same gritty smoke. In this, phantom figures moved, appeared, and vanished; hoarse cries resounded, and a general air of wild confusion and alarm prevailed. For the moment, I felt as if some history of the town's past were re-enacting, as if a sudden swoop of Frank or Dutchman upon the coast had

called forth all the defensive ardour of its people. There was nothing of gunpowder in the stringent opacity, however; but, rather, a strong suggestion of ancient and disintegrated mortar.

A shape sped by me in the fog, and I managed to stay and question it.

"What is it all?" I asked.

"House fell down," was the breathless answer; "and a poor chap left aloft on the ruins."

Then I grew as insane as the rest of the company. I strode aimlessly to and fro, striving at every coign to pierce with my eyesight the white drift. I pushed back my hat; I gnawed my knuckles; I felt that I could not stay still, yet knew not for what point to make. Almost I felt that in another moment I should screech out—when a breath of sea air caught the skirt of the cloud, and rolled the bulk of it up and away over the house-tops.

Then, at once, was revealed to me the cause and object of all this gaggle, and confusion, and outcry. It was revealed to the crowd, too, that stood about me, and, in the revelation, the noise of its mouthing went off and faded, till a tense silence reigned and the murmur of one's breathing seemed a sacrilege.

I saw before me a ruinous space—a great ragged gap in a lofty block of brick and mortar. This block had evidently, at one time, consisted of two high semi-detached houses, and of these, one lay a monstrous heap of tumbled and shattered *débris*. A ruin, but not quite; for, as the course of a landslip will often tower with great spires and pinnacles of rock and ragged earth that have withstood the pull and onset of the moving hill-side, so here a high sheet of shattered wall, crowned with a cluster of toppling chimneys, stood up stark in the midst of the general overthrow. And there aloft, clinging to the crumbling stack, that might at any moment part, and fling and crush him into the savage ruin below, stood the figure of a solitary man. And the man was my friend of the Parade, Jack Curtice.

I could see and recognise him plainly—even the frantic clutch of his hands and the deadly pallor of his face.

The block—an ancient one—had been, as I afterwards learned, in course of demolition when the catastrophe took place. At the moment the poor fellow had

been alone at his work, and now his destruction seemed a mere matter of seconds.

White dust rose from the heap, like smoke from an extinguished fire; and ever, as we looked, spars and splinters of brick tore away from the high fragment yet standing, and plunged with a thud into the wrack underneath.

It was glaringly evident that not long could elapse before wall and man would come down with a hideous, shattering run. A slip, a wilder clutch at his frail support, might in an instant precipitate the calamity.

Then from the upturned faces of the women cries of pity and anguish broke forth, and men nipped one another's arms and gasped, and knew not what counsel to offer.

"Do summut! do summut!" cried the women; and their mates only shook off their pleadings with a peevish show of callousness, that was merely the dumb anguish of undemonstrativeness. For, while their throats were thick, their practical brains were busy.

Some one suggested a ladder, and in a moment there was an aimless scurrying and turning amongst the women.

"Why don't 'ee stir theeself and hunt for un, Jarge?" panted one that stood near me, twisting hysterically upon a slow youth at her side.

"Shut up, 'Liza!" he answered gruffly; then, with a sort of indrawn gasp—"Look art the wall, lass—look art the wall!"

It was obvious to the least knowing what he meant. To lean so much as a broomstick, it seemed, against that tottering ruin would infallibly complete its destruction.

One foot of the clinging figure high up was seen to move slightly, and a little bomb of mortar span out into the air and burst into dust on a projecting brick. A long shrill sigh broke from the crowd.

Then the male wiseheads came together, and, desperate to snap the chord of impotent suspense, mooted and rejected plan after plan that their sane judgment knew from the first to be impracticable.

At the outset it was plainly impossible for a soul to approach the ruins. Apart from the almost certain mangling such a venture would entail upon the explorer, the least stirring or shifting of the great heap of rubbish flung about the base of the wall would certainly risk the immediate collapse of the latter.

Success, it was evident, must come, if at all, from a distance—but how?

One suggested slinging a rope from window to window of adjacent houses across the path of the broken chimney-stack—a good method of rescue had circumstances lent themselves to it. They did not. On the ruin side a wide space intervened; on the other, the sister house to that which had fallen, and which was also included in the order of demolition, was itself affected by the loss of its support, and leaned in a sinister manner, its party walls bulged and rent towards the scene of devastation.

Nothing short of the great Roc itself could, it seemed, snatch the poor fellow from his death perch.

There came suddenly an ominous silence. Then strode out in front of his fellows —and he moved so close to the ruin that the women whimpered and held one another—an old, rough-bearded chap in stained corduroy.

"Whart's he gone to do?" gasped the sibilant voices.

He hollowed his hands to his mouth, he cleared his hoarse throat two or three times. Only a little trailing screech came from it at first. Then he cursed his weakness, and pulled himself together.

"Jark! Jark Curtus!" he hailed, in an explosive voice.

"Hullo!"

The weak, small response floated down.

"My lard! my poor lard! we've thought oor best, arnd we can do nothun fower 'ee."

Instantly a shrill protest of horror went up from the women. This was not what they had expected.

"What! leave the mis'rable boy to his fate!"

There followed a storm of hisses from them—absolutely unreasonable, of course. The old fellow turned to retire, with hanging head.

At the moment a girl, flushed, blowzed, breathless, broke through the skirt of the mob and barred his retreat.

"Oh!" she panted, shaking her jet-black noddle at him—"here's a parcel o' gor-crows for discussin' help to a Christian marn! What! a score o' wiselings, and not one to hit oot the means and the way?"

She had only just heard, and had run a mile to the rescue of her old lad.

The women caught her enthusiasm, and jeered and cheered formlessly, as their manner is; for each desired for her own voice a separate recognition.

Jenny pushed rudely past the abashed gaffer. She was hatless, and her hair had tumbled abroad. She raised her face, with the eyes shining.

"Jack!" she cried, in a shrill voice—"Jack!"

The little weak response wailed down again.

"Jenny! I'm anigh done."

"Hold on a bit longer, Jack!" she screamed. "Don't move till I tell 'ee.
I'm agone to save thee, Jack!"

Again from the women a rapturous cry broke out. What incompetent noodles appeared their masters in juxtaposition with this fearless, defiant creature.

The man up aloft seemed to shiver in the shock of the outcry; and once more some fragments of mortar rolled from under his feet and bounded into the depths. The girl rounded upon the voicers.

"Hold thee blazing tongues!" she cried in fury. "D'ee warnt to shake un from his perch?"

She turned to the foremost group of men.

"A couple o' long scaffold poles fro' yonder!" she cried hurriedly, "and twenty fathom o' rope!"

Her quick eyes and intelligence had found what she wanted in a builder's yard no great distance away.

"Follow, a dozen o' you!" she cried; and sped off in the direction she had indicated.

Just twelve men, and no more, obeyed her. She was mistress of the situation, and the crowd felt it. They made room for the dominant intellect, and awaited developments, watching, in suppressed excitement and trepidation, the figure—whom exhaustion was slowly mastering—high up above them.

Suddenly a sort of huge L-shaped structure moved down the street, until it stood opposite the ruined house. Then, twisting and rearing itself aloft, it took to itself the form of a lofty, slender gallows.

It was formed of a couple of forty-foot scaffolding poles, stoutly bound and corded together, the base of one to the top of the other, so that they stood at right angles. Five or six feet of the butt of the horizontal one was projected beyond its lashings, and to this three lengths of rope were fastened, and trailed long ends in the dust as the structure was held aloft and pushed and dragged into position.

"Now!" shrieked the girl, red-hot, reliant, never still for a moment; "as marny as can hold to each end there, and swing the blessed boom out towards him!"

Fifty may have responded. They swarmed like ants about the upraised pole, and she drove them into position—a black knot of men hauling on the triple cordage—left, right, and middle, like the ribs of a tent.

They saw her meaning and fell into place with a shout. To hold the projecting pole levered up at that height was a test of weight and muscle, even without their man on the end of it; but there were plenty more to help pull, did their united force waver.

"Jack!" screamed the girl again, in a wildness of excitement. "Only a second longer, Jack! Hold on by your eyelids, and snatch the stick the moment it comes agen thee!"

The horizontal spar pointed down the street. Slowly the men worked round with the ropes, and slowly the point of the pole turned in the direction of the chimney-stack and its forlorn burden. There was room and to spare for the process in the wide gap made by the tumbled house.

The crowd held its breath. Here and there a strangled sob was rent from overstrained lungs; here and there the wailing voice of a baby whined up and subsided.

The pole swung round with the toiling men—neared him on the ruin. He turned his head and saw, shifted his position and staggered. Jenny gave a piercing screech. The men, thinking something was wrong, paused a moment.

On the instant there came a crackling, tearing sound—a heaving roll—a splintering crash and uproar. The man aloft was seen to make a flying leap—or was it only a hurled fragment of the falling chimney?—and white dust rose in a fog once more and blotted out all the tragedy that might be enacting behind it.

A horrible silence succeeded, then a single woman yelled, and her cry was echoed by fifty hoarse voices.

The noise came from those at the ropes. They were straining and tugging, and some of them bobbed up and down like peas on a drum.

"More on ye! more on ye! We've hooked un, and he's got the pull of a sea sarpint!"

The ropes became thick with striving men. The whole street resounded with a medley of cries.

Then the point of the boom swung slowly out of the fog, and there was the rescued man swinging and swaying at the end of it.

They lowered him gradually into the street. But the strain upon them was awful, and he came down with a run the last few yards.

Then they let the angle of the gallows wheel over as it listed, and stood and mopped their hot foreheads, while the crowd rushed for the poor shaky subject of all its turmoil.

I could not get within fifty feet of him; or, I think, I should have given him and Jenny then and there all my fortune.

Later, I made their acquaintance in a casual way, and compromised with my conscience by presenting them with a very pretty tea-service to help them set up house with.

BLACK VENN

I

"George," said Plancine.

"Please say it again," said George.

She dimpled at him and obeyed, with the soft suggestion of accent that was like a tender confidence. Her feet were sunk in Devonshire grass; her name was on the birth register of a little Devonshire sea-town; yet the sun of France was in her veins as surely as his caress was on her lips.

Therefore she said "George" with a sweet dragging sound that greatly fluttered the sensibilities of the person addressed, and not infrequently led them to alight, like Prince Dummling's queen bee, on the very mouth of that honeyed flower of speech.

Now Plancine put her cheek on her George's rough sleeve, and said she,—

"I have a confession to make—about something a little silly. Consequently I have postponed it till now, when it is too dark for you to see my face."

"Never!" he murmured fervently. "A double cataract could not deprive me of that vision. It is printed here, Plancine."

He smacked his chest hard on the left side.

"Yet it sounds hollow, George?"

"Yes," he said. "It is a sandwich-box, an empty one. I would not consign your image to such a deplorable casket. My heart was what I meant. How I hate sandwiches—misers shivering between sheets—a vile gastronomic economy!"

"Poor boy! I will make you little dough-cakes when you go apainting."

"Plancine! Your image here, yes. But your dough-cakes—!"

"Then keep to your sandwiches, sir."

"I must. But the person who invented them was no gentleman!"

"Papa would like to hear you say that."

"Say what?"

"Admit the possibility of any social distinction."

"It is only a question of sandwiches."

"George, must you be a Chartist and believe in Feargus O'Connor?"

"My soul, I cannot go back on my principles, for all that the violets of your eyes have sprouted under the shadow of a venerable family-tree."

"That is very prettily said. You may kiss my thumb-nail with the white spot in it for luck. No, sir. That is presuming. Now I am snug, and you may talk."

"Plancine, I am a son of the people. I hold by my own. No doubt, if I had blue blood to boast of, I should keep a vial of it in a prominent place on the drawing-room mantelpiece. As it is, I confess my desire is to carve for myself a name in art that shall be independent of all adventitious support; to answer to my vocation straight, upright, and manly."

"That is better than nobility—though I have pride in my own. I wish papa thought so. Yet he has both himself."

"The fine soul! For fifty years he has stood square to adversity with a smile on his face. Could I ever achieve that? Already I cry out on poverty; because I want an unencumbered field for work, and—yes, one other trifle."

"One other trifle, George?"

He took Plancine's face between his hands and looked very lovingly into her eyes.

"I think I did the old man too much honour," he said. "You nestling of eighteen —what credit to scout misfortune with such a bird at one's side!"

"Ah! but papa is sixty-nine and the bird but eighteen."

"And eighteen years of heaven are a good education in happiness."

So they coo'd, these two. The June scents of the little garden were wafted all about them. The moon had come up out of the sea, and, finding a trellis of branches over their heads, hung their young brows with coronals of shadowy leaves, like the old dame she was, rummaging in her trinket box for something for her favourites.

In the dimly-luminous parlour (that smelt of folios and warm coffee) of the little dark house in the background, the figure of papa, poring at the table over geological maps, was visible.

Fifty years ago an *émigré*, denounced, proscribed, and escaped from the ruin of a shattered society: here, in '49, a stately, large-boned man, placidly enjoying the consciousness of a serene dignity maintained at the expense of much and prolonged self-effacement—this was papa.

Grey hair, thinning but slightly near the temples; grey moustache and beard pointed *de bouc*; flowered dressing-gown girdled about a heart as simple as a child's—this was papa, papa who grubbed over his ordnance surveys while the young folks outside whispered of the stars.

Right beneath them—the latter—a broad gully of the hills went plunging precipitously, all rolled with leaf and flower, to the undercliff of soft blue lias and the very roof ridges of King's Cobb, whose walls and chimneys, now snowed with light, fretted a scallop of the striding bay that swept the land here like a scythe.

Plancine's village, a lofty appanage or suburb of this little seaboard town at the hill-foot, seemed rather the parent stock from which the other had emancipated itself. For all down the steep slope that fled from Upper to King's Cobb was flung a *débris* of houses that, like the ice-fall of a glacier, would appear to have broken from the main body and gone careering into the valley below.

It was in point of fact, however, but a subordinate hamlet—a hanging garden for

the jaded tourist in the dog days, when his soul stifled in the oven of the sea-level cliffs—an eyrie for Plancine, and for George, the earnest painter, a Paradise before the fall.

And now says George, "We have talked all round your confession, and still I wait to give you absolution."

"I will confess. I read it in one of papa's books that is called the *Talmud*."

"Gracious me! you should be careful. What did you read?"

"That whoever wants to see the souls of the dead—"

"Plancine!"

"—must take finely sifted ashes, and strew them round his bed; and in the morning he will see their foot-tracks, as a cock's. I did it."

"You did?"

"Last night, yes. And what a business I had afterwards sweeping them up!"

"And did you see anything?"

"Something—yes—I think so. But it might have been mice. There are plenty up there."

"Now you are an odd Plancine! What did you want with the ghosts of the dead?"

"I will tell you, you tall man; and you will not abuse my confidence. George, for all your gay independence, you must allow me a little family pride and a little pathetic interest in the fortunes of the dead and gone De Jussacs."

"It is Mademoiselle De Jussac that speaks."

"It is Plancine, who knows so little:—that 'The Terror' would have guillotined her father, a boy of fourteen: that he escaped to Prussia, to Belgium, to England; for six years always a wanderer and a fugitive: that he was wrecked on this dear coast and, penniless, started life anew here on his little accomplishments: that he made out a meagre existence, and late in the order of years (he was fifty) married

an expatriated countrywoman, who died—George, my mother died when I was seventeen months old—and that is where I stop. My good, big father—so lonely, so poor, and so silent! He tells me little. He speaks scantily of the past. But he was a Vicomte and is the last of his line; and I wanted the ghosts to explain to me so much that I have never learned."

The moonlight fell upon her sweet, pale, uplifted face. There were tears in her eyes that glittered like frost.

But George, for all his love, showed a little masculine impatience.

"Reserve is very good," he said; "but we can't all be Lord Burleighs by holding our tongues. There is a sort of silence that is pregnant with nothing."

"George, you cannot mean to insult my father?"

"No, dear. But why does he make such a mystery of his past? I would have mine as clear as a window, for all to look through. Why does he treat me with such suave and courteous opposition—permitting my suit, yet withholding his consent?"

"If you could be less democratic, dear—"

"It is a religion with me—not a brutal indulgence."

"Perhaps he cannot dissociate the two. Then, he admires your genius and commends your courage; but your poor purse hungers, my lover, and he desires riches for his Plancine."

"And Plancine?"

"She will die a grey-haired maid for thee, 'O Richard! O my king!'"

"My sweet—my bird—my wife! Oh, that you could be that now and kiss me on to fortune! I should be double-souled and inspired. A few months, and Madame la Vicomtesse should 'walk in silk attire.' I flame at the picture. Why will your father not yield you gracefully, instead of plying us with that eternal enigma of Black Venn?"

"Because enthusiasm alone may not command wealth," said a deep voice near

them.

Papa had come upon them unobserved. The young man wheeled and charged while his blood was hot.

"Mr. De Jussac, it is a shame to hold me in this unending suspense."

"Is it not better than decided rejection?"

"I have served like Jacob. You cannot doubt my single-hearted devotion?"

"I doubt nothing, my George" (about *his* accent there was no tender compromise)—"I doubt nothing, but that the balance at your bankers' is excessive."

"You would not value Plancine at so much bullion?"

"But yes, my friend; for bullion is the algebraic formula that represents comfort. When Black Venn slips his apron—"

George made a gesture of impatience.

"When Black Venn slips his apron," repeated the father quietly, "I shall be in a position to consider your suit."

"That is tantamount to putting me off altogether. It is ungenerous. It is preposterous. You may or may not be right; but it is simply farcical (Plancine cried, "George!"—but he went on warmly, nevertheless) to make our happiness contingent on the possible tumbling down of a bit of old cliff—an accident that, after all, may never happen."

"Ah!" the quiet, strong voice went on; and in the old eyes turned moonwards one might have fancied one could read a certain pathos of abnegation, or approaching self-sacrifice; "but it will, and shortly, for I prophesy. It was no idle cruelty of mine that first suggested this condition, but a natural reluctance to sign myself back to utter loneliness."

Plancine cried, "Papa! papa!" and sprang into his arms.

"A little patience," said De Jussac, pressing his moustache to the round head,

"and you will honour this weary prophet, I think. I was up on the cliff to-day. The great crack is ever widening. A bowling wind, a loud thunderstorm, and that apron of the hill will tear from its bondage and sink sweltering down the slopes."

In the moment of speaking a tremor seized all his limbs, his eyes glared maniacal, his outstretched arm pointed seawards.

"The guillotine!" he shrieked, "the guillotine!"

In the offing of the bay was a vessel making for the unseen harbour below. It stood up black against the moonlight, its sails and yards presenting some fantastic resemblance to that engine of blood.

George stepped back and hung his head embarrassed. He had more than once been witness of a like seizure. It was the guillotine fright—the fright that had smitten the boy of fourteen, and had pursued the man ever since with periodic attacks of illusion. Anything—a branch, a door-post, a window, would suggest the hateful form during those periods—happily brief—when the poor mind was temporarily unhinged. No doubt, in earlier years, the fits had occurred frequently. Now they were rare, and generally, it seemed, attributable to some strong excitement or emotion.

Plancine knew how to act. She put her hand over the frantic eyes, and led the old man stumbling up the garden path. She was going to sing to him from the little sweet folk-ballads of the old gay France before the trouble came—

"The king would wed his daughter
Over the English sea;
But never across the water
Shall a husband come to me."

Love floated on the freshet of her voice straight into the heart of the young man who stood without.

II

Perhaps at first it had not been the least of the bitterness in M. De Jussac's cup of calamity that his mere pride of name must adjust itself to its altered conditions. That the Vicomte De Jussac should have been expatriated because he declined when called upon to contribute his heart's blood to the red conduit in the Faubourg St. Antoine was certainly an infamy, but one of which the very essence was that unquestioning acknowledgment of his rank. That the land of his adoption should have dubbed him Mr. Jussuks—in stolid unconsciousness, too, of the solecism—was an outrage of a totally different order—an outrage only to be condoned on the score that an impenetrable insular *gaucherie*, and not a malicious impertinence, was responsible for it.

Mr. Jussuks had, however, outlived his sense of the injurious appellation; had outlived much prejudice, the wear of poverty, his memory of many things, and, very early, his scorn of the plebeian processes that to the impecunious are a condition of living at all. He was certainly a man of courageous independence, inasmuch as from the hour of his setting foot in England—and that was at the outset of the century—he had controlled his own little fortunes without a hand to help him over the deep places.

Of his first struggles little is known but this—that for years, turning to account some small knowledge of draughtsmanship he had acquired, he found employment in ladies' academies, of which there was a plenitude at that date in King's Cobb.

That, however, which brought him eventually into a modest prominence—not only in that same beautiful but indifferently known watering-place (upon which he had happened, it would appear, fortuitously), but elsewhere and amongst men of a certain mark—was a discovery—or the practical application of one—which in its result procured him a definite object in life, together with the means to pursue it.

Ammonites, and such small geological fry, were to be found by the thousand in the petrified mud beds of the Cobb region; but it was left to the ingenuity, aided by good fortune, of the foreigner to unearth from the flaking and perishing cliffs of lias some of the earliest and finest specimens of the ichthyo- and plesio-saurus that a past world has yielded to the naturalists.

Out of these the *émigré* made money, and so was enabled to pursue and enlarge upon his researches. Presently he prospered into a competence, married (poor Mademoiselle Belleville, of the Silver Street Academy, who died of typhoid at the end of a couple of summers), and so grew into the kindly old age of the absorbed and gentle naturalist, with his Plancine budding at his side.

What in all these fifty years had he forgotten? His name, his rank, his very origin? Much, no doubt. But that there was one haunting memory that had dwelt with him throughout, his child and her lover were to learn—one memory, and that dreadful recurring illusion of the guillotine.

"When Black Venn slips his apron, I shall be in a position to consider your suit."

Surely that was an odd and enigmatical condition, entirely remote from the subject at issue? Yet from the moment of the first impassioned pleadings of the stricken George, De Jussac had insisted upon it as one from which there should be no appeal.

Now the Black Venn referred to was a great mound of lias that rolled up and inland, in the far sweep of the bay, from the giddy margin of the lower ruin of cliffs. These—mere compressed mountains of mud, blown by the winds and battered by the sea—were in a constant state of yawn and collapse. Yard by yard they yielded to the scourge of Time, and landslides were of common occurrence.

All along the middle slope of Black Venn itself, a wide, deep fissure, dark and impenetrable, had stretched from ages unrecorded. But the eventual opening-out of this crevasse, and the consequent subsidence of the incline, or apron, below it, had been foretold by Mr. De Jussac; and this, in fact, was the condition to which he had alluded.

III

"Mr. De Jussac! do you hear me?"

"I am coming, my friend."

The light shining steadily through a front window of the cottage flickered and shifted. The young man in the rain and storm outside danced with impatience.

Suddenly the door opened, and Plancine's father stood there, candle in hand.

"What is it, my George?"

"The hill, sir—the hill! It's fallen! You were right. You must stand by your word. Black Venn has slipped his apron!"

"My God, no!"

There were despair and exultation in his voice.

"My God, no!" he whispered again, and dived into a cupboard under the stair.

Thence he reappeared with a horn lantern and his old blue cloak.

"Come, then!" he cried. "My hour is upon me!"

"Mr. De Jussac, it will wait till the morning."

"No, no, no! Do you trifle with your destiny? It has happened opportunely, while all are within doors and we have a clear field. How do you know? have you seen? Is it possible to descend to it from above?"

"I passed there less than an hour ago. It is possible, I am sure."

They set off hurriedly through the rain-beaten night. Not a word passed between them as they left the village and struck into the high-valley road that ran past, at a moderate distance, the head of the bay. De Jussac strode rapidly in advance of his companion. His long cloak whirled in the blast; it flogged his gaunt limbs all set to intense action. He seemed uplifted, translated—like one in whom the very article of a life-long faith, or monomania, is about to be justified.

Toiling onward, like driven cattle, they swerved from the road presently and breasted a sharp incline. Their boots squelched on the sodden turf; the wind bore on them heavily.

George saw the dancing lanthorn go up the slope in front of him like a will-o'-the-wisp—stop, and swing steady, heard the loud cry of jubilation that issued from the withered throat.

"It is true! The moment is realized!"

They stood together on the verge of the upper lip of the fissure. It was a cliff now, twenty, thirty feet to its base. The lower ground had fallen like a dead jaw; had slipped—none so great a distance—down the slope leading to the under-cliff, and lay a billowing mass subsided upon itself.

De Jussac would stand not an instant.

"We must climb down—somehow, anyhow!" he cried feverishly. "We must search all along what was once the bottom of the cleft."

"It is a risk, sir. Why not wait till the morning?"

"No, no! now! My God! I demand it. Others may forestall us if we delay. See, my friend, I wish but my own; and what proof of right have I if another should snatch the treasure?"

"The treasure?"

"It is our fortune that lies there—yours, and mine, and the little Plancine's. Do I know what I say? Hurry, hurry, hurry! while my heart does not burst."

He forced the lanthorn into the young man's hands. He was panting and sobbing like a child. Before the other realized his intention, he had flung himself upon his

hands and knees, had slipped over the edge, and was scrambling down the broken wall of lias.

There was nothing for George but to take his own life in hand and humour his venerated elder. He followed with the lanthorn, thinking of Plancine a little, and hoping he should fall on a soft place.

But they got down in safety, breathing hard and extremely dirty. Caution, it is true, reacts very commonly upon itself.

The moment his companion's feet touched bottom, De Jussac snatched the light from his hand, roughly enough to send him off his balance, and went scurrying to and fro along the face of the cliff like a mad thing.

"I cannot find it!" he cried, rushing back after an interval—nervous, in an agony of restlessness—a very pitiable old man.

George spoke up from the ground.

"Find what?" said he, feeling all sopped and dazed.

"The box—the casket! It could never perish. It was of sheet-iron. Look, look, my friend! Your eyes are younger than mine—a box, a foot long, of hard iron!"

"I am sitting upon something hard," said George.

He sprang to his feet and took the lanthorn.

"Bones," said he, peering down. "Some old mastodon, I expect. Is this your treasure?"

De Jussac was glaring. His head drooped lower and lower. His lips were parted, and the line of strong white teeth showed between them. His voice, when he spoke, was quite fearful in its low intensity.

"Bones—yes, and human. Where they lie, the other must be near. Ah, Lacombe, Lacombe; you will yield me my own at last!"

He was shaking a slow finger at the poor remnants—a rib or two, the half of a yellow skull.

Suddenly he was down on his knees, tearing at the black, thick soil, diving into it, tossing it hither and thither.

A pause, a rending exclamation, and he was on his feet again with a scream of ecstasy. An oblong casket, rusty, corroded, but unbroken, was in his hand.

"Now," he whispered, sibilant through the wind, controlling himself, though he was shaking from head to foot, "now to return as we have come. Not a word, not a word till we have this safe in the cottage!"

They found, after some search, a difficult way up. By-and-by they stood once more on the lip of the fall, and paused for breath.

It was at this very instant that De Jussac dropped the box beside him and threw up his hands.

"The guillotine!" he shrieked, and fell headlong into the pit he had just issued from.

IV

The poor bandaged figure; the approaching death; the dog whining softly in the yard.

"I am dying, my little Plancine?"

The girl's forehead was bowed on the homely quilt.

"Nay, cry not, little one! I go very happy. That (he indicated by a motion of his eyelids the fatal box, which, yet unopened, lay on a table by the sunny window) shall repay thee for thy long devotion, for thy poverty, and for thy brave sweetness with the old papa."

"No, no, no!"

"But they are diamonds, Plancine—such diamonds, my bird. They have flashed at Versailles, at the little Trianon. They were honoured to lie on the breast of a beautiful and courageous woman—thine aunt, Plancine; the most noble the Comtesse de la Morne. She gave her wealth, almost her life, for her king—all but her diamonds. It was at Brussels, whither I had escaped from The Terror—I, a weak and desolate boy of but fourteen. I lived with her, in her common, cheap lodging. For five years we made out our friendless and deserted existence in company. In truth, we were an embarrassment, and they looked at us askance. Long after her mind failed her, the memory of her own former beauty dwelt with her; yet she could not comprehend but that it was still a talisman to conjure with. Even to the end she would deck herself and coquet to her glass. But she was good and faithful, Plancine; and, at the last, when she was dying, she gave me this box. 'It contains all that is left to me of my former condition,' she said. 'It shall make thy fortune for thee in England, my nephew, whither thou must journey when poor Dorine is underground.' By that I knew it was her cherished diamonds she bequeathed me. 'They do not want thee here,' she said. 'Thou must

take boat for England when I am gone.'

"But George, my friend!"

The young man was standing sorrowful by the open window. He could have seen the sailing-boats in the bay, the sailing clouds in the sky placidly floating over a world of serene and verdurous loveliness. But his vision was all inward, of the piteous calm, following storm and disaster, in which the dying voice from the bed was like the lapping of little waves.

He came at once and stood over Plancine, not daring to touch her.

"It was not wilfulness, but my great love," said the broken, gentle voice, "that made the condition. All of you I cannot extol, knowing what I have known. But you are an honest gentleman and a true, my brave; and you shall make this dearest a noble husband."

Waveringly George stole his hand towards the bowed head and let it rest there.

From the battered face a smile broke like flowers from a blasted soil.

"Withholding my countenance only as I foresaw the means to enrich you both were approaching my grasp, I waited for the hill to break away that I might recover my casket. It was there—it is here; and now my Plancine shall never know poverty more, or her husband restrict the scope of his so admirable art on the score of necessity."

He saw the eyes questioning what the lips would not ask.

"But how I lost it?" he said. "I took the box; I obeyed her behests. The moment was acute; the times peremptory. I sailed for England, hurriedly and secretly, never to this day having feasted my eyes on what lies within there. With me went Lacombe, Madame's 'runner' in the old days—a stolid Berrichon, who had lived upon her bounty to the end. The rogue! the ingrate! We were wrecked upon this coast; we plunged and came ashore. I know not who were lost or saved; but Lacombe and I clung together and were thrown upon the land, the box still in my grasp. We climbed the cliffs where a stair had been cut; we broke eastwards from the upper slopes and staggered on through the blown darkness. Suddenly Lacombe stopped. The day was faint then on the watery horizon; and in the ghostly light I saw his face and read the murder in it. We were standing on the

verge of the cleft under Black Venn. 'No further!' he whispered. 'You must go down there!' He snatched the box from my hand. In the instant of his doing so, stricken by the death terror, the affection to which I was then much subject seized me. I screamed, 'My God! the guillotine!' Taken by surprise, he started back, staggered, and went down crashing to the fate he had designed for me. I seemed to lie prostrate for hours, while his moans came up fainter and fainter till they ceased. Then I rose and faced life, lonely, friendless, and a beggar."

The restless wandering of his eyes travelled over his daughter's head to the rusty casket by the window.

"It was very well," he whispered. "I thank my God that He has permitted me at the perfect moment to realize my investment in that dead rascal's dishonesty. Have I ever desired wealth save for my little *pouponne* here? And I have sorely tried thee, my George. But the old naturalist had such faith in his prediction. Now—"

His vision was glazing; the muscles of his face were quietly settling to the repose that death only can command.

"Now, I would see the fruit of my prophecy; would see it all hung on the neck, in the hair of my child, that I may die rejoicing. Canst thou force the casket, George?"

The young man turned with a stifled groan. Some tools lay on a shelf hard by. He grasped a chisel and went to his task with shaking hands.

The box was all eaten and corroded. It was a matter of but a few seconds to prise it open. The lid fell back on the table with a rusty clang.

"Ah!" cried the dying man. "What now? Dost thou see them? Quick! quick! to glorify this little head! Are they not exquisite?"

George was gazing down with a dull, vacant feeling at his heart.

"Are they not?" repeated the voice, in terrible excitement.

"They—Mr. De Jussac, they are loveliness itself. Plancine, I will not touch them. You must be the first."

He strode to the kneeling girl; lifted, almost roughly dragged her to her feet.

"Come!" he said; and, supporting her across the room, whispered madly in her ear: "Pretend! For God's sake, pretend!"

Plancine's swimming eyes looked down, looked upon a litter of perished rags of paper, and, lying in the midst of the rubbish, an ancient stained and cockled miniature of a powdered Louis *Seize* coquette.

This was all. This was the treasure the old crazed vanity had thought sufficient to build her nephew his fortune.

The diamonds! Probably these had long before been sacrificed to the armies ineffectively manoeuvring for the destruction of Monsieur "Veto's" enemies.

Plancine lifted her head. Thereafter George never ceased to recall with a glad pride the nobility that had shone in her eyes.

"My papa!" she cried softly, going swiftly to the bed; "they are beautiful as the stars that glittered over the old untroubled France!"

De Jussac sprang up on his pillow.

"The guillotine!" he cried. "The beams break into flowers! The axe is a shaft of light!"

And so the glowing blade descended.

AN EDDY ON THE FLOOR

PART I

OF POLYHISTOR'S NARRATIVE

WRITTEN FOR, BUT NEVER INSERTED IN, THE ——– FAMILY MAGAZINE

The eyes of Polyhistor—as he sat before the fire at night—took in the tawdry surroundings of his lodging-house room with nothing of that apathy of resignation to his personal [Greek: anankê] which of all moods is to Fortune, the goddess of spontaneity, the most antipathetic. Indeed, he felt his wit, like Romeo's, to be of cheveril; and his conviction that it needed only the pull of circumstance to stretch it "from an inch narrow to an ell broad" expressed but the very wooing quality of a constitutional optimism.

Now this inherent optimism is at least a serviceable weapon when it takes the form of self-reliance. It is always at hand in an emergency—a guard of honour to the soul. The loneliness of individual life must learn self-respect from within, not without; and were all creeds to be mixed, that truism should be found their precipitate.

Therefore Polyhistor was content to draw grass-green rep curtains across window-panes sloughed with wintry sleet; to place his feet upon a rug flayed of colour to it dusty sinews; to admit to his close fellowship—and find a familiar comfort in them, too—three separate lithographs of affected babies inviting any canine confidences but the bite one desired for them, and a dismal daguerreotype of his landlady's deceased husband, slowly perishing in pegtops and a yellow fog of despondency, out of which only his boots and a very tall hat frowned insistent, the tabernacles of enduring respectability:—he was content, because he knew these were only incidents in his career—the slums to be first traversed on a

journey before the rounding breadths of open country were reached,—and the station in life he purposed stopping at eventually was the terminus of prosperity, intellectual and material.

With no present good fortune but the capacity for desiring it; with the right to affix a letter or so—like grace after skilly—to his name; with the consciousness that, having overcome theoretical pharmaceutics masterfully, he was now combatting practical dispensing slavishly; with full confidence in his social position (he stood under the shadow of "high connections," like the little winged "Victory" in a conqueror's hand, he chose to think) to help him to eventual distinction, he toasted his toes that sour winter evening and reviewed in comfort an army of prospects.

Also his thoughts reverted indulgently to the incidents and experiences of the previous night.

He had had the pleasure of an invitation to one of those reunions or séances at the house, in a fashionable quarter, of his distant connection, Lady Barbara Grille, whereat it was his hostess's humour to gather together those many birds of alien feather and incongruous habit that will flock from the hedgerows to the least little flattering crumb of attention. And scarce one of them but thinks the simple feast is spread for him alone. And with so cheap a bait may a title lure.

Lady Barbara, to do her justice, trades upon her position only in so far as it shapes itself the straight road to her desires. She is a carpet adventurer—an explorer amongst the nerves of moral sensation, to whom the discovery of an untrodden mental tract is a pure delight, and the more delightful the more ephemeral. She flits from guest to guest, shooting out to each a little proboscis, as it were, and happy if its point touches a speck of honey. She gathers from all, and stores the sweet agglomerate, let us hope, to feed upon it in the winter of her life, when the hive of her busy brain shall be thatched with snow.

That reference to so charming a personality should be in this place a digression is Polyhistor's unhappiness. She affects his narrative only inasmuch as he happened to meet at her house a gentleman who for a time exerted a considerable influence over his fortunes.

* * * * *

Here Polyhistor's narrative must give place to certain editorial marginalia by

Miss Lucy ——, who "runs" the —— Family Magazine:—

"Polyhistor, indeed!" she writes. "The conceit of some people! He seems to take himself for a sort of *Admirable Crichton*, and all because his chance meeting with the gentleman referred to (a very *interesting* person, who is, I understand, reforming our prisons) brought him the offer of an appointment quite beyond his deserts. I was very glad to hear of it, however, and I asked the creature to contribute a paper recording his first impressions of *this notable man*; instead of which he begins with an opinionated rigmarole about himself, and goes on from bad to worse by describing a long conversation he had about prison reform with that horrid, masculine Mrs. C——, whom all the officers call 'Charlie,' and who thinks that for men to grow humane is a sign of their *decadence*. *Of course* I shall 'cut' the whole of their talk together (it is a blessed privilege to be an editor), and jump to the part where *Polyhistor* (!) describes the *notable person's* visit to him, which was due to his (the N.P.'s) having the night before overheard some of the conversation *between those two*."

* * * * *

POLYHISTOR'S NARRATIVE (*continued*).

Now as Polyhistor sat, he humoured his recollection (in the intervals of scribbling verses to the *beaux yeux* of a certain Miss L——) with some of "Charlie's" characteristic last-night utterances.

She had dated man's decadence from the moment when he began to "poor-fellow" irreclaimable savagery on the score of heredity.

She had repudiated the old humbug of sex superiority because she had seen it fall on its face to howl over a trodden worm, with the result that it discovered itself hollow behind, like the elf-maiden.

She had said: "Once you taught us divinely—*argumentum baculinum*," said she; "(for you are the sons of God, you know). But you have since so insisted upon the Rights of Humanity that we have learned ourselves in the phrase, and that the earthy have the best right to precedence on the earth."

And thereupon Charlie had launched into abuse of what she called the latest masculine fad—prison reform, to wit—and a heated discussion between her and

Polyhistor had ensued, in the midst of which she had happened to glance behind her, to find that very notable person who is the subject of this narrative vouchsafing a silent attention to her diatribe. And then—

But at this period to his cogitations Polyhistor's landlady entered with a card, which she presented to his consideration:—

MAJOR JAMES SHRIKE, H.M. PRISON, D——.

All astonishment, Polyhistor bade his visitor up.

He entered briskly, fur-collared, hat in hand, and bowed as he stood on the threshold. He was a very short man—snub-nosed; rusty-whiskered; indubitably and unimpressively a cockney in appearance. He might have walked out of a Cruikshank etching.

Polyhistor was beginning, "May I inquire—" when the other took him up with a vehement frankness that he found engaging at once.

"This is a great intrusion. Will you pardon me? I heard some remarks of yours last night that deeply interested me. I obtained your name and address of our hostess, and took the liberty of—"

"Oh! pray be seated. Say no more. My kinswoman's introduction is all-sufficient. I am happy in having caught your attention in so motley a crowd."

"She doesn't—forgive the impertinence—take herself seriously enough."

"Lady Barbara? Then you've found her out?"

"Ah!—you're not offended?"

"Not in the least."

"Good. It was a motley assemblage, as you say. Yet I'm inclined to think I found my pearl in the oyster. I'm afraid I interrupted—eh?"

"No, no, not at all. Only some idle scribbling. I'd finished."

"You are a poet?"

"Only a lunatic. I haven't taken my degree."

"Ah! it's a noble gift—the gift of song; precious through its rarity."

Polyhistor caught a note of emotion in his visitor's voice, and glanced at him curiously.

"Surely," he thought, "that vulgar, ruddy little face is transfigured."

"But," said the stranger, coming to earth, "I am lingering beside the mark. I must try to justify my solecism in manners by a straight reference to the object of my visit. That is, in the first instance, a matter of business."

"Business!"

"I am a man with a purpose, seeking the hopefullest means to an end. Plainly: if I could procure you the post of resident doctor at D—— gaol, would you be disposed to accept it?"

Polyhistor looked his utter astonishment.

"I can affect no surprise at yours," said the visitor, attentively regarding Polyhistor. "It is perfectly natural. Let me forestall some unnecessary expression of it. My offer seems unaccountable to you, seeing that we never met until last night. But I don't move entirely in the dark. I have ventured in the interval to inform myself as to the details of your career. I was entirely one with much of your expression of opinion as to the treatment of criminals, in which you controverted the crude and unpleasant scepticism of the lady you talked with." (Poor New Charlie!) "Combining the two, I come to the immediate conclusion that you are the man for my purpose."

"You have dumbfounded me. I don't know what to answer. You have views, I know, as to prison treatment. Will you sketch them? Will you talk on, while I try to bring my scattered wits to a focus?"

"Certainly I will. Let me, in the first instance, recall to you a few words of your own. They ran somewhat in this fashion: Is not the man of practical genius the man who is most apt at solving the little problems of resourcefulness in life? Do you remember them?"

"Perhaps I do, in a cruder form."

"They attracted me at once. It is upon such a postulate I base my practice. Their moral is this: To know the antidote the moment the snake bites. That is to have the intuition of divinity. We shall rise to it some day, no doubt, and climb the hither side of the new Olympus. Who knows? Over the crest the spirit of creation may be ours."

Polyhistor nodded, still at sea, and the other went on with a smile:—

"I once knew a world-famous engineer with whom I used to breakfast occasionally. He had a patent egg-boiler on the table, with a little double-sided ladle underneath to hold the spirit. He complained that his egg was always undercooked. I said, 'Why not reverse the ladle so as to bring the deeper cup uppermost?' He was charmed with my perspicacity. The solution had never occurred to him. You remember, too, no doubt, the story of Coleridge and the horse collar. We aim too much at great developments. If we cultivate resourcefulness, the rest will follow. Shall I state my system *in nuce*? It is to encourage this spirit of resourcefulness."

"Surely the habitual criminal has it in a marked degree?"

"Yes; but abnormally developed in a single direction. His one object is to out-manoeuvre in a game of desperate and immoral chances. The tactical spirit in him has none of the higher ambition. It has felt itself in the degree only that stops at defiance."

"That is perfectly true."

"It is half self-conscious of an individuality that instinctively assumes the hopelessness of a recognition by duller intellects. Leaning to resentment through misguided vanity, it falls 'all oblique.' What is the cure for this? I answer, the teaching of a divine egotism. The subject must be led to a pure devotion to self. What he wishes to respect he must be taught to make beautiful and interesting. The policy of sacrifice to others has so long stunted his moral nature because it is an hypocritical policy. We are responsible to ourselves in the first instance; and to argue an eternal system of blind self-sacrifice is to undervalue the fine gift of individuality. In such he sees but an indefensible policy of force applied to the advantage of the community. He is told to be good—not that he may morally profit, but that others may not suffer inconvenience."

Polyhistor was beginning to grasp, through his confusion, a certain clue of meaning in his visitor's rapid utterance. The stranger spoke fluently, but in the dry, positive voice that characterizes men of will.

"Pray go on," Polyhistor said; "I am digesting in silence."

"We must endeavour to lead him to respect of self by showing him what his mind is capable of. I argue on no sectarian, no religious grounds even. Is it possible to make a man's self his most precious possession? Anyhow, I work to that end. A doctor purges before building up with a tonic. I eliminate cant and hypocrisy, and then introduce self-respect. It isn't enough to employ a man's hands only. Initiation in some labour that should prove wholesome and remunerative is a redeeming factor, but it isn't all. His mind must work also, and awaken to its capacities. If it rusts, the body reverts to inhuman instincts."

"May I ask how you—?"

"By intercourse—in my own person or through my officials. I wish to have only those about me who are willing to contribute to my designs, and with whom I can work in absolute harmony. All my officers are chosen to that end. No doubt a dash of constitutional sentimentalism gives colour to my theories. I get it from a human tract in me that circumstances have obliged me to put a hoarding round."

"I begin to gather daylight."

"Quite so. My patients are invited to exchange views with their guardians in a spirit of perfect friendliness; to solve little problems of practical moment; to acquire the pride of self-reliance. We have competitions, such as certain newspapers open to their readers, in a simple form. I draw up the questions myself. The answers give me insight into the mental conditions of the competitors. Upon insight I proceed. I am fortunate in private means, and I am in a position to offer modest prizes to the winners. Whenever such an one is discharged, he finds awaiting him the tools most handy to his vocation. I bid him go forth in no pharisaical spirit, and invite him to communicate with me. I wish the shadow of the gaol to extend no further than the road whereon it lies. Henceforth, we are acquaintances with a common interest at heart. Isn't it monstrous that a state-fixed degree of misconduct should earn a man social ostracism? Parents are generally inclined to rule extra tenderness towards a child

whose peccadilloes have brought him a whipping. For myself, I have no faith in police supervision. Give a culprit his term and have done with it. I find the majority who come back to me are ticket-of-leave men.

"Have I said enough? I offer you the reversion of the post. The present holder of it leaves in a month's time. Please to determine here and at once."

"Very good. I have decided."

"You will accept?"

"Yes."

* * * * *

So far wrote Polyhistor in the bonny days of early manhood—an attempt made in a spasm of enthusiasm inspired in him and humoured by his most engaging Mentor, to record his first impressions of a notable personality not many days after its introduction to him. He has never taken up the tale again until now, when an insistent sense, as of a task left unfinished, compels him to the effort. Over his sweet Mentor the grass lies thick, and flowers of aged stalk bloom perennially, and "Oh, the difference to me!"

To *me*, for it is time to drop the poor conceit, the pseudonym that once served its little purpose to awaken tender derision.

I take up the old and stained manuscript, with its marginalia, that are like the dim call from a far-away voice, and I know that, so I am driven to record the sequel to that gay introduction, it must be in a spirit of sombreness most deadly by contrast. I look at the faded opening words. The fire of the first line of the narrative is long out; the grate is cold some forty years—forty years!—and I think I have been a little chill during all that time. But, though the room rustle with phantoms and menace stalk in the retrospect, I shall acquit my conscience of its burden, refusing to be bullied by the counsel of a destiny that subpoena'd me entirely against my will.

PART II

OF POLYHISTOR'S NARRATIVE

CONTINUED AND FINISHED AFTER A LAPSE OF FORTY YEARS

With my unexpected appointment as doctor to D—— gaol, I seemed to have put on the seven-league boots of success. No doubt it was an extraordinary degree of good fortune, even to one who had looked forward with a broad view of confidence; yet, I think, perhaps on account of the very casual nature of my promotion, I never took the post entirely seriously.

At the same time I was fully bent on justifying my little cockney patron's choice by a resolute subscription to his theories of prison management.

Major James Shrike inspired me with a curious conceit of impertinent respect. In person the very embodiment of that insignificant vulgarity, without extenuating circumstances, which is the type in caricature of the ultimate cockney, he possessed a force of mind and an earnestness of purpose that absolutely redeemed him on close acquaintanceship. I found him all he had stated himself to be, and something more.

He had a noble object always in view—the employment of sane and humanitarian methods in the treatment of redeemable criminals, and he strove towards it with completely untiring devotion. He was of those who never insist beyond the limits of their own understanding, clear-sighted in discipline, frank in relaxation, an altruist in the larger sense.

His undaunted persistence, as I learned, received ample illustration some few years prior to my acquaintance with him, when—his system being experimental rather than mature—a devastating endemic of typhoid in the prison had for the time stultified his efforts. He stuck to his post; but so virulent was the outbreak

that the prison commissioners judged a complete evacuation of the building and overhauling of the drainage to be necessary. As a consequence, for some eighteen months—during thirteen of which the Governor and his household remained sole inmates of the solitary pile (so sluggishly do we redeem our condemned social bog-lands)—the "system" stood still for lack of material to mould. At the end of over a year of stagnation, a contract was accepted and workmen put in, and another five months saw the prison reordered for practical purposes.

The interval of forced inactivity must have sorely tried the patience of the Governor. Practical theorists condemned to rust too often eat out their own hearts. Major Shrike never referred to this period, and, indeed, laboriously snubbed any allusion to it.

He was, I have a shrewd notion, something of an officially petted reformer. Anyhow, to his abolition of the insensate barbarism of crank and treadmill in favour of civilizing methods no opposition was offered. Solitary confinement—a punishment outside all nature to a gregarious race—found no advocate in him. "A man's own suffering mind," he argued, "must be, of all moral food, the most poisonous for him to feed on. Surround a scorpion with fire and he stings himself to death, they say. Throw a diseased soul entirely upon its own resources and moral suicide results."

To sum up: his nature embodied humanity without sentimentalism, firmness without obstinacy, individuality without selfishness; his activity was boundless, his devotion to his system so real as to admit no utilitarian sophistries into his scheme of personal benevolence. Before I had been with him a week, I respected him as I had never respected man before.

* * * * *

One evening (it was during the second month of my appointment) we were sitting in his private study—a dark, comfortable room lined with books. It was an occasion on which a new characteristic of the man was offered to my inspection.

A prisoner of a somewhat unusual type had come in that day—a spiritualistic medium, convicted of imposture. To this person I casually referred.

"May I ask how you propose dealing with the new-comer?"

"On the familiar lines."

"But, surely—here we have a man of superior education, of imagination even?"

"No, no, no! A hawker's opportuneness; that describes it. These fellows would make death itself a vulgarity."

"You've no faith in their—"

"Not a tittle. Heaven forfend! A sheet and a turnip are poetry to their manifestations. It's as crude and sour soil for us to work on as any I know. We'll cart it wholesale."

"I take you—excuse my saying so—for a supremely sceptical man."

"As to what?"

"The supernatural."

There was no answer during a considerable interval. Presently it came, with deliberate insistence:—

"It is a principle with me to oppose bullying. We are here for a definite purpose—his duty plain to any man who wills to read it. There may be disembodied spirits who seek to distress or annoy where they can no longer control. If there are, mine, which is not yet divorced from its means to material action, declines to be influenced by any irresponsible whimsey, emanating from a place whose denizens appear to be actuated by a mere frivolous antagonism to all human order and progress."

"But supposing you, a murderer, to be haunted by the presentment of your victim?"

"I will imagine that to be my case. Well, it makes no difference. My interest is with the great human system, in one of whose veins I am a circulating drop. It is my business to help to keep the system sound, to do my duty without fear or favour. If disease—say a fouled conscience—contaminates me, it is for me to throw off the incubus, not accept it, and transmit the poison. Whatever my lapses of nature, I owe it to the entire system to work for purity in my allotted sphere, and not to allow any microbe bugbear to ride me roughshod, to the detriment of

my fellow drops."

I laughed.

"It should be for you," I said, "to learn to shiver, like the boy in the fairy tale."

"I cannot", he answered, with a peculiar quiet smile; "and yet prisons, above all places, should be haunted."

* * * * *

Very shortly after his arrival I was called to the cell of the medium, F——. He suffered, by his own statement, from severe pains in the head.

I found the man to be nervous, anemic; his manner characterized by a sort of hysterical effrontery.

"Send me to the infirmary", he begged. "This isn't punishment, but torture."

"What are your symptoms?"

"I see things; my case has no comparison with others. To a man of my super-sensitiveness close confinement is mere cruelty."

I made a short examination. He was restless under my hands.

"You'll stay where you are", I said.

He broke out into violent abuse, and I left him.

Later in the day I visited him again. He was then white and sullen; but under his mood I could read real excitement of some sort.

"Now, confess to me, my man", I said, "what do you see?"

He eyed me narrowly, with his lips a little shaky.

"Will you have me moved if I tell you?"

"I can give no promise till I know."

He made up his mind after an interval of silence.

"There's something uncanny in my neighbourhood. Who's confined in the next cell—there, to the left?"

"To my knowledge it's empty."

He shook his head incredulously.

"Very well," I said, "I don't mean to bandy words with you"; and I turned to go.

At that he came after me with a frightened choke.

"Doctor, your mission's a merciful one. I'm not trying to sauce you. For God's sake have me moved! I can see further than most, I tell you!"

The fellow's manner gave me pause. He was patently and beyond the pride of concealment terrified.

"What do you see?" I repeated stubbornly.

"It isn't that I see, but I know. The cell's not empty!"

I stared at him in considerable wonderment.

"I will make inquiries," I said. "You may take that for a promise. If the cell proves empty, you stop where you are."

I noticed that he dropped his hands with a lost gesture as I left him. I was sufficiently moved to accost the warder who awaited me on the spot.

"Johnson," I said, "is that cell—"

"Empty, sir," answered the man sharply and at once.

Before I could respond, F—— came suddenly to the door, which I still held open.

"You lying cur!" he shouted. "You damned lying cur!"

The warder thrust the man back with violence.

"Now you, 49," he said, "dry up, and none of your sauce!" and he banged to the door with a sounding slap, and turned to me with a lowering face. The prisoner inside yelped and stormed at the studded panels.

"That cell's empty, sir," repeated Johnson.

"Will you, as a matter of conscience, let me convince myself? I promised the man."

"No, I can't."

"You can't?"

"No, sir."

"This is a piece of stupid discourtesy. You can have no reason, of course?"

"I can't open it—that's all."

"Oh, Johnson! Then I must go to the fountain-head."

"Very well, sir."

Quite baffled by the man's obstinacy, I said no more, but walked off. If my anger was roused, my curiosity was piqued in proportion.

* * * * *

I had no opportunity of interviewing the Governor all day, but at night I visited him by invitation to play a game of piquet.

He was a man without "incumbrances"—as a severe conservatism designates the *lares* of the cottage—and, at home, lived at his ease and indulged his amusements without comment.

I found him "tasting" his books, with which the room was well lined, and drawing with relish at an excellent cigar in the intervals of the courses.

He nodded to me, and held out an open volume in his left hand.

"Listen to this fellow," he said, tapping the page with his fingers:—

'"The most tolerable sort of Revenge, is for those wrongs which there is no Law to remedy: But then, let a man take heed, the Revenge be such, as there is no law to punish: Else, a man's Enemy, is still before hand, and it is two for one. Some, when they take Revenge, are Desirous the party should know, whence it cometh. This is the more Generous. For the Delight seemeth to be, not so much in doing the Hurt, as in making the Party repent: But Base and Crafty *Cowards are like the Arrow that flyeth in the Dark. Cosmus, Duke of Florence, had a Desperate Saying against Perfidious or Neglecting Friends, as if these wrongs were unpardonable. You shall reade (saith he) that we are commanded to forgive our Enemies: But you never read, that we are commanded, to forgive our Friends*.'

"Is he not a rare fellow?"

"Who?" said I.

"Francis Bacon, who screwed his wit to his philosophy, like a hammer-head to its handle, and knocked a nail in at every blow. How many of our friends round about here would be picking oakum now if they had made a gospel of that quotation?"

"You mean they take no heed that the Law may punish for that for which it gives no remedy?"

"Precisely; and specifically as to revenge. The criminal, from the murderer to the petty pilferer, is actuated solely by the spirit of vengeance—vengeance blind and speechless—towards a system that forces him into a position quite outside his natural instincts."

"As to that, we have left Nature in the thicket. It is hopeless hunting for her now."

"We hear her breathing sometimes, my friend. Otherwise Her Majesty's prison locks would rust. But, I grant you, we have grown so unfamiliar with her that we call her simplest manifestations _super_natural nowadays."

"That reminds me. I visited F—— this afternoon. The man was in a queer way—not foxing, in my opinion. Hysteria, probably."

"Oh! What was the matter with him?"

"The form it took was some absurd prejudice about the next cell—number 47, He swore it was not empty—was quite upset about it—said there was some infernal influence at work in his neighbourhood. Nerves, he finds, I suppose, may revenge themselves on one who has made a habit of playing tricks with them. To satisfy him, I asked Johnson to open the door of the next cell—"

"Well?"

"He refused."

"It is closed by my orders."

"That settles it, of course. The manner of Johnson's refusal was a bit uncivil, but —"

He had been looking at me intently all this time—so intently that I was conscious of a little embarrassment and confusion. His mouth was set like a dash between brackets, and his eyes glistened. Now his features relaxed, and he gave a short high neigh of a laugh.

"My dear fellow, you must make allowances for the rough old lurcher. He was a soldier. He is all cut and measured out to the regimental pattern. With him Major Shrike, like the king, can do no wrong. Did I ever tell you he served under me in India? He did; and, moreover, I saved his life there."

"In an engagement?"

"Worse—from the bite of a snake. It was a mere question of will. I told him to wake and walk, and he did. They had thought him already in rigor mortis; and, as for him—well, his devotion to me since has been single to the last degree."

"That's as it should be."

"To be sure. And he's quite in my confidence. You must pass over the old beggar's churlishness."

I laughed an assent. And then an odd thing happened. As I spoke, I had walked over to a bookcase on the opposite side of the room to that on which my host stood. Near this bookcase hung a mirror—an oblong affair, set in brass *repoussé* work—on the wall; and, happening to glance into it as I approached, I caught

sight of the Major's reflection as he turned his face to follow my movement.

I say "turned his face"—a formal description only. What met my startled gaze was an image of some nameless horror—of features grooved, and battered, and shapeless, as if they had been torn by a wild beast.

I gave a little indrawn gasp and turned about. There stood the Major, plainly himself, with a pleasant smile on his face.

"What's up?" said he.

He spoke abstractedly, pulling at his cigar; and I answered rudely,
"That's a damned bad looking-glass of yours!"

"I didn't know there was anything wrong with it," he said, still abstracted and apart. And, indeed, when by sheer mental effort I forced myself to look again, there stood my companion as he stood in the room.

I gave a tremulous laugh, muttered something or nothing, and fell to examining the books in the case. But my fingers shook a trifle as I aimlessly pulled out one volume after another.

"Am I getting fanciful?" I thought—"I whose business it is to give practical account of every bugbear of the nerves. Bah! My liver must be out of order. A speck of bile in one's eye may look a flying dragon."

I dismissed the folly from my mind, and set myself resolutely to inspecting the books marshalled before me. Roving amongst them, I pulled out, entirely at random, a thin, worn duodecimo, that was thrust well back at a shelf end, as if it shrank from comparison with its prosperous and portly neighbours. Nothing but chance impelled me to the choice; and I don't know to this day what the ragged volume was about. It opened naturally at a marker that lay in it—a folded slip of paper, yellow with age; and glancing at this, a printed name caught my eye.

With some stir of curiosity, I spread the slip out. It was a title-page to a volume, of poems, presumably; and the author was James Shrike.

I uttered an exclamation, and turned, book in hand.

"An author!" I said. "You an author, Major Shrike!"

To my surprise, he snapped round upon me with something like a glare of fury on his face. This the more startled me as I believed I had reason to regard him as a man whose principles of conduct had long disciplined a temper that was naturally hasty enough.

Before I could speak to explain, he had come hurriedly across the room and had rudely snatched the paper out of my hand.

"How did this get—" he began; then in a moment came to himself, and apologized for his ill manners.

"I thought every scrap of the stuff had been destroyed", he said, and tore the page into fragments. "It is an ancient effusion, doctor—perhaps the greatest folly of my life; but it's something of a sore subject with me, and I shall be obliged if you'll not refer to it again."

He courted my forgiveness so frankly that the matter passed without embarrassment; and we had our game and spent a genial evening together. But memory of the queer little scene stuck in my mind, and I could not forbear pondering it fitfully.

Surely here was a new side-light that played upon my friend and superior a little fantastically.

* * * * *

Conscious of a certain vague wonder in my mind, I was traversing the prison, lost in thought, after my sociable evening with the Governor, when the fact that dim light was issuing from the open door of cell number 49 brought me to myself and to a pause in the corridor outside.

Then I saw that something was wrong with the cell's inmate, and that my services were required.

The medium was struggling on the floor, in what looked like an epileptic fit, and Johnson and another warder were holding him from doing an injury to himself.

The younger man welcomed my appearance with relief.

"Heerd him guggling," he said, "and thought as something were up. You come

timely, sir."

More assistance was procured, and I ordered the prisoner's removal to the infirmary. For a minute, before following him, I was left alone with Johnson.

"It came to a climax, then?" I said, looking the man steadily in the face.

"He may be subject to 'em, sir", he replied, evasively.

I walked deliberately up to the closed door of the adjoining cell, which was the last on that side of the corridor. Huddled against the massive end wall, and half imbedded in it, as it seemed, it lay in a certain shadow, and bore every sign of dust and disuse. Looking closely, I saw that the trap in the door was not only firmly bolted, but *screwed into its socket*.

I turned and said to the warder quietly,—

"Is it long since this cell was in use?"

"You're very fond of asking questions", he answered doggedly.

It was evident he would baffle me by impertinence rather than yield a confidence. A queer insistence had seized me—a strange desire to know more about this mysterious chamber. But, for all my curiosity, I flushed at the man's tone.

"You have your orders", I said sternly, "and do well to hold by them. I doubt, nevertheless, if they include impertinence to your superiors."

"I look straight on my duty, sir," he said, a little abashed. "I don't wish to give offence."

He did not, I feel sure. He followed his instinct to throw me off the scent, that was all.

I strode off in a fume, and after attending F—— in the infirmary, went promptly to my own quarters.

I was in an odd frame of mind, and for long tramped my sitting-room to and fro, too restless to go to bed, or, as an alternative, to settle down to a book. There was

a welling up in my heart of some emotion that I could neither trace nor define. It seemed neighbour to terror, neighbour to an intense fainting pity, yet was not distinctly either of these. Indeed, where was cause for one, or the subject of the other? F—— might have endured mental sufferings which it was only human to help to end, yet F—— was a swindling rogue, who, once relieved, merited no further consideration.

It was not on him my sentiments were wasted. Who, then, was responsible for them?

There is a very plain line of demarcation between the legitimate spirit of inquiry and mere apish curiosity. I could recognise it, I have no doubt, as a rule, yet in my then mood, under the influence of a kind of morbid seizure, inquisitiveness took me by the throat. I could not whistle my mind from the chase of a certain graveyard will-o'-the-wisp; and on it went stumbling and floundering through bog and mire, until it fell into a state of collapse, and was useful for nothing else.

I went to bed and to sleep without difficulty, but I was conscious of myself all the time, and of a shadowless horror that seemed to come stealthily out of corners and to bend over and look at me, and to be nothing but a curtain or a hanging coat when I started and stared.

Over and over again this happened, and my temperature rose by leaps, and suddenly I saw that if I failed to assert myself, and promptly, fever would lap me in a consuming fire. Then in a moment I broke into a profuse perspiration, and sank exhausted into delicious unconsciousness.

Morning found me restored to vigour, but still with the maggot of curiosity boring in my brain. It worked there all day, and for many subsequent days, and at last it seemed as if my every faculty were honeycombed with its ramifications. Then "this will not do", I thought, but still the tunnelling process went on.

At first I would not acknowledge to myself what all this mental to-do was about. I was ashamed of my new development, in fact, and nervous, too, in a degree of what it might reveal in the matter of moral degeneration; but gradually, as the curious devil mastered me, I grew into such harmony with it that I could shut my eyes no longer to the true purpose of its insistence. It was the *closed cell* about which my thoughts hovered like crows circling round carrion.

* * * * *

"In the dead waste and middle" of a certain night I awoke with a strange, quick recovery of consciousness. There was the passing of a single expiration, and I had been asleep and was awake. I had gone to bed with no sense of premonition or of resolve in a particular direction; I sat up a monomaniac. It was as if, swelling in the silent hours, the tumour of curiosity had come to a head, and in a moment it was necessary to operate upon it.

I make no excuse for my then condition. I am convinced I was the victim of some undistinguishable force, that I was an agent under the control of the supernatural, if you like. Some thought had been in my mind of late that in my position it was my duty to unriddle the mystery of the closed cell. This was a sop timidly held out to and rejected by my better reason. I sought—and I knew it in my heart—solution of the puzzle, because it was a puzzle with an atmosphere that vitiated my moral fibre. Now, suddenly, I knew I must act, or, by forcing self-control, imperil my mind's stability.

All strung to a sort of exaltation, I rose noiselessly and dressed myself with rapid, nervous hands. My every faculty was focussed upon a solitary point. Without and around there was nothing but shadow and uncertainty. I seemed conscious only of a shaft of light, as it were, traversing the darkness and globing itself in a steady disc of radiance on a lonely door.

Slipping out into the great echoing vault of the prison in stockinged feet, I sped with no hesitation of purpose in the direction of the corridor that was my goal. Surely some resolute Providence guided and encompassed me, for no meeting with the night patrol occurred at any point to embarrass or deter me. Like a ghost myself, I flitted along the stone flags of the passages, hardly waking a murmur from them in my progress.

Without, I knew, a wild and stormy wind thundered on the walls of the prison. Within, where the very atmosphere was self-contained, a cold and solemn peace held like an irrevocable judgment.

I found myself as if in a dream before the sealed door that had for days harassed my waking thoughts. Dim light from a distant gas jet made a patch of yellow upon one of its panels; the rest was buttressed with shadow.

A sense of fear and constriction was upon me as I drew softly from my pocket a screwdriver I had brought with me. It never occurred to me, I swear, that the

quest was no business of mine, and that even now I could withdraw from it, and no one be the wiser. But I was afraid—I was afraid. And there was not even the negative comfort of knowing that the neighbouring cell was tenanted. It gaped like a ghostly garret next door to a deserted house.

What reason had I to be there at all, or, being there, to fear? I can no more explain than tell how it was that I, an impartial follower of my vocation, had allowed myself to be tricked by that in the nerves I had made it my interest to study and combat in others.

My hand that held the tool was cold and wet. The stiff little shriek of the first screw, as it turned at first uneasily in its socket, sent a jarring thrill through me. But I persevered, and it came out readily by-and-by, as did the four or five others that held the trap secure.

Then I paused a moment; and, I confess, the quick pant of fear seemed to come grey from my lips. There were sounds about me—the deep breathing of imprisoned men; and I envied the sleepers their hard-wrung repose.

At last, in one access of determination, I put out my hand, and sliding back the bolt, hurriedly flung open the trap. An acrid whiff of dust assailed my nostrils as I stepped back a pace and stood expectant of anything—or nothing. What did I wish, or dread, or foresee? The complete absurdity of my behaviour was revealed to me in a moment. I could shake off the incubus here and now, and be a sane man again.

I giggled, with an actual ring of self-contempt in my voice, as I made a forward movement to close the aperture. I advanced my face to it, and inhaled the sluggish air that stole forth, and—God in heaven!

I had staggered back with that cry in my throat, when I felt fingers like iron clamps close on my arm and hold it. The grip, more than the face I turned to look upon in my surging terror, was forcibly human.

It was the warder Johnson who had seized me, and my heart bounded as I met the cold fury of his eyes.

"Prying!" he said, in a hoarse, savage whisper. "So you will, will you?
And now let the devil help you!"

It was not this fellow I feared, though his white face was set like a demon's; and in the thick of my terror I made a feeble attempt to assert my authority.

"Let me go!" I muttered. "What! you dare?"

In his frenzy he shook my arm as a terrier shakes a rat, and, like a dog, he held on, daring me to release myself.

For the moment an instinct half-murderous leapt in me. It sank and was overwhelmed in a slough of some more secret emotion.

"Oh!" I whispered, collapsing, as it were, to the man's fury, even pitifully deprecating it. "What is it? What's there? It drew me—something unnameable".

He gave a snapping laugh like a cough. His rage waxed second by second. There was a maniacal suggestiveness in it; and not much longer, it was evident, could he have it under control. I saw it run and congest in his eyes; and, on the instant of its accumulation, he tore at me with a sudden wild strength, and drove me up against the very door of the secret cell.

The action, the necessity of self-defence, restored me to some measure of dignity and sanity.

"Let me go, you ruffian!" I cried, struggling to free myself from his grasp.

It was useless. He held me madly. There was no beating him off: and, so holding me, he managed to produce a single key from one of his pockets, and to slip it with a rusty clang into the lock of the door.

"You dirty, prying civilian!" he panted at me, as he swayed this way and that with the pull of my body. "You shall have your wish, by G—! You want to see inside, do you? Look, then!"

He dashed open the door as he spoke, and pulled me violently into the opening. A great waft of the cold, dank air came at us, and with it—what?

The warder had jerked his dark lantern from his belt, and now—an arm of his still clasped about one of mine—snapped the slide open.

"Where is it?" he muttered, directing the disc of light round and about the floor

of the cell. I ceased struggling. Some counter influence was raising an odd curiosity in me.

"Ah!" he cried, in a stifled voice, "there you are, my friend!"

He was setting the light slowly travelling along the stone flags close by the wall over against us, and now, so guiding it, looked askance at me with a small, greedy smile.

"Follow the light, sir," he whispered jeeringly.

I looked, and saw twirling on the floor, in the patch of radiance cast by the lamp, *a little eddy of dust*, it seemed. This eddy was never still, but went circling in that stagnant place without apparent cause or influence; and, as it circled, it moved slowly on by wall and corner, so that presently in its progress it must reach us where we stood.

Now, draughts will play queer freaks in quiet places, and of this trifling phenomenon I should have taken little note ordinarily. But, I must say at once, that as I gazed upon the odd moving thing my heart seemed to fall in upon itself like a drained artery.

"Johnson!" I cried, "I must get out of this. I don't know what's the matter, or—Why do you hold me? D—n it! man, let me go; let me go, I say!"

As I grappled with him he dropped the lantern with a crash and flung his arms violently about me.

"You don't!" he panted, the muscles of his bent and rigid neck seeming actually to cut into my shoulder-blade. "You don't, by G—! You came of your own accord, and now you shall take your bellyful!"

It was a struggle for life or death, or, worse, for life and reason. But I was young and wiry, and held my own, if I could do little more. Yet there was something to combat beyond the mere brute strength of the man I struggled with, for I fought in an atmosphere of horror unexplainable, and I knew that inch by inch the *thing* on the floor was circling round in our direction.

Suddenly in the breathing darkness I felt it close upon us, gave one mortal yell of fear, and, with a last despairing fury, tore myself from the encircling arms, and

sprang into the corridor without. As I plunged and leapt, the warder clutched at me, missed, caught a foot on the edge of the door, and, as the latter whirled to with a clap, fell heavily at my feet in a fit. Then, as I stood staring down upon him, steps sounded along the corridor and the voices of scared men hurrying up.

* * * * *

Ill and shaken, and, for the time, little in love with life, yet fearing death as I had never dreaded it before, I spent the rest of that horrible night huddled between my crumpled sheets, fearing to look forth, fearing to think, wild only to be far away, to be housed in some green and innocent hamlet, where I might forget the madness and the terror in learning to walk the unvext paths of placid souls. I had not fairly knocked under until alone with my new dread familiar. That unction I could lay to my heart, at least. I had done the manly part by the stricken warder, whom I had attended to his own home, in a row of little tenements that stood south of the prison walls. I had replied to all inquiries with some dignity and spirit, attributing my ruffled condition to an assault on the part of Johnson, when he was already under the shadow of his seizure. I had directed his removal, and grudged him no professional attention that it was in my power to bestow. But afterwards, locked into my room, my whole nervous system broke up like a trodden ant-hill, leaving me conscious of nothing but an aimless scurrying terror and the black swarm of thoughts, so that I verily fancied my reason would give under the strain.

Yet I had more to endure and to triumph over.

Near morning I fell into a troubled sleep, throughout which the drawn twitch of muscle seemed an accent on every word of ill-omen I had ever spelt out of the alphabet of fear. If my body rested, my brain was an open chamber for any toad of ugliness that listed to "sit at squat" in.

Suddenly I woke to the fact that there was a knocking at my door—that there had been for some little time.

I cried, "Come in!" finding a weak restorative in the mere sound of my own human voice; then, remembering the key was turned, bade the visitor wait until I could come to him.

Scrambling, feeling dazed and white-livered, out of bed, I opened the door, and met one of the warders on the threshold. The man looked scared, and his lips, I

noticed, were set in a somewhat boding fashion.

"Can you come at once, sir?" he said. "There's summat wrong with the Governor."

"Wrong? What's the matter with him?"

"Why,"—he looked down, rubbed an imaginary protuberance smooth with his foot, and glanced up at me again with a quick, furtive expression,—"he's got his face set in the grating of 47, and danged if a man Jack of us can get him to move or speak."

I turned away, feeling sick. I hurriedly pulled on coat and trousers, and hurriedly went off with my summoner. Reason was all absorbed in a wildest phantasy of apprehension.

"Who found him?" I muttered, as we sped on.

"Vokins see him go down the corridor about half after eight, sir, and see him give a start like when he noticed the trap open. It's never been so before in my time. Johnson must ha' done it last night, before he were took."

"Yes, yes."

"The man said the Governor went to shut it, it seemed, and to draw his face to'ards the bars in so doin'. Then he see him a-lookin' through, as he thought; but nat'rally it weren't no business of his'n, and he went off about his work. But when he come anigh agen, fifteen minutes later, there were the Governor in the same position; and he got scared over it, and called out to one or two of us."

"Why didn't one of you ask the Major if anything was wrong?"

"Bless you! we did; and no answer. And we pulled him, compatible with discipline, but—"

"But what?"

"He's stuck."

"Stuck!"

"See for yourself, sir. That's all I ask."

I did, a moment later. A little group was collected about the door of cell 47, and the members of it spoke together in whispers, as if they were frightened men. One young fellow, with a face white in patches, as if it had been floured, slid from them as I approached, and accosted me tremulously.

"Don't go anigh, sir. There's something wrong about the place."

I pulled myself together, forcibly beating down the excitement reawakened by the associations of the spot. In the discomfiture of others' nerves I found my own restoration.

"Don't be an ass!" I said, in a determined voice, "There's nothing here that can't be explained. Make way for me, please!"

They parted and let me through, and I saw him. He stood, spruce, frock-coated, dapper, as he always was, with his face pressed against and *into* the grill, and either hand raised and clenched tightly round a bar of the trap. His posture was as of one caught and striving frantically to release himself; yet the narrowness of the interval between the rails precluded so extravagant an idea. He stood quite motionless—taut and on the strain, as it were—and nothing of his face was visible but the back ridges of his jaw-bones, showing white through a bush of red whiskers.

"Major Shrike!" I rapped out, and, allowing myself no hesitation, reached forth my hand and grasped his shoulder. The body vibrated under my touch, but he neither answered nor made sign of hearing me. Then I pulled at him forcibly, and ever with increasing strength. His fingers held like steel braces. He seemed glued to the trap, like Theseus to the rock.

Hastily I peered round, to see if I could get glimpse of his face. I noticed enough to send me back with a little stagger.

"Has none of you got a key to this door?" I asked, reviewing the scared faces about me, than which my own was no less troubled, I feel sure.

"Only the Governor, sir," said the warder who had fetched me. "There's not a man but him amongst us that ever seen this opened."

He was wrong there, I could have told him; but held my tongue, for obvious reasons.

"I want it opened. Will one of you feel in his pockets?"

Not a soul stirred. Even had not sense of discipline precluded, that of a certain inhuman atmosphere made fearful creatures of them all.

"Then," said I, "I must do it myself."

I turned once more to the stiff-strung figure, had actually put hand on it, when an exclamation from Vokins arrested me.

"There's a key—there, sir!" he said—"stickin' out yonder between its feet."

Sure enough there was—Johnson's, no doubt, that had been shot from its socket by the clapping to of the door, and afterwards kicked aside by the warder in his convulsive struggles.

I stooped, only too thankful for the respite, and drew it forth. I had seen it but once before, yet I recognised it at a glance.

Now, I confess, my heart felt ill as I slipped the key into the wards, and a sickness of resentment at the tyranny of Fate in making me its helpless minister surged up in my veins. Once, with my fingers on the iron loop, I paused, and ventured a fearful side glance at the figure whose crookt elbow almost touched my face; then, strung to the high pitch of inevitability, I shot the lock, pushed at the door, and in the act, made a back leap into the corridor.

Scarcely, in doing so, did I look for the totter and collapse outwards of the rigid form. I had expected to see it fall away, face down, into the cell, as its support swung from it. Yet it was, I swear, as if something from within had relaxed its grasp and given the fearful dead man a swingeing push outwards as the door opened.

It went on its back, with a dusty slap on the stone flags, and from all its spectators—me included—came a sudden drawn sound, like wind in a keyhole.

What can I say, or how describe it? A dead thing it was—but the face!

Barred with livid scars where the grating rails had crossed it, the rest seemed to have been worked and kneaded into a mere featureless plate of yellow and expressionless flesh.

And it was this I had seen in the glass!

* * * * *

There was an interval following the experience above narrated, during which a certain personality that had once been mine was effaced or suspended, and I seemed a passive creature, innocent of the least desire of independence. It was not that I was actually ill or actually insane. A merciful Providence set my finer wits slumbering, that was all, leaving me a sufficiency of the grosser faculties that were necessary to the right ordering of my behaviour.

I kept to my room, it is true, and even lay a good deal in bed; but this was more to satisfy the busy scruples of a *locum tenens*—a practitioner of the neighbourhood, who came daily to the prison to officiate in my absence—than to cosset a complaint that in its inactivity was purely negative. I could review what had happened with a calmness as profound as if I had read of it in a book. I could have wished to continue my duties, indeed, had the power of insistence remained to me. But the saner medicus was acute where I had gone blunt, and bade me to the restful course. He was right. I was mentally stunned, and had I not slept off my lethargy, I should have gone mad in an hour—leapt at a bound, probably, from inertia to flaming lunacy.

I remembered everything, but through a fluffy atmosphere, so to speak. It was as if I looked on bygone pictures through ground glass that softened the ugly outlines.

Sometimes I referred to these to my substitute, who was wise to answer me according to my mood; for the truth left me unruffled, whereas an obvious evasion of it would have distressed me.

"Hammond," I said one day, "I have never yet asked you. How did I give my evidence at the inquest?"

"Like a doctor and a sane man."

"That's good. But it was a difficult course to steer. You conducted the post-

mortem. Did any peculiarity in the dead man's face strike you?"

"Nothing but this: that the excessive contraction of the bicipital muscles had brought the features into such forcible contact with the bars as to cause bruising and actual abrasion. He must have been dead some little time when you found him."

"And nothing else? You noticed nothing else in his face—a sort of obliteration of what makes one human, I mean?"

"Oh, dear, no! nothing but the painful constriction that marks any ordinary fatal attack of *angina pectoris*.—There's a rum breach of promise case in the paper to-day. You should read it; it'll make you laugh."

I had no more inclination to laugh than to sigh; but I accepted the change of subject with an equanimity now habitual to me.

* * * * *

One morning I sat up in bed, and knew that consciousness was wide awake in me once more. It had slept, and now rose refreshed, but trembling. Looking back, all in a flutter of new responsibility, along the misty path by way of which I had recently loitered, I shook with an awful thankfulness at sight of the pitfalls I had skirted and escaped—of the demons my witlessness had baffled.

The joy of life was in my heart again, but chastened and made pitiful by experience.

Hammond noticed the change in me directly he entered, and congratulated me upon it.

"Go slow at first, old man," he said. "You've fairly sloughed the old skin; but give the sun time to toughen the new one. Walk in it at present, and be content."

I was, in great measure, and I followed his advice. I got leave of absence, and ran down for a month in the country to a certain house we wot of, where kindly ministration to my convalescence was only one of the many blisses to be put to an account of rosy days.

"*Then did my love awake,*

Most like a lily-flower,
And as the lovely queene of heaven,
So shone shee in her bower."

Ah, me! ah, me! when was it? A year ago, or two-thirds of a lifetime? Alas! "Age with stealing steps hath clawde me with his crowch." And will the yews root in *my* heart, I wonder?

I was well, sane, recovered, when one morning, towards the end of my visit, I received a letter from Hammond, enclosing a packet addressed to me, and jealously sealed and fastened. My friend's communication ran as follows:—

"There died here yesterday afternoon a warder, Johnson—he who had that apoplectic seizure, you will remember, the night before poor Shrike's exit. I attended him to the end, and, being alone with him an hour before the finish, he took the enclosed from under his pillow, and a solemn oath from me that I would forward it direct to you, sealed as you will find it, and permit no other soul to examine or even touch it. I acquit myself of the charge, but, my dear fellow, with an uneasy sense of the responsibility I incur in thus possibly suggesting to you a retrospect of events which you had much best consign to the limbo of the—not unexplainable, but not worth trying to explain. It was patent from what I have gathered that you were in an overstrung and excitable condition at that time, and that your temporary collapse was purely nervous in its character. It seems there was some nonsense abroad in the prison about a certain cell, and that there were fools who thought fit to associate Johnson's attack and the other's death with the opening of that cell's door. I have given the new Governor a tip, and he has stopped all that. We have examined the cell in company, and found it, as one might suppose, a very ordinary chamber. The two men died perfectly natural deaths, and there is the last to be said on the subject. I mention it only from the fear that enclosed may contain some allusion to the rubbish, a perusal of which might check the wholesome convalescence of your thoughts. If you take my advice, you will throw the packet into the fire unread. At least, if you do examine it, postpone the duty till you feel yourself absolutely impervious to any mental trickery, and—bear in mind that you are a worthy member of a particularly matter-of-fact and unemotional profession."

* * * * *

I smiled at the last clause, for I was now in a condition to feel a rather warm

shame over my erst weak-knee'd collapse before a sheet and an illuminated turnip. I took the packet to my bedroom, shut the door, and sat myself down by the open window. The garden lay below me, and the dewy meadows beyond. In the one, bees were busy ruffling the ruddy gillyflowers and April stocks; in the other, the hedge twigs were all frosted with Mary buds, as if Spring had brushed them with the fleece of her wings in passing.

I fetched a sigh of content as I broke the seal of the packet and brought out the enclosure. Somewhere in the garden a little sardonic laugh was clipt to silence. It came from groom or maid, no doubt; yet it thrilled me with an odd feeling of uncanniness, and I shivered slightly.

"Bah!" I said to myself determinedly. "There is a shrewd nip in the wind, for all the show of sunlight;" and I rose, pulled down the window, and resumed my seat.

Then in the closed room, that had become deathly quiet by contrast, I opened and read the dead man's letter.

* * * * *

"Sir,—I hope you will read what I here put down. I lay it on you as a solemn injunction, for I am a dying man, and I know it. And to who is my death due, and the Governor's death, if not to you, for your pryin' and curiosity, as surely as if you had drove a nife through our harts? Therefore, I say, Read this, and take my burden from me, for it has been a burden; and now it is right that you that interfered should have it on your own mortal shoulders. The Major is dead and I am dying, and in the first of my fit it went on in my head like cimbells that the trap was left open, and that if he passed he would look in and *it* would get him. For he knew not fear, neither would he submit to bullying by God or devil.

"Now I will tell you the truth, and Heaven quit you of your responsibility in our destruction.

"There wasn't another man to me like the Governor in all the countries of the world. Once he brought me to life after doctors had given me up for dead; but he willed it, and I lived; and ever afterwards I loved him as a dog loves its master. That was in the Punjab; and I came home to England with him, and was his servant when he got his appointment to the jail here. I tell you he was a proud and fierce man, but under control and tender to those he favoured; and I will tell

you also a strange thing about him. Though he was a soldier and an officer, and strict in discipline as made men fear and admire him, his heart at bottom was all for books, and literature, and such-like gentle crafts. I had his confidence, as a man gives his confidence to his dog, and before me sometimes he unbent as he never would before others. In this way I learnt the bitter sorrow of his life. He had once hoped to be a poet, acknowledged as such before the world. He was by natur' an idelist, as they call it, and God knows what it meant to him to come out of the woods, so to speak, and sweat in the dust of cities; but he did it, for his will was of tempered steel. He buried his dreams in the clouds and came down to earth greatly resolved, but with one undying hate. It is not good to hate as he could, and worse to be hated by such as him; and I will tell you the story, and what it led to.

"It was when he was a subaltern that he made up his mind to the plunge. For years he had placed all his hopes and confidents in a book of verses he had wrote, and added to, and improved during that time. A little encouragement, a little word of praise, was all he looked for, and then he was ready to buckle to again, profitin' by advice, and do better. He put all the love and beauty of his heart into that book, and at last, after doubt, and anguish, and much diffidents, he published it and give it to the world. Sir, it fell what they call still-born from the press. It was like a green leaf flutterin' down in a dead wood. To a proud and hopeful man, bubblin' with music, the pain of neglect, when he come to realize it, was terrible. But nothing was said, and there was nothing to say. In silence he had to endure and suffer.

"But one day, during maneuvers, there came to the camp a grey-faced man, a newspaper correspondent, and young Shrike knocked up a friendship with him. Now how it come about I cannot tell, but so it did that this skip-kennel wormed the lad's sorrow out of him, and his confidents, swore he'd been damnabilly used, and that when he got back he'd crack up the book himself in his own paper. He was a fool for his pains, and a serpent in his cruelty. The notice come out as promised, and, my God! the author was laughed and mocked at from beginning to end. Even confidentses he had given to the creature was twisted to his ridicule, and his very appearance joked over. And the mess got wind of it, and made a rare story for the dog days.

"He bore it like a soldier, and that he became heart and liver from the moment. But he put something to the account of the grey-faced man and locked it up in his breast.

"He come across him again years afterwards in India, and told him very politely that he hadn't forgotten him, and didn't intend to. But he was anigh losin' sight of him there for ever and a day, for the creature took cholera, or what looked like it, and rubbed shoulders with death and the devil before he pulled through. And he come across him again over here, and that was the last of him, as you shall see presently.

"Once, after I knew the Major (he were Captain then), I was a-brushin' his coat, and he stood a long while before the glass. Then he twisted upon me, with a smile on his mouth, and says he,—

"'The dog was right, Johnson: this isn't the face of a poet. I was a presumtious ass, and born to cast up figgers with a pen behind my ear.'

"'Captain,' I says, 'if you was skinned, you'd look like any other man without his. The quality of a soul isn't expressed by a coat.'

"'Well,' he answers, 'my soul's pretty clean-swept, I think, save for one Bluebeard chamber in it that's been kep' locked ever so many years. It's nice and dirty by this time, I expect,' he says. Then the grin comes on his mouth again. 'I'll open it some day,' he says, 'and look. There's something in it about comparing me to a dancing dervish, with the wind in my petticuts. Perhaps I'll get the chance to set somebody else dancing by-and-by.'

"He did, and took it, and the Bluebeard chamber come to be opened in this very jail.

"It was when the system was lying fallow, so to speak, and the prison was deserted. Nobody was there but him and me and the echoes from the empty courts. The contract for restoration hadn't been signed, and for months, and more than a year, we lay idle, nothing bein' done.

"Near the beginnin' of this period, one day comes, for the third time of the Major's seein' him, the grey-faced man. 'Let bygones be bygones,' he says. 'I was a good friend to you, though you didn't know it; and now, I expect, you're in the way to thank me.'

"'I am,' says the Major.

"'Of course,' he answers. 'Where would be your fame and reputation as one of the leadin' prison reformers of the day if you had kep' on in that riming nonsense?'

"'Have you come for my thanks?' says the Governor.

"'I've come,' says the grey-faced man, 'to examine and report upon your system.'

"'For your paper?'

"'Possibly; but to satisfy myself of its efficacy, in the first instance.'

"'You aren't commissioned, then?'

"'No; I come on my own responsibility.'

"'Without consultation with any one?'

"'Absolutely without. I haven't even a wife to advise me,' he says, with a yellow grin. What once passed for cholera had set the bile on his skin like paint, and he had caught a manner of coughing behind his hand like a toast-master.

"'I know,' says the Major, looking him steady in the face, 'that what you say about me and my affairs is sure to be actuated by conscientious motives.'

"'Ah,' he answers. 'You're sore about that review still, I see.'

"'Not at all,' says the Major; 'and, in proof, I invite you to be my guest for the night, and to-morrow I'll show you over the prison and explain my system.'

"The creature cried, 'Done!' and they set to and discussed jail matters in great earnestness. I couldn't guess the Governor's intentions, but, somehow, his manner troubled me. And yet I can remember only one point of his talk. He were always dead against making public show of his birds. 'They're there for reformation, not ignimony,' he'd say. Prisons in the old days were often, with the asylum and the work'us, made the holiday show-places of towns. I've heard of one Justice of the Peace, up North, who, to save himself trouble, used to sign a lot of blank orders for leave to view, so that applicants needn't bother him when they wanted to go over. They've changed all that, and the Governor were instrumental in the change.

"'It's against my rule,' he said that night, 'to exhibit to a stranger without a Government permit; but, seein' the place is empty, and for old remembrance' sake, I'll make an exception in your favour, and you shall learn all I can show you of the inside of a prison.'

"Now this was natural enough; but I was uneasy.

"He treated his guest royally; so much that when we assembled the next mornin' for the inspection, the grey-faced man were shaky as a wet dog. But the Major were all set prim and dry, like the soldier he was.

"We went straight away down corridor B, and at cell 47 we stopped.

"'We will begin our inspection here,' said the Governor. 'Johnson, open the door.'

"I had the keys of the row; fitted in the right one, and pushed open the door.

"'After you, sir,' said the Major; and the creature walked in, and he shut the door on him.

"I think he smelt a rat at once, for he began beating on the wood and calling out to us. But the Major only turned round to me with his face like a stone.

"'Take that key from the bunch,' he said, 'and give it to me.'

"I obeyed, all in a tremble, and he took and put it in his pocket.

"'My God, Major!' I whispered, 'what are you going to do with him?'

"'Silence, sir!' he said. 'How dare you question your superior officer!'

"And the noise inside grew louder.

"The Governor, he listened to it a moment like music; then he unbolted and flung open the trap, and the creature's face came at it like a wild beast's.

"'Sir,' said the Major to it, 'you can't better understand my system than by experiencing it. What an article for your paper you could write already—almost as pungint a one as that in which you ruined the hopes and prospects of a young cockney poet.'

"The man mouthed at the bars. He was half-mad, I think, in that one minute.

"'Let me out!' he screamed. 'This is a hideous joke! Let me out!'

"'When you are quite quiet—deathly quiet,' said the Major, 'you shall come out. Not before;' and he shut the trap in its face very softly.

"'Come, Johnson, march!' he said, and took the lead, and we walked out of the prison.

"I was like to faint, but I dared not disobey, and the man's screeching followed us

all down the empty corridors and halls, until we shut the first great door on it.

"It may have gone on for hours, alone in that awful emptiness. The creature was a reptile, but the thought sickened my heart.

"And from that hour till his death, five months later, he rotted and maddened in his dreadful tomb."

* * * * *

There was more, but I pushed the ghastly confession from me at this point in uncontrollable loathing and terror. Was it possible—possible, that injured vanity could so falsify its victim's every tradition of decency?

"Oh!" I muttered, "what a disease is ambition! Who takes one step towards it puts his foot on Alsirat!"

It was minutes before my shocked nerves were equal to a resumption of the task; but at last I took it up again, with a groan.

* * * * *

"I don't think at first I realized the full mischief the Governor intended to do. At least, I hoped he only meant to give the man a good fright and then let him go. I might have known better. How could he ever release him without ruining himself?

"The next morning he summoned me to attend him. There was a strange new look of triumph in his face, and in his hand he held a heavy hunting-crop. I pray to God he acted in madness, but my duty and obedience was to him.

"'There is sport toward, Johnson,' he said. 'My dervish has got to dance.'

"I followed him quiet. We listened when I opened the jail door, but the place was silent as the grave. But from the cell, when we reached it, came a low, whispering sound.

"The Governor slipped the trap and looked through.

"'All right,' he said, and put the key in the door and flung it open.

"He were sittin' crouched on the ground, and he looked up at us vacant-like. His face were all fallen down, as it were, and his mouth never ceased to shake and whisper.

"The Major shut the door and posted me in a corner. Then he moved to the creature with his whip.

"'Up!' he cried. 'Up, you dervish, and dance to us!' and he brought the thong with a smack across his shoulders.

"The creature leapt under the blow, and then to his feet with a cry, and the Major whipped him till he danced. All round the cell he drove him, lashing and cutting —and again, and many times again, until the poor thing rolled on the floor whimpering and sobbing. I shall have to give an account of this some day. I shall have to whip my master with a red-hot serpent round the blazing furnace of the pit, and I shall do it with agony, because here my love and my obedience was to him.

"When it was finished, he bade me put down food and drink that I had brought with me, and come away with him; and we went, leaving him rolling on the floor of the cell, and shut him alone in the empty prison until we should come again at the same time to-morrow.

"So day by day this went on, and the dancing three or four times a week, until at last the whip could be left behind, for the man would scream and begin to dance at the mere turning of the key in the lock. And he danced for four months, but not the fifth.

"Nobody official came near us all this time. The prison stood lonely as a deserted ruin where dark things have been done.

"Once, with fear and trembling, I asked my master how he would account for the inmate of 47 if he was suddenly called upon by authority to open the cell; and he answered, smiling,—

"I should say it was my mad brother. By his own account, he showed me a brother's love, you know. It would be thought a liberty; but the authorities, I think, would stretch a point for me. But if I got sufficient notice, I should clear out the cell.'

"I asked him how, with my eyes rather than my lips, and he answered me only with a look.

"And all this time he was, outside the prison, living the life of a good man—helping the needy, ministering to the poor. He even entertained occasionally, and had more than one noisy party in his house.

"But the fifth month the creature danced no more. He was a dumb, silent animal then, with matted hair and beard; and when one entered he would only look up at one pitifully, as if he said, 'My long punishment is nearly ended'. How it came that no inquiry was ever made about him I know not, but none ever was. Perhaps he was one of the wandering gentry that nobody ever knows where they are next. He was unmarried, and had apparently not told of his intended journey to a soul.

"And at the last he died in the night. We found him lying stiff and stark in the morning, and scratched with a piece of black crust on a stone of the wall these strange words: 'An Eddy on the Floor'. Just that—nothing else.

"Then the Governor came and looked down, and was silent. Suddenly he caught me by the shoulder.

"'Johnson', he cried, 'if it was to do again, I would do it! I repent of nothing. But he has paid the penalty, and we call quits. May he rest in peace!'

"'Amen!' I answered low. Yet I knew our turn must come for this.

"We buried him in quicklime under the wall where the murderers lie, and I made the cell trim and rubbed out the writing, and the Governor locked all up and took away the key. But he locked in more than he bargained for.

"For months the place was left to itself, and neither of us went anigh 47. Then one day the workmen was to be put in, and the Major he took me round with him for a last examination of the place before they come.

"He hesitated a bit outside a particular cell; but at last he drove in the key and kicked open the door.

"'My God!' he says, 'he's dancing still!'

"My heart was thumpin', I tell you, as I looked over his shoulder. What did we

see? What you well understand, sir; but, for all it was no more than that, we knew as well as if it was shouted in our ears that it was him, dancin'. It went round by the walls and drew towards us, and as it stole near I screamed out, 'An Eddy on the Floor!' and seized and dragged the Major out and clapped to the door behind us.

"'Oh!' I said, 'in another moment it would have had us'.

"He looked at me gloomily.

"'Johnson', he said, 'I'm not to be frighted or coerced. He may dance, but he shall dance alone. Get a screwdriver and some screws and fasten up this trap. No one from this time looks into this cell.'

"I did as he bid me, sweatin'; and I swear all the time I wrought I dreaded a hand would come through the trap and clutch mine.

"On one pretex' or another, from that day till the night you meddled with it, he kep' that cell as close shut as a tomb. And he went his ways, discardin' the past from that time forth. Now and again a over-sensitive prisoner in the next cell would complain of feelin' uncomfortable. If possible, he would be removed to another; if not, he was damd for his fancies. And so it might be goin' on to now, if you hadn't pried and interfered. I don't blame you at this moment, sir. Likely you were an instrument in the hands of Providence; only, as the instrument, you must now take the burden of the truth on your own shoulders. I am a dying man, but I cannot die till I have confessed. Per'aps you may find it in your hart some day to give up a prayer for me—but it must be for the Major as well.

"Your obedient servant,

"J. JOHNSON."

* * * * *

What comment of my own can I append to this wild narrative? Professionally, and apart from personal experiences, I should rule it the composition of an epileptic. That a noted journalist, nameless as he was and is to me, however nomadic in habit, could disappear from human ken, and his fellows rest content to leave him unaccounted for, seems a tax upon credulity so stupendous that I cannot seriously endorse the statement.

Yet, also—there *is* that little matter of my personal experience.

DINAH'S MAMMOTH

On a day early in the summer of the present year Miss Dinah Groom was found lying dead off a field-path of the little obscure Wiltshire village which she had named her "rest and be thankful." At the date of her decease she was not an old woman, though any one marking her white hair and much-furrowed features might have supposed her one. The hair, however, was ample in quantity, the wrinkles rather so many under-scores of energy than evidences of senility; and until the blinds were down over her soul, she had looked into and across the world with a pair of eyes that seemed to reflect the very blue and white of a June sky. No doubt she had thought to breast the hills and sail the seas again in some renaissance of vigour. No doubt her "retreat," like a Roman Catholic's, was designed to be merely temporary. She aped the hermit for the sake of a sojourn in the hermitage. She came to her island of Avalon to be restored of her weary limbs and her blistered feet, so to speak; and there her heart, too weak for her spirit, failed her, and she fell amongst the young budding poppies, and died.

I use the word "heart" literally, and in no sentimental sense. To talk of associations of sentiment in connection with this lady would be misleading. She herself would not have repudiated any responsibility for the term as applied to her; she would have simply failed to understand the term itself. There was no least affectation in this. Throughout her life of sixty years, as I gather, she acted never once upon principle. Impulse and inclination dominated her, and she would indulge many primitive instincts without a thought of conventions. Yet she was not selfish; or, at least, only in the self-contained and self-protective meaning of the word. She was a perfect animal, conscious of her supreme brute caste, shrewd, resourceful, and the plain embodiment of truth.

Miss Groom had, I think, a boundless feeling of fellowship with beauty of whatever description; but no least touch of that sorrow of affection which, in its very humanity, is divine. Her unswerving creed was that woman was the inheritrix of the earth, the reversion of which she had wilfully mortgaged to an

alien race, and that she had bartered her material immortality for a sensation. For man she had no vulgar and jealous contempt; but she feared and shrank from him as something moved by scruples with which she had no sympathy. She understood the world of Nature, and could respond to its bloodless caresses and passions. She could *not* understand the moodiness that dwells upon a grievance, or that would sell its birthright of joy for a pitiful memory.

Yet (and here I must speak with discretion, for I have no sufficient data to go upon) there was that of contradictoriness in her character that, I have reason to believe, she had borne children, and had even been right and particular as to their temporal welfare until such time as, in the nature of things, they were of an age to make shift for themselves. This, virtually, I know to be the case; and that, once quit of the primitive maternal responsibility, she gave no more thought to them than a thrush gives to its fledglings when she has educated them to their first flights, and to the useful knack of cracking a snail on a stone.

My own feeling about Dinah Groom was that she had "thrown back" a long way over the heads of heredity, and that, in her fearlessness, in her undegenerate physique, in the animal regularity of her face and form, she presented to modern days a startling aboriginal type.

Beautiful—save in the sense of symmetry—she can never have been to the ordinary man; inasmuch as she would subscribe to no arbitrary standard of his dictating. She had a high, rich colour; but her complexion must always have been rough, and a pronounced little moustache crossed her upper lip, like an accent to the speech that was too distinct and uncompromising to be melodious. Her every limb and feature, however, was instinct with capability, and, in her presence, one must always be moved to marvel over that indescribable worship of disproportion that has grown to be the religion of a shapely race.

* * * * *

How I first became acquainted with Miss Groom it is unnecessary to explain. During the last three years of her life I was fortunate to be her guest in the Wiltshire retreat for an aggregate of many months. She took a fancy to me—to my solitariness and moroseness, perhaps—and she not only liked to have me with her, but, after a time, she fell into something of a habit of recalling for my benefit certain passages and experiences of her past life. In doing this, there was no suggestion of confidence; and I am breaking no faith in alluding to them. She

was a fine talker—rugged, unpicturesque, but with an instinctive capacity of selection in words. If I quote her, as I wish to do, I cannot reproduce her style; and that, no doubt, would appear bald on paper. But, at least, the matter is all her own.

Now, I must premise that I arrogate to myself no exhibitory rights in this lady. She was familiar with and to many from the foremost ranks of those who "follow knowledge like a sinking star"; those great and restless spirits to whom inaction reads stagnation. To such, in all probability, I tell, in speaking of Dinah Groom, a twice-told tale; and, therefore—inasmuch as I make it my business only to print what is hitherto unrecorded—to them I give the assurance that I do not claim to have "discovered" their friend.

* * * * *

On a wall of the little embowered sitting-room hung a queer picture, by Ernest Griset, of the "Overwhelming of the Mammoths in the Ice." From the first this odd conception had engaged my curiosity,—purely for its fanciful side,—and one evening, in alluding to it, I made the not very profound remark that Imagination had no anatomy.

"They are true beasts," said Dinah.

"They are the mastodons of Cuvier, no doubt; but, then, Cuvier never saw a mastodon, you know."

"But I have; and I tell you Griset and Cuvier are very nearly right."

I expressed no surprise.

"In what were they astray?" I asked.

"The mammoth, as I saw it, had a huge hump—like the steam-chest of an enormous engine—over its shoulders."

"And where did you see it, and when?"

"You are curious to know?"

"Yes, I think I am; and there is a quiet of expectancy abroad. I hear the ghost of

my dead brother walking in the corridor, Dinah; and we are all waiting for you to speak."

She smiled, and said, "Push me over the cigarettes."

She struck a match, kindled the little crackling tube, and threw the light out into the shrubbery. It traced a tiny arc of flame and vanished. The sky was full of the mewing of lost kittens, it seemed. The sound came from innumerable peewits, that fled and circled above the slopes of the darkening meadows below.

"What an uncomfortable seer you are!" she said, "to people this dear human night with your fancies. No doubt, now, you will read between the lines of that bird speech down there?" (She looked at me curiously, but with none of the mournful speculativeness of a soul struggling against the dimness of its own vision.) "To me it is articulate happiness—nothing more abstruse. Yes, I have seen a mastodon; and I was as glad to happen on the beast as a naturalist is glad to find a missing link in a chain of evidence. From the moment, I knew myself quite clearly to be the recovered heir to this abused planet."

She paused a moment, and contracted her brows, as if regretfully and in anger. "If I had only seen it sooner!" she cried, low; "before I had, in my pride of strength, tested the poison that has bewildered the brains of my sisters!"

Her general reserve was her self-armour against the bolts of the Philistines. What worldling would not have read mania in much that was spoken by this sane woman? Yet, indeed, if we were all to find the power to give expression to our inmost thoughts, madness and sanity would have to change places in the order of affairs.

"Once," said Dinah—"and it was when I was a young woman—a man in whom I was interested shipped as passenger on a whaling vessel. This friend was what is called a degenerate. Physically and morally he had yielded his claim to any share in that province of the sun, that his race had conquered and annexed only to find it antipathetic to its needs. Combative effort was grown impossible to him, as in time it will grow to you all. You drop from the world like dead flies from a wall. He could not physic his soul with woods, and groves, and waters. To his perceptions, life was become an abnormality—a disease of which he sickened, as you all must when the last of the fever of aggression has been diluted out of your veins. You die of your triumph, as the bee dies of his own weapon of

offence; and you can find no antidote to the poison in the nature you have inoculated with your own virus.

"This man contemplated self-destruction as the only escape. He had sought distraction of his moral torments in travel long and varied. Many of the most beautiful, of the historically interesting places of the world, he had visited and sojourned in—without avail. His haunting feeling, he said, was that he did not belong to himself. Pursued by this Nemesis, he came home to end it all. He still proclaimed his spiritual independence; but it was immeshed, and he must tear the strands. This was wonderfully perplexing to me, and, out of my curiosity, I must persuade him to make one more attempt. His late efforts, I assured him, were nothing but an endeavour to cure nausea with sweet syrups. He would not get his change out of nature by such pitiful wooing. Let him, rather, emulate, if he could not feel, the spirit of his remote forbears, and rally his nerves to an expedition into the harsh and awful places of the earth. I would accompany him, and watch with and for him, and supply that of the fibre he lacked.

"He consented, and, after some difficulty (for there is an economy of room in whalers), we obtained passage in a vessel and sailed into the unknown. Our life and our food were simple and rugged; but the keen air, the relief from luxury, the novelty and the wonder, wrought upon my companion and renewed him, so that presently I was amused to note in him signs of a moral preening—some smug resumption of that arrogant air of superiority that is a tradition with your race."

Miss Groom here puckered her lips, and breathed a little destructive laugh upon her cigarette ash.

"It did not last long," she said. "We encountered very bad weather, and his nerves again went by the board. That was in the 60th longitude, I think (where whales were still to be found in those years), and seven hundred miles or so to the east of Spitzbergen. On the day—it was in August—that the storm first overtook us, the boats were out in pursuit of a 'right' whale, as, I believe, the men called it—a great bull creature, and piebald like a horse; and I saw the spouting of his breath as if a water main had burst in a London fog. The wind came in a sudden charge from the northwest, and the whale dived with a harpoon in its back; and in the confusion a reel fouled, and one of the boats was whipt under in a moment—half a mile down, perhaps—and its crew drawn with it, and their lungs, full of air, burst like bubbles. We had no time to think of them. We got the other boat-load on board, and then the gale sent us crashing down the slopes of

the sea. I have no knowledge of how long we were curst of the tempest and the sport of its ravings. I only know that when it released us at last, we had been hurled a thousand miles eastwards. The long interval was all a hellish jangle in which time seemed obliterated. Sometimes we saw the sun—a furious red globe; and we seemed to stand still while it raced down the sky and ricocheted over the furthermost waves like a red-hot cannon ball. Sometimes in pitch darkness the wild sense of flight and expectation was an ecstasy. But through all my friend lay in a half-delirious stupor.

"At length a morning broke, full of icy scud, but the sea panting and exhausted of its rage. As a child catches its breath after a storm of tears, so it would heave up suddenly, and vibrate, and sink; and we rocked upon it, a ruined hulk. We were off a flat, vacant shore—if shore you could call it—whose margin, for miles inland, it seemed, undulated with the lifting of the swell. It was treeless desolation manifest; and on our sea side, as far as the eye could reach, the water bobbed and winked with countless spars of ice.

"I will tell you at once, my friend,—we were brought to opposite an inhuman swamp on the coast of Siberia, fifty miles or more to the west of North-east Cape; and there what remained of the crew made shift to cast anchor; and for a day and night the ragged ship curtsied to the land, like a blind beggar to an empty street, and we only dozed in our corners and wondered at the silence.

"By-and-by the men made a raft, and that took us all ashore. There was something like a definite coast-line, then; but for long before we touched it the undersides of the planks were scraping and hissing over vegetation. This was the winter fur of the land—thick, coarse tundra moss; and on that we pitched a camp, and on that we remained for long weeks while the ship was mending. It was a weird, lonely time. Once or twice strange, wandering creatures came our way—little, belted men, with hairless faces, who rode up on strong horses, and liked to exhibit their skilful management of them. They talked to us in their chirpy jargon (Toongus, I think it was called); but jargon it must needs remain to us.

"Well, we made a patch of the hulk, and we shipped in her again. We were fortunate to be able to do that, for, with every stiffish wind blowing inshore, we had feared she would drag her moorings and ground immovably on the swamps. The land, indeed, was so flat and low that, whenever the sea rose at all, it threshed the very plains and crackled in the moss; and we were glad, despite the

risk, to leave so lifeless a place."

Dinah paused to light another cigarette, and to inhale the ecstasy of the first puff or so before she continued. Up through the still evening, from a curve of the main road that crooked an elbow to her front garden, came what sounded like the purring of a great cat—the wind in the telegraph wires.

"And I am now to tell you," she said, "about the mastodon?"

"As you please," I answered.

"I do please; for why should I keep it to myself? It makes no difference; only I warn you, if you quote me, you will be writ down a fool or a maniac. This relation lacks witnesses, for the whaler—that I subsequently quitted for another homing vessel—was never heard of in port any more."

She looked at me with some serious scrutiny before she went on.

"For these regions, it had been an extraordinarily hot summer—phenomenally hot, I understand; and to this—to the melting and breaking away of the ice from hitherto century-locked fastnesses, the captain attributed the wonderful experience that befell us. The sea was strewn with blocks and bergs, all hurrying onwards in the strong currents, as if in haste to escape the pursuing demon of frost that should re-fetter them; and their multitude kept the steersman's arms spinning till the man would fall half-fainting over the spoke-handles.

"Now, one morning early in September, a dense bright fog dropped suddenly upon the waters. We were making what sail we could—with our crippled spars and stunted trees of masts—and this it were useless to shorten, and so invite a rearward bombardment from the chasing hummocks. So we kept our course by the compass, and trailed on through a blind mist while fear drummed in our throats. The demoralization of my friend was by this time complete. For myself, I seldom had a thought but that Nature would sheathe her claws when she played with me.

"'This cannot last long!' said the captain.

"The words were on his lips when we struck with a noise like the splintering of glass. We were all thrown down, and my companion screamed like a mad thing. The captain rose and ran to the bows; and in a moment he came back and his

beard was shaking.

"'God save us!' he cried, 'and fetch aft the rum!'

"There you have man in his invincible moods. They drank till they were in a condition to face death; and then they found that our situation was rather improved than otherwise by the collision. For—so it appeared—we had run full tilt for a perpendicular fissure in a huge block, and into that our bows were firmly wedged, the nature of the impact distributing the shock, and the berg itself carrying us along with it and protecting us.

"Now the dipping motion of the vessel was exchanged for a heavy regular wash along its stern quarters; for the bows were so much raised as that I felt a little strain on my knees as I went forward to satisfy my curiosity with a view of the icy mass into which we were penetrated. I waited, indeed, until the crew were come aft again from looking, and my friend crept timidly at my shoulder; but when we reached the stem, there was one of the hands, a little soberer than his fellows, sprawled over the bulwarks, and staring with all his eyes into the green lift of the wall against him.

"'Is it a mermaid you see, Killigrew?' I asked.

"The man shifted his gaze to me slowly and solemnly.

"'Nowt, nowt,' said he; 'but a turble monster, like a pram stuck in jelly.'

"I laughed, and went to his side. The fog, as I have said, was dense and bright, and one could see into it a little way, as into a milky white agate. But now and again a film of it would pull thin, and then sunlight came through and made a dim radiance of the ice.

"'I can make out nothing,' I said.

"He cocked an eye and leered up at me. 'Look steady and sober,' he said, 'and you'll make en owut like as in a glass darkly.'

"I gave a little gasp and my friend a cry before the words were issued from the man's mouth. Drawn by some current of air, the fog at the moment blew out of the cleft, like smoke from a chimney; and there, before our gaze, was a great curved tusk coming up through the ice and inside it.

"Now I clapped my hands in an agony, lest the fog should close in again, and the vision fade before my eyes; for, following the sweep of the tusk, I was aware of the phantom presentment of some monster creature lying imbedded within the ice, its mighty carcase prostrate as it had fallen; the conformation of its enormous forehead presented directly to our gaze. Its little toffee-ball eyes—little proportionately, that is to say—squinted at us, it seemed, through half-closed lids, and a huge, hairy trunk lay curled, like the proboscis of a dead moth, between its tree-like fore-legs. Away beyond, the great red-brown drum of its hide bellied upward on ribs as thick as a Dutch galliot's, and sprouting from its shoulders was the hump I have mentioned, but here, from its position, sprawled abroad and lying over in a shapeless mass.

"There was something else—horribly nauseating but for its strangeness. The brute had been partly disembowelled, as there was ample evidence to show, for the ice had preserved all.

"Suddenly my companion gave a high nervous shriek.

"'Look!' he cried—'the hand! the hand sticking out of the side!'

"I saw in a moment; turned, and called excitedly to the captain. He—all the crew—came tumbling forward up the slippery deck. I seized him by the shoulder.

"'Do you see?' I screamed—'the human hand beckoning to us from that great body!'

"He gazed stupidly, swaying where he stood.

"'One o' them bloomin' pre-hadymite cows!' he muttered; 'caught in the cold nip, by thunder! and some unfortnit crept into her for warmth.'

"I believed the creature's rude intuition had flown true.

"'Cannot you get at it?' I gasped.

"He stared at me. All in an instant a little paltry demon of avarice blinked out of his eye-holes.

"'Why,' he said slowly, 'who knows but it mayn't be a gal a-jingling from top to toe with gold curtain rings!'

"He was a furious dare-devil immediately, and quick, and savage, and peremptory. His spirit entered into his men. They went over the side with pikes and axes, and, scrambling for any foothold, set to work on the ice like maniacs. In the lust of cupidity they did not even think how they wrought against their own safety and that of the ship.

"The point of the uppermost tusk came to within a foot of the ice-surface. This they soon reached, and, prising frantically with crowbars, flaked off and rolled away half-ton blocks of the superincumbent mass. I need not detail the fierce process. In half an hour they had laid bare a great segment of that part of the trunk whence the hand protruded, and then they paused, and at a word flung down their tools.

"I was leaning over the bulwarks watching them. I could contain my excitement no longer.

"'Come,' I said to my friend, 'help me down, for I must go.'

"He climbed over, trembling, and assisted me to a standing on the ice. We scrambled along the track of *débris* left by the crew. At the moment half a dozen of the latter were rolling back a broad flap of the hide, in which they had found a long L-shaped rent revealed. Then a hoarse cry broke from them, and I stumbled forward and looked down, and saw.

"They lay beneath the mighty ribs as in a cage, of which the intercostal spaces were a foot in width, and the bars of a strength to maintain the enormous pressure of that which had surrounded and entombed them; they lay in one close group, their naked limbs smeared with the stain of their prison—a man, a woman, and a tiny child. From their faces, and their unfallen flesh, they might have been sleeping; but they were not; they were come down to us, a transfixture of death—prehistoric people in a prehistoric brute, and their eyes—their eyes!"

Dinah's voice trailed off into silence. Some expression that I could not interpret was on her face. There was regret in it, but nothing of pathos or mysticism. Suddenly she breathed out a great sigh and resumed her narrative.

"You will want to know how they looked, these lifeless survivors of a remote race from a remote time? I will try to tell you. The men hacked away the ribs with their axes, and laid bare the group lying in the hollow scooped out of the fallen beast. They were little people, and the man, according to your modern

canons of taste, was by far the most beautiful of the three. He sat erect, with one uplifted arm projected through the ribs; as if, surprised by the frost-stroke, he had started to escape, and had been petrified in the act. His face, wondering and delicate as a baby's, was hairless; and his head only a pretty infantile down covered—a curling floss as radiant as spun glass. His wide-open eyes glinted yet with a hyacinth blue, and it was difficult to realize that they were dead and vacant.

"The woman was of coarser mould, ruddy, vigorous, brown-haired and eyed. She looked the very hamadryad of some blossoming tree, a sweet capricious daughter of the blameless earth. Everything luxuriated in her—colour, hair, and lusty flesh; and the child she held to her bosom with a manner that indescribably commingled contempt, and resentment, and a passion of proprietorship.

"This baby—joining the prominent characteristics of the two—was the oddest little mortal I have ever seen. What did its expression convey to me? 'I am fairly caught, and must brazen out the situation!' There! that was what it was; I cannot put it more lucidly. Only the thing's wee face was animal conscious for the first time of itself, and inclined to rejoice in that primitive energy of knowledge.

"Now, my friend, I must tell you how the sight operated upon me and upon my companion. For myself, I can only say that, looking upon that fine, independent fore-mother of my race, I felt the sun in my veins and the winy fragrance of antique woods and pastures. I laughed; I clapped my hands; I danced on the ice-rubbish, so that they thought me mad. But, for the other—the man—he was in a different plight. He was transfigured; his nervousness was gone in a flash. He cast himself down upon his knees, and gazed and gazed, his hands clasped, upon that sleek, mild progenitor of his, that pure image of gentle self-containment, whose very meekness suggested an indomitable will.

"Suddenly he, my friend, cried out: 'This is one caught in the process of materialization! It is not flesh; my God, no!'

"It seemed, indeed, as if it were as he said. I stopped in my capering and looked down. The tarry hinds standing by grinned and jeered.

"On the instant there came a splintering snap, and the floe rocked and curtsied.

"'Back!' yelled the captain. 'She's breaking through by the head!'

"He shrieked of the ship. She was clearing herself, had already shaken her prow free of the ice.

"There was a wild scamper for safety. I was carried with the throng. It was not until I was hauled on board once more that I thought of my friend. He still knelt where we had fled from him, a wrapt, strange expression on his face.

"'Come back!' I screamed. 'You will be lost!'

"Now at that he turned his head and looked at me; but he never moved, and his voice came to me quiet and exultant.

"'Lost!' he said, 'ay, for forty-three years: and here, here I find myself!'

"We dipped, and the wash of the water came about our bows. The block of ice swerved, made a sluggish half-pirouette and dropped astern.

"'Come!' I shrieked again faintly.

"With the echo of my cry he was a phantom, a blot, had vanished in the rearward fog; and thereout a little joyous laugh came to me.

"And that was a queer good-bye for ever, wasn't it?"

THE BLACK REAPER

PROEM

Heaven's Nursery

"Sinner, sinner, whence do you come?"
"From the bitter earth they called my home."

"Sinner, sinner, why do you wait?"
"I fear to knock at the golden gate:

"My crimes were heavy; my doom is sure,
And I dread the anguish I must endure."

"Had you ever a child down there?"
"One—but it died, and I learnt despair."

"Here you will find it, behind the gate."
"God forbid! for it felt my hate—

"Shrunk in the frost of my cruelties.
More than the Judge's I fear its eyes."

"Hist! At the keyhole place your ear.
Sinner, what is the sound you hear?

"Is it ten thousand babes at play?
Heaven's nursery lies that way.

"Through it to judgment all must fare

It was God's pity placed it there."

The gate swung open; the sinner past;
Little hands caught and held him fast.

"While you wait the call of the Nameless One,
There's time for a game at 'Touch-and-Run'!"

He played with them there in that shining place,
With the hot tears scorching his furrowed face—

Played, till the voice rang dread and clear:
"Where is the sinner? I wait him here!"

Then shouting with laughter one and all
They pushed him on to the Judgment Hall;

Stood by him; swarmed to the daïs steps,
A jumble of gleeful eyes and lips.

The Judge leaned stern from His Judgment Throne:
"I gave thee—where is thy littte one?"

Wildly the culprit caught his breath:
"Lord, I have sinned. My doom be death."

He hung his head with a broken sob.
There sprang a child from the rosy mob—

"Daddy!" it cried, with a joyful shriek;
Leapt to his arms and kissed his cheek.

But he put it from him with bursting sighs,
And looked on the Judge with swimming eyes;

Stood abashed in his bitter shame,
Waiting the sentence that never came.

From the Throne spoke out the thundered Word:
"This be thy doom!" No more he heard,

For a chime of laughter from baby throats
  Took up those crashing organ notes,

Mixed with; silenced them; made them void—
  And the children's laughter was unalloyed,

"This be thy doom," came a little squeak,
  "To play with us here at 'hide-and-seek'!"

Thrice did the Judge essay to frown;
  Thrice did the children laugh Him down—

Till at the last, He caught and kissed
  The maddest of all and the merriest;

Turned to the sinner, with smiling face:
  "These render futile the Judgment Place.

"Sunniest rascals, imp and elf,
  Who think they can better the Judge Himself.

"Sinner—whatever thy sins may be,
  Theirs is the sentence—go from Me!"

THE BLACK REAPER

TAKEN FROM THE Q—— REGISTER OF LOCAL EVENTS, AS COMPILED FROM AUTHENTIC NARRATIVES

I

Now I am to tell you of a thing that befell in the year 1665 of the Great Plague, when the hearts of certain amongst men, grown callous in wickedness upon that rebound from an inhuman austerity, were opened to the vision of a terror that moved and spoke not in the silent places of the fields. Forasmuch as, however, in the recovery from delirium a patient may marvel over the incredulity of neighbours who refuse to give credence to the presentments that have been *ipso facto* to him, so, the nation being sound again, and its constitution hale, I expect little but a laugh for my piety in relating of the following incident; which, nevertheless, is as essential true as that he who shall look through the knot-hole in the plank of a coffin shall acquire the evil eye.

For, indeed, in those days of a wild fear and confusion, when every condition that maketh for reason was set wandering by a devious path, and all men sitting as in a theatre of death looked to see the curtain rise upon God knows what horrors, it was vouchsafed to many to witness sights and sounds beyond the compass of Nature, and that as if the devil and his minions had profited by the anarchy to slip unobserved into the world. And I know that this is so, for all the insolence of a recovered scepticism; and, as to the unseen, we are like one that traverseth the dark with a lanthorn, himself the skipper of a little moving blot of light, but a positive mark for any secret foe without the circumference of its radiance.

Be that as it may, and whether it was our particular ill-fortune, or, as some asserted, our particular wickedness, that made of our village an inviting back-door of entrance to the Prince of Darkness, I know not; but so it is that disease

and contagion are ever inclined to penetrate by way of flaws or humours where the veil of the flesh is already perforated, as a kite circleth round its quarry, looking for the weak place to strike: and, without doubt, in that land of corruption we were a very foul blot indeed.

How this came about it were idle to speculate; yet no man shall have the hardihood to affirm that it was otherwise. Nor do I seek to extenuate myself, who was in truth no better than my neighbours in most that made us a community of drunkards and forswearers both lewd and abominable. For in that village a depravity that was like madness had come to possess the heads of the people, and no man durst take his stand on honesty or even common decency, for fear he should be set upon by his comrades and drummed out of his government on a pint pot. Yet for myself I will say was one only redeeming quality, and that was the pure love I bore to my solitary orphaned child, the little Margery.

Now, our Vicar—a patient and God-fearing man, for all his predial tithes were impropriated by his lord, that was an absentee and a sheriff in London—did little to stem that current of lewdness that had set in strong with the Restoration. And this was from no lack of virtue in himself, but rather from a natural invertebracy, as one may say, and an order of mind that, yet being no order, is made the sport of any sophister with a wit for paragram. Thus it always is that mere example is of little avail without precept,—of which, however, it is an important condition, —and that the successful directors of men be not those who go to the van and lead, unconscious of the gibes and mockery in their rear, but such rather as drive the mob before them with a smiting hand and no infirmity of purpose. So, if a certain affection for our pastor dwelt in our hearts, no title of respect was there to leaven it and justify his high office before Him that consigned the trust; and ever deeper and deeper we sank in the slough of corruption, until was brought about this pass—that naught but some scourging despotism of the Church should acquit us of the fate of Sodom. That such, at the eleventh hour, was vouchsafed us of God's mercy, it is my purpose to show; and, doubtless, this offering of a loop-hole was to account by reason of the devil's having debarked his reserves, as it were, in our port; and so quartering upon us a soldiery that we were, at no invitation of our own, to maintain, stood us a certain extenuation.

It was late in the order of things before in our village so much as a rumour of the plague reached us. Newspapers were not in those days, and reports, being by word of mouth, travelled slowly, and were often spent bullets by the time they fell amongst us. Yet, by May, some gossip there was of the distemper having

gotten a hold in certain quarters of London and increasing, and this alarmed our people, though it made no abatement of their profligacy. But presently the reports coming thicker, with confirmation of the terror and panic that was enlarging on all sides, we must take measures for our safety; though into June and July, when the pestilence was raging, none infected had come our way, and that from our remote and isolated position. Yet it needs but fear for the crown to that wickedness that is self-indulgence; and forasmuch as this fear fattens like a toadstool on the decomposition it springs from, it grew with us to the proportions that we were set to kill or destroy any that should approach us from the stricken districts.

And then suddenly there appeared in our midst *he* that was appointed to be our scourge and our cautery.

Whence he came, or how, no man of us could say. Only one day we were a community of roysterers and scoffers, impious and abominable, and the next he was amongst us smiting and thundering.

Some would have it that he was an old collegiate of our Vicar's, but at last one of those wandering Dissenters that found never as now the times opportune to their teachings—a theory to which our minister's treatment of the stranger gave colour. For from the moment of his appearance he took the reins of government, as it were, appropriating the pulpit and launching his bolts therefrom, with the full consent and encouragement of the other. There were those, again, who were resolved that his commission was from a high place, whither news of our infamy had reached, and that we had best give him a respectful hearing, lest we should run a chance of having our hearing stopped altogether. A few were convinced he was no man at all, but rather a fiend sent to thresh us with the scourge of our own contriving, that we might be tender, like steak, for the cooking; and yet other few regarded him with terror, as an actual figure or embodiment of the distemper.

But, generally, after the first surprise, the feeling of resentment at his intrusion woke and gained ground, and we were much put about that he should have thus assumed the pastorship without invitation, quartering with our Vicar; who kept himself aloof and was little seen, and seeking to drive us by terror, and amazement, and a great menace of retribution. For, in truth, this was not the method to which we were wont, and it both angered and disturbed us.

This feeling would have enlarged the sooner, perhaps, were it not for a certain restraining influence possessed of the new-comer, which neighboured him with darkness and mystery. For he was above the common tall, and ever appeared in public with a slouched hat, that concealed all the upper part of his face and showed little otherwise but the dense black beard that dropped upon his breast like a shadow.

Now with August came a fresh burst of panic, how the desolation increased and the land was overrun with swarms of infected persons seeking an asylum from the city; and our anger rose high against the stranger, who yet dwelt with us and encouraged the distemper of our minds by furious denunciations of our guilt.

Thus far, for all the corruption of our hearts, we had maintained the practice of church-going, thinking, maybe, poor fools! to hoodwink the Almighty with a show of reverence; but now, as by a common consent, we neglected the observances and loitered of a Sabbath in the fields, and thither at the last the strange man pursued us and ended the matter.

For so it fell that at the time of the harvest's ripening a goodish body of us males was gathered one Sunday for coolness about the neighbourhood of the dripping well, whose waters were a tradition, for they had long gone dry. This well was situate in a sort of cave or deep scoop at the foot of a cliff of limestone, to which the cultivated ground that led up to it fell somewhat. High above, the cliff broke away into a wide stretch of pasture land, but the face of the rock itself was all patched with bramble and little starved birch-trees clutching for foothold; and in like manner the excavation beneath was half-stifled and gloomed over with undergrowth, so that it looked a place very dismal and uninviting, save in the ardour of the dog-days.

Within, where had been the basin, was a great shattered hole going down to unknown depths; and this no man had thought to explore, for a mystery held about the spot that was doubtless the foster-child of ignorance.

But to the front of the well and of the cliff stretched a noble field of corn, and this field was of an uncommon shape, being, roughly, a vast circle and a little one joined by a neck and in suggestion not unlike an hour-glass; and into the crop thereof, which was of goodly weight and condition, were the first sickles to be put on the morrow.

Now as we stood or lay around, idly discussing of the news, and congratulating ourselves that we were featly quit of our incubus, to us along the meadow path, his shadow jumping on the corn, came the very subject of our gossip.

He strode up, looking neither to right nor left, and with the first word that fell, low and damnatory, from his lips, we knew that the moment had come when, whether for good or evil, he intended to cast us from him and acquit himself of further responsibility in our direction.

"Behold!" he cried, pausing over against us, "I go from among ye! Behold, ye that have not obeyed nor inclined your ear, but have walked every one in the imagination of his evil heart! Saith the Lord, 'I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry unto Me, I will not hearken unto them.'"

His voice rang out, and a dark silence fell among us. It was pregnant, but with little of humility. We had had enough of this interloper and his abuse. Then, like Jeremiah, he went to prophesy:—

"I read ye, men of Anathoth, and the murder in your hearts. Ye that have worshipped the shameful thing and burned incense to Baal—shall I cringe that ye devise against me, or not rather pray to the Lord of Hosts, 'Let me see Thy vengeance on them'? And He answereth, 'I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth, even the year of their visitation.'"

Now, though I was no participator in that direful thing that followed, I stood by, nor interfered, and so must share the blame. For there were men risen all about, and their faces lowering, and it seemed that it would go hard with the stranger were he not more particular.

But he moved forward, with a stately and commanding gesture, and stood with his back to the well-scoop and threatened us and spoke.

"Lo!" he shrieked, "your hour is upon you! Ye shall be mowed down like ripe corn, and the shadow of your name shall be swept from the earth! The glass of your iniquity is turned, and when its sand is run through, not a man of ye shall be!"

He raised his arm aloft, and in a moment he was overborne. Even then, as all say, none got sight of his face; but he fought with lowered head, and his black beard

flapped like a wounded crow. But suddenly a boy-child ran forward of the bystanders, crying and screaming,—

"Hurt him not! They are hurting him—oh, me! oh, me!"

And from the sweat and struggle came his voice, gasping, "I spare the little children!"

Then only I know of the surge and the crash towards the well-mouth, of an instant cessation of motion, and immediately of men toiling hither and thither with boulders and huge blocks, which they piled over the rent, and so sealed it with a cromlech of stone.

II

That, in the heat of rage and of terror, we had gone farther than we had at first designed, our gloom and our silence on the morrow attested. True we were quit of our incubus, but on such terms as not even the severity of the times could excuse. For the man had but chastised us to our improvement; and to destroy the scourge is not to condone the offence. For myself, as I bore up the little Margery to my shoulder on my way to the reaping, I felt the burden of guilt so great as that I found myself muttering of an apology to the Lord that I durst put myself into touch with innocence. "But the walk would fatigue her otherwise," I murmured; and, when we were come to the field, I took and carried her into the upper or little meadow, out of reach of the scythes, and placed her to sleep amongst the corn, and so left her with a groan.

But when I was come anew to my comrades, who stood at the lower extremity of the field—and this was the bottom of the hour-glass, so to speak—I was aware of a stir amongst them, and, advancing closer, that they were all intent upon the neighbourhood of the field I had left, staring like distraught creatures, and holding well together, as if in a panic. Therefore, following the direction of their eyes, and of one that pointed with rigid finger, I turned me about, and looked whence I had come; and my heart went with a somersault, and in a moment I was all sick and dazed.

For I saw, at the upper curve of the meadow, where the well lay in gloom, that a man had sprung out of the earth, as it seemed, and was started reaping; and the face of this man was all in shadow, from which his beard ran out and down like a stream of gall.

He reaped swiftly and steadily, swinging like a pendulum; but, though the sheaves fell to him right and left, no swish of the scythe came to us, nor any sound but the beating of our own hearts.

Now, from the first moment of my looking, no doubt was in my lost soul but that this was him we had destroyed come back to verify his prophecy in ministering to the vengeance of the Lord of Hosts; and at the thought a deep groan rent my bosom, and was echoed by those about me. But scarcely was it issued when a second terror smote me as that I near reeled. Margery—my babe! put to sleep there in the path of the Black Reaper!

At that, though they called to me, I sprang forward like a madman, and running along the meadow, through the neck of the glass, reached the little thing, and stooped and snatched her into my arms. She was sound and unfrighted, as I felt with a burst of thankfulness; but, looking about me, as I turned again to fly, I had near dropped in my tracks for the sickness and horror I experienced in the nearer neighbourhood of the apparition. For, though it never raised its head, or changed the steady swing of its shoulders, I knew that it was aware of and was reaping at me. Now, I tell you, it was ten yards away, yet the point of the scythe came gliding upon me silently, like a snake, through the stalks, and at that I screamed out and ran for my life.

I escaped, sweating with terror; but when I was sped back to the men, there was all the village collected, and our Vicar to the front, praying from a throat that rattled like a dead leaf in a draught. I know not what he said, for the low cries of the women filled the air; but his face was white as a smock, and his fingers writhed in one another like a knot of worms.

"The plague is upon us!" they wailed. "We shall be mowed down like ripe corn!"

And even as they shrieked the Black Reaper paused, and, putting away his scythe, stooped and gathered up a sheaf in his arms and stood it on end. And, with the very act, a man—one that had been forward in yesterday's business—fell down amongst us yelling and foaming; and he rent his breast in his frenzy, revealing the purple blot thereon, and he passed blaspheming. And the reaper stooped and stooped again, and with every sheaf he gathered together one of us fell stricken and rolled in his agony, while the rest stood by palsied.

But, when at length all that was cut was accounted for, and a dozen of us were gone each to his judgment, and he had taken up his scythe to reap anew, a wild fury woke in the breasts of some of the more abandoned and reckless amongst us.

"It is not to be tolerated!" they cried. "Let us at once fire the corn and burn this sorcerer!"

And with that, some fire or six of them, emboldened by despair, ran up into the little field, and, separating, had out each his flint and fired the crop in his own place, and retreated to the narrow part for safety.

Now the reaper rested on his scythe, as if unexpectedly acquitted of a part of his labour; but the corn flamed up in these five or six directions, and was consumed in each to the compass of a single sheaf: whereat the fire died away. And with its dying the faces of those that had ventured went black as coal; and they flung up their arms, screaming, and fell prone where they stood, and were hidden from our view.

Then, indeed, despair seized upon all of us that survived, and we made no doubt but that we were to be exterminated and wiped from the earth for our sins, as were the men of Anathoth. And for an hour the Black Reaper mowed and trussed, till he had cut all from the little upper field and was approached to the neck of juncture with the lower and larger. And before us that remained, and who were drawn back amongst the trees, weeping and praying, a fifth of our comrades lay foul, and dead, and sweltering, and all blotched over with the dreadful mark of the pestilence.

Now, as I say, the reaper was nearing the neck of juncture; and so we knew that if he should once pass into the great field towards us and continue his mowing, not one of us should be left to give earnest of our repentance.

Then, as it seemed, our Vicar came to a resolution, moving forward with a face all wrapt and entranced; and he strode up the meadow path and approached the apparition, and stretched out his arms to it entreating. And we saw the other pause, awaiting him; and, as he came near, put forth his hand, and so, gently, on the good old head. But as we looked, catching at our breaths with a little pathos of hope, the priestly face was thrown back radiant, and the figure of him that would give his life for us sank amongst the yet standing corn and disappeared from our sight.

So at last we yielded ourselves fully to our despair; for if our pastor should find no mercy, what possibility of it could be for us!

It was in this moment of an uttermost grief and horror, when each stood apart

from his neighbour, fearing the contamination of his presence, that there was vouchsafed to me, of God's pity, a wild and sudden inspiration. Still to my neck fastened the little Margery—not frighted, it seemed, but mazed—and other babes there were in plenty, that clung to their mothers' skirts and peeped out, wondering at the strange show.

I ran to the front and shrieked: "The children! the children! He will not touch the little children! Bring them and set them in his path!" And so crying I sped to the neck of meadow, and loosened the soft arms from my throat, and put the little one down within the corn.

Now at once the women saw what I would be at, and full a score of them snatched up their babes and followed me. And here we were reckless for ourselves; but we knelt the innocents in one close line across the neck of land, so that the Black Reaper should not find space between any of them to swing his scythe. And having done this, we fell back with our hearts bubbling in our breasts, and we stood panting and watched.

He had paused over that one full sheaf of his reaping; but now, with the sound of the women's running, he seized his weapon again and set to upon the narrow belt of corn that yet separated him from the children. But presently, coming out upon the tender array, his scythe stopped and trailed in his hand, and for a full minute he stood like a figure of stone. Then thrice he walked slowly backwards and forwards along the line, seeking for an interval whereby he might pass; and the children laughed at him like silver bells, showing no fear, and perchance meeting that of love in his eyes that was hidden from us.

Then of a sudden he came to before the midmost of the line, and, while we drew our breath like dying souls, stooped and snapped his blade across his knee, and, holding the two parts in his hand, turned and strode back into the shadow of the dripping well. There arrived, he paused once more, and, twisting him about, waved his hand once to us and vanished into the blackness. But there were those who affirmed that in that instant of his turning, his face was revealed, and that it was a face radiant and beautiful as an angel's.

Such is the history of the wild judgment that befell us, and by grace of the little children was foregone; and such was the stranger whose name no man ever heard tell, but whom many have since sought to identify with that spirit of the pestilence that entered into men's hearts and confounded them, so that they saw

visions and were afterwards confused in their memories.

But this I may say, that when at last our courage would fetch us to that little field of death, we found it to be all blackened and blasted, so as nothing would take root there then or ever since; and it was as if, after all the golden sand of the hour-glass was run away and the lives of the most impious with it, the destroyer saw fit to stay his hand for sake of the babes that he had pronounced innocent, and for such as were spared to witness to His judgment. And this I do here, with a heart as contrite as if it were the morrow of the visitation, the which with me it ever has remained.

A VOICE FROM THE PIT

"Signor, we are arrived," whispered the old man in my ear; and he put out a sudden cold hand, corded like melon rind, to stay me in the stumbling darkness.

We were on a tilted table-land of the mountain; and, looking forth and below, the far indigo crescent of the bay, where it swept towards Castellamare, seemed to rise up at me, as if it were a perpendicular wall, across which the white crests of the waves flew like ghost moths.

We skirted a boulder, and came upon a field of sleek purple lava sown all over with little lemon jets of silent smoke, which in their wan and melancholy glow might have been the corpse lights of those innumerable dead whose tombstone was the mountain itself.

Far away to the right the great projecting socket of the crater flickered intermittently with a nerve of fire. It was like the glinting of the watchful eye of some vast Crustacean, and in that harsh and stupendous desolation seemed the final crown and expression of utter inhumanity.

I started upon hearing the low whisper of my companion at my ear.

"In the bay yesterday the Signor saved my life. I give the Signor, in return, my life's secret."

He seized my right hand in his left with a sinewy clutch, and pointed a stiff finger at the luminous blots.

"See there, and there, and there," he shrilled. "One floats and wavers like a spineless ribbon of seaweed in the water; another burns with a steady radiance; a third blares from its fissure like a flame driven by the blowpipe. It is all a question of the under-draught, and some may feel it a little, and some a little

more or a little less. Ah! but I will show you one that feels it not at all—a hole, a narrow shaft that goes straight down into the pit of the great hell, and is cold as the mouth of a barbel."

The bones of his face stood out like rocks against sand, and the pupils of his maniac eyes were glazed or fell into shadow as the volcano lightnings fluttered.

Suddenly he drew me to a broken pile of sulphur rock lying tumbled against a ridge of the mountain that ran towards the crater. It lay heaped, a fused and fantastic ruin; and in a moment the old man leapt from me, and was tugging by main strength a vast fragment from its place.

I leaned over his shoulder, and looked down upon the hollow revealed by the displaced boulder. It was like the bell of a mighty trumpet, and in the middle a puckered opening seemed to suck inwards, as it were the mouth of some subterranean monster risen to the surface of the world for air.

"Quick! quick!" muttered Paolo. "The Signor must place his ear to the hole."

With a little odd stir at my heart, I dropped upon my knees and leaned my head deep into the cup. I must have stayed thus for a full minute before I drew myself back and looked up at the old mountaineer. His eyes gazed down into mine with mad intensity.

"*Si! si!*" he whispered. "What didst thou hear?"

"I heard a long surging thunder, Paolo, and the deep shrill screaming of many gas jets."

He bent down, with livid face.

"Signor, it is the booming of the everlasting fire, and thou hast heard the voices of the damned."

"No, my friend, no. But it is a marvellous transmission of the uproar of hidden forces."

He leapt to the shallow pit.

"Listen and believe!" he cried; and funnelling his hands about his lips, he

stooped over the central hole.

"Marco! Marco!" he screeched, in a piercing voice.

Something answered back. What was it? A malformed and twisted echo? A whistle of imprisoned steam tricked into some horrible caricature of a human voice?

"Paolo!" it seemed to wail, weak and faint with agony. "*L'arqua*, *l'arqua*, Paolo!"

The old man sprang to his feet and, looking down upon me in a sort of terrible triumph, unslung a water-flask from his belt, and, pulling out the cork, poured the cold liquid down into the puckered orifice. Then I felt his clutch on my arm again.

"He drinks!" he cried. "Listen and thou wilt understand."

I rose with a ghost of a laugh, and once more addressed my ear to the opening.

From unthinkable depths came up a strange, gloating sound, as from a ravenous throat made vibrant with ecstasy.

"Paolo," I cried, as I rose and stood before him—and there was an admonitory note in my voice—"a feather may decide the balance. Beware meddling with hidden thunders, or thou mayst set rolling such another tombstone as that on which these corpse fires are yet flaming."

And he only answered me, set and deathly,—

"We of the mountains, Signor, know more things than we may tell of."

http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/4/0/4/14045

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from public domain print editions means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG-tm concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for the eBooks, unless you receive specific permission. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the rules is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. They may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING with public domain eBooks. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

*** START: FULL LICENSE ***

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg-tm License (available with this file or online at http://gutenberg.net/license).

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg-tm works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg-tm name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg-tm License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any

sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.net), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH F3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a

defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTIBILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic

works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need, is critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at http://www.gutenberg.net/fundraising/pglaf.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at http://www.gutenberg.net/about/contact

For additional contact information:

Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread

public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit http://www.gutenberg.net/fundraising/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: http://www.gutenberg.net/fundraising/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart is the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is

included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

http://www.gutenberg.net

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.