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THE COLUMN OF DUST

" O dust, have faith according to the term
Of this life's lease ! Ere the corrupting worm
Have power to destroy the dust thou art !
 Ere the dark rust
Of death can clog the engine of thy heart !
Great is thine honour, though thou walk in night ;
For fringes of thy darkness feel the Light
 Which was ordained to be
 When God, the Just,
From shadow shaping thee,
 Put trust
 In dust."

LAURENCE HOUSMAN.

THE COLUMN OF DUST

BY

EVELYN UNDERHILL

AUTHOR OF "THE GREY WORLD," "THE LOST WORD," ETC.

METHUEN
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.



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TO
ARTHUR AND PUREFOY MACHEN
FRIENDSHIP'S OFFERING

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THE COLUMN OF DUST

CHAPTER I

THE DANGERS OF CURIOSITY

“O Loveless, Hateless! . . . past the sense
Of kindly-eyed benevolence,
To what tune danceth this Immense?”

HARDY: *The Dynasts.*

I CHOOSE for the first act of my comedy the spectacle of a complete freedom cruelly mated with an unquenchable curiosity. Such a liberty, clearly impossible to those who are fettered by the illusions of sense, is no natural prerogative even of the intangible and spiritual populations. Constrained by the unceasing pull and push of that love which moves the worlds, these are drawn forward to the joys of a selfless adoration, or downward to the weary miseries of individual self-fulfilment: those eternally opposing attitudes which an old-fashioned and clear-sighted theology has crudely classified as Heaven and Hell.

This is the story of a being—a thing—a spirit, if you will—who loved nothing, and therefore was free.

It wished to serve neither its own interests nor those of the Supernal Light; and had no aim, only an aching inquisitiveness. Now the itch to know, coupled with the inability to care, produces there, as here, that restless and unsociable disposition which we classify as the result of an imperfect and egotistical education. There, as here, it of course frustrates itself; since those who do not love can never understand. Hence this thing, which was free, was also ignorant and very wretched. The essence of its wretchedness was, that because it, its ignorance and curiosity, had never been born, they could never die. They existed in the unchanging Idea, without hope of release. Fortunately, it did not know this; for spirit is as unable to conceive ending as man to conceive endlessness.

This something, then, was alive and utterly alone, with a loneliness that is only possible to the disinterested and discarnate. There was nothing for it to do, since it could neither create, combine, nor destroy. It could think, but possessed no medium of self-expression, no apparatus by which it could be linked up with other lives; for it did not love, and being immaterial, lacked the senses—those oblique and clumsy substitutes for love by which men reach out towards each other's souls.

It came storming through eternity; through the crystalline spaces of that which is spaceless, and down the immeasurable periods of that which transcends time. It was isolated, energetic, and desirous of adventure; hungry, restless, and alert; a very vagrant of the invisible. Avid of all knowledge, it perceived with a certain enjoyment the general movement and

direction of things : the mighty figures of that dance of angels at which philosophy has tried to peep. But in the midst of the great pageant which the Uncreated has dreamed for His own delight, it suffered a crescent and incessant irritation because of its own lack of understanding. The figures of the dance might be comprehensible, but the steps defied analysis. This uninstructed, and therefore sceptical, observer was angrily aware of certain complicated knots, turbulent manifestations of being, which rudely disturbed the symmetry of the whole. These he could not explain to himself ; for they were ugly, disorderly, irrelevant. Because they were inexplicable, because he held them to be infringements of the Plan, they attracted whilst they disgusted him. He wondered and watched : forgot himself in his occupation—a dangerous business for egotists of every grade.

Hence there was born a moment in which he saw the many worlds and planes of being, which, from the standpoint of eternity, are perceived under an aspect of great and serene simplicity, interpenetrating one another ; and the world of matter, turbulent and many-tinted, crossing them all. Deep in this world of matter he identified that lawless and inconsistent element which had disturbed his first placid classification of things. It was the faint, distressful cry of life, which came in a wailing cadence from that writhing, tossing corner of the Dream, and broke the profound silence of reality.

Within this disagreeable and meaningless maze of noise, chaos, corruption, he presently perceived the earth, as a peculiarly hideous and unresting

tangle; an irreducible blot upon that perfect process of evolving Will whose shadow is the Universe. He saw it teeming with horrible little organisms, which devoured one another in their ceaseless effort to preserve a visible and independent life; but, in spite of all their care and cruelty, broke down after a few moments of meaningless activity, and were dissolved into the dust from which they came. The sight was at once fascinating and revolting. He wondered incessantly and with a growing irritation why Being should manifest itself like that. Hence the image of the earth expanded, until it filled his horizon in a fashion that he knew to be absurd. His consciousness was concentrated upon it; and the great and free vision slipped away from him, as happens to us when we turn from the largeness of landscape to contemplate the inexplicable civilization of the hive.

Thus this stupendous victim of petty curiosity—growthless, sexless, eternal—brooded over that absurd paradox of creation, a temporal world founded upon the considerations, supported by the illusions, of matter, growth, and sex. He heard the thud and surge of life which echoed through it, and gazing into its heart, saw the countless souls that clustered upon its surface, each locked inexorably within the transparent walls of the flesh. These he could understand, for they, too, were spirits; sexless and solitary things. Being as yet impervious to the false suggestions of appearance, he was peculiarly susceptible to the currents which swayed them, circulating in and about the visible world: the subtle movements of expansion and contraction,

the loves and hates of the entangled souls. He felt the curious withdrawal, like the ebbing of a strong tide, with which many drew back from life, refused it, as if dreading the impact of their waves of being against its shattering cliffs. He felt the deadening stagnation of those others, unconscious of life, who drifted through it inert. Here and there he felt the pull of a vortex of power amongst these negative forces; the eager vitality of those true lovers of life who accepted it, rejoiced in it, making a whirlpool in the spiritual sea.

Crossing all these there was still another influence, by which he was bewildered and abashed. Out of the turmoil, dragged or distilled from it as it seemed by the very conflict of the Idea with the horrible enigma of material things, there was poured forth a strange ecstasy, a vivid and penetrating love, which pierced its way to the very heart of that Divine reality whose calm as he had ignorantly thought, was disturbed by the fretfulness of the worlds which lay upon Its breast. This love passed easily by the status of those spiritual orders to which he belonged, and merged itself in that End of Being for which all creation hungers eternally. That such splendour and such fragrance should come from this loathsome and complicated dance of beauty and ugliness, growth and decay, was an exasperating paradox, an indication of essential lawlessness, which he watched with disapproval, yet with a growing fascination. He could not understand it, could not leave it alone. It excited him, as life excites the virgin who watches it with amazement and distrust.

But presently the Nemesis of the specialist over-

took him ; the transparent cell-walls thickened beneath his curious gaze, and hid the dwellers within. The illusion of solidity surged mist-like across the landscape, dimming his sight : he had drawn too near, and could no longer see the life in its depths. That life was surely there, and the adorable Idea behind it ; but, looking sedulously at the disconcerting appearance, its ineptitude, its cruelty, its unrest, he lost that consciousness of the Idea which is the prerogative of the spiritual life. He was caught in the chains of his own inquisitiveness ; and, weighted by those chains, sank from plane to plane of perception, ever narrowing the field of vision as he fell.

The desire to know, that mortal enemy of the power to be, had forced him to accept the illusions that he despised. He was slowly and inevitably pressed into their deeps ; concentrated, in spite of himself, on one point in the turmoil, where, as it seemed, a tiny and individual fight was going on. There was a little furry thing that lived, and an agonized spirit which looked out at him through two green windows ; solitary in the midst of all the other life, and greatly frightened. Something in the furry bag which held the spirit hurt dreadfully. He wondered what it could be, and why the prisoner within should mind so much. Whilst he was still absorbed in his own curiosity and the strangeness of this experience, there was a struggle and a tremor that passed over the bag of fur, and then a faint cry. The light left the green windows : a small matter in itself, but bringing to this immortal watcher the appalling knowledge of things that could come to an end.

“What a loathsome dream I am looking at!” he

said; and, very naturally, he determined forthwith to cease this foolish looking at a nasty and unprofitable world.

He turned towards the great spaces, the empty and majestic Real. But the Real had withdrawn beyond his range. Then horror fell on him, and with it an utter helplessness; for he perceived that he could not leave off looking at the dream because he was no longer looking, he was *there*. A cry came from him—a very bitter cry of wrath and fear.

“Ah, what has happened? I am caught! I cannot get away!”

He had seen death; and suddenly felt on him the weight of the strange and dreadful fetters of mortality.

CHAPTER II

HOW SOMETHING CAME FROM SOMEWHERE

“ Une pratique, même superstitieuse, même insensée, est efficace, parce que c'est un réalisation de la volonté.”

ÉLIPHAS LÉVI: *Rituel de la Haute Magie.*

WITHIN the bookshop a dusty darkness was made noticeable by the existence of one low-lying patch of light. At 10 p.m. business hours were long over, and the place revenged itself upon intrusion by the uncanny air of peopled solitude, the suggestion that all trespassers will be prosecuted with circumstances of occult terror, which lurks in empty houses, deep forests, and solitary shrines. Commerce was cast out, and seven other devils took her place.

A woman stood within the patch of light, and also within a small circle which she had traced with charcoal upon the imperfectly scrubbed floor. She seemed a healthy and a solid woman: body and brain well balanced, soul asleep. She was studying a stained and coarsely-printed duodecimo which lay upon the desk beside her. It was a rare old English translation of the “Grand Grimoire,” which, having recently been rebacked with new brown morocco by strenuous and unsympathetic hands, was now kept

open with difficulty by a heavy stamp-moistener and two bulldog letter-clips.

The light was produced by two candles of that brownish-yellow wax which Catholics always burn about the biers of their dead. Since the agents of death and birth are always one, it is hardly strange that these should be the lights assigned by antique tradition to help the incoming of another life. The candles stood upon the floor; with the spot on which the woman was, they marked the points of a triangle which had been carefully drawn within the charcoal ring. Hence they at once proclaimed themselves as instruments of ceremony, not of illumination; belonging rather to the saucerful of incense, the little pan of charcoal that stood on the gas-stove, than to the daily apparatus of ledger, order-book, and publishers' catalogues which crowded the neighbouring desk.

A small mirror hung high up between the bookshelves. It was tilted forward, giving an excellent view of the floor. The flames of the candles were reflected in it: two shining points, exhibiting with a horrible thoroughness the vast and lonely dusk in which they shone. Thus seen, winking and glittering out of the greyness, they seemed intimately, unpleasantly alive; and Constance Tyrrel, in spite of a sound classical education, and much inherited and carefully fostered common sense, felt them to be watchful personalities, companions full of eerie suggestion, poisoning her essential solitude by their hint of terrible companionship.

She began, instinctively, to calculate the shortest possible time in which her present business could be

done; then, detecting in this operation the first symptom of oncoming panic, she deliberately looked away from the mirror, and again forced her attention to the Grimoire and to the grotesque and varied objects which were ranged upon her desk ready for use.

There was a piece of cardboard, on which the Pentagram, the Tetragrammaton, and the Caduceus had been traced in coloured inks according to the recipe of Éliphas Lévi. Symbols in outline are seldom impressive, and I am afraid that this talisman had failed to affect her imagination as it should. She hung it upon her breast with a piece of string; and, noting the effect, wondered whether this were or were not the ancestor of the scapular. There was also a forked hazel twig, its tips covered with little thimbles of steel: the magician's wand. She took it in her hand; and, staying always within the circle, reached out for the pan of charcoal and placed it on the ground before her. The childishness of these proceedings would have amused her had it not been for the intense silence, the loneliness of the bookshop, its dim uncertain corners, and the horrible impression of looking out into infinite and cruel darkness—only possible to those who stand in a restricted patch of light—which she received when she raised her eyes from the ground. This darkness was made the more hateful by its very incompleteness; by the radiant mirror which swam out of it, reflecting the two candle flames, like the glowing eyes of some vigilant animal eternally imprisoned in its depths. Now and then she heard footsteps in the street; the rattle and hoot of a motor, the

barking of dogs. These noises reminded her that she was shut in with another world, another century, where she could claim no aid but that afforded by her own curiosity and courage.

She took a little incense from her saucer, and threw it on the charcoal. The perfumed smoke ascended in a thick white cloud, veiling the disconcerting mirror and the surrounding bookshelves, inappropriately filled with county histories, educational works, and cheap reprints. It placed itself between Constance and the objects of her daily toil; shut her more closely with her undertaking.

She was in the midst of it now: this visible sign of transcendental ambitions assured her of that. Its scent in her nostrils assured her, too, of the solemnities of the undertaking. It lapped her in the atmosphere of ceremony, opened vistas of dream. She turned with a new confidence to the Grimoire, and began to read aloud the Ritual of Conjunction. It was her first attempt to force the lock of that Door which has no key.

“‘Ego Constantia conjuro te per Deum vivum, per Deum verum, per Deum sanctum et regnantem.’”

She said it bravely: yet in the very act of reading her judgment sat aloof. It refused to capitulate before the fragrance, the darkness, the amazing phrases. It reminded her that the thing was silly, whilst her imagination murmured that the words were at any rate stupendous. She read them—the long elaborate spell—in the high-pitched, shaky, and shame-stricken voice of one who rehearses some pretentious piece of rhetoric alone, and dreads the mortification of being

overheard. Also, to speak clearly seemed almost an acknowledgment that there was, after all, something present to which she could speak: it was an act which peopled the dusky corners of the shop with terrible presences. She shivered a little, and forgot to attribute her discomfort to self-suggestion or overstimulated nerves. She kept her eyes fixed upon the Grimoire, lest they should meet in the mirror the reflection of some life other than their own. With each fresh phase of the strange chant, the majestic appeal to invisible peoples, intangible powers, the suspicion that this life awaited the opening of her eyes increased.

“ ‘Te exorciso ut nunc et sine mora appareas mihi juxta circulum pulchrâ et honestâ, animæ et corporis forma.’ ”

She paused. She wondered whether she really desired this terrific result: conceived its possibility. The smoke had cleared a little, and she could detect the opposite side of the shop and the glint of some unpleasant scarlet bindings; standard English novelists in half-roan with deckled edge. Everything was very quiet. Her nervousness had passed away. Nothing happened.

Constance discovered herself to be disappointed. She believed nothing, and was therefore the more ready to believe anything; having all the transcendental curiosity of the true materialist. Her present undertaking was either perilous or absurd. She was not disposed to take either of these risks for nothing. Her fighting instincts were aroused. If success were possible, she would not forego it. Hence the last clauses of the incantation came from her lips with an

imperious ring which was appropriate enough to that superb procession of Divine names by which the student of magic really compels himself to exaltation, whilst he purports to be compelling the spirits of the air.

“ ‘ Per nomina maxima Dei deorum Dominus dominatum, Adonay Tetragrammaton Jehovah !
O Theos Athanatos !
 Ischyros Hagios, Pentagrammaton Shadday
O Theos Athanatos !
 Tetragrammaton Adonay, Ischyros Athanatos,
 Shadday !
 Cados, Eloy, Hagios !
O Theos Athanatos !
 Adonay ! Adonay ! Adonay ! ’ ”

The final phrases echoed through the empty shop in a wild, an appealing cry which she hardly recognized as her own. Thus recited, fresh from the book, by one who knew nothing of its cipher, the necessity of discovering the truly secret words beneath their concealing signs, it would have sounded absurd enough in the ears of a professional occultist ; but on this woman's lips it was at once a prayer and a command. She perceived for the first time why it was that these eccentric substantives were known as Words of Power. Their curious rhythms rose, as it were, to waves—inexorable waves of sound—which battered the cliff of uncreated things. As she ceased, she realized that she was intensely fatigued : the overpowering fatigue of a person who has worked beyond her strength, and feels every limb to be invaded by the languors of her brain. It seemed to her, too, that the shop had become very cold. Evidently a gusty

wind had arisen outside, and found its way under the ill-fitting door; for the two candle flames flickered suddenly, as if blown sharply towards her, then righted themselves and burned steadily again. Nothing happened.

At the ending of the evocation, said the Grimoire, if the spirit which is conjured by the Magus still fails to appear, the operator will place the steel tips of his wand upon the burning brazier, and make the last and most violent assault upon the unseen world; the mighty and primitive spell called the Clavicle of Solomon. "And be ye not afraid," adds the rubric, "though ye shall hear the loud cries and groans of the spirits who are now being forced to appear within the circle of earth."

Constance had read these directions and this warning with some amusement during her furtive studies of the occult. Upon a sunny afternoon in early spring, in the interval of serving a lady addicted to the literature of the Higher Health and a curate who wished to read Pierre Louys for reasons unconnected with French prose, she had found its careful encouragements quaint and delightful. Now, oddly enough, she turned at once, though with a certain tremulousness, to look for the page upon which the strange syllables of the Clavicle were drawn within their encompassing sign. She did it naturally and inevitably; as if it were now impossible to abandon this adventure whilst any path remained untried.

But as she searched by the feeble light of her candles, the tightly-bound leaves of the little book escaped from fingers which were no longer very steady in their grasp. It shut itself with a snap,

and she caught sight between two fly-leaves of a tiny slip of paper, so thin that a breath was needed to disengage it from the page on which it lay. There were on it a few lines of faded writing and many curious signs.

In her rather hasty collation of the Grimoire she had not seen this paper. Now, because she was eager and somewhat disheartened by her non-success, wide-eyed towards all chances of adventure, she took it from its place, held it to the light, and deciphered with difficulty the opening words :

“Lo, my beloved son and very dear disciple, I bequeath to thee this Grimoire, the companion of my labours, wherein are faithfully set forth the true Rituals of Magic, together with all things needful for the prosecution of that most divine experiment on which thou art set : to wit, the Word, the Sign, and the Way. Guard well that secret knowledge, remembering the four oaths of thy initiation : to Dare, to Will, to Learn, and to Conceal. But as to this book, have no fear lest the profane and those unlearned in Philosophie discover aught therein, since, even as the Ark within the Temple, all truth here dwells behind a veil ; which veil the priests of the Hidden Wisdom alone may pass. . . .” Here followed three lines of Cabalistic figures, which Constance could not read. At the side there was a gloss in tiny writing : “*Nota.*—Take heed that thou dost not forget to sing rightly, and according to the manner of the adepts, these most powerful and all-holy Names of God, and the great Key of Solomon, our Master ; for it is very certain that upon the due

observance of this matter the whole virtue of thy evocation doth depend."

She replaced the paper in the Grimoire, feeling herself to be little enlightened; for she had no knowledge of that right singing of the adepts which it held essential to the work. However, she turned to the Clavicle, and laid the metal tips of her wand upon the brazier carefully and efficiently, as if she were busied over some intricate operation of cookery; as accurate in her ritual actions as any priest before the altar of his God. She glanced at the mirror, and saw reflected in it her own face. The candles lit it from below, casting peculiar shadows upon the eye-sockets and chin. It seemed a stranger's face: white, peering, curious, and amazed. The contours which gave to it its workaday expression of responsibility and common sense had disappeared.

She began to read; and now, to her amazement, a third and almost horrible change came over her voice. It was no longer the shamefaced muttering thing of a person who suspects her own absurdity; had no more the sharp pitch of overstrung but undefeated nerves. Constance was now impelled to chant, in a loud tone and with a grave intense and crescent determination, the strange old Hebrew spell. The words drew from her—she knew not for what reason—a long and rhythmic cry; a wailing music, with curious ululative prolongations of the vowel sounds. It came from some obscure corner of her spirit, which thus found for the first time a language suited to its needs. She had ceased to be self-conscious, and was far away from the bookshop; her whole will pressing against the barriers of an ex-

perience which, as she had gradually and automatically come to believe, was close to her hand. And as the walls of Jericho fell before the persistent trumpets, so under the assault of her cry this barrier seemed to tremble.

“Therefore appear, lest I continue to torment thee with the Words of Power of the great Solomon thy master.”

The stream of strange and twisted syllables, the unearthly wailing song, the rhythms which made no appeal to the ear of sense, rose and lifted her with them; then gathered the whole strength of her spirit for the supreme statement of exalted and illuminated will: “Messias Soter Emanuel Sabaoth Adonay, te adoro et invoco.”

Her eyes were upon the mirror as she ended; and still it reflected her own strained face, but no other. There was no hand laid on her shoulder, no veiled form.

But there was surely something in the mirror which she had not seen before. She saw a tiny disturbance on the ground, close beyond the edge of the charcoal ring; as if the draught that blew beneath the door had disturbed a little pile of dust. It rose in the air a little way, and hung there like a cloud. The thing was natural enough, for there is always plenty of dust in a bookshop. Nevertheless, the small movement in the dusk had joggled Constance's weary nerves. She watched it, fascinated, longing all the while to look away; and as she watched a fresh wave of overmastering fatigue came on her, and with it, of course, a sudden gust of fear. She knew that, in the impossible event of a spiritual

manifestation, she had but to conquer her will, to lay her hand upon the pentagram, and command the Presence to obey, not to intimidate, its conjurer; but it takes great confidence in the unseen to attribute to supernatural causes a phenomenon which may well have been produced by a draughty door. She stared, and struggled with a rising pulse and feelings of great discomfort in the throat.

Meanwhile, the little column of dust rose with a curious spiral motion, as if it were impelled from within. It hung in the air; a grey, faint, cobwebby thing. And then she heard the crying of a sad and frightened voice, which said:

“Ah, what has happened? I am caught! I cannot get away!” And again an inarticulate cry, that came in a rising cadence of anguish and dread.

She exclaimed: “My God! What is it? What have I done?”

The sound of her own voice, harsh and uncertain, convinced her that the other voice had not been heard by the outward ear.

She turned from the mirror, and looked with horror at the floor. The column of dust had disappeared. The candles burned clearly in the dusk.

Then she remembered that she was quite alone: that there was nothing more to do, nothing that she could do. It was late, and she longed to be away. She went to the back of the shop, and switched on the electric light. It seemed an almost impious proceeding after all that had passed; but the nice commonplace click and the immediate radiance comforted her. She extinguished her ceremonial candles, packed away wand, pentagram, and

incense in her little leather bag, and carefully rubbed the circle from the floor. The physical exercise restored her to a sense of her own largeness, healthiness, and solidity. She forgot the imaginary voice, and remembered the real world.

She left the bookshop, locking the door behind her. She held the keys, for Mr. Lambton was of a slothful disposition, and left his manager as many responsibilities as he could. She was glad to be out in the air again, and looked forward to a brisk walk through lighted streets. At this moment the mud and motor-omnibuses, the drizzling rain that fell, were familiar and delightful things; freckles on the beloved face of life.

There was a dead kitten in the gutter; a little bag of fur. She stepped back when she saw it, and crossed the road lower down. She was not a squeamish woman, but this was hardly the moment for dead things. It was evidently true, as Éliphas Lévi had said, and the best modern occultists agreed, that magical operations did have some curious effect upon the mind. She could not recover her normal poise; things wore an unusual air, and she was an alien amongst them. She decided that she would go to bed early; she was not in the mood for sitting alone that night.

She had yet to realize that she would never be alone any more.

CHAPTER III

FURNISHED LODGINGS

“Now I know that the walls of sense that seemed so impenetrable, that seemed to loom up above the heavens and to be founded below the depths, and to shut us in for evermore, are no such everlasting impassable barriers as we fancied, but thinnest and most airy veils that melt away before the seeker, and dissolve as the early mist of the morning about the brooks.”—ARTHUR MACHEN: *The House of Souls*

IN common with the many persons who have some imagination, but small taste for metaphysics, Constance had conceived of the invisible world as situated, somehow, in the air, crisply defined within its own frontiers, and amenable to the usual classifications of geography. Its inhabitants were as safely bestowed as the inhabitants of the Zoo; they were behind the strong bars of natural phenomena, and could not get out. The spirit-world of the old and the astral plane of the new occultists each suggested to her separate cages, into which the curious might sometimes look.

This woman had the mania of adventure, and few opportunities of gratifying her taste. For years she had moved within the dull boundaries of a wage-

earner's existence, which she abhorred, but could not overpass. Once she had explored the deeps of life; now heights and deeps alike seemed shut from her. She longed for new landscape, experience, danger. Hence her sudden excursion into life's uncharted outskirts; those building estates which the spirit of man has not yet decided to develop.

Though she was, in her own opinion, wholly free from superstition, she had thought it possible that, by deliberate recourse to the self-hypnotizing ceremonial of the old magicians, she might at any rate peep into the strange wild district beyond the barriers of sense; for much that is obviously absurd when ascribed to the agency of unseen forces, becomes acceptable to the educated mind if interpreted in terms of psychology. Explaining the human soul with that precision which is so sadly lacking in the Pentateuch, this science had taught Constance that the release of her subliminal powers was all that was necessary if she wished to perceive the unknown but strictly natural world beyond the threshold as an interesting extension of the known. If you see in your incantation a method of shifting the field of consciousness, and call your magic wand an autoscope, these things no longer seem silly, but take their place as part of the cosmic plan. A careful study of the works of Professor James had further convinced her that some forms of credulity are still compatible with self-respect.

But the result of her temporary will to believe, and of the experiment which it had prompted, was, as she now felt, profoundly unsatisfactory. She was left in complete doubt as to whether or no the

invocation had worked ; and the sceptical state, so convenient when its object is the dogma of a too strenuous religion, is very uncomfortable when applied to an individual ghost. If her conjuration had indeed released supernatural powers, if it were true that something had happened, the inner eye been opened upon a hidden plane of being, then she had seen—what ? An unmeaning and horrible interference with that solid earth and those respectable laws of Nature which she preferred to take for granted : a column of dust that mounted and hung in the air, as if endowed with some incomprehensible life. The thought of it, of the intimate and unnatural thing, was more dreadful than any phantom could have been. It seemed to make all things unsafe. She decided that it could not, must not, be true.

Science came to the assistance of its child, and helped her to put a proper interpretation on an adventure which refused to square itself with any known theory of the unseen, but ranged itself easily amongst the accredited varieties of optical and auditory hallucination. To look at it in any other way would have been too horrible. To connect the strange and tormented voice—which, as she assured herself, she had not really heard—with that vision of the writhing, twisting, misty, yet living, thing which rose, one knew not how, and vanished, one knew not where : this was to knock the bottom out of all her past experience, to acquiesce in the unreality of all real things, even of life.

Constance adored life. She had clutched it and been stung by it ; but, in spite of this rebuff, she remained its lover, adoring the wonders which she

never tasted, passionately credulous of charms which she was not permitted to enjoy. The world which lived unconscious of life, as children sit upon the knees of their mother and play indifferently with little toys, never pausing to look into her face; this normal, practical, earning and spending world had always seemed strange to her, its scale of values unreal and remote. She had silently refused to acknowledge that scale of values; the importance of demeanour and propriety, of buying and selling, of food, furniture, games, change of air, and of all the little sterile daily acts. Watching other women in their attitude towards life, she was reminded of persons who, suddenly confronted by a goddess, confine their attention to the fact that she twiddles her thumbs.

But in spite of brave theories, of curiosity, boredom, an eternal readiness for the adventures which so seldom came, she was invaded now by a longing for ordinary trivial, homely things. The instinctive human fear of the unseen had been awakened by the evening's performance. As she walked, she looked for a dog who might be persuaded to lick her hand. She would have liked to gossip with her landlady or struggle for bargains at a sale.

A beggar accosted her, and she, who had few pennies to spare, took out her purse. She made a remark about the weather, eagerly; thirsting for the little contact with humanity which would obliterate the memory of that other contact with something, perhaps, which was not human at all. But the beggar was taciturn. He took the money and went away. Constance's eyes followed him with regret.

The mood of adventure was over, and the reaction had come.

In the midst of her solitary and uncongenial life, which a cultivated scepticism did little to cheer, she had wished so much to open a new door, to satisfy latent but passionate curiosities, add new territory to her domain. Now that wish had departed, leaving behind it the insecure sensations of one who has peeped for a moment through a forbidden door in the ramparts, and obtained from this glimpse a permanent memory of great precipices all about her dwelling-place, of the black gulf and soundless moat below.

She dreaded the four walls of her room, shutting her in to a *tête-à-tête* with her own imagination. Presently she came to those four walls, by way of a grained door and three flights of linoleum-covered stairs. She fumbled for matches, and lighted her duplex lamp. It smelt as usual, in a refreshingly real way. The dingy mantel-border—maroon cloth, with a faded embroidery of old-gold chrysanthemums—further reassured her; but she avoided the mirror, and would have liked to cover it up had it not been that she was afraid of despising herself. Her own contempt was the only humiliation that she could not bear.

Vera's toys lay everywhere. Constance picked up a doll's frock, upon which the child had evidently wiped her mouth after eating bread and jam for tea. Actuality was there, ready to encourage and support its worshipper. She dropped the frock and went to the window; looking out from her empty, bright, and hideous room, which distressed her, into the dim and attractive night.

The soft rain, which was hardly more than a determined dampness, had given a delicate sheen to the sloping roof next her own: and she enjoyed it with that cultivated taste for appearance which is the prerogative of solitary lives. Her rooms, for cheapness' sake, were high up; and the vista was all of slates, parapets, and chimney-pots, delightfully various, full of quaint and unreasonable irregularities, with that character of ruggedness which is peculiar to the tops of things. The moist roof comforted Constance. It gave to her suddenly an image of the whole safe and mighty city enshrouded in a benevolent mist of rain; all the bright eyes of its million houses peering with the utmost assurance into the dusk, all the vivid streaks of trains and trams running in and under its roads without fear or hesitation. That solid, sharply-lit, assertive city was full of living creatures: real ones. It was so compact, so assured, so full of itself, that there could be no room for the invisible populations to creep between its close network of shops and souls.

She heard the jingle of a hansom in the street behind, the scrape and clatter of the hoofs as it drew up. The iron cried, "Real! real! real!" as it struck the ground. Constance knew the sound very well. Once night had fallen, many hansoms came to the house in the street behind. Sometimes the noise, and all that was implied by it, saddened and disgusted her. Now it echoed the beloved music of the town, and brought her an inexplicable sense of companionship and consolation; for years of intensest loneliness had taught her to extract

from human noises, human sights, something of the social warmth for which she often longed. She suddenly found that it was quite easy to turn back into the glaring and solitary room. It, too, was a part of the sheltering town—a cell, her cell, in the great hive—and therefore as friendly to her, as protective as the streets. There was nothing—nothing real—to differentiate this evening from other evenings: no reason why she should not make her cocoa as usual, read a while, and go to bed. She went to the china cupboard, and discovered with vexation that her favourite cup had been used for painting-water and left unwashed. She turned and glanced round the room, searching for further disagreeable results of Vera's activity.

Then she saw near the fireplace a little column of dust, that rose and hung in the air.

She stared at it with the dull and bewildered stare of a backward child who is given a difficult task. It was far beyond her power of assimilation; but she perceived it to be henceforward a part of her life, added to experience by her own act and desire. Her nature rose then, of its own accord, to meet it; as usually happens when the great things of life break abruptly upon the soul. She was not particularly astonished. She was hardly afraid.

She began to walk up and down the room, trying to argue with herself; recalling to her remembrance all that she had ever read upon self-suggestion and hallucination. These considerations, however, wore a hopelessly academic air, and brought no conviction with them. At intervals her mind returned with a jerk to the actualities of the moment, and she glanced

hastily and furtively at the corner of the room. Always the cloud of dust hung in the air.

She knew it in her heart to be a sign of life, of something that would communicate with her if it could. She felt it there, as lonely and as curious as herself; but she was not softened by its need. She set her whole will as a barrier against its coming: she was determined to ward off this horrible companionship, which pressed towards her with a certain wistfulness, like some desperate and desolate creature exiled in a foreign town. She felt the assault of its desire, and resisted with all her strength. The room grew cold as she stood there with clenched hands and rigid knees. This time she recognized the symptom as one that was proper to her state.

Then the little grey thing wavered and leaned towards her. It was like a sudden sally from an invested citadel. Constance wavered too, and knew the battle to be lost. She screamed, and was not even ashamed of herself.

There was an answering scream from the next room. Vera cried out: "Tanta, Tanta, what's the matter? I wants you! It's dark, and I'm awake."

She went to the child—herself the more terrified, the more childlike. She, too, was awake in the dark, and accepted with gratitude the comforting presence of a fellow-victim. There was a feeble gas-jet in the passage, and by its light Vera's small dark face, convulsed with fear, was discernible as a shadowy patch amongst the tossed bed-clothes.

Constance gathered the little warm body on to her lap. It shook with the terror of an animal which scents panic in its neighbourhood. She said with

unusual tenderness: "What is the matter, my little one?" for the spur of fear had touched her human instincts on the quick.

Vera cried: "Oh, I don't know; but it's dark—it's dreadful. And I heard a boggy scream in my alone."

"There are no bogies, darling. You were dreaming." As she said it she wished that it were true.

Vera curled herself tightly against the broad, firm shoulder. "You hold me tight, and then they won't come," she said.

Constance, sitting in the darkness on the uncomfortable bedroom chair, with the child's heavy body in her arms, the querulous little voice in her ears, saying: "Hold me tight! You mustn't go—you shan't!" wished that she might thus sit for ever, with the protective influence of the flesh between her and the invading foe. It was a new sensation; for Vera was not an attractive child, and her many claims upon attention had never included a sentimental appeal. She seemed to present no promise of a future womanhood; but rather, in some elusive way, a condensed history of those animal natures through which her spirit had presumably climbed on its way towards life. The squat stature, the heavy limbs, the lowering brow, the wide and formless mouth, were adapted to be the agents of instinct rather than of character; and instinct, elemental appetites and uncontrolled passions, had already sealed them.

But at this moment Constance forgot these things. She looked at the clumsy little body with a new eagerness, a new possessive sense. She cuddled it against her bosom, concentrated on its helplessness, its happy ignorance, its warmth. By her own act,

her own arrogant curiosity, strangeness and terror had been admitted to her universe. They must not be permitted to infect this scrap of life which was in her keeping. She perceived that she must endure them alone; must never entertain company in that dreadful room of windows which looked out upon the timeless, spaceless wilds. Everything, after all, had to be attempted and endured alone, once childhood was past. The hive-like city of a myriad cells, which seemed so social and so warm, was really a city of a myriad prisons. Each inhabitant in some unendurable hour, when the view from the windows was too clear, the solitude of the four walls too keen, would fling himself, as she had done, upon the door: to find that an inexorable hand had turned the key.

But in some of the cells two were shut together; and they protected one another from the impact of solitude and fear, so that the prison straightway became a home. There was no one who would do this for her; no one in all the world to whom she could tell her adventure, to whom she could appeal for the sheltering love, the dear human presence, the foolish comforting platitudes of common sense.

She had got to see it out; and when she had seen it out, no one would know, no one would blame her curiosity, admire her courage. This fact added to the old monotonous loneliness in which she had lived so long a new and bitter sense of isolation.

Vera was quickly comforted. Soon she fell asleep. Constance put her into bed very gently, left a lighted candle and a chocolate cream by her side, and returned to the sitting-room. As she entered, she glanced quickly towards the corner; but the

column of dust was not there. She was reassured, and shut the door softly.

Then she perceived that there was a figure sitting by the fireplace. It was, perhaps, less a figure than a form : an impressionist sketch of humanity, without detail and without sex. That unnerved her, and she shrank with beating heart against the closed door, hid her face with her hands, and stayed in that comforting and self-imposed darkness for a period which seemed to have no relation to ordinary intervals of time.

At last she heard within her mind the sad and wailing voice which had first attacked her in the bookshop ; but it had lost its original accent of fear and grief. It said : " If they are all cowards, what am I to do ? And how shall I ever understand ? "

Because she could not endure the taunt of cowardice, even from a voice which she suspected was her own, she raised her head and looked again. Then she saw two brilliant, wild, and hungry eyes, which gazed into hers from the recesses of some alien life that had caught them in its folds.

She said : " Ah, what are you ? What have I done ? " And again the silent voice replied : " You know. "

She exclaimed : " No ! I do not understand. "

It seemed to her that it was a sad and lost thing which answered her with difficulty, and picking its way, as it were, amongst the strange periods of a foreign tongue.

It said : " Nor do I ; but I think that you have got to see me as a shape, as something which has a limiting edge, because otherwise you will not let me

enter your experience. You are dreaming so deeply that you cannot recognize spirit unless it enters into the unreasonable illusions of your dream. So I must attack your consciousness on its ordinary earthly plane; because I *will* get in, I *will* know, I have got to understand."

She cried out suddenly: "Oh, it isn't real! It can't be real!"

The voice said: "No. A picture built of your dream-stuff, that is all. But do not be deceived; all pictures represent realities. I am here, within the appearance, as you are there within your clothes. What does the shape matter? It is only a little dust."

But there was no one sitting by the fire.

She exclaimed in her astonishment: "I thought I saw!"

And there was again a voice that replied: "And you think you know, and you think you feel. What strange and meaningless dreams!"

Then the last scrap of courage deserted her, and she seized the lamp and fled ingloriously from the room. But she turned at the door, and looked swiftly and furtively at the corner by the fireplace, from which she fled. It was a coward's glance, and met a coward's retribution. There was a little eddy of dust that rose from the floor and hung suspended in the air.

Constance undressed hastily, and lay wakeful, with Vera held tightly in her arms.

CHAPTER IV

THE DAY'S WORK

“Petit à petit, il a pénétré un plus grand nombre d'éléments psychiques, les teignant pour ainsi dire de sa propre couleur ; et voici que votre point de vue sur l'ensemble des choses vous paraît maintenant avoir changé.”—BERGSON : *Les Données Immédiates de la Conscience*.

THIS one rift in the solid stuff out of which she had built her universe, this hateful and inconsistent thing which her senses reported, left Constance poised solitary in the midst of terrific spaces. All that she called reality had been shattered, and only consciousness remained as a certain fact.

She had seen, abruptly, the insecurity of those defences which protect our illusions and ward off the horrors of truth. She had found a little hole in the wall of appearance ; and, peeping through, had caught a glimpse of that seething pot of spiritual forces whence, now and then, a bubble rises to the surface of things. There were beings there—living, and full of horror because devoid of shape. She had opened a door for them, and now they could press in on her ; and she, loathing their companionship, could not resist. All her robust and eager enjoyment of life

fled from her. It was not real any more. Only that invisible and intangible eternity behind the shadow-show was real; that, and its detestable inhabitants.

She had one consolation. She felt herself to be unique in so perceiving the true proportion of things. Many teachers, she knew, had referred to it; but she shared the conviction of all other tasters of supreme experience that no one had seen reality face to face before. It made this poor visible life seem futile, its discipline absurd; yet she was immersed in that life, and it pressed in on her, forcing itself on her attention in a peculiarly exasperating way. There were mysteries all about her, strange companions, a knowledge of some actual and densely-populated world here, at hand, penetrating her own body perhaps, as well as all objects of her thought. Yet Vera's bath must be faced every morning, and the shop, that little universe, where souls and bodies were but the material for a profitable distribution of the real things—cloth, leather, paper and ink. This state of things constituted a paradox which would have been amusing had it not been personal. As she went to business in the morning, automatically dodging the motor-omnibuses, staring out of her dream in amazement at the people who surged up in her path, all hurrying and all unreal, she repeated to herself continually: "I have got to go on! I have got to go on!"

She came to the bookshop at the moment in which the last of the shutters ran up with a bang, disclosing a window in which Constance was accustomed to take a certain professional pride. She gave it as she

entered the scrutinizing glance which a good housewife bestows on the drawing-room curtains as she goes up her garden-path. The window was wide and uncrowded; the loving amplitude of a museum, not the tightly-packed practicalities of trade. It was never without its MS. of the Decretals, its Flemish herbal, open at a page at once decorative and decorous, Burton's "Arabian Nights" placed discreetly in the background, a cover in tooled Levant from the Doves Bindery, or one or two of the rarer products of the Kelmscott Press. Within, topography and scandalous chronicles jostled the ancients very comfortably upon the shelves. There were also a few high-class remainders, and several piles of cheap reprints; for Lambton's was one of the many establishments which stand, Janus-faced, between culture and commerce. One corner was devoted to current literature: reviewers' copies, often uncut and always very cheap.

Two tables stood in the wide space between the bookshelves. On one Mr. John Lambton arranged a permanent exhibition of book-lovers' trinkets: limited editions, pocket classics, neatly-boxed marvels of limp lambskin and rough calf. Thomas à Kempis in twenty different dresses—all worldly; the wisdom of the East in American spelling; or the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," clothed with a chaste absurdity in white. The other table, which was smaller, held large unreadable colour books, a few works on Italian painters, and new copies of such novels as Constance felt that cultured and bookish people ought to read.

She looked up as she entered at the tight-ribbed

rows of books on the shelves; little nests of words, bewilderingly various. They were gay in the morning light, and wide awake. She stared at them, as one stares at abnormal shapes; seeing them no longer as concrete things, but as odd agglomerations of line and surface.

Little nests of words! Ideas, those evanescent, wandering things, caught and tucked up in paper; as unruly children are tucked up in bed. To open a book, and let the soul of it gush out like perfume, invading, overwhelming the mind; this was a daily miracle, and she the purveyor of such miracles! She had never thought of it before; but at this moment the mystery of it swept her, and with it amazement that one should thus sell thoughts for money, since thoughts were real and money was not. How inconceivable an act, to communicate the dream which came from the heart of Dante in three volumes limp green leather for six shillings net! In the face of this and all other paradoxes of her concrete life, she was suddenly infected with an unworldly bewilderment. She looked out with astonished vision on an incredible earth. All things were made new; for it seemed that she had abruptly acquired the innocence of eye which we snatch so easily from our children, to give back so tardily and incompletely to our artists, poets, and saints.

She took off her hat, assumed her blue linen overall, and sat down at her desk. The mirror was opposite to her. She raised her eyes, saw it, and at once the scene of the past night was re-created for her: the dusk and solitude, all the ceremonial absurdities, the perfumed smoke which had ascended

like a white pillar, that other pillar of grey and shivering dust which had arisen from the floor, the urgent and tormented voice that had addressed itself to no earthly ear. Fire and all the eternities evoked in a bookshop—in that prison of a myriad cells! The tangible and intangible worlds were swept up together, in one heap of confused experience, like the surging clouds in a crystal-gazer's ball. But it was the invisible side that seemed homely and possible of comprehension; the visible that was alien and remote. When she questioned herself she found nothing, save the nervous upheaval caused by her late experience, to account for this state of things. She was amazed by her own topsy-turvy condition, conscious of it, and interested in it. But she seemed to have lost the useful art of taking things for granted. She stared at the strange new world of unmeaning colour and shape, and wondered why it should exist at all.

Then Mr. John Lambton came through the glass door from his private room; and at once Constance became the normal business woman, the useful manager, the prudent and cultivated bibliophile. Mr. John held a catalogue in his hand. He was going to ask her advice; a circumstance much dreaded by Miss Tyrrel, since it often compelled her to exhibit an intellectual superiority which prudence advised her to keep for the sole use of her customers. It is one thing to bandy Horace with old gentlemen, and another to improve inadvertently upon your employer's Latin pronunciation.

Mr. Lambton had engaged Constance because an assistant who knew something about literature had

become necessary to his peace of mind. He was one of those unfortunate persons whose short sight and aquiline nose suggest a culture which their conversation cannot endorse. In such a superior class of business as that of Lambton and Sons this was particularly inconvenient; for Elzevirs in the window are held to imply erudition behind the counter. There was scarcely a day in which some customer did not embark upon a conversation which Mr. John was obliged to terminate in a sudden and sometimes tactless way. The thing came to a head on the morning upon which a disgusted liturgiologist found Dugdale's "Monasticon" and Haeckel's "Monism" side by side on the shelf labelled "R.C. Theology." Mr. John, stung by his client's contemptuous glance, alarmed by his immediate exit, felt that the services of a well-educated inferior had become no less necessary to commercial prosperity than to personal comfort and self-respect.

Miss Tyrrel, then, found herself obliged to maintain a carefully subsidiary position, whilst keeping a vigilant eye upon her employer's bibliographical aberrations. She was rather glad to find that on this morning he wished to consult her about nothing more recondite than the "Romaunt of Syr Gawayne," the large-paper edition of which had just gone into remainder. Mr. John thought that it could be sold very profitably at one-and-six, and he observed that it was a fine large book for the money, and if cased in velvet calf, with ribbon ties, would be singularly suitable for presentation.

"You had better send an order to-day," he said, "or else one of the other big houses will go and buy

the lot. When they come, get them bound up and put aside for the Christmas season. They'll fetch half a guinea then."

"But I think it's only a facsimile of the Burdett MS.," answered Constance—"not at all a book for general circulation: Middle English, very difficult to make out, and a good deal of curious matter in the notes."

Mr. John replied: "All the better. Looks cultured, medieval, and so on. People don't want to read the books they give away."

Constance wrote out the order in a spirit of disgusted obedience, and then remembered how little such things mattered to one who had attained to the superb generalizations which characterized her present view of life. This view had departed from her at Mr. John's entrance; now it began to encroach by slow steps upon her orderly and busy mind. She was enfranchised from that carefulness about many bibliographical things which usually obsessed her from nine till seven; but she had only cast off one set of chains to assume another.

It was gradually borne in on her that her senses were no longer quite her own; there was a Thing which used them, and she participated in that use, but could not control it. She leaned, as it were, over the shoulder of a new inhabitant, and peeped out of the window with him. So peeping, she recognized a fellow-victim of that impassioned curiosity, that cold lust of knowledge, which had urged her to all the adventures of her life. It seemed as though she, out of the whole phenomenal world, had attracted her antitype in the world of reality. When she turned

inwards and asked the persistent Presence, "Why are you here?" he, using perforce the language with which his hostess provided him, could only answer, "I want to know!" All through life that had been her own need. She respected it.

Presently a customer, who had been prowling happily in the recesses of the shop, approached with a copy of Balzac's "Contes Drolatiques." He had unearthed it from the dark corner where those books which are catalogued "curious" were usually kept, and was turning it over with interest. Seeing a young woman behind the desk, he hesitated; but reflected that shop-girls share with nurses a certain immunity from the ordinary decencies of life, and came boldly on.

"This," he said, "seems a very quaint, uncommon sort of book—most amusing, too. But it's—well, distinctly, don't you know?"—he thought for a moment, came to the conclusion that his French was bound to be better than hers, and added firmly, "*lubrique.*"

Constance, hardly readjusted to West London ideals, answered him calmly and vaguely:

"He writes entirely from the medieval standpoint: puts everything down, of course, just as it really happens, without leaving out the usual things. But there's nothing uncommon in it really—nothing but life. The costume is different, and the people are quite candid, that is all. Modern married life in the suburbs is just as"—she was determined to give him his word again—"just as *lubrique.*"

The customer looked at her with surprise, and with a noticeably joyous anticipation, but her smooth black

hair and solid figure did not suggest pleasantries. She added immediately :

“That copy is twelve-and-six. It’s in a very good state, and has all the Doré illustrations. I can give you another, with the margins rather cut down, for seven shillings, if you like ; but it isn’t such good value for the money.”

The customer thanked her, and said that he would think it over. He left the book lying on the desk, and Constance carefully reinterred it in its dark corner, returned to her ledger, and glanced at the clock. It was after half-past twelve, and a quarter to one was the hour of the Mid-day Friend.

Every prosperous bookshop has its gang of prowlers, who pay their footing by a purchase once in a while, but have their real commercial value for the establishment in the fact that they stimulate the prowling instincts of other passers-by. These may be persons of a nicer conscience than your true adept of the business, and feel that each delicious loiter and surreptitious bout of reading must be paid for, if only from the penny box. The conscientious prowler, however, tends with the passing months to join the more professional and less lucrative class. It was the distinction of the Mid-day Friend that he had moved in the opposite direction.

In that slow, unnoticed way which is peculiar to great constitutional changes, his visits had ceased to be an accident and had become an institution. There had been first the involuntary glance at the wide and open entrance as he passed, and then the momentary lingering to read a title or so, and then the day on which he had entered the shop in chase

of a colour book whose vivid charms had forced it into remainder a little before the usual time. He had turned it over, looking with admiration at the blue trees and orange castles, and the purple-margined peasants silhouetted against greenish skies. Then he had put it down with a sigh.

"I'm afraid I must not take it," he said. "The truth is, my wife doesn't like these books, and it vexes her to see them lie about. You see, she has made our house very artistic—whitewash, and all that."

This statement at once aroused sentiments of interest and pity in Constance; delightful and stimulating emotions which her customers seldom provoked. She conceived of this blunt, square, bullet-headed man, wholesomely animal, poised uncomfortably upon sparse and tasteful furniture; his very weight and virility an offence, his broad-toed boots always in the way. The constant society of a wife who condemned all that one thought ingenious and beautiful seemed a more lonely business than her own solitary lodgings, where there was, at any rate, no one to set up irksome and exclusive canons of taste.

On his next visit she learned that his name was Andrew: a circumstance mentioned in connection with Scotland, the national thistle, and the animals which feed thereon. This form of humour seemed a relief to him. She divined that it was not permitted at home. She had laughed with such evident good-humour and enjoyment that he could hardly fail to index her as the sort of woman who understands and appreciates a man. He bought a book. On the next day he returned and bought another,

with a pathetic air of trying to make his visits worth her while. In a week they seemed intimate friends.

Upon this morning Constance looked forward almost hungrily to Andrew's visit. She turned towards the idea of his solid and unimaginative personality with that instinct for a counter-irritant which causes us to seek out our least appropriate acquaintances in seasons of grief. He did not want to be spiritual, he did not want to think. She saw at this moment much to commend in such a point of view. She loved her body, honoured it deliberately as the medium of all great experience. The Mid-day Friend took the body seriously; was interested in the clothes which it wore, the games that were good for it, the things that one gave it to eat. His own body was excellently groomed, warm, efficient, and compact. He would have been shocked and puzzled by the suggestion that it really had something in common with a column of dust; for outside the pages of the Burial Service such metaphors were clearly morbid and absurd.

He came. His "Morning, Miss Tyrrel. Hope you're well. Beastly weather we're having!" at once satisfied her craving for honest ordinariness. But, to her surprise, he did not fidget in the usual way; flick the pages of the second-hand novels, or otherwise try to find a reason for his presence. He walked without hesitation towards the bookshelves, and she found herself following him in the subdued but attentive attitude of the expert saleswoman. For once, it appeared, there was a definite object in his visit.

"It's my wife's birthday," he said. "Forgot all

about it till I'd left the house this morning. Rather awkward! I must take something home. She's a curious woman, you know—childish in a way, as many are, although clever. Doesn't like these little things passed by. Seems to me I may as well give her a book as anything else. She reads a good deal: the right sort of thing, of course. It occurred to me that you'd be able to find me something she would like. It had better be thoroughly up to date or else quite old-fashioned; anything in between is no good."

Constance successively suggested "Neolithic Pantheism"; "Southern Siberia: the Home of the Soul"; and "The Duty of Duties: Development of Self"; but he thought that she was sure to have read all those. He wandered from one table to another, picking up books with an uncertain hand. She liked the air of manly helplessness with which he confronted an intellectual choice. Clearly, it was important that he should avoid any mistake.

"Women are queer," he said. "One doesn't understand 'em. Not that one wants to, for that matter; but it's more comfortable not to do the wrong thing if one can help it."

"If they really are women—just that—you can't do the wrong thing, can you?"

"That's it!" said Andrew eagerly. "That's what one wants 'em to be, of course. But they never are nowadays—at least, not in our set. Don't seem to understand what men want. Oh, very nice to us, do their duty, and so on, of course. I'm not saying anything. But clever, and always worrying about it; as if brains in women were a sort of disease. I

beg your pardon! Beastly of me. I forgot. Really, you let me come chatting to you, and sometimes one's tongue runs on."

Constance was aware of something which picked up these utterances, looked at them curiously, and laid them by with a helpless air of non-comprehension. But she resisted its companionship, expelled it as it were from the neighbourhood of her mind, and concentrated her will upon Andrew and his interests. His robust humanity called out hers to meet it. He found her, on this morning, peculiarly sympathetic; and never suspected that her unusual proximity of spirit was due rather to the repulsive powers of another than to his own attractive force.

He was greatly pleased by an expensive copy of Browning's "Christmas Eve," printed in illegible Gothic type, with fantastic bloomers, and bound in naked millboards held together by linen braid.

"The binding," he said, "is just right for our drawing-room—so bare and simple—couldn't be better. But she wouldn't read it; and I doubt if she'd even let it lie about. You see, Browning, from what I hear, is just a bit gone by in our set; and old-fashioned books are worse to them than last year's clothes. Quaint, isn't it, the way things come and go? When we were first married, you know, she got quite depressed because I couldn't stick him; and now he goes on the top shelf, with Ruskin and George Eliot and Carlyle."

He was standing by her desk; and having laid down the blatantly austere "Christmas Eve," he picked up a shabby duodecimo and began to flick its

leaves, gently and indifferently, as he talked. It was the "Grand Grimoire."

"Now here," he said presently, "is a very rummy little thing! I wonder if that would do? I shall be late for lunch if I don't find something soon. What is it? Magic, eh? That's quite a notion. A bit out of the common, I suppose. She's not likely to have seen one before?"

"Hardly. They are getting very scarce. This is the first copy we have had for years."

He gazed vaguely at the queer woodcuts and strange garbled recipes, as precise and unemotional as a cookery-book.

"Queer notions those old chaps had! Look here: 'To evoke the spirit of an angel, the magic circle being drawn and the altar of incense prepared——!' God bless my soul—what next? First catch your angel, eh? Oh, I'll take this; it will just suit Muriel. She's keen on spooks and things, and she hates the point of view of modern science. Not much modern science here!"

Constance answered: "On the contrary, if you know how to read its formulæ, this *is* modern science, and the things that modern science hasn't yet got to."

"Oh, come!" said Andrew, humouring her. "Modern science, you know, is practical, experimental, constructive, and so on."

"Well, so is this. It is just a series of scientific experiments; nothing else. And they are real enough and practical enough for those who know how to perform them, goodness knows! Other people, of course, will find it about as enlightening

as a collection of chemists' prescriptions; and about as dangerous, too, if they go meddling without authority."

"Yes, but vampires and spells and salamanders, you know!" insisted Andrew. "They're all here, taking themselves quite seriously. You're not going to tell me those are scientific facts, are you? We mayn't know much, but we are jolly well sure *they* don't exist."

"You can't prove a negative."

"God bless my soul—what next?" said Mr. Vince for the second time. Within his own mind, he added: "She seemed such a sensible woman, too."

He felt puzzled for a moment, and slightly disheartened. It was the first time that they had disagreed. Then the word "angel" suddenly occurred to him, and suggested that the queer little book might perhaps have something to do with religion, though it seemed on the surface to have more in common with Maskelyne and Cooke. There were so many new religions now. No doubt Miss Tyrrel affected one of them—a circumstance which would explain her peculiar attitude at once. She might even be a Romanist; they believed a lot of very curious things. He became shy and careful; for it was an axiom with him that one should never disturb women's religion. They required it, poor creatures!

As for Constance, she asked herself with temper: "What on earth can have made me play the fool, and talk to him in that idiotic way? For two pins I should have told him the whole affair. Of course, he is disgusted now, and thinks I am a

superstitious rotter; and very likely that is what I am!"

Her manner became constrained and business-like, confirming his suspicion that he had somehow shocked her by mistake. He paid for the Grimoire, and retired in a mood of contrition. Constance wrapped it up in brown paper, and tied thin green string about it, with a certain relief. She still had a vague idea that in the absence of all exciting suggestions, it might be possible to banish the humiliating memory of her experiment, and of the tiresome hallucinations which it had induced.

But the protective influence of humanity seemed to have departed with her friend; and a puzzled voice, which she was learning to recognize, murmured in her ear: "It is all so very funny, but *what* does it mean?"

And once more she looked out on a world which had become strange to her—inconceivable, grotesque.

CHAPTER V

A DOMESTIC INTERIOR

“How much more dulcet the *dulcis Amaryllidis ira*, when Amaryllis knows Sophocles and Hegel by heart!”
—COVENTRY PATMORE: *Religio Poeta*.

ANDREW VINCE entered the drawing-room carefully. The floor was highly polished, and the one small rug, which always skated before his advancing feet, added to its deceptive qualities. There was a purple sofa near the window, a closed cupboard in one corner. Four large fat cushions were arranged upon the floor. The walls were white. There were no curtains and no pictures.

Mrs. Vince—who would have resembled a Dominican nun dressed by Liberty had it not been for the masses of healthy-looking yellow hair which she wore, with becoming austerity, in a coronal plait—sat upon one of the cushions, and spoke with her accustomed earnestness about nothing in particular. She had applied to the uses of society the journalist’s trick of skimming things with an air of intensity, and many men called her a wonderful little woman. “The blue butterfly,” one of them had said of her; but this unusually irreverent epigram had been

generally condemned, though constantly repeated, in her set.

A member of this set lounged before the fire and listened to her hostess's conversation. She, like Muriel, seemed at first sight too healthy to be eccentric; tall and pretty, with a mature and comfortable prettiness that suggested an easy disposition and an absence of tiresome ideals. If Muriel was the butterfly of her circle, Phœbe Foster was its bumble-bee. She was prosperous, and dressed well; believing that luxurious surroundings and an ample diet constituted as fine a discipline for the modern soul as the tedious simplicities of the cloister or its agnostic equivalent; the workman's dwelling adapted to the use of ladies living alone. "Anyone," she said, "could be spiritual with self-denial, boiled vegetables, and the 'Lives of the Saints'; but it is much more difficult to feel that you are resting on Eternity when there is a brocaded cushion in between."

She was speaking of purity as Andrew entered; and one feels it to be characteristic of her point of view that she did not think it necessary to change the conversation.

"One is obliged," she was saying, "to leave the static conception, the mere idle chastity, behind. Where, otherwise, would be Woman's value to the race? *The courtesan is a heretic, the nun is an atheist.* Do you remember?"

"Purity in wifhood!" answered Mrs. Vince, with the gentle didacticism appropriate to her youth "Spiritual eugenics! That must, of course, be our ideal. To bear one or two children of beautiful

character, and shed an atmosphere of peace upon the home."

Andrew, fresh from the tossing current of the streets, the eager war with other brains which made up his daily work, felt that there was something chill and horrible in the peaceful grey light which came through the curtainless windows, the peaceful spaces of white walls and polished floor, and the arrogant prattle of these women who sat safely ensconced as in a fortress, protected from life and truth by the earnings of the men whom they despised. It threw him back upon himself, as sudden entrance into a refrigerator forces the organism to draw heavily on its stock of latent heat. Domesticity, for him, had been drawn in outline, with a pen of exaggerated refinement. Its convention was excellent, its design was complete, but it still awaited the warm tints which should give it the semblance of life.

However, the place was his, after all. He spread his coat-tails, sat down deliberately upon the purple sofa, checked its recoil by planting his heels firmly on the floor, and said, "Where's the boy?"

The ladies looked at one another, and Muriel rang the bell twice. The child who came in response to it was fair and languid, as if the forces which brought him to birth had wearied before the end of their task. He ran to his mother, and leaned against her with a pretty gesture of abandonment. His hair was a little too long, his socks were a little too short. His smile, if a trifle superior, was seraphic.

Vince said to his son, "Well, Felix, what have you been doing to-day?"

The boy answered, "Bits of poetry and rhythmy things, of course;" and his mother put her arm about him, as if she felt competent, at any rate, to protect her child from the cruder follies of fatherhood and the degrading influences of an ordinary education. One of his hands was within hers: with the other, he began to trace the course of the black embroidery which ran over her white dress. His touch was dainty and bird-like. He and his mother appeared to be wholly content. They had forgotten Vince's presence.

Phœbe Foster said to him politely, "Felix loses none of his prettiness. He is quite a little angel still."

She spoke in a discreet and social murmur, and neither the child nor his mother caught the words.

Andrew replied, "Perhaps; but he's getting rather beyond the angelic stage now. He's got to be a boy before long, drat him! That means coming to terms with Old Nick as well as with Gabriel, you know." His intonation was quite clear, and his intention no less so when he added, "He will be ready for the preparatory school in another year or two, and then it's good-bye to poetry and long hair. Takes a man to make a man. I sometimes think you ladies don't quite know what a male thing means."

"We know—some of us—what it ought to become," said Phœbe gently.

It was noticeable that whilst Andrew's entrance had only introduced constraint, that of Felix had

brought with it a sense of active hostility. Already camps were formed. The glove had been thrown down, and a little encouragement would set the combatants to work. Miss Foster rose and said good-bye. She loved tranquillity, and believed that she had a right to it.

Andrew was now left with a forced option. He could either change the conversation or continue it. Silence was impossible, for he did not live in his wife's universe. He therefore took the "Grand Grimoire" from his pocket, and wished her, rather tardily, many happy returns of the departing day.

Muriel accepted the little old book very graciously. She had a keen sense of duty: and except in moments of intellectual collision, always treated her husband with kindness. Also, in spite of herself, she was pleased and excited by the unusual nature of his gift.

"This is quite interesting!" she said. "Only the other day someone was speaking to me about auto-suggestion and will-power, and the place which they occupied in medieval magic. It is going to be an important subject, from the point of view of historical psychology: which is most interesting, of course. But I am rather surprised that you——"

Felix, still leaning against her knee, anticipated her, exclaiming, "Fancy Father finding such a queer little thing as that!" He would have pulled it away, but his mother kept it within her own hands, holding it open firmly and cruelly: the gesture of a person who feels that her act of reading is far more important than any domestic sanctities which may happen to pertain to the thing read.

She pressed back the covers until the new morocco hinges gave the despairing squeak of a stout lady compelled to unsuitable athletics; and said—
“Look, Felix! This will interest you. That’s called a colophon, and those are woodcuts. Are they not rough and funny? That’s the way that people first began to make the pictures for their books.”

Peace might have reigned in the room, for Muriel was always amiable when she was imparting information; but Felix, watching the turning of the small torn brownish pages, suddenly arrested the process, and broke the spell by planting a beautifully clean little finger on the middle of a leaf.

“What’s that?” he said.

Muriel’s serenity departed. Felix had asked a question which she could not answer; an objectionable and unheard-of situation, for which Andrew and his extraordinary present must certainly be blamed. She was silent.

Vince said cheerfully, “What have you got hold of, old boy?”

Felix began to read aloud, carefully, syllable by syllable, “‘Vaychen stimulamaton y ezpares Tetragrammaton oryoram irion esytion existion eryoma!’”

“It is a spell, darling,” said his mother.

“Sounds like one of my rhythmy things,” answered Felix: and Andrew laughed in a hearty and irritating way.

“Modern education,” he said, “does not seem to be so very modern, after all! I was told to-day that this thing was full of modern science and the

things that science has not got to yet; and it really begins to look rather like it."

"Who told you that?"

"The woman from whom I bought it."

"But what does it *mean*?" said Felix anxiously.

Andrew replied, "If you want to know what it means, I fancy that you will have to ask Mummie to take you to see the lady who sold me this book. She knows all about everything."

"So does Mummie," answered Felix. "And I don't like ladies; they talk so. Oh, Mummie, *what* does it mean?"

Muriel left the question on one side, and spoke directly to her husband: "Where did you pick it up?" she said.

"Oh, at a second-hand bookshop that I pass on my way to the office."

"What made you get it? Was it in the window?"

"No. I look in now and then," said Andrew grudgingly. He began to feel that he might as well have given her the Shorter Catechism at once.

Muriel became almost interested. "You look in?" she exclaimed. "At a bookshop? What an extraordinary idea!"

"I like a novel to read with my lunch sometimes," explained Vince.

Muriel replied indifferently, "Oh, I see; I thought as they had things like this, it must be a *good* bookshop."

"All sorts," said Andrew, "doggy books, travels, Kipling, Corelli, and so on: and rows of these old brown things at the back, all looking as if they'd been dug out of a mousy cupboard."

“And this woman? She sounds rather interesting. Does she keep it?”

“No. She’s the manager. Curious thing: she’s quite a lady—educated, nice manners. I suppose the poor creature was left badly off and didn’t find a husband. Bad luck! Must be over thirty now, but she is a fine woman still. We’ve got quite chummy one way and another. It makes a bit of a change for her, I dare say, to have a little chat now and then.”

Muriel sprang from the middle classes, and had the eye for minute social detail and all that is implied by it which is peculiar to this caste. She thought quickly and automatically, “If this girl really finds it interesting to chat with a man like Andrew, she cannot be *quite* a lady.”

Felix had been amusing himself with the Grimoire, and now offered another passage for interpretation.

“What is an Undine?” said he.

Muriel answered, “It is a very beautiful story which you shall read when you have grown a bigger boy.”

“No, it’s not a story; it’s a thing, and you say prayers to it,” replied Felix. “There’s one in here. How funny! Raymond Percy says prayers too; but I don’t think they are about Undines. Shall I say prayers when I’m a bigger boy?”

“No, dear; it will not be necessary,” said his mother. “Your little soul has been nurtured from birth. It will, I hope, expand like a flower by its own innocent strength.”

Felix recognized the language and remembered his supper; a slice of bread and butter with brown

sugar on it, which an old-fashioned and affectionate nurse administered at half-past six o'clock.

"Please, may I go back to the nursery?" he said. "Good-night, Father. Do you know, Mummie, Raymond has got a lovely rocking-horse now, and a little runny train, as well as prayers?"

"Why on earth don't you let the child have some toys?" said Andrew when his son had gone away. There was almost a growl in his voice.

Muriel answered him gravely and patiently. "I have told you, Andrew," she said, "that the child's training must be left wholly in my hands if I am to undertake it at all. At this point, a divided influence would be fatal. He has his poetry-books and dancing and his singing-games; the newest authorities are agreed that those are the proper agents for the development of the subconscious mind. They awake the sense of joy, which has no rational relation to tin soldiers and mechanical ships. Such toys only enchain the imagination, and cause children to attach too much importance to material things."

"Poor little beasts! It's rather rough luck to be a modern child."

Muriel suddenly smiled at him, with an aggravating and invulnerable radiance that seemed to break from within. "I won't argue with you," she said. "We speak to one another from such different planes that it is useless, and controversy is almost negative in its effects upon the soul. I like the little book; it was dear of you to bring it. It is more interesting to me than you can understand. Tell me more about this woman. What is she like, and how much does she really know about psychic things?"

“Oh, she’s tall—dark—rather solid!” answered Andrew. “Looks as if she did Swedish gymnastics after her bath; that sort of type, don’t you know? Very good teeth and nice complexion——” He caught Muriel’s expression and stopped.

“Don’t you know anything about her that matters?” said his wife patiently.

“Not much. I haven’t a ghost of an idea who her people are, or where she comes from. But she’s all right, don’t you know. One can see that in a second. She was rather queer this morning; a bit upset by the damp weather, perhaps. It must be chilly work in that shop at times, with the door wide open all day. I’d always looked upon her as a bright, business-like sort of woman; full of sense; no frills. But she said some extraordinary silly things about this book.”

Muriel became interested, leaned forward a little, and said, “Tell me.”

“Well, she really seemed almost inclined to take it seriously. Absurd, of course. Can’t think what she was driving at. Said it was like a lot of chemists’ prescriptions; useful to the professional who knew what to do with them, but dangerous to amateurs who didn’t.”

“How curious!” exclaimed Muriel. “She must have an interesting mind. Perhaps she is a practical occultist. One finds them in the most unexpected places: even on the Stock Exchange, I hear.”

“Oh, she’s not such a fool as that.”

His wife hardly heard him. There was a glow of excitement in her eyes. She had caught a glimpse of a transcendental novelty; and, eager for the chase,

entirely forgot to be grateful to the man who had put her on the scent. She said almost peremptorily, "What is the address of the shop?"

Vince gave it to her; he had no alternative. But it seemed a little hard that Muriel, who took so much, should now annex this slight yet singularly satisfactory friendship. No doubt she would subjugate Miss Tyrrel. Few women could resist her; for they all, in Andrew's experience, wished to be clever, and Muriel invariably attributed this quality to those persons who shared her spiritual and educational views. Constance would be taken in hand, patronized, taught to sit on cushions on the floor. She would soon cease to laugh at his jokes.

CHAPTER VI

THREE SORTS OF IGNORANCE

“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.”—BLAKE: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

CONSTANCE stood high upon a ladder, vainly trying to keep pace with the interminable dusting and tidying which mingles domesticity with literature in all well-ordered bookshops. The tightly packed shelves rose like a stratified cliff from floor to ceiling within a few inches of her eyes; and she was poised in the air amongst them, like some climber hung upon the face of a precipice—intent on their service, as is the way with born librarians and bibliophiles. There was something intimate, personal, and homely in her relation with each volume. She loved them, and it pleased her to tend them. The monotony of her occupation induced, mechanically, a feeling of security and peace. It was like knitting raised to the intellectual plane.

Now and again, when a footstep caught her attention and suggested the possibility of an early customer, she turned for a moment and glanced

downwards. Then she obtained an excellent view of the establishment, and also of the landscape which was framed by the open door : a little patch of pavement, some bits of dirty paper in the gutter, the skirts and trousers of pedestrians, the tail tips of the many passing dogs. These, because they were living, moving things, exhilarated her. She longed to touch them and feel their delightful warmth : the exquisite children in white gaiters ; their nurses, who hastened to Kensington Gardens with a novelette peeping under the perambulator rug ; the active, prosperous girls, taking their terriers for a morning walk.

She was alone, and therefore wholly under the dominion of the Watcher. So constant was his presence, so rare were the moments in which she obtained possession of herself, that this state of things had begun to seem almost natural. She was getting accustomed to his point of view ; to the curious mixture of ignorance and arrogance, the breadth and pettiness that he displayed. She regretted her experiment, for his companionship was not pleasant ; and he gave as yet no illumination in return for his lodging. She, as she divined, must teach him the earth : he was busy with his lessons, probing, guessing, questioning all the while. But he had nothing to impart about the heavens in exchange, and this was disappointing. Seeking a greater freedom, she had been caught in a peculiarly exasperating slavery.

But the thing was done. With the fatalism that was an aspect of her general acceptance of life, she acquiesced quietly enough in the queer rearrangement

of things; and this so completely that her outward demeanour was unchanged by it. Mr. John had not even suspected her of neuralgia; much less of demoniac possession. The dust that she was had dignity; it was not easily thrown into turmoil by the breezes of the abyss. She took up her existence and dealt with it day by day, with her old solidity and calm.

Nevertheless, she had had a hard week of it. There was her ordinary work to perform, and the spring publishing season was now upon them. There was Vera to attend at the opening and the close of every day. There were the innumerable small duties, the makings and mendings, letting out of tucks, inserting of clean collars, which wage-earning women can never delegate. These things had always filled the routine side of life to overflowing. Now, there was added to them the entertainment of the sleepless Watcher, whose passionate domination of her senses left her exhausted and bewildered every night. He had a ceaseless eagerness to see, hear, touch, and smell the odd and clumsy world into which he had pushed his way. So her eyes, ears, and hands did the work of two; and whenever her will was dormant for a moment, his seized the helm and drove the tired body on to fresh experience, and the tired mind to fresh interpretation.

There were no more visual hallucinations, no apparent interferences with the laws of external life; only the constant presence of an alien point of view, and of a Self, a Thing, an actual if intangible personality, that put the machinery of her brain to

its own purposes. This personality infected her, gave her a new flavour, a new relation to the other constituents of life; as, when an aromatic herb is introduced into the casserole, its real spirit enters into a permanent union with the chicken. Thus, very often, she hardly knew whether the thoughts she had and the words she said were symbols of the Watcher's ideas or of her own. Already, she had almost forgotten what the dear and natural world had been used to look like, before her powers of perception received this disagreeable twist. Now, unnaturalness had become the standard of reality.

There was only one escape from his overpowering companionship, only one door of return to her true self. When other people entered into communication with her, when life—real life—put in a peremptory claim, and she responded, there was civil war; her will to live struggling with his will to know. Then, if the external forces of life were strong enough, the human drove back the inhuman, and the social, normal Constance emerged with a great sense of relief. But even so, she was always acutely conscious of the besieger at her gates, waiting till the reinforcements should be withdrawn. Then he was back again; unfriendly, egotistical, rather contemptuous. Life, for him, was an odd and interesting exhibition, and she the show-woman. He had a right to her services.

He had recovered from the first horror of his fall, and was prepared to enjoy himself. But he could not understand existence, nor could she explain it; for she had never before noticed that it stood in need of explanation. Violently and passionately he

demanded the grammar of life; and she, who had always spoken the language, of course knew nothing of the rules.

He found some difficulty in trimming perceptions which had been framed for eternity to the narrow outlook of a bookseller's manager in a West-End street. Bit by bit, he was learning the uses of her senses; eagerly practising these new, delightful tricks of sight and hearing on every little object within range. But all manifestations of energy seemed to him to be much upon a level. They were but moments in the movement of the dream: and there was nothing in his idea of things which could help him to distinguish the trivial from the important incidents of life.

Birth and death, trade and traffic, food and clothes, each raised in him astonished curiosity. Hence he assumed, absurdly, that all these new objects of his knowledge must equally and of necessity be worth the knowing; and concentrated eagerly upon the plots of novels, the flavour of food, the very names of the streets, trying to find out the meaning, or—with a more annoying particularity—their use. Worse; when she, or those whom he viewed through her eyes, acted, he presumed a reason for the act. She was helpless before the misconceptions of a creature who applied the standards of the infinite to civilized daily life.

He was amazed by all that he saw: by that love of the aboriginal burrow which constrains the Londoner, whenever possible, to perform the secret operations of storage, cookery, and travel underground: by the teeming streets in which our urban populations are everlastingly content to fidget. He

could not comprehend the incessant pouring to and fro of people by all the spacious highways and plaited alleys. Seen from his universe, they were like mercury scattered on a disc, which runs without reason in a hundred little processions and solitary drops, unites into a formless, wriggling mass, and breaks away again to an unending repetition of the process.

Now, from the top of the ladder, as he caught glimpses of the eternal crawl of women past the shops, the eternal vacant hurry of the men, his questions began to besiege her: came between her and the orderly and satisfying work on which she longed to concentrate her weary mind.

“They are all alive, all conscious, I suppose, these little creatures that I see run by? At least, they like to think that they are alive. But why should they be always on the move? What is the use of it? Are they not *able* to be still? Their bodies first run one way, and then they run the other. I see them do it with a strange determination, as if it mattered a great deal. But it makes no difference, really; does it? They cannot get away yet. Life means staying here, does it not? being glued to the ground? And death means getting away? However much they run about, they cannot get out of the knot until they die. Is this restlessness the beginning of their dying; the creeping of something that is already corrupt?”

Constance answered, “No; it is a proof of their vitality. They cannot rest, cannot be idle, because they are alive and have so many things to do.” She could think of no better explanation.

He retorted at once, "But there are no real things to do. Reality does not change; it is perfect, and very quiet. I have always existed in it, and therefore I know. This activity is a loathsome illusion; it has no relation to the real."

"They think that it has."

"How can they think it? They know about death. They know that they are crumbling all the time."

"They don't think about death. This is life, and they want to live it whilst they can."

"What a foolish and unreasonable wish! Surely one may live, taste life, be in it, even acquiesce in the decay, without the eternal fretfulness of doing things?"

"I do not know," said Constance, "but it seems to be implicit in the game. We are pushed, you know, for the most part. We don't do very much of it ourselves. Perhaps if you played the game you would understand. You see, when these people die, they will leave things behind them; children, perhaps, whom they must set going in life. Humanity is a chain, not a lot of little spots. When people run to and fro, they are pulled by the other links."

"But the children will die in their turn. They will all die. Then they will exist in the Real for ever and ever, without earning or eating or any kind of fuss. Why undertake this weariness and struggle, just to stay a few more hours within the dream? It is so ugly, miserable, and meaningless! Why do they not all try to die as soon as they can? Why do not you try to die—now, at once? Disentangle yourself from the dream?"

Constance replied, to her own surprise, "That is

against the rules." She had not known it before; now, she was certain of it. It was as if he, coming behind, had pushed her on, beyond her normal standpoint as well as his own, till she saw involuntarily things which were yet below his horizon.

"That is comprehensible," said the Watcher; "but if there are rules the game must be real, and there must be a meaning in it. The game that I see with your eyes and your brain is lawless. It has no prize and no object. Nothing happens within it which is real."

Glancing back on her own experience, Constance said, "Real things do happen, even in this corner; but only to one's self. I think that you would hardly notice them; they look so little, so unimportant, to outsiders, compared with the beginning and strange ending of the game."

"But they are hideous, these things," replied the Watcher. "They are like the bubbles of putrescence, which happen and die, but cause nothing, leave no trace. They confuse the game, if there is one; hide the meaning. I suppose it is concealed somewhere beneath the froth of action. If it is there, I must find it. I will, and I shall."

Then Constance suddenly realized that the thing which he was judging so harshly was not Life, the great goddess, but her own life, the little circle of sensation in which she moved and he with her. Seen with a stranger's eye, it was indeed squalid, senseless. She thought with shame of her breakfast table; the dingy, threadbare cloth, which had to last a week in spite of many brown and greasy stains, the smutty, chipped and unpleasant appear-

ance of the milk jug, the smears and the sloppiness, Vera's face when she had finished eating her egg. Then she thought of the dreary streets, and the bookshop, and Miss Reekyn, the next-door milliner, who often offered her a cup of tea. That was really all. Day by day she went round this little ring of experience, with the docility and regularity of a circus horse.

And she offered this to the Watcher, who had been dragged out of infinity by his passionate curiosity, his determination to know that mystery of life which she saw—even from the lodging-house window—as the lustrous and many-coloured garment of her God. This was the thing that, with all her opportunities, with the fierce flame of adventure burning in her heart, she offered to Eternity as her rendering of existence. She was ashamed, feeling herself guilty of a lack of patriotism in that she had shown this foreign guest no better thing.

She said to him suddenly, "Go! Go! find all the wonders, look for the thread. Don't stay in this corner with me."

But he answered, almost in anger, "I cannot go for no one else will receive me; and without a habitation how am I to stay within the dream?"

Her eyes were opened for an instant then. The cliff of books fled far away; and she saw the tideless and everlasting sea of spiritual existence, and Life, like a little iridescent ball of foam, blown across the surface of the waves. She was an infinitesimal bubble in that unsubstantial mass. In an instant it would be dissolved, reabsorbed in the ocean; all its cherished separateness for ever gone. Mean-

while, the Watcher nested within her bubble, and was blown with her over the deeps. She shared in this moment his contemptuous bewilderment, confronted with the little coloured evanescent world of sense, even admitted a hateful doubt when he murmured: "I suppose you *are* alive—real, eternal—somewhere: inside, behind it all? Only caught much tighter than I am, and able to believe in nothing but the dream."

She thought, "Suppose that I were not real? Suppose that I, too, were a dream?" She turned from that vision in horror and fear.

The collector, who had been making up the order-list in the back office, here passed through the shop and said to her, "Torrington's traveller is here, miss; the governor says will you please see him as soon as you are disengaged?"

"Send him in," said Constance; and she descended the ladder with a feeling of gratitude for unexpected rescue from a thickening web.

Mr. John came with the traveller; a bearded, intelligent person carrying a small black bag, who might have been mistaken for an unsuccessful doctor had he looked more convincingly antiseptic.

"I think," said Mr. John to his manager, "that we can do with a dozen of their mixed poets in quarter-vellum?"

"They come three-and-nine apiece if you take a quantity," interrupted the traveller. "Marvellous value. Artistically tooled backs and assorted labels; the best thing our firm has done in presentation poets. You won't regret them. A splendid window line, and safe at five-and-six in this district."

Mr. John threw down the catalogue upon Constance's desk. "Just make a good selling selection, Miss Tyrrel," he said. The action looked dignified, and he knew that it was judicious.

"Burns? Scott? Whittier?" suggested the traveller eagerly.

She shook her head. "No good to us. I'll take Keats two, Shelley two, Milton one. We don't do much in Miltons lately. Browning? Only the earlier works, of course? Oh, yes; I had better have three Robert and one Mrs. Four more to make up the dozen. Put me in some Longfellows; we shall want them for the school prize season later on."

"You're a good buyer, miss," said the traveller grudgingly.

His voice was succeeded by a very sweet and gentle one, which murmured, "See, Felix, that is how they order the books we buy to read. Is it not interesting? This must be the lady whom Father knows, I think. How sad—and how surprising—to find that Longfellow still sells so well!"

"Why?" said Felix.

Muriel answered, "He had bourgeois ideals, darling. You will understand that when you are a bigger boy."

Constance, catching this reply, at once divined a customer of the more fastidious sort, assumed that air of understanding which seemed so sympathetic and was really so business-like, and said in a reassuring tone, "He is not generally read of course, but we have a large educa-

tional connection, and I am obliged to buy for that."

"Nothing, I think," said the lady firmly, "exerts a worse influence on the developing emotions of children than the feebler poetry of the Victorian era. One should give them myth—the myth of all the religions—for religions were invented in the childhood of the world, were they not?"

Miss Tyrrel, whom these statements merely amazed, glanced at the new customer, and was at once wholly subjugated by her appearance; being one of those women for whom the crucial encounter and the overmastering appeal must always come from one of her own sex. As she put it to herself, men were interesting animals, but women mattered most. This brilliant, young, absurd, self-conscious creature, with her serene expression, embroidered dress and artistically unusual hat, was like a pretty novelty suddenly exhibited in the shop-window of life. She revived Constance's drooping belief in the resources of the establishment; so that she at once became interested, wanted the delightful thing, and did not stop to ask the price.

Muriel, who often found it prudent to adopt a deferential tone when speaking to those whom she believed to be her inferiors, now said to her,

"I really ought to apologize for coming in and troubling you like this; and just, I am afraid, at the busy time of the day. But, you see, my husband mentioned you in connection with a very curious little book on magic that he bought here lately. He seemed to think that you would be kind enough to

tell me something about it ; and, in fact, it was he who advised me to come."

She thought, "As Andrew is such a good customer, she will have to be civil to me after that."

As for Constance, she at once perceived that this must be the wife of the Mid-day Friend ; and was amazed that a creature who was at once beautiful, intelligent, and ridiculous could fail to satisfy the demands of any reasonable man. She had pictured Mrs. Vince as austere, flat-waisted, even Early Italian in type. But Andrew evidently possessed a fascinating toy, and would not be content because it refused to be turned into a companion. This was foolish of him. Where he would not play, Constance, whose toy-cupboard life had not furnished very richly, was willing enough to enjoy the opportunity of a game. At this moment she felt a desperate need of something to fall in love with ; something that would restore her lost confidence in the world of sense ; and Muriel, being both silly and pretty, seemed specially adapted to this purpose.

She said, "I think the little book that you mean must be the Grimoire that Mr. Vince bought here a few days ago. I am afraid I cannot tell you very much about that. It was bought in with a number of other old books at a country sale, and has no history."

It was Felix who replied, "We don't want to ask about history, thank you. Mummie knows about that. We've really come because she doesn't know about Undines, and if they are real. You see, it's rather important, because, of course, if they are real,

I shall have to know about them when I'm a bigger boy. Father said you knew about everything."

"My husband," said Mrs. Vince, "is hardly what one would call a bookish man, though he tells me that he often comes here for novels and so on. But I am interested in these subjects; they are most curious, as I dare say you know, from the psychological point of view, and I find few things so satisfying to the intuitive sense as subliminal psychology. I fancied, from what he told me, that you also were a student of psychic things, and of their relation to the mystical and occult."

Constance fell. She did not seriously suppose that Muriel's charming appearance indicated any understanding of transcendental matters; but she was in the mood which makes a shipwrecked man drink sea-water, knowing that it will only induce a more maddening thirst, but unable to resist the momentary consolation. She therefore said, "I told Mr. Vince when he bought the little book that it was not so absurd as it seemed. I am afraid that he thought me very silly and credulous; but evidently you are more inclined to agree with me?"

As she spoke, the troubled movements of the Watcher reminded her that she was dealing disingenuously—even frivolously—with one of the sparsely distributed realities which had enabled him to forge a link between infinity and earth.

"You must not let my husband's remarks annoy you," said Muriel. "All men are materialists; and really, I don't know that one wants them to be anything else. But I do so entirely agree with you! Few things are so absurd as they seem, I think:

and even if they were, one should keep an open mind towards the unseen. In the light of modern thought, we are learning to understand these subjects more and more."

Constance replied, "Modern thought makes no difference, you know, really. The thing is there, and always has been. At the most, we have only given it new names, and invented a new explanation."

"How interesting of you to say so!" exclaimed Muriel. "I see that you are a Medievalist. And you are really inclined to take magic seriously? You believe that the old occultists were justified in the claims that they made? That there is something in it beyond self-suggestion and hypnosis?"

"I don't believe," said Constance, "because I know. It's the people who don't know who have to try and believe: and I should think they would find it rather difficult."

She stopped; but it was too late. Muriel, whom unorthodox dogmatism always delighted, invited her to tea with enthusiasm. The astonished voice of the Watcher cried in its turn, "Go, go!" and Constance, amazed by the suddenness of the event, consented.

As they left the shop, Felix said to his mother, "Mummie, I think this is a new kind of lady."

Muriel misunderstood him. "Darling," she answered, "lots of ladies wear pinafores and do work."

"Different inside, I mean," said Felix firmly.

Muriel, who shared the opinion of the best modern authorities on family life, that we can learn more from our children than they can ever learn from us,

looked back at Miss Tyrrel with renewed interest. She felt that her careful development of the boy's subconscious mind was already having its reward. She would be able to use him as a terrier in seeking out those abnormal persons whose presence in her drawing-room gave her so much delight.

She caught Constance's eye as she turned. The Watcher had come back to the windows, and Muriel noticed with surprise their wild and strange expression of bewilderment, loneliness, and curiosity.

"Poor thing!" she thought. "I expect she has a very dull time of it. Commercial society must be most trying to such an intelligent woman as that. My visit has been quite an excitement. I am glad that I asked her to call."

CHAPTER VII

THE STREET AND THE DRAWING-ROOM

“The key of the great mysteries lies hidden in all things around us, but the perplexities of the convention hinder us from finding it.”—A. E. WAITE: *A Book of Mystery and Vision*.

BECAUSE she had made a little place for the Watcher, had accepted his presence, even took a certain pride in her guardianship, Constance now found herself subjected to a steady invasion, as one after another the chambers of her mind opened their doors to him. His vision was merged with hers in all save immediately human matters. Thus she was finally made aware of a new aspect of the universe; of an angle from which she might perceive the splendour, aliveness, and mysterious qualities of natural things, the inconceivable lunacy of most man-arranged things.

This happened to her with a rush upon the Saturday afternoon on which she went to tea with Mrs. Vince. She had set out with eagerness: a little excited, as always when adventure or new experience was on hand, and therefore perhaps the more ready to open her eyes on strange truth. It was early in May, and there were moments of a shy and exquisite

sunshine between the passing of the fluffy clouds. Constance, alighting from her omnibus, came down a steep and tree-planted street with her face to the south. She was in a superior residential neighbourhood; and the houses upon either hand were built of red brick and had many large, clean windows, all opened at the top, and furnished with casement curtains of soft silk. Expensive tulips of discordant tints grew in the little gardens. There were fantastic knockers on many of the doors.

It was in this unexpected district that she saw the Shining Tree. It sprang upon her consciousness out of the patchy, sunny world of paving-stones, window-boxes, and pale blue sky; complete, alive, a radiant personality, whose real roots, she was sure, penetrated far beyond the limitations of the material world.

She gazed, astonished, into the heart of it; saw the travail and stress of the spirit of life crying out for expression, the mysterious sap rushing through its arteries, the ceaseless and ritual dance of every speck of substance which built it—that eternal setting to partners, which constitutes the rhythm of the world. She perceived the long and eager fingers fringed with tentacles too delicate for sight, which clawed their way far into the earth; their fervid and restless search for food to nourish the arrogant and tufted tail which they sent into the upper air. It was as if, accustomed to glance carelessly at the face of an agreeable and conventionally-clothed acquaintance, that acquaintance were now revealed to her in the awful dignity of the nude.

As for the tufted tail, it was no elastic and ingenious arrangement of branch and twig, set with buds and

young leaves; no convenient perching place of innumerable sparrows. It broke, like an imprisoned angel, through the concrete prosperities of the street; its airy filaments enmeshed a light which she had never seen before. In that light it dwelt, solitary: apart, yet very near. There was something between them: something, in spite of her longing, which kept them separate. She wondered what it could be. She saw each leaf fierce and lucent as an emerald, radiant of green fire: blazing—passionate with energy—a verdant furnace, wherein transcendent life was distilled, cast into the mould of material things. Either, as she supposed for a moment, it was not there at all, or else it had always awaited the perceiving intelligence, in virtue of some amazing significance that it had; a nook which it filled, a truth that it expressed, within the Universal Dream.

Its presence obliterated the clumsy shapes of the ordinary world and their foolish limitations. It gave her a vision of another universe; of the whirl through space of countless planets, all teeming, feathery, flowering, to the angelic eye, with some such radiant inflorescence as this. She saw the Cosmos as God's flower garden, in which He strode, well content, in the cool of the day; and man as the little scuttling insect, breeding and feeding amongst the leaves.

She saw it thus for an instant, the shining, glassy, pulsating thing. Then, as it seemed, another veil was stripped from her eyes, and she saw it in its unimaginable reality, as it is seen by the spiritual sight; remote, and more wonderfully luminous, the fit object of her adoration.

The Watcher's voice cried within her, "Ah, beautiful, exquisite world! Here at last is the meaning, the Real, the Idea! Why did I not understand before?"

As for her, she had nothing to say, nothing to show him. She was too astonished and too full of joy.

He said again, "Ah, what amazing happiness you have, you little creatures! All the shapes and colours, and the sharp edges against the light, and the lovely little differences of things! What a splendid dream! What a gloss upon eternity! How satisfying! But why do you always look at the other side? How greatly you are mistaken, and how much joy you must miss, because of being busy with unreal and ugly things!"

A woman passed, dressed in Isabella-coloured rags. Her coarse hair was gathered in an unseemly knot by the help of a bit of common string. Her dingy, mottled stockings lay in folds about the ankles. Her boots were unlaced. She carried a tiny baby at her breast, and a few bunches of shabby violets in a basket. The baby was a condensed statement of human unpleasantness; the violets, in their present condition of purplish pulp, still conveyed, like kings in exile, a poignant suggestion of lost fragrance and shy grace.

This smudged sketch of womanhood came between Constance and the Tree; unconscious of the thing that was close to her, and of the parted veil through which the other woman peeped. She was wrapped closely in her own cares and discomforts: a ragged vestal—virgin to all delights save one—so busy tending

the difficult flame of life that she never had time to warm herself by its rays. The Watcher withdrew from his look-out when she came within its field; one could feel the strong contractive movement of loathing which her image had evoked.

He said, "Why do you let your earth breed such horrible things? Stamp them out! Feed the beautiful and starve the vile."

Constance answered, "I don't think one can, because it is all one."

The Watcher replied, "No, no! How foolish, how blind you are! Here is the true and lovely dream close beside you. Look at it; live in it. This is the true projection of the Will. But the ugly side of vision is all false. Leave that alone; let it die!"

The woman came nearer and said, "Violets, lady? Do buy some violets! I ain't taken nothing to-day." The hopeless effort of the myriad feeble poor, all the teeming alleys, the indistinguishable hordes, seemed to come as a wailing chorus to her words.

Somewhere in Constance's mind an inhabitant arose who knew that music; who wrestled with the Watcher for possession of her will, saying: "Cling to the human, however loathsome. Do not refuse life in all her implications."

But the Shining Tree was there, as it seemed, with the other message, crying, "Open your eyes to the light, to a world made luminous. Leave the shadows. Come, come!" The Watcher applauded those words.

There she was, between two worlds of experience,

between the two great expressions of the Spirit of Life; the Shining Tree in its transcendental splendour and security, and the shifting agonized and pullulating deeps. Beauty called her through the parted veil of perception, casting open door after door upon the countless aspects of creation. But pain, friendly, ugly human pain, was at her elbow, whispering that this was a birthright which she would only renounce at her cost.

The unsavoury baby stirred under its shawl at this moment, and thrust out a tightly clenched and grimy fist. Then Constance saw for an instant Life the ever-lovely—fertile, heedless, generous life—springing beneath the rags; fresh and exquisite as nascent corn beneath the mould. Its champion within her acknowledged this presence; recognizing it as identical with that vision by which it had always been guided and upheld, and unconscious of its maimed, degraded face. The child and his mother became a symbol, and Love was in the air, very humble and glad, saying, “*Vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve!*”

The woman had grown to the likeness of the Shining Tree; she too was radiant, eternal, and sublime. The spirit of life ran like a divine fire in her veins, and was given to the infant at her breast. She had become a majestic link in the process of creation; an auxiliary of the angels. A fresh door was thrown open upon reality, whereby it was seen that even the prisoners in the dungeon still wore the insignia of kings. The Tree was there, throwing, as it were, the shelter of a transcendental loveliness and knowledge about the poor efforts of those entangled

in the flesh. The woman and child, seen against it, were an image of all life.

It seemed an anticlimax to give the woman sixpence, to look with interest at the baby's moist and smutty face; but she did it. In this act that deep-seated personality within her became dominant; the baffled and disgusted Watcher loosed the reins. Acknowledging beauty, she had vindicated her humanity by paying her deepest reverence to life; a proceeding which can only seem insane to those spiritual natures which have not been passed through the furnace of love.

* * * * *

She came to Mrs. Vince's drawing-room hardly prepared by the curtain-raiser for a full appreciation of that comedy which was the main business of her afternoon. Andrew met her with surprise, for his wife had forgotten to tell him of the invitation. He looked thicker than ever in his own home; and so out of place that Constance found it difficult to remember that he was her host.

His civilities were automatic. He had said, "Very good of you to come to us!" before he realized that the goodness, for once, was actually on Muriel's side. She was going to be kind to Miss Tyrrel. This, he felt, would be a delicate matter; but he was obliged to acknowledge her conduct as perfect. It must clearly be a point of honour with all three of them to forget the bookshop; and Vince saw it with a painful distinctness when his friend was announced. Therefore the curious sincerity of Muriel's welcome amazed him. There were interesting people in the room;

but she turned from them all to attend on her new guest.

She said, "I've been looking forward so much to this: in fact, we all have! I know you're wonderful; oh, yes! I saw it the moment that I met you. My little boy felt it too; and you know how sensitive children are—they are near the Source, and have not had time to forget. But you shan't be teased to tell people things. I promise! They are all longing to meet you; and if you would rather, they will have to be contented with just that!"

She smiled at Constance with an air of secret intimacy, shutting her in the little circle of her own comprehension. The effect was dazzling, for Muriel was looking unusually pretty. Her hair was arranged with a laborious and becoming simplicity; her large eyes shone with spiritual enthusiasm. If gaiety could rightly be attributed to the really high-minded, she was almost gay upon this afternoon; and Andrew, watching her, was amazed that such exaltation could be produced by lectures, exclusive ideals, and a vegetarian diet. The woollen underclothing which he knew that she affected would have kept any ordinary woman from attaining that air of esoteric smartness which constituted Muriel's peculiar charm.

Constance drifted away, leaving her hostess at liberty. Miss Foster at once took her place and said softly, "Who is the big dark-haired woman in impossible brown kid gloves?"

"She is going to be interesting," answered Muriel. "At least, I hope so; but they are very tiresome sometimes. Occult things, magic and so on. Talk to her, there's a dear, and presently I'll get

Mrs. Reed to draw her out. It is her first visit. I've just been putting her at her ease. Oddly enough, it was Andrew who discovered her; and, as a matter of fact, she keeps a shop."

"Being in a shop, nowadays, is so very different," said Phoebe.

"Yes; but still, even now, a shop isn't *quite*. It is books, you see. Rather a new idea, isn't it? And rather a pity, I think. Of course, if it were hats, or old furniture, anyone would receive her."

"I expect she *is* a lady; she certainly moves like one," said another guest, who had been listening to the conversation.

"Yes, I noticed that at once," replied Muriel. Then, recollecting herself, she added hastily: "But at any rate she is a woman, which is of course a far greater thing."

"And rarer," observed Andrew abruptly.

All the ladies in his vicinity looked at him with as much surprise as if an infant in arms had made an intelligible remark.

"I will go and talk to her," said Phoebe, in whom Andrew aroused that instinctive dislike which all women feel for the husbands of their more cultivated friends. Also, she wished to help Muriel with her party; and was aware that if the new acquisition were first drawn out by the wrong person, her value as an asset would be sensibly diminished.

She approached Constance; but too late. Miss Tyrrel had already been captured. A comfortable lady in very worldly clothes sat by her on the sofa; and Phoebe, recognizing in Mrs. Wetherbee that

hateful form of stupidity which is apt to make one's own cleverness seem absurd, shortened sail, and remained at a little distance in an attitude of watchful detachment.

"I don't think," said Mrs. Wetherbee, without further preliminary, "that I have seen you at one of Mrs. Vince's parties before?"

"No," said Constance.

"You were wise to come. I always do; it amuses me. She doesn't want me; but there are some people, you know, that even these clever young women are obliged to ask. You see, I've known Andrew ever since he was in petticoats. Very unsuitable he looked in them—such a little man! Muriel dislikes me because I haven't got a soul: but as I live next door, she has never been able to drop me. Tiresome for her, isn't it?"

She chuckled, stuffed a soft mauve pillow into the space between her shoulders and the sofa, and continued talking in that mood of unbridled confidence about other people's business which the company of an entire stranger will sometimes provoke.

"Muriel," she said, "is a pretty girl, isn't she? Piquante, unusual; even artistic clothes never look dowdy on her. One isn't surprised that Andrew fell in love, although the little wretch hadn't a penny."

"I admire Mrs. Vince immensely," replied Constance.

"Too much like a Madonna in a drawing-room to please me," said Mrs. Wetherbee. "Give her a halo, a blue tea-gown, and a baby—but she never had another after Felix, lazy creature! As for poor Andrew, he is just in the position of a St. Joseph in

these nice little pictures you get at High Church shops. I can't think how they do them—only eighteenpence in real oak frames. Well, that's what he makes me think of: standing up behind, in a very uncomfortable position, whilst Muriel is admired. A good, honest fellow, with sound business instincts and his living to get at his trade, shut up with a painfully unique and exquisite wife. Everyone else on their knees before her, and he feeling that attitude rather fatiguing after a hard day's work. How coarse and ugly all the ordinary little comfortable bad habits must appear in such company! Could you drink bottled stout with that sitting at the other end of the table? Would it be possible to snore in the presence of a really spiritual woman? That is Andrew's condition all over. Muriel enjoys her own virtues thoroughly; but his don't agree with the furniture, and so they have to be kept out of sight."

Constance, who was too much interested in Muriel's hair to care very much about her virtues, was bewildered by this brutal frankness, and had nothing to say. There was a short silence; and Miss Foster, seeing her opportunity, pounced.

"I want you," she said, "to talk to *me* a little, if you will. We haven't been introduced, but I feel that we know one another. Mrs. Vince told me one or two things. You must not mind. I am sure that we shall be sympathetic. I too have a great belief in the undeveloped faculties of man."

Constance replied, "I am afraid that Mrs. Vince is mistaken. I am a very ordinary person: and as to the subjects which interest her, I know hardly

anything; beyond, perhaps, the immensity of my own ignorance."

"Intuition," said Phoebe, "is greater than knowledge. And especially a *woman's* intuition, unhindered by the love of carnal things."

Constance could see Andrew in the middle distance, moving to and fro with the awkward and desperate motions of a man resisting to the utmost his natural instinct for flight. He was so humbly human, so desperately real, that she almost expected house and tea-party to dissolve and leave him, incurably actual, poised in space.

Muriel had retreated to the window, whence her gentle and earnest voice could be heard now and then. She was conversing with two clean-shaven and frock-coated youths, whose presence was obviously a tribute to the appearance rather than to the opinions of the assembled ladies. One of them kept a perpetual but unostentatious watch upon the movements of Miss Foster. The other looked at his hostess, whilst he listened to a heavy, sallow woman, with greasy black hair, prominent eyes, and many Egyptian ornaments.

The sallow woman, whose name was Mrs. Reed, was speaking in a voice of extraordinary power and sweetness. "Salt, sulphur, and mercury," she said, "are really in their ultimate implications the Three Mariés at the sepulchre of Sol. When we have learned this, we are at the threshold of the Grand Arcanum; for complicity of myth merges in unity of experience, if we could but understand."

"What is the Grand Arcanum?" asked the youth who was watching Miss Foster.

The sallow lady looked at him severely. "Osiris," she said, "died a sacrifice; and of Isis Horus was reborn. Alchemical gold is the fruit of destroying fire. Does this tell you nothing?"

The questioner was abashed, and his companion muttered "Poor old Freddy!" in an almost audible tone.

Muriel broke in. "We must not," she observed, "attribute too much finality even to pre-Christian myths, I think. Can they, after all, be more than methods of training the subconscious mind to an apprehension of Truth?"

"No," said Freddy, moving away with a dexterity which was clearly the result of long practice.

It was at this point that the Watcher, surging up to the encounter of this inner nest of illusion and the new existences that it contained, exclaimed in her mind, "It is all unreal, confused, and hopeless! Ah, why will they pervert and spoil the dream?"

She was off her guard, he was strong, and the words were audible. She heard her lips say them. They sounded strange and uncivil, and she wondered what would happen next. Fortunately, Phoebe understood them to be a reply to her last observation. She said approvingly, "That is so true! Knowledge without insight leads us from the light instead of to it. I see that you are a mystic."

"All young people like to call themselves mystics nowadays," interrupted Mrs. Wetherbee, with a knowing air of kindly contempt. "I often wonder whether they know what they mean by it."

"Surely," said Phoebe gently, "a mystic is one who lives in reality instead of in appearance?"

Constance heard her own voice saying, "Then there can be no mystics on the earth."

"Oh, I cannot agree with you there," replied Phœbe. "Indeed, we know to the contrary; for the great mystics have left their records behind. Did we not know that ecstasy and meditation can shift the threshold of consciousness and open the soul's eyes upon the unseen, we should be miserable indeed."

Constance, still at the mercy of her lodger, and possessed by that curious exaltation and freedom from self-consciousness which society sometimes induces in those who live much alone, said, "That is but one illusion the more."

"Just so!" agreed Mrs. Wetherbee. "A mystic's experience is only valid for himself. All the books say so. He may not be mad, of course, but you can't prove it. Besides, these subjects make people cold and unsociable. In a married woman, they generally mean a husband who is either unsatisfied or unsatisfactory. Probably both in the end. The fact is, they aren't quite normal; and that is why nice women have always felt that they are not right."

Muriel had joined them. "A nice woman, dear Mrs. Wetherbee," she said, "is unfortunately so often called nice because she has not sufficient character to suggest any other adjective."

"She always has womanliness," replied Mrs. Wetherbee. "Oh yes, I know it's an old-fashioned word; and what's more, I don't care if it is! You may depend upon it, my dear, that the really womanly woman is the grandest figure in the world,

and when you young people have got through with your mysticism, the men will make you come back to it."

"She is sublime as a mother, and often unaccountably clever in making love," observed Phœbe dispassionately, "if you mean by womanly the deep-bosomed, quiescent creature with steady nerves. For the rest, she is afraid of life; like priests and other people who are born to the perfect performance of a restricted job."

Constance took fire at that. "But she *is* life!" she said. "She has it! You, who watch and classify—do you think that *you* live? You are only the wall-flowers at the ball. You haven't joined the dance—you haven't earned your supper! I wonder whether you'll get it in the end?"

Phœbe looked at her in some surprise, and then answered very placidly, "You do not take into account the interior life of the soul, or the spiritual children that it bears."

"No, you forget *them*," observed the youth called Freddy, who had been waiting for an opportunity of agreeing with Miss Foster's remarks.

"Yes!" said Muriel, "that is the real existence, the higher consciousness, is it not? And it is all *here*!" She tapped her chest mysteriously as she spoke.

"Of course! In the solar plexus!" exclaimed another lady; a pretty, fluffy person, quaintly dressed in the Early Victorian style. "What a wonderful discovery, is it not? Once it has awakened, they say that even the most dyspeptic people may eat *anything* without endangering their inner peace."

"And pray, how does one awake it?" asked Mrs. Wetherbee.

Phœbe replied, "By the practice of meditation."

"Yes, of course," said the fluffy lady rather plaintively, "meditation is the beginning of everything, is it not? At least, in spiritual things; and now they say it leads to success in business as well, which would be so very delightful. Through the will-force, you know, and concentration. But it isn't as easy as it sounds, not by any means. The other day I shut myself up in my bedroom and tried hard to meditate on the Mystic Rose. They recommend that, you know, in some of the books, and it is a very sweet idea; but I must say it did not seem particularly helpful. Nothing happened; and after a little time I went to sleep."

"You should ask Miss Tyrrel to advise you," said Muriel, anxious to show the positive aspects of her new acquisition. "She is a student of the old occultists; and you know they practised all these things under different names in the Middle Ages, for magic has a great deal to do with the psychology of the subconscious mind."

Constance looked at the fluffy lady, aware that in the eyes of the angels the faint and delightful tints of her complexion were of more importance than many higher thoughts. She also noticed that Mrs. Reed had drawn near, and formed part of a little circle that seemed to wait upon her words.

She said, "But I don't quite know why you should want to do these things. When you have done them, life will never be the same again to you. All its proportions will have altered, and you may

not like it so well. You have so many worlds of your own, that you can hardly miss the real world, which is the one that you have not got. When you have got it, all the others must go; and it is so simple, that I think at first you might be rather bored. As for me, I had very little that was worth having in my world, and so I was tempted to explore. But you——”

She looked at them—at the eager circle of small-souled egotists—at Muriel, who said appealingly, “Isn’t she wonderful?” and at the other women, who agreed without enthusiasm. She saw the little struggling scraps of life within these curious and fragile envelopes; tiny flames, disguised and differentiated by the variety of their enclosing lamps. They all, as it seemed, took the lamps very seriously; forgetting that these were matters of artifice, built up from the atmospheric gases and the substance of the earth, and that their inhabitants were alike sparks from the same Central Fire. But Constance was not allowed to forget it. That hawk-eyed lodger of hers pierced through the pretence, and saw the poor bewildered flame struggling for air within its elaborate prison.

The odd thing was that the crowd of little souls—some nearly smothered by the cobwebs that they had gathered round themselves—took no interest in each other, but only in each other’s lamps. The polite life of the drawing-room was just that; the myriad inextinguishable flames, disdaining their own immortal heat and radiance, feeding hungrily upon the illusions which caused them to mistake coloured glass for divine fire.

Constance finished her sentence. "You can live your life, your dream-life, if you choose, in all its richness; down to the bottom and up to the heights. That is very close to reality, and the only satisfying thing, I am afraid. If you explore, all that you will learn will be the necessity of getting back there—if you can!"

"How interesting!" said Muriel, in a slightly disappointed tone.

The fluffy lady looked displeased and bewildered. Her pretty mouth was drawn into the beginning of a pout. But presently her face cleared, and she said triumphantly, "I think I know what you must mean exactly. A friend of mine had a baby through Christian Science last year. So you see it does all fit in."

"*Everything* fits in," observed Mrs. Reed solemnly, "for the Many are comprehended in the One."

When Miss Tyrrel left, Andrew followed her into the hall, found her umbrella, and with more than his usual obtuseness asked whether she wanted a cab.

"I was wondering, don't you know," he said slowly. His mind rambled to the bookshop, and back again to his own home. He wished to realize Constance in both situations, and found the idea difficult to deal with. Finally, he said, "We must keep this up, eh? Capital plan; so good for Muriel. Change of society. These women, don't you know, are all alike."

Constance answered, "They seem all very different to me; quite a new world."

"That's it. They're a little lot all to themselves.

Don't seem to catch on to ordinary life, somehow. It's been made too soft for them, I fancy; and they're mostly clever. Not that one minds clever women; but they ought to be given a toughish time. They're like boys; they need it."

She smiled. "Don't give Mrs. Vince a hard time; she's delicious."

He seemed pleased. "She *has* nice colouring," he said; "I thought you would admire her. But these women never think of that; they come here because she lets 'em talk. Waste of a pretty girl, isn't it, to give her up to that sort of thing?"

Constance, who had been pursued all the afternoon by a longing to enjoy Muriel in peace without the disturbing follies of persons who were not pretty, agreed cordially. He would have continued the conversation, but Mrs. Reed appeared at the foot of the staircase. Andrew shook hands hastily, said "Mind you look us up again," and retreated.

Mrs. Reed came to the door and allowed the parlourmaid to cover her dress with a shabby alpaca dust-cloak. She looked almost ordinary, once her scarabs were concealed. Oblivious of this abrupt relapse into undistinguished dowdiness, she fixed her large and solemn eyes on Miss Tyrrel's face, and said, "Shall we go a little way together?"

When the door was safely closed upon them, she continued, "I have been wishing to talk with you all the afternoon. I think this is your first visit, is it not? A delightful house; quite a refuge for those who long for a more spiritual environment than that

provided by modern civilization. Mr. Vince, of course, is very male; but one doesn't mind that. But to-day people were not as receptive as usual; you, for instance, were not understood. I see so well what you were trying to express to them. These foolish young women know nothing of the vast and secret forces with which they play."

"That's it!" said Constance eagerly.

"But you and I, who know, whom neither the flux of time nor the wreck of dogma can disturb—we can safely accept the extended life that is offered to those who have seen the Metaphysical Lover face to face." She turned down a narrow lane beneath the high wall of a church, stopped at a vivid red brick portico marked "230 to 315," and added, "Here is my little eyrie. Will you not come in for a moment? I feel sure that we have much in common."

The long climb up cemented and uncarpeted stairs, past distempered corridors speckled with innumerable front-doors that seemed to have strayed out of doll's-house-land to relieve the hygienic severity of germ-proof walls and fire-proof flooring, concentrated the attention of both ladies on material things. They clutched the fronts of their skirts, husbanded their breath, and spoke little until Mrs. Reed inserted her latch-key in a Yale lock on the top floor.

Then Constance said politely, "How nice and airy you must be up here!" and the Watcher within muttered, "You certainly make the dream as inconvenient as you can!"

It was with an almost conventional courtesy that

Mrs. Reed now led her visitor into the single sitting-room of the little flat. Constance was not surprised to find whitewash, rush carpet, a small cast of Isis nursing the infant Horus, and a complete absence of tablecloths and other textile amenities; but she was slightly astonished when she perceived a very old and red-faced gentleman dozing by the small fire. A large blue Persian cat was folded into a compact parcel on his knee. The completeness of Mrs. Reed's personality, the authoritative position which she had seemed to occupy in Muriel's circle, had suggested a detachment from the more ordinary human relations. It seemed hardly credible that the Metaphysical Lover could suffer a domestic rivalry.

Yet Mrs. Reed now approached the old gentleman, looked at him with profound interest and tenderness, and said, "Dear, have you had a good afternoon?"

"Eh, what? You back, my love?" said the old man. "Been gallivanting with your young friends, eh? Had a pleasant party? That's right—I like you to enjoy yourself. Ra and I have had a nice quiet hour together; very comfortable. In fact, I fancy we have both had forty winks."

"You must have your milk now," replied Mrs. Reed, "and you will have to entertain Miss Tyrrel whilst I get it." She said to Constance, in a lower tone, "Will you talk to my husband a little? It would be kind. He is rather deaf; but it will be all right if you articulate distinctly."

"My wife," said Mr. Reed to Constance, when they were alone, "is a dear good girl, and very intel-

ligent, as I dare say you know. I'm proud of her. I like to see her friends come here; it shows that she is appreciated. It is very providential that she should have these interests, for we never had any family; and that's a sad misfortune for any woman. As I sometimes say, I have to be father, husband, and baby, all in one!"

He chuckled with immense and senile enjoyment of this well-digested pleasantry. Mrs. Reed returned with hot milk in a feeding cup, helped him to take it, and said "That's a good old dear!" as the last drop was neatly disposed of.

"My little Nell makes me quite lazy!" murmured Mr. Reed, when the meal was over and his mouth had been wiped.

His big head settled down again upon the shoulders, the loose baggy cheeks almost touching the lapels of his velveteen coat. His lips fell apart, and one saw that a few dark yellow stumps still remained in the sunken gums. His eyelids closed.

"A very comforting drop o' milk—very comforting indeed!" he said sleepily.

Then the Watcher cried suddenly and silently in his nest, "Vile! vile! Why feed the foul and useless body when it is beginning to decay? Let it go! Let it die! Nourish the beautiful things!"

Constance, in horror, exclaimed, "No, no!"

He said, "Why not? This bit of the dream is finished and done with. Why clutch it? Where is its value? Let it pass away and join the real."

Oddly enough, the only reply which came to her mind was the word which Helen Reed had spoken,

“*The Many are comprehended in the One!*” It seemed inappropriate as well as absurd, for it suggested a vital connection between ineffable beauty and the old man who was huddled by the fire. Nevertheless, she said it.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO SORTS OF SOLITUDE

“The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.”

BLAKE: *Proverbs of Hell.*

ONE day in the beginning of July, Andrew asked Miss Tyrrel to go with him to the play; and the forces of Philistia and Bohemia went to war in her mind. Muriel had been placed upon the committee of the Psycho-Deistic league; and its annual meeting was to take place at her house. On these occasions, Vince always took refuge in musical comedy. He went, as a rule, alone; laughed without restraint at the horse-play, jokes, and topical songs, luxuriated in the vague emotions which were evoked by the more amorous passages, observed with understanding the physical charms of the performers. But this year, in one of those spasms of philanthropy which are indistinguishable from self-indulgence, he had conceived the notion of giving Constance a treat. He spoke of it to Muriel, who was depressingly tolerant but hardly encouraging.

“Miss Tyrrel,” she said, “will scarcely care for your kind of theatre, will she? I had been thinking that next time there was anything good at the Stage

Society, I might give her your ticket. She is really very cultivated, you know; Girton in fact; and she reads all the right things. The popular drama exasperates that type of mind. But you might ask her. It will be a kindness, and I can't have her here that evening. The Inner Circle meets, and only members are admitted."

Andrew was a little grieved. He had hoped for a jealousy which he would certainly have discounted; and the excessive breadth of Muriel's mind—in which he could not help seeing something slightly unwomanly—discounted the joys of the undertaking. But his spirits were raised when he perceived that Constance, at any rate, felt her decision to be governed by considerations of propriety. No male creature likes to feel harmless. Andrew's self-respect was stimulated by the fact that he had to persuade Miss Tyrrel that the civility he offered was neither unusual nor objectionable in such a friendship as theirs.

That friendship, founded on Vince's refreshingly materialistic point of view, had been confirmed by the addition of a new element: the hopeless determination, in both of them, to admire in Muriel all those fascinations which were most at variance with her intellectual claims. They talked, like rival lovers, of her beauty, and disputed the supremacy of each feature over the rest. She was the unending subject of their conversation. Andrew had come to recognize the bookshop as the one place in which he might speak freely and enthusiastically of his wife; and Constance looked for his coming because he brought with him some of the glamour which

hung about the aggravating object of their adoration.

To her, this was but the renewal of an experience which had been constant in her girlhood. That feverish and bewildering period, in which the sonorous rhythms of the classics that she wished to love had seldom succeeded in drowning the throb of life that exasperated her nerves and confused her brain, had been characterized by the savage and shamefaced emotion which she poured out, unmasked, at the feet of certain chosen women. Her attitude towards them, always shy and always passionate, was seldom appreciated and never understood. Some had taken advantage of it, and made demands on her. These she had served with an almost tiresome eagerness; so that they soon became indifferent to her affection. Others had never perceived the existence of this sentiment. These she preferred; for she was able in their case to preserve her illusions intact. She proposed if possible to keep Mrs. Vince in this fortunate ignorance: an undertaking which was made easier by the presence of a fellow-victim, upon whom one could inflict the enthusiasms that might otherwise have become tediously apparent to their object. To these circumstances Vince owed the secure and comfortable position which he now occupied in her life. Few things seem safer than a Platonic friendship which is founded upon a conspiracy to admire the wife of one of the parties concerned.

Constance, then, accepted Andrew's invitation; and, to the amazement of the Watcher, devoted a Saturday afternoon to the renovation of her only evening dress. He wished to be out in the sun, seeing beautiful

shapes ; for Nature appeared to him now as the one enticing aspect of the dream. Compared with this exploration of beauty, these magical encounters with the real, all other occupations seemed but foolishness ; and he hated the necessity which made his every movement dependent on his entertainer's whims. Hence, when she paid no attention to his reiterated hints, disgust grew on him ; and there was a note of irritation in his remonstrances.

"Surely," he said, "you must see the extreme absurdity of your behaviour? that, even on your own interpretation of the facts, your actions are entirely inconsistent? You shut yourself in a space that has no beauty, in order that you may concentrate on dress! *Dress!* How came you, I wonder, to think of that insane device?"

She was busy. His comments distracted her.

"We do it," she answered, rather angry, "because we, also, like to add to outward beauty if we can."

"Add to beauty? How can you add to beauty by these masses of queer and coloured rags, spun from the poor patient plants and animals and chopped to inconvenient shapes? Why, it is but more dust in different patterns, rolled round you, in order to conceal the mysterious body underneath. A curious mania, when all that matters is the soul, which is already assured of secrecy, which no one in the body can ever see. One body, I had thought, were enough disguise for the shyest spirit ; yet you must all, it seems, have two at least, and elevate the fashioning of the second to a very solemn thing. But the result of this fashioning can never

add to beauty; for it is meant to hide, not to express, the real."

Constance was intent on the *Lady's Own Magazine*, which assured its readers that a very French effect might be secured by the application of two yards of black *crêpe-de-chine* and some spangled fringe to an old white satin bodice: an operation which it described as well within the powers of the homemaker. She was a woman. She was preparing for a probably delightful evening with her only friend. She was determined that he should have no cause to be ashamed of her appearance. It is therefore hardly surprising that she found the phenomena beneath her fingers more interesting than the inner witness to their unreality. She went on with her work, keeping one eye upon Vera—who showed a disposition to begin illicit doll's dressmaking at the other end of the *crêpe-de-chine*—and resolutely turning her attention from the fretful voice which urged on her its ignorance, its annoyance, and her duty of conciliation and enlightenment.

But he would not let her be. He said again, "I suppose that you are compelled to believe in your body, and this distresses you? And so you cover it with pretences in which even you can hardly believe."

Then, exasperated, she cried aloud, "No! I am proud of it—I love it. I, at any rate, have never been ashamed."

Vera loosed her end of the *crêpe-de-chine*, dropped the scissors, and said reproachfully "Tanta! How queer you shouted. You shouldn't. It made me jump."

Constance was abruptly recalled to the consideration of a body in which it was certainly very difficult to take pride: for even when freshly washed, and dressed in the clean clothes which she detested, Vera always carried with her a curious suggestion of squalor. She had hands which defied the nailbrush; and looked as though even her white pinafores had come to her by mistake. They never remained white very long; for dirt of all kinds flew to her, as if detecting congenial company.

Miss Tyrrel heard a regular liquid sound as of surreptitious sucking, looked up, and exclaimed sharply, "Take that stuff out of your mouth at once!"

The child unwillingly extracted a dark and glutinous mass, composed of a rag of black silk which had met a half-dissolved piece of toffee and become inextricably entwined with it. The resulting compound was not pleasant to handle, but it was necessary to take it from Vera, and ensure its destruction; a proceeding which the victim watched with a sullen scowl. She seldom cried, and never failed to resent authority.

Constance, of late, had begun to detest these episodes. It was a part, perhaps, of the growing influence of the Watcher, whose home-sickness betrayed itself in a passionate æstheticism. The lens through which she had looked for an instant on reality offered no renewal of that vision; but it persistently magnified the hideous properties of those illusions to which she was chained. Upon this stifling afternoon, with the usual summer smells of London coming through the open window, the

crooked Venetian blind moving in the draught and making zebra-patterns on the shabby wall, this moist chewed gummy rag which she must take between her fingers nauseated her. When she had disposed of it, she felt that Vera's neighbourhood had become loathsome. She gathered her work, went into the little bedroom, and gave herself with an almost morbid pleasure to the contemplation and analysis of her own fury of disgust.

(She perceived that she hated her life. Standing aside and looking at it, it seemed to her weary and distorted vision a mere travesty of existence; an uneventful sequence of sordid material acts. The Watcher encouraged this attitude: crying out on his incarceration, casting himself with fury against the bars. Sometimes he was interested, but happy he never was. Urged, then, as by a double spur, there came to her mind a momentary longing to renew the active revolt of her youth: when, stung, not by squalor but by the hopeless inertia of the comfortable class, she had cut her way out of the garden and bartered all privilege for a little actuality. The crushed primeval spirit of adventure rose and pricked her—this capable, wage-earning woman of thirty-five or so—reminding her of those wild raptures and wonderful deeps of existence which form part of the great and confused heritage of the human soul.

Then the recoil wave came, bringing a memory of the savage tooth that waits behind those soft lips of Nature whose kiss she had once accepted with courage, even with delight. Thence a venom had come which still worked in her life. That experiment was not worth repeating.

The old white evening bodice slipped from her knee; and her indifference was so great that she did not put out her hand to save it. One of the bones, which had cut its way through the covering sheath, caught in a flounce of her skirt. It made a little tear, and anchored itself. She rescued her work then, and it reminded her of the brightening margin of her life: of Andrew, who wanted her comradeship, and of Muriel, whom she wanted even more. She possessed, after all, the essentials of existence: a little place in the dance, and a little opportunity of service.

At a quarter to nine upon the following Monday evening, Constance arrived at the Tottenham Court Road Tube station, and took her place in the lift. Her depression had passed away. She felt happy and dreamy. After her long and sordid solitude, the mere putting on of evening dress was an excitement. It gave to her a curious sensation of well-being; armed her, as it were, for the encounter with life.

As the platform rose, taking her to the surface, she contemplated in a mood of slightly cynical amusement the advertisements which covered its walls; appeals, every one of them, to the supposed needs of man. "You cannot afford to do your writing the old way!" "You want our shirts; we want You!" "The New Note! Decorative Smartness combined with the Comfort of the Home!"

The Watcher too—always entertained by our odd habit of burrowing, our quaint conceits as to the reality of levels, the air of importance which characterizes the running to and fro of modern men—looked on these things with pleased surprise,

saying, "Strange cries of one immortal spirit to another!"

But there was another advertisement, less conspicuous, in little red and black letters without ornament. "*Be not deceived: God is not mocked!*" It wore so modest an air amidst all the heraldry of trade, that it would hardly have held Constance's attention had he not exclaimed, "What's that? That is different! That is real. How has it got into the dream?"

The long absent note of fear had returned to his voice, and he said again, "I'm caught—we all are! How can we be other than deceived? It is we that are mocked: hoodwinked, and made helpless! We stand in great danger, with none to advise us, no power of right judgment, no means of escape! And beyond, the eternal Idea, and eternal seeking within It. Oh, cruel, treacherous, and blinding dream!"

The words in their simple frame glared out as from another dimension, and drew the great ring of Eternity about the small illusions, the childish conveniences, the little scrambles and self-seekings of twentieth-century London life. They followed Constance and her lodger, indeed "not truly one but truly two," to the doors of the theatre. They obliterated the smiling portrait of Miss Sybil Selby as "Yvonne, the Little Breton Bride." They shone, fierce and accusative, under the arc lights, and passed with them through the violently swinging doors which seemed themselves infected with some exalted and dramatic emotion. Thus they came at last to the corner opposite the box-office, where Vince awaited his friend.

He said to her, "Here we are, all ready for a ripping evening, eh? Jolly places. Stalls, fourth row; the nicest bit of the house. See everything you want to see and nothing that you don't. I hate to notice the wigs and the rouge. Plenty of them outside in the street. Awfully good piece too; I've seen it three times, and by Jove! I don't mind if I see it a dozen more. Nice voice that girl's got—Sybil Selby. Dances well; neat ankles. Come along! it's time we were in our seats."

The curtain rose upon "The Little Breton Bride"; upon a "set" which ingeniously utilized the quays of Quimper, with their many little bridges, and a strolling crowd of chorus-girls in coifs. The orchestra struck up an airy, worldly waltz; and the hero and his party made a realistic entrance in a Daimler sixteen horse-power motor, whilst the chorus-girls sang an amorous and cheerfully unmeaning introtit appropriate to the business of the night.

At once they were in the thick of it: of the swirling, dancing, softly sensuous world. Rhythm and sentiment, cloying melodies and pretty passions, were poured out upon the audience; producing in them an agreeable anæsthesia, a forgetfulness of all they held for real. Soon, their dreamy minds were enchained by the deliberate measure of the dance, the monotonous cadence of the songs. They were at the mercy of those whom they had hired to amuse them: the eternal paradox of the arts. Yet the drugs with which the thing was done were very simple: merely co-ordinated sounds and movements, expressing a gay and incoherent love-tale in which light affections triumphed and the deeps of life were carefully ignored.

At the end of the first act, Andrew, cheered by Miss Tyrrel's evident enjoyment, said to her, "Hope you are liking it? Awfully good of you to come, don't you know, just to a thing like this, nothing out of the ordinary. Muriel was afraid you might be bored."

Constance looked at him, and at the glittering house with its air of sleek smartness, and then at the box of chocolates in her lap; and her mouth trembled a little. She was, for the moment, in the position of a protected woman; back amongst the foolish comforts and dear easy habits of a class that she had deliberately left.

She answered, "It is about eight years since any man waited on me, considered my pleasure, gave me sweets. So, is it likely that I should be bored?"

Vince was genuinely shocked and affected. "By Jove!" he said, "By Jove! Poor girl!" He had not supposed that bookselling entailed such social ostracism as this.

Then he thought, with a little comforting spasm of self-sufficiency, "I expect she is jolly particular whom she does go out with." That explained it. (Faddy women always get left in the lurch.

The Watcher, meanwhile, clamoured for some explanation of the proceedings of the night. The lurid and untruthful simulation of an existence that was itself untrue; the crowd of attentive spectators, looking eagerly at a false distorted picture of their own false distorted lives: this paradox of the drama was far beyond the understanding of a poor uneducated spirit for whom even space and time were still foolish and puzzling conventions.

“If you really like these curious ways,” he said, “to dance and to sing when you wish to express your feelings, and to kiss one another a great deal—and after all this is not much more foolish than the ordinary ugly earthly way—why not do it yourselves instead of watching other people pretend? If this be your standard of beauty, do you not waste time in merely watching? Should you not participate whilst you can? Rush together—embrace—be ecstatic? Why delegate these picturesque emotions to a race of slaves? Life has strange rules, but this is the strangest; that you should be impelled to enjoy watching an imitation in a corner, when you might go out and live the real before you die.”

At the end of the second act, the high-born hero had lifted his peasant bride into the motor-car, and held her with one hand against his breast whilst the other feebly grasped the steering wheel. He leaned over her with a realistic gesture of protection, singing,

“Dear little bride!
Through the world wide
I'll carry my dove in her nest!
They may offer us gold,
Or riches untold,
But we know that true love is the best!”

The chorus-girls tossed confetti in the air, until Miss Sybil Selby, resplendent in lace coif and brocaded apron, seemed another Danaë beneath its significant showers; and the curtain fell as the car moved slowly away to the plaintive and haunting music of violins.

Then Andrew turned, and saw with astonishment a woman whom he had never known before; a being

with softened eyes, absurdly entranced. The magnetism of the play had affected Constance. Her strained vision followed the ridiculous lovers; her strained ear extracted from the sentimental music the regretful cry of all that she had missed in life. There was a lump in her throat. It was as if some magic powder had been mingled with the confetti; pollen from the divine flower which grows upon the walls of Might-Have-Been.

She was invaded by a gentle, sensuous melancholy; by an absurd longing to be kissed. The disdain of reality, the rhythm of the dancers, the mildly voluptuous music, came like an overpowering perfume to enchain her mind: so that the crude emotions of the lovers, the simple insistence on happiness, on the joy and paramount importance of the mating instinct, stung to life something that had long slept.

All about them, triumphant sentimentalism was having its way. People leaned forward with shining eyes and slightly foolish smiles. The few detached persons who were amongst the audience enjoyed the ironic spectacle of a houseful of prosperous, civilized and artificial beings—tightly strapped, every one of them, within the uniform of society; each hair assigned to its place by inexorable law—responding in spite of themselves to an irrational and primitive appeal. In every part of the theatre Woman, at that moment, looked at Man.

“How odd!” said the Watcher. “In order to make people natural, you are obliged to resort to artifice. So *that* is why you make a dream about the dream?”

But Constance took no notice. The burden of reality had been shifted. She was swept away, into a joyous, absurd, bespangled country, where her starved heart was fed upon emotional meringues and her aching senses were lulled and warmed. She sat thus for a moment or two; holding tight this lovely, selfless sense of wonder, of vivid and exalted life. Then Andrew rose and put her cloak about her shoulders; and she realized, with a stab of sorrow, that her evening was at an end.

In him, also, the feast of sensuous melody and mild emotion had woke a certain wistfulness. As they came into the foyer, and stood a few moments to let the crowd pass by, he said anxiously, "It *has* been rather jolly, hasn't it? Do it again, eh?"

Constance looked at him, but did not speak.

He continued, in an abrupt burst of confidence, "We are both a bit out of it, don't you know, in some ways; so it's natural enough we should be friends."

She exclaimed, "You shouldn't feel out of it you are not alone in the world, as I am. You have so many things to care for in your life."

She spoke impulsively, and was astonished at herself: but his answer astonished her more. He said, "Yes; in a way, I know I seem to have. But then, you see, the things aren't really mine. I can't catch on; don't fit. I'm rather like that Johnny in the 'Arabian Nights,' who went out to dinner and kept on seeing imaginary food he couldn't eat. Nicely dished up—one admires it; but one's hungry all the same. There's Muriel—she's adorable; and

she's my wife, of course—but her life's stuffed full of other things. Very natural; she's clever, and I'm not. But she's fenced round by 'em; I can't get near."

"She's so young," said Constance gently, "and so pretty, and enjoying it so much. It must be rather nice to watch her being happy. And, after all, she *is* yours."

"Oh, it's not that. I don't mind her having a good time; lots of friends; running about, and so on. I'm not that sort of beast—harem type. Girls must play round, don't you know; one likes it. They all do it—not peculiar in any way—so, where's the harm? Very different from what it was in my poor old father's time! But these women—they've got her into a shell of fads. One can't get past. And there she is all the time—attractive as ever, and just out of reach. It's a bit maddening——"

His voice had the growl in it now; and he spoke as if to himself, deliberately and without self-consciousness. There was no knowledge between them of the outrageous quality of their conversation. It had grown, as it were, out of the events of the night. His speech did not strike her as a complaint; a sin against the code of married men. It seemed rather an explanation which he was making to himself.

She saw something—the essential man in him, the creature of ideals—struggling like a dumb animal against the circumstances of his life. The sight moved her to an almost maternal pity; so that she felt with him as well as for him when he said, "One's growing older all the while, too; losing chances; getting fixed; and the whole thing is dreary

and jangled up. There she is, as I say, pretty, fetching. People envy one. But we live in water-tight compartments in our house. My fault! It's a silly mistake; wish now I'd pushed things a bit at the start. Then there's the boy. Bound to keep an eye on him, protect him a bit from the women; and she doesn't like it, of course. So *he's* between us as well as the culture and things. That's the damnation of children: responsible for 'em. Must do it! You wait till you have one——"

Constance blushed furiously: and Andrew, instantly contrite, apologized for the violence of his language, and returned to his normal state of clumsy shyness.

She said, "Oh don't be unhappy! Just be fond of them both. You might enjoy it all so very much."

He replied, "I am — awfully fond, really. If I wasn't, don't you know, I shouldn't care. Fact is, I'm a bit lonely—it's just that. On my soul, I believe it always is that at the bottom. When we feel lonely, we're miserable; and when we don't feel lonely we're not. Other things don't matter, except when they make us notice we're alone."

Constance looked at him with moist eyes, and answered, "Yes; I believe it *is* just that!"

He would have driven her home; but she, with the prudence of intrepid and experienced people, refused it. Her landlady was a Puritan, who slept in the basement and was easily disturbed.

As they said good-night, he asked anxiously, "We're chums now, aren't we?"

She counter-questioned with, "What do you want?"

“Oh, just to come in and out,” he said with eagerness. “Talk a bit, you know; swop ideas.”

To be consigned, though it was of her own choice, to a green and yellow omnibus full of brisk and dingy people from the pit: to end the evening by a solitary return to her lodgings, where lights would be out and she must fumble for the chain of the front-door—all this gave to Constance a foolish but poignant sense of isolation, of having missed fire in life. She saw from the window of the omnibus bareheaded women in exquisite cloaks, leaning upon the arms of men who protected them, and walking delicately beneath the great arc lights. There was something intimate in the relation of each couple; they carried with them a suggestion of romance. She was shut out from that aspect of existence: could only watch it, with her own uncanny experience hugged tightly in her breast. At this moment, she wanted it very badly; the prettiness, the protection, all the airy, fluffy way of taking things.

The omnibus brought her to the Tube station; and she sank into the burrow again, continuing, automatically, the cheap and undistinguished scurry to her cheap and undistinguished lair. But within the lift, the real and dreadful words in their little frame awaited her. *Be not deceived!* The hard inexorable quality of that Eternity which is behind these illusory miseries and excitements struck her like a blow. She thought bitterly of Andrew's simple statement, “One is growing older all the while.” She ran forward along the years, and came upon the final necessity of his death. Then she knew that even

whilst she knelt at Muriel's shrine, she needed Andrew; and she hated that knowledge.

Somewhere, somehow, even this, she supposed, had beauty and significance; but she was blinded. Altogether overcome by her lassitude, by the reaction from the short and feverish evening, she, the brave lover of life, whispered with inward tears, "I don't think I want to live any more!"

Then something within her exclaimed, "Ah, do not be grieved; I cannot bear it. It is horrible; I think it gives me pain. Surely it were better to die than to be hurt by these little foolish things?"

Instantly and absurdly, the social instinct, the craving for sympathy, awoke. Constance turned on her inner companion and said, "I'm alone—so dreadfully alone! I can't endure it!"

It was an astonished voice which answered, "Alone? Is that what matters? Must you always for your comfort be linked up with other creatures? And is *that* why I do not understand?"

She was intent on her own wretchedness, and did not reply; until presently, to her amazement, he said gently, "Am I no use to you? Can I not help?"

Then she was conscious of a tiny inward revolution; and with it of the birth of some new thing.

He said, "I do not want you to be lonely. Ah, be happy again with the beautiful colours and shapes! Are these not sufficient for your joy? A strange pain has come between us: it pushes. Because of it, I want to help you if I can. Do not suffer! It is so horrible that you should have a pain."

She asked him with eagerness, "Do you really care?"

He answered. "Yes, I don't know why, but somehow, I am sorry for your sadness. It hurts me; and I want you to be glad." And then, as in the glorious moment when he saw the Shining Tree, he added, "I think that I begin to understand."

Grateful for this strange and unexpected sympathy, companioned by it, she came home; crept up the dingy staircase to her room. She took off the evening dress slowly and wearily. Already the black *crêpe-de-chine* looked crushed and sad. The blind was up, the window opened wide for coolness' sake. As she raised her eyes from a careful folding of the satin skirt which might have to do duty many other times, she saw far up the mighty and eternal stars that peered through the summer haze. Again she had the sensation of a white and changeless Ring set about her; again she remembered the hateful and incisive words that were set on the wall of the lift. Then both were obliterated by Andrew's figure, solid and imperturbable, fixed upon the margin of her life.

The Watcher had exclaimed in his bitterness, "It is we that are mocked, hoodwinked, and made helpless!" But now there was a grieving and strangely humanized voice which murmured, "I am sorry for the sorrow of my friend."

CHAPTER IX

THE ROAD TO PENRITH AND OTHER PLACES

“ Nature is never spent ;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things ;
And though the last lights from the black west went,
Oh, morning at the brown brink eastwards springs !”

GERARD HOPKINS.

AS she fled through the coloured counties, under the steady radiance of an August sun, Constance had within her the astonished and friendly voice of the Watcher, saying,

“ See how the splendid trees stand up in the field ! Ah, look at the curves, the lines, the incredible shapes ! Open your eyes—look, look ! Do not let so much of the beauty escape you ! Your poor vague senses are letting it slip by. It is far too wonderful for that. Seize it—feed on it ! Use the best of your body whilst you can.”

She let him have his way with her, for she was bewildered and tired ; and he, since his sudden awakening to the wonderful experience of pity, had cast off something of the arrogant inquisitiveness which had led him to drive her senses so remorselessly and exclusively in the interests of his own investigations. Now, he offered her a share in his

adventures. There had been a reversal of their positions; so that she was mainly conscious of looking through his nature at the world, and not as before of lending her eyes and brain to his purposes.

Her summer holiday had come; and she was out with a sense of wild freedom that hardly felt the body's weight, scurrying through an incredible world. With a release from the monotony of work there had come also a release from the craving for humanity. She threw it behind her: Andrew and Muriel, Helen Reed, who had lately made advances towards intimacy, and all the anodynes which she had clutched in her loneliness to lull the appetite for natural joy. She was eager to take up the heritage of sun and air; nestled in a corner of the third-class carriage, and let the pageant of England slip past her.

As for the Watcher, he saw for the first time with human eyes the most divine treasure of humanity; an earth not wholly smeared with toil, a fresh and flowery country of waving grasses set with solemn elms, of ripening harvest, rose-set hedges and cropped downs. He and his friend, cuddled together, looked joyously and dreamily into the sacred heart of living things. The black blur of Leeds, that takes from its neighbouring fields the very colour of hope; the entangled world of the West Riding, where hell-mouth seems to have broken out in a singularly inappropriate place; these moved them only to a gentle interest. He was invaded by a new spirit of tolerance; and she, very tired, felt something of that agreeable light-headedness which comes with a certain quality of fatigue.

In the early afternoon, they came to the frontiers of the North; the austere and stony country of Ribblesdale. The sun lingered south of them, in the more fertile and responsive Midlands; and here there was a little cloud spread very thinly over the sky. In that cold strong light the rocks, cropping here and there from the tight earth, looked blue, pale and curious. They forced themselves up from the grass with a menacing air which reminded man's body of its softness and instability. They seemed to be saying, "Verily, we are the people!" remembering that when it came to the battle of the dust St. Stephen was crushed back to primal earth—but the stones of martyrdom remained.

Vera, head out of window, said, "I think those rocks are ghosts which growl at me!"

The Watcher whispered, "They are your mother and your father; from that womb you came out, and to that womb you will return, for dust is the foundation of the dream."

The scamper of the train brought them through the land of stone and into the country of the pine-woods; and Constance, looking with her friend at the shapes of dark trees against a brightening sky, found them charged with a terrible significance. They seemed the proper guardians of some immemorial secret; of an antique land, a land of earth sorcery, which the scumbling brush of man had hardly touched. Already London was far distant; already sanity, clear vision, and the healthy exaltation of the hills began. She looked forward with great eagerness, having now obtained that sense of a door eternally ajar, which prepares the soul for

romance, mystery, and all unreasonable truth. When at last the train stopped at their small and wind-swept station, she leapt out with a clear apprehension that some mighty and definitive destination had been reached.

The place to which they had been brought was perched at the very margin of the fells. Those nude angels of the North dominated the little village; faint and wonderful shapes, lifted up from the business of earth, and running day by day the whole gamut of prophetic emotion, from the regal gloom of Lamentations to the radiant expectation of Isaiah. Driven perhaps to opposition by their splendours, the sowing and reaping world which crept to their feet had a sharpness of detail that had put the most meticulous Pre-Raphaelite to shame. The middle distance stood as distinct as some print by Dürer; with black woods, and the stripe and check of fields and hedges. Each tree in the setting sun was a sharp dark insistent shape; one out of many scattered sentinels that seemed to guard the transfigured fells from the profane investigation of field-glass, camera and exploring feet.

Constance—her luggage safely bestowed and early supper ordered—walked along the high road which ran with prosaic straightness to Penrith, and saw this mighty panorama unrolled in its infinite detail. A weary London woman, tossed suddenly into this, may well feel a certain flutter of the heart. Confronted by the stupendous sacrament of natural beauty—that spotless and ineffable host which Earth, the virgin mother, eternally brings forth and offers, an oblation on the altar of life—an ecstasy that was

not wholly joy invaded her spirit. Something, she knew, was being offered; something which her hard and work-worn hands could scarcely grasp. The Watcher was hushed, and asked no questions; for curiosity cannot survive in the presence of awe.

There was a hay-rick in the neighbouring field, its patient shape responsive to the play of slanting light. In the hedge by which they walked, the sharp and eager fingers of a hawthorn were stretched out against the greenish sky. Its clean crisp edges were instinct with vitality; and with beauty, which is the spiritual aspect of intensest life. These leaves—and behind them, the teeming earth with all its children—cried out for recognition to this sister of theirs, this impassioned amateur of experience. Constance was glad with a vicarious vanity to think her mother so beautiful: proud that she, who was of the family, might show to her visitor one of the lovelier moments of the dear earth.

As she lingered, the sun first left the valley, then crept from the summit of the hills. At once, the angels wrapped their blue veils around them; being dazzled by the radiant sky, where the game of green and rose-colour had already begun. Then the changeful play of the celestial opal, immortally bright, was offered for a moment; as if to exhibit the true and natural darkness of the earth.

Gazing at the magic funeral of the sun, and caring little where she stepped, Constance's foot came sharply on some soft uneven thing that gave beneath it. She moved quickly; and Vera, forced by the gathering dusk to abandon the quest of wild raspberries, pounced and held up a few pitiful

feathers, kept together by that which had once been the wonder of flesh.

“Look!” she said. “What fun! A dead bird—you trod on it.”

Constance looked, and felt bitterly grieved, ashamed, sickened by her own action. Absorbed in a selfish feeding upon beauty, she had insulted that poor little memorial of a radiant life. Out of its corruption, it rebuked her.

She turned from the sunset, and the imperial hills, that were putting on the purple mantle in which they greet the night. Clouds were coming to them now: tall violet-grey battalions, leaning towards their goal and observing a steady and unhurried march from the south-west. They came and rested on the summit of the fell; sank into the valleys and cast fleecy folds about the pikes. Behind them, the purple angels muttered angrily. They were preparing to pour forth cleansing waters on an unwilling world.

She walked back to the village; and having her face set towards it, where it spread itself with a northern amplitude and independence about its central green, she saw it in its unity. One or two lights appeared in the windows, creating an instant opposition between the dark and eternal hills and this little, transitory, superficial patch of human habitation, human dreams. The hills, the darkening fields, were the more alive, the more insistent. They pressed on her attention.

The Watcher whispered, “How they crowd about one at this hour!”

She said, “Whom do you mean?”

He answered, "Those who came first."

It was she who now said, "I do not understand."

He replied, "But surely you know them, surely you are with them? If one must not be alone, and if one must love, it cannot be that you have only the souls still entangled in their bodies, from whom to choose your friends?"

She repeated, "I do not understand!" Nevertheless, fear outran comprehension.

He went on, "I see them on the hills! How wild they are, and how surprised at life! Their stones are there, the little dusty marks that they erected; and so they cannot get away. Your friends have made no mark; they have not rubbed out the life that came before. It mingles with them yet. Do you mean that they do not know, do not see it, just because the dusty covering is not here?"

She asked, "Are you talking of the *dead*?" She shivered a little; for triumphant vitality hates to meet a ghost.

He answered, "Why, yes; the liberated ones. In your busy gobbling up of one another, do you take no notice of the part you cannot slay? Tonight, the liberated hosts are in the hills! I see them at strange rites behind the hedges. I hear their patter on the road. Oh, the little antique spirits of slain children: the mothers of the people: the keepers of the herds! They are here! Nothing is changed. You have chased them from the cities, or smothered them. Perhaps it may be that; I am not sure. Because of this, they are all the thicker about the immemorial valleys. They come down to drink at the changeless rivers they have always

known. Here are battle-fields. Here, in these wide valleys, they surge to and fro and rehearse the great drama of life. Troops of victorious souls that escaped from bleeding bodies ; under these hills, and deep in that bracken, which their hands tore up to stanch the cruel wounds."

She answered, "Yes, yes ! Of course, in a way, the past is always with us."

"Not past !" he said, "the dead have no past ; they live in the eternal Now. It is progress ; they are nearer to the real. These I knew first, before I had eyes to see the poor souls still imprisoned in the dust. They have gone on ; they are the leaders of your army. Surely you acknowledge their presence ? Surely you owe them your homage and your help ?"

She was hastening towards the friendly houses now : for the twilight deepened, and the conversation was little to her taste. They came past the low wall of the churchyard. A slab of new white marble peeped over the coping stone. She did not like it : it seemed a pale hand stretched out from the other side. But he would not let her by. He broke his exhortation, and asked her, "What is that ?"

She said, "It is the graveyard, I suppose."

He asked again, "Is that where the worn-out bodies are put away ?"

Then it occurred to her that the Watcher had never seen a place of burial before : for London, the polite centre of a secular civilization, is remarkable for its tactful concealment of the dead. The mind that is bred in the hills knows no such artifice. It is of the opinion of the Silurist, that it were ill to be

unkind to a Jonathan, though in dust : and therefore holds fast to this, the most intimate and pathetic keepsake of its emigrated friends. This church and its quiet company stood, as is there usual, at the entrance to the village ; a gentle, unobtrusive link between two worlds. With another step or two they were at the lych-gate, and saw the dim path which approached a plain doorway, then branched and skirted the wall of the nave. There had been here no artificial levelling of the earth. From its small eminences and dimpling hollows, the plain old gravestones peered with a gracious and natural effect : as if they were indeed at one with the land.

Beyond the church, this land rose suddenly ; in a slope of rough grass unbroken as yet by the making of little homes. Clearly an upland field had lately been added to the graveyard, in the interests of a generation yet to come. At its highest point a monolith shot up against the skyline ; a strange, great, formless thing, growing as it were from the ground, and bearing no resemblance to the civil futilities of the monumental mason and his art.

Night was upon them ; and already the grass was grey, the little church vague in the dusk. Earth now seemed built of some primal stuff, that existed in chaos before there was light. Constance, unnerved by the evening's conversation, would have hastened to sanctuary ; but she felt the spur of her guest, who could not leave so great a matter unexplored. He quelled her natural desire for the neighbourhood of houses and live things, and under his direction, she scrambled and slipped in the twilight up the steep dry grassy slope.

Coming to its summit, she saw a wider sky, where brightness lingered on the horizon line. Beneath it she divined the folded hills: knew that the deeper blackness hid the woods. She peered at the battered sandstone pillar which had beckoned her to this solitary place, and saw that it was an armless cross; once covered, no doubt, with the plaited patterns and lost symbols of the Celtic Church, now only retaining upon its roughened surface a memory of the artifice of man. It stood upon a new pedestal, and in the step of the pedestal there was an inscription cut. Although now the light was very nearly gone, she stooped, and with eye and finger traced the words.

“This Runic Cross, work of the first Christians of our land, was discovered in the foundations of the church. It is now again set up, by the village which it once protected, as a memorial of the Nameless Dead.”

The Watcher remarked, “I knew that you were mistaken. You see they are remembered after all; are given a gathering place.”

The night breeze had sprung up, and blew from the hills upon the churchyard. It seemed to Constance's fancy that the wind was full of life—antique, barbaric life, the life of those old Christians of the hills—that They were coming to a trysting-place, and that the Watcher already discerned them. There were more words upon the pedestal; and though her instinct was all for the village and humanity, she made haste to decipher them that she might the sooner be gone. They seemed lacking in flavour after that which went before; and she deplored the

uncertainty of clerical taste, even where it is combined with a passion for archæology.

“*By Thy precious Death and Burial, good Lord, deliver us!*” It was only a fragment from the Litany. She could not be impressed.

But the Watcher’s comment on these words struck her as peculiar. He said, “So, the Idea did once break through? And yet, you do not understand!”

CHAPTER X

HOW THOSE WHO LOSE THEMSELVES OFTEN FIND
SOMETHING MORE VALUABLE

“ That light did lead me on
More surely than the shining of noontide,
Where well I knew that One
Did for my coming bide ;
Where he abode, might none but he abide.”

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS :
The Dark Night of the Soul.

NOTHING would do but they must go, all three of them, into the heart of the fells; and qualify the distant glamour by the familiar touch. The village produced a rough cart, and a short thick pony of the kind that embarks willingly upon cross-country exploration : and they were off, in the vivid afternoon, through the tangle of dark woods and bright cornfields which lay between them and the road that runs along the hills.

There was a little stirring breeze, and the pale green barley danced in the wind with a delicate airy ecstasy as they passed; so that the Watcher in his nest reached out to this new loveliness with a gesture that was almost adoration. The oats, faintly blue like aquamarines, seemed of a more sober habit.

They made minuet steps, with tiny tossings of the head. The deeper blue of the turnip fields brought inappropriate hints of the wild ocean to the least idyllic processes of agriculture. Behind, the stately hills marched with them; on one hand the sharp Lake Mountains, on the other the fells.

Presently they plunged to the lowest point of the valley; a little breathless, I think, because of their apprehension of the beauty that they might find—for this was a wonderful day, on which anything might happen and the least credible of discoveries might be made. They swung through space on a jewelled planet; and it was for them that the caskets were flung open and the secret gems disclosed.

They crossed the beck, where it ran through deep hayfields to the river beyond: a little eager splashing thing, that called all other children to join its play. There was a heavenly inflorescence at its margins, all made up of those very simple plants which are too dignified and too beautiful to compel the casual eye. It was the Watcher who called his friend's attention to the dear golden fluff of yellow bedstraw, and to the woundwort and betony, standing up like purple spears in the soft grass. Then, because her eyes were directed to that marvellous and incomparable population, she saw, with his delight to help her vision, the dyer's greenweed—disowned Plantagenet—and the towering wild angelica, whose mighty branches hint of old forests made of flowering things. And since respectability is no more the norm of hedges than of human life, she saw also the ivory crown of the meadowsweet; that fascinating child of joy whose daintiness, in the eyes of the

mangolds, is very certainly the measure of her sin.

There they were, in their essential reality, their unsullied radiance; matter for the exploration of many æons, tossed into the pageant of one sunny afternoon. Because he was unaffected by man's arrogant standard of size, the Watcher was at once satisfied and subjugated by this luxuriant outpouring of beauty. It woke the slumbering virtue of humility; and washed his eyes, so that he caught, as it were, a sidelong glimpse of God. It was a definitive hour for both of them; this first sight of the flowered meadows of the North. There, Life clothes herself in haste, and rushes out to meet the sun in her short moment of fertility; and hence the significant personalities of the plants assert themselves as nowhere else in the full splendour of their triumphant individuality. They blaze forth, and hit the heart which opens itself to receive that holy wound.

They climbed from the valley to dusty roads that ran between stone walls. There they saw the Lady of the Hills, the great wild cranesbill, lifting her blue paten to the sky. Constance began to wonder why she had so long neglected the easy and perfect friendship of the flowers. It raised the heart to some lucent and gentle plane of being, beyond the fevers and anxieties of human intercourse. So dreaming, she allowed the pony to ramble at loose rein among the tangled roads. Life seemed divine. The future mattered little. She was invaded by the consciousness of heavenly peace. Vera had left the cart to make dashes into hedge, ditch, and bypath

clutching vainly at scuttling beetles and nimble flies. She was at her best under these circumstances of action. There, the animal aspect seemed in place, and Nature justified the coarse and tireless frame.

They came presently to a gap in the stone wall, and a wheel-track that went, as it seemed, directly to the fells. Constance, who had the Londoner's shadowy belief that all roads lead, somehow, the right way, divined in this byway the short cut which her landlord had described to her as going back towards the village by way of the hills. She turned the cart into the short rough grass; and they trundled slowly in and out of ruts, and through gates, and by deep dark bracken that stretched clawing fingers up the side of the sage-coloured hill. Soon they were a long way from all roads and other memories of civilization: being, indeed, upon an outpost of the fells. The sun sloped, twilight began to come, but there was no hint in their vague and wandering path of a return to human habitations. The pony lost his eager and exploratory manner. He lingered and stopped doubtfully. The sun went, and a chill came to the air. Then Vera, a little way ahead, stopped to cry, "Tanta! make the pony come quicker. He's going dreadful slow! It's dark and nasty, and I want my tea."

Constance answered, "I'm afraid he is getting tired and wants a rest."

Vera said with petulance, "Horrid little horse! He shan't be tired. He's ours—he's got to go! I want my tea."

Then Constance, dragged back to the unlovely

cares of common sense, halted, looked round, and noticed for the first time their solitary position; the woman and child and the weary little animal, with the great and pathless earth stretching from them on every side—rough, billowy, and very desolate. She forgot that they had come but a few miles from the road. She had no knowledge of the quarter in which their destination lay. She did not mind; for they had achieved the object of the expedition, were hidden in the hills. Already ancient mysteries peeped from the stunted bushes, whispering fragments of the primeval ritual of the wild. Anything might stir and rise suddenly in the brake; for if conscious life were concealed there, it was a life, she felt sure, far removed from the human plane.

The Watcher said, "It is well to be here; one discerns again the music of the stars." Her peaceful heart repeated, "It is well!" She was brought to a new place, immersed in a new experience; and that contented her.

But Vera was not content. She flung herself into the cart, crying querulously. "*Do* let us go home! I'm tired—I want my tea! I think it is a very nasty drive."

Then Constance suggested to the pony that his respite was at an end; but the encouraging rein and very gentle lash had no effect upon his tired limbs and stubborn mind. He hung his head and planted his feet more firmly on the ground. She said, "I'm afraid we must let him rest a little more."

Vera stamped her foot, and cried, "I won't! I shan't! I hate him. I want to go home to my tea!"

She dashed from the cart and into the bracken ; snatched a loose stick which lay there, and hit the wearied pony with all her angry strength across the ears. It leapt forward ; and Vera jumped into the rocking cart, crying gaily : " There ! he only wanted hitting ! I knew I'd make him go."

The pony went, indeed—a poor bothered fevered thing—blindly and without sense of direction. It ran with a sort of convulsive strength ; with miserable shudderings and settings back of the ears. So they were flung into hollows and up little hills, jerked this way and that. Constance had the reins, but her strength was no match for a frightened moorland pony who scents the neighbourhood of the fell. She put her arm firmly about Vera, and resigned herself to the event.

During a period that seemed infinite, the cart raced through the twilight ; tilting, leaping, twisting, but, by some miracle, never overturned. They fled past a swift-dissolving vista of immense grey fields, looming trees and shadowy corners ; and past a sudden black pine-wood, a thing of terror in the dusk. Far off, they saw white roads that rushed from an invisible highway into the heart of a dim veiled land. Far up, they saw the fell. But they were caught in the debatable land between the two ; and in this situation there seemed for them no hope.

Then one of the great limestone boulders that push out from the earth on the lower slopes stood suddenly in their path ; and the dazed and worried pony could not elude it. Almost before the peril reached their minds, one wheel met the obstacle with

a crash ; the cart tried to mount it, failed, tottered, and was overturned. Constance and the child half leapt, half tumbled, from the low seat to the ground. There they lay huddled, in a bewilderment that excluded the more natural sensations of despair, amidst a litter of broken shafts, a wheel torn from its axle, and a pony which was kicking its way to freedom as quickly as it might.

Constance rose, shook herself, and examined Vera. Routine took charge of her ; and she acted without thought and therefore with decision. The child was sobbing with fear, anger and fatigue ; but she was unhurt. Constance, suddenly alert to the realities of their situation, said to her,

“ Stop crying ; get up quickly. It’s nearly dark, and we have got to find our way home.”

She went to the crestfallen and panting pony, extricated his limbs from the entangled harness, took a handful of bracken and rubbed him down. She said to Vera, “ I’m going to put you on the pony. Don’t be frightened—hold tight, and let him go the pace he likes. You will have a lovely ride, just like a grown-up lady, and we shall soon find a cottage to get tea.”

She dared not ask herself yet in which direction she should go to find it, or what were her chances of success ; for their course had been a twisted one, with doubling to and fro and the tracing of wild circles, and she had no knowledge of the sky to help her.

At this instant the voice of the Watcher said urgently, “ The light ! We must go to the light.”

Then she looked up, and saw with deep thankfulness a little sharp star that had flashed into being and shone low down in the hills. Unquestionably it called to them; offering at least a certainty of human life. It was no great matter to quiet the pony, and place Vera upon his back. She did it, and set out to wander up the pathless fell without any sensation of anxiety. She was still sustained by the mystic's delightful conviction that nothing really matters in the least.

"What funny little things happen to us!" said the Watcher, "and what infinite shades of experience you have packed within the limits of the dream. I like these dark and lonely places, where the foolish, bustling people never come."

She might have agreed with him: for indeed the wild and darkling earth about them cried messages of wonder to the eager mind. But the vague and crescent miseries of a cross-country walk, unwillingly undertaken in the dusk, quelled her thirst for adventure. She was hardly in training; and sooner than she had thought it possible, she grew breathless. Breathlessness brought in its train indifference, fatigue, at last exasperation. The approach to the light was very long; as they went, it seemed to retreat from them into the bosom of the hills. It led them upwards, with many miserable slippings and scramblings on the dried heather, sudden sinkings into bracken and clambering upon harsh and disconcerting stones, to a saucer-like valley scooped out from a spur of the fell. There its presence seemed to create a greater darkness, a terrible and mysterious gloom. There were two little hillocks at

the entrance, guarding perhaps the citadel of some primeval and inhuman life.

The Watcher whispered, "Press on! press on! We are drawing very near." He was like a hound upon the scent: eager, excited. But she could not respond. She stood dissociated from him at this moment, and felt the lonelier for his evident air of being at home. She was invaded, too, by a panic terror: for there was nothing in her past experience which could help her in dealing with the circumstances of this hour. A hare sat sentinel on one of the little hillocks. It moved as they came up to it, and Vera screamed. That scream made their condition seem unsafe: but they plodded on. When they were come a little farther, they saw beyond the saucer-like valley a narrower crevice in the hill; and within it the dark shape of a building, and the slit of radiant window which had been their guiding light.

It was the child, sharp-eyed, who exclaimed with a sob of rage and hunger, "Oh, Tanta! how perfectly hateful! It's only a church after all."

Constance, then, was aware of a certain sinking of the heart; and of a sense of helplessness, a distrust of her situation, which the unpeopled hills had been powerless to induce. The fears of the traveller faded before the fears of the lost. Man had been there and left his mark; and it was a hieroglyphic that she had no skill to read.

But the Watcher still cried, "Go to the light. It is real; it calls us. You cannot—you must not—retreat!"

That drove her on; and she led the pony up the

last slopes of heather to the little limestone chapel which stood solitary on its knoll. There was a sudden uprising of shadowy grey forms from under the wall as they came to it; and a hoarse cry and a scuttering in the dusk which jarred her weary nerves and brought strange choking sensations to her throat. Then the frightened sheep ran towards the hills, and they were again alone.

The door of the place was shut, and through the keyhole that mysterious light looked out on them. She was past further adventure, and when her first casual exploration failed to discover the latch of the door, she abandoned it.

The Watcher murmured, "This is a place of safety; all is well!" But her heart did not echo his words.

Because there seemed nothing else to do, she lifted Vera from the depressed and weary pony. It rambled a yard or so away, stopped, and began to crop at the short grass. Presently it turned the corner of the church and disappeared.

A man came out from the lean-to cottage which was concealed at the little church's eastern end. When he saw the bridled pony, he was surprised. He went quickly towards the entrance, with such rising feelings of anger and distress as might possess a lover whose secret lair was suddenly unmasked. When he was come round the north-west angle, he saw a figure that sat upon the threshold of the chapel and leaned against the door. He perceived it to be the form of a very weary woman, and a remark about damned tourists died stillborn. Instead, he approached and said to her, very gently,

"That is Lancelot's attitude. But won't you come inside?"

The Watcher took Constance's lips for his own purposes, and whispered, "Yes!"

Vera exclaimed with petulant relief, "Oh, here's a man! How lovely! Tanta, do ask him if we can't come in and have some tea."

The man said, "Poor child, of course you shall be fed!"

Then he put his hand to an inconspicuous boss, pressed it, and opened the church door. He held it, and allowed Constance to pass him, followed her and knelt upon the ground; an act which at once made Miss Tyrrel feel awkward and obtrusive.

But before she had time to digest these unpleasant emotions an amazing thing happened. A force stronger than herself brought her, too, to her knees; and to an act of profound though involuntary adoration. She knew not what she worshipped; but knew that worship she must. The hushed voice of the Watcher whispered within her, "It is the Idea!"

She could not rise. She forgot to be self-conscious. She knew only that her weariness was strangely healed. When she had knelt with bowed head for a few moments, feeling the unseen waves beating upon her brow, she looked up and saw that she was in a plain and oblong chamber, built of rough stones and floored with beaten earth. There were in it no pews, no place for priest and choir, none of the customary conveniences of piety. Hence the attention, undistracted, ran straight to the essential point; to the one object which lifted this sanctuary from a squalid desolation to an ordered austerity.

There was at the eastern end a little table, and on it a red brocaded cloth heavy like a pall, and touching the ground. This table bore no crucifix, no flowers, nor any candles; so that Constance said to herself, "If this place is Church of England, it must be very Low!"

But on the simple altar there was a curious metal case; of silver, inlaid with plaited patterns, angels, and mysterious animals, whose wings were made of enamels, gems, and gold. The doors of it stood open, so that one looked within, as into a little shrine. Inside, there was a rough glass cup, without a base, and with one clumsy handle. A kitchen teacup might have provided its model; but not the strange sheen of purple, black, and gold which ran through the glass. With sudden and inappropriate memories of South Kensington, she said to herself, "Phœnician, I am sure of it! But what is it doing here?"

Then she perceived that this antique vessel was the thing to which she knelt; the link with eternity which her lodger adored. Even whilst she fought its influence and speculated upon its meaning, it cast its spells upon her soul. There was nothing else within the chapel, unless it were the lighted wick in its clay saucer which had guided them to this place.

Centuries slid from her, and she found herself united to the primitive worship of the hills. Outside in the dusk, those hills and their inhabitants were gathering, brooding above the chapel, as if they would guard its enigmatic treasure from the peering vision of the modern world. Within, she—a daughter of that world—little suited to such company and such

rites, knelt with a man and a spirit who had been caught into some ecstatic and unheard-of communion by a symbol which only invoked in her the vague sensations of wonder, of desire, and of unrest.

She glanced at the man. He still knelt at her side, and had clearly forgotten that she was there; a circumstance which contradicted all that she knew of human life. He gazed at the glass cup with an ardent love which was without a taint of fatuousness. His glance pierced through it to something beyond; clearly seen and intimately known. He was young, spare, vivid, superbly alive.

There was a sudden shriek from the doorway behind them, and Vera cried in panic, "Oh, get up and speak to me quick! Tanta! It's lonely, it's queer! There's dreadful bogies in the hill. I hate your nasty prayers—I want my tea!"

He instantly rose to his feet, and said, "Come! we are forgetting. There is the child to be fed."

She followed him from the chapel with an unwillingness that she could not understand.

When they were in the two-roomed cottage, and he was cutting bread and setting milk to boil, he said to her, "You are the first that has come."

She replied, "We lost our way and wrecked the cart; and then we saw your light upon the hill."

He said, "That may have been the manner of it, but it could not be the cause." And because she looked at him strangely, he added, "Surely you know what it is you have seen to-night?"

She answered, "No; but I think that it was real, and mattered very much."

"Real?" he said. "I should think so! In the

last resort, it is our earnest of the only thing that matters; the transcendent link with reality. You, no less than Parsifal, have looked upon the Holy Graal."

She gazed at him then in amazement; and the feeble voice of common sense muttered that he must certainly be mad, or at least a hysteric of the religious type. He caught her eye, laughed at her, and said, "Oh, yes! Of course all knowing people would think I was insane; but you cannot, because you knelt down."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"All the better! That counts one to us."

"To us?"

"Yes—to the angels' side."

She said tentatively—for of course it might be desirable to humour him—"Oh, but it can't be, you know! At least, not really. It's absurd, incredible. And besides, how could you possibly be sure?"

There was an alarming note of obstinacy in his reply.

"No one can doubt, who has experienced the power of great relics; and this is the mightiest relic of them all. And besides, there is tradition; and I am of those who hold that tradition may be misread but cannot lie. Here, you know, in the Westmorland hills, was the last stronghold of the Celtic Church. Here my predecessors in her priesthood lingered with their treasures and their rites; long after Italian bishops came to the north, and the Isle of Saints was saintless, and the great monastic hives had been dispersed. With them was hid, adored, kept safe, the lost key of the

Middle Ages; that Graal which was sought by all the chivalry of God. Sought mystically, and also sought actually, because of the undying tradition of its loss——”

“ But now——”

“ But now ” he exclaimed, “ it was given to me—me, the meanest of its lovers!—to find, hold, and cherish. Never mind how. Grace did it, and that is enough. Has any man of our generation a dearer destiny, do you think? I am permitted to stand sentinel between it and a world that would not understand. We must keep our realities safe where we are able; from moth and rust, from thieves that break in and steal—worse, from possible museums. There are certain things spread up and down the world, you know, which enshrine the Only Secret and keep it safe. These are the most sacred of all trusts, and all who have eyes to see them are born to their guardianship. Some are in good hands; others are of such a nature that they cannot be perceived by those who do not love, and therefore they will never be profaned. But some are known only at their own peril. I have brought one such here to hide it. It is safe in the bosom of our hills; in the nest which has hid it so long!”

He went to a cupboard, brought cups and plates, and gave them warm milk, bread and butter, and oat-cake. Miss Tyrrel looked at the little neat commonplace cottage, and then at this eager man with hot blue eyes who spoke the language of fairyland with fervour and conviction. Side by side with her rebellious reason, the spirit of the Watcher looked out on this new slice of experience; and he, she perceived, had left

his perennial aspect of astonishment. He seemed as one who, sojourning in barbarous lands, where all is bizarre and difficult to accept, suddenly hears the dear accents of home; more, hears something, someone, whose presence in that home had long been desired, long needed, but never attained. They were within the field of some mighty and spiritual magnet, whose powers transcended time and space. She had always eluded dogma, with an agility which she doubtless owed to her excellent education; but here, in this crevice of the hills, was something which she could not elude. The Watcher cried in ecstasy, "The real! the real!" She raised her head with the gesture of a trapped and frightened thing; and again the man laughed.

"Tiresome, is it not?" he said. "But inevitable, I assure you. You had better acquiesce. The Finger of God is not to be escaped: it pursues, it caresses, it touches where it will."

It was the old and hateful message: *God is not mocked*. He was not. He had met her in the city. He had chased her to the hills. He waited, inexorable, behind the veil. Here, there was a rent in that veil; and through it a Hand was stretched forth, which offered her a gift. She was too far away to see the wound upon that generous hand; and as for the gift, a woman of her superior intelligence could only look upon it as the fruit of a fantastic—even perverse—imagination.

It was merely a cup of rough glass, curiously iridescent, and stained with the colours of an imperial grief.

CHAPTER XI

MARTIN UPON REALITY

“En cette jonction et en cette joie adviennent souvent de grands bonheurs a l’homme ; et maintes mystérieuses et secrètes merveilles des trésors divins sont manifestées et découvertes.”—RUYSBROECK L’ADMIRABLE : *L’Ornement des Noces Spirituelles*.

HE brought them, late at night, by an invisible path, to the point at which they could see their village close beneath them. He wrapped the sleepy Vera in his old and faded plaid, and carried her down the fell ; saying, “Though my name is Martin, we will not divide the cloak to-night.” At the first hint of field and road, he parted from them ; and turned again towards his friendly hills, and the watchful lamp which was before the shrine.

It was during this last solitary stage of their descent that the Watcher, returning to his long-abandoned mood of mockery—almost as if he too were over-tired—had whispered within Miss Tyrrel’s mind certain bitter, surprising, and contemptuous words.

“So,” he said, “it appears that you know too much to be deceived by reality, when at last you

meet it. It is well indeed that They have fed you with illusion, since this is all that you are able to digest! The killing, eating, earning, quarrelling, the meaningless wriggles of life; that is acceptable, it seems, but not the Idea. It is offered to you, it is present, it penetrates your very modes of being. Even in the adventures of your body you may meet it face to face. But you prefer the more rational illusions—fashion and morality and the Intellectual Life. I have laughed to-night; real laughter, which is another thing than your disordered mirth. One of you, I suppose, once knew of it: the one who spoke about the 'laughter of the gods.' You have cherished the phrase and the man; you thought it clever, did you not? *Is it clever to perceive one's own humiliation in perspective?*"

She, made meek by the experiences of the day, said, "Oh, I know that I am blind and limited; but why were *you* able to apprehend something wonderful there?"

Then he replied more gently, "Because I have dwelt always within It; although till I had sunk into life I did not notice, did not understand. Seen against that darkness, one can hardly fail to recognize the light."

This was but an ill preparation for the return to practical matters; to their lodging, and to an agitated landlady in whom abruptly relieved anxiety effervesced as wrath of a quality difficult to appease. Constance's assurance as to the safety of the pony was received with distrust; and her apparent inability to describe its present whereabouts did but exacerbate the situation. As a fact, it had been left

in Martin's care, with an undertaking that she should go herself the next day to retrieve it.

Martin had said, "I dare not risk discovery by your village. It is full of summer visitors who go to and fro seeking what secret beauty they may destroy. They call it an object for a walk. They would think that my hidden treasure-house was very quaint; and the more cultured and pestilent amongst them would write descriptions of it and publish them in the *Spectator* and the *Westminster Gazette*. As it is, the place is well concealed; I have passed many summers in safety. Do not betray me! That were a treachery to two worlds."

She, seeing in vision with a housewife's eye the necessary general shop—the soap and soda, pepper, sugar, rice—and also the flour-mill and the weekly butcher's cart, which certainly could never climb the fell, said to him, "How do you manage, if you never come?"

"He replied, "I have another route; over the hills and far away to a little lonely uncommunicative place. There, the people accept my existence and wish to know no more. Hill-folk have so little curiosity; their own concerns suffice them. I go down amongst them, lend a hand if there is need, buy what I require, and back again by the sheep-tracks. No one thinks it worth while to follow and question me. A taste for solitude is no novelty in the North; they are well accustomed to dour folk, ill-tempered anchorites, and people stowed away in odd nooks. Likely enough I am catalogued as daft; but were I sick and asked help, they would give it. You see, they have wintered me and summered me

many a time; and I am part of their landscape now."

Part of hers, too, he was destined to become; though the fitting of him in was a matter of hard pushing and urgent faith. When she woke upon the following morning and looked round her attic bedroom, where relics of medieval discomfort were mitigated by an aggressive wall-paper, and chromolithographs of "The Good Shepherd," "Mother's Sweetheart," and "The Coronation of Edward VII.," she seemed far indeed from the austere chapel in the fells. How could a sensible and industrious woman, whose investigations of philosophy had ranged from Aristotle to Schopenhauer, find room in her consciousness for that incredible Cup, and its fantastic guardian? True, she found room there for the more impossible Watcher; but the camel, as usual, had left little place for the gnat. The Watcher, after all, came from another universe, where anything might happen and anything be true; but Martin's claim involved the readjustment of a dimension as to which she had already made up her mind. Although she would have repudiated scholasticism with a violence which was proper to her education, she was still a dualist at heart.

Vera slept hard after her adventure; and Constance left her in bed, dressed, and descended to the presence of a landlord whose low opinion of Londoners had been confirmed by yesterday's performance. She breakfasted in haste and discomfort, being one of those who can ill endure the disapproval of their inferiors.

But there was an encouraging voice within which

said to her, "Dear friend, why let yourself be troubled? Are we not going back to the real?"

As she came out in her short skirt and tam-o'-shanter, she met the postman and received from him a fat letter in a hand that she did not know. She took it with her to read upon the way; and at the first halt, after the sharp, hot scramble which put a patch of heather between her and the cultivated land, she sat upon a boulder and spread it on her knee.

The letter was from Mrs. Reed; one of those lengthy and intimate letters which are produced, not by overpowering affection, but by long periods of leisure enjoyed in an uncongenial spot. It was dated from the Villa Medici Boarding Establishment, Sandhill-on-Sea, a place which, as Mrs. Reed observed in her opening paragraphs, had "no soul, and not even a desirable body; being but the dreary evolutionary product of golf, gas-works and red brick."

"Of course," she said, "it is all *maya*, illusion; nevertheless, I own that an inexpressible disgust makes me sad when I see Nature playing the Piccadilly harlot by the sea with the added horror of a deliberate winsomeness. Here one perceives the educative influence of phenomena in its negative aspect; the materialistic qualities of the modern seaside resort producing its appropriate population. I see young men and young women who have no thought beyond the sphere of Malkuth, in whom the Universal Medicine has never worked. They rush to and fro without hats; and did they but know it, also without hope. All their dreams, all their ideals, are concerned with physical things; the movement

of muscles and the touching of lips. Fortunately the air is very good, and my husband benefits. He spends many hours daily in a bath-chair upon the promenade. You, I hope, are climbing happily the ladder of dream in the lovely arena of the North; for I am sure that you were born with the vision that can look upon the stars. Are they not the eyes of Isis the Maternal One? And are not our illusions a progress to her arms? There is no one here to whom one can talk; and I spend much time in preparing the lectures for my autumn class; 'The Egyptian Under-world as an English Over-belief.' Mr. and Mrs. Vince passed through the town in their motor the other day, *en route* for the South Downs and Arundel, I think: but they only remained with us a few hours. He was very healthy, and wore mud-coloured clothes marked with grease. Is it a sin against the light to say that this seemed appropriate? He spoke of carburetters, and appeared to be happy. As for Muriel, she wore her dear look of detachment; but such a holiday, I think, can mean little to her. Within the sublime heart of things all must of course be unity; one knows it. But it is hard to realize the Absolute at Sandhill——"

Constance put the letter in her pocket, and from the height upon which she was poised dipped dreamily into that other life. She had been conscious of an egoistic pang when she came upon the image of Andrew, so far away, enjoying himself so completely. She had no point of contact with that prosperous and modern life which he took for granted; with hotels and motor-cars, all the imperative claims of petrol-tank, maps, and lunch-basket,

the delightful intricacies of cylinders and speeds. Hence these things seemed to lift him far from her sphere; to constitute a slur upon their friendship. Muriel, tied up in soft veils and whisked through the air—his hand upon the steering-wheel the one barrier between her exquisite body and death—could hardly fail to be warmed to something like womanhood by such a contact with the simple elements of life. Each, drawn closer to the other, was probably drawn farther from her; a gloomy idea indeed for the woman outside their life who had learned to depend on them. Andrew, between his carburetter and his darling, with outlets for every energy, holding life by each hand, must be far from the mood in which he had said to her, "I'm lonely—it's just that," and awakened by this cruel appeal a sympathy that he did not really need.

She looked sorrowfully at the hills, which were grey, cold, and sad, and at the close roof of trees lying tufty beneath her. She got up with a sigh, for existence had again become arduous. She had ceased to acquiesce.

Then she turned to the ascent, and the Watcher once more raised his head—plumed himself, as it were. He understood now the dignity and joy of energy; of earth moving on earth, spirit driving it, mental concepts and determinations realized, if only in the dust. But the odd entanglements of humanity were still beyond him; as we, whilst we feed, exercise, and cherish our pet animals, hardly extend our sympathy to their friendships, love-affairs and hidden griefs. Hence his friend, when she turned to her fellow-creatures, still turned from him; and whilst

he was grieved by her troubles, he offered his condolences at a threshold which he might not cross.

The sheep-track which she followed took her round the shoulder of the hill and behind a knoll that hid the village from her sight. Then she stepped quickly from the credible to the actual; being hemmed in by the barren and majestic earth, roofed by a very gentle morning sky, beckoned on by the first glimpse of a tiny gable peering above the heathered slope. She knew that in another instant she would see the little window, and the faint glimmer of its ritual light. She felt like a traveller whose feet have come to the brink of a fairy ring; who, remembering the magic which invests it in the dusk, hesitates, even in the daylight, to cross a frontier which may delimitate that country from which no wanderer returns unchanged.

She completed the ascent of the last little hillock, and saw beneath her the chapel in its dell. Martin was feeding his chickens. He wore tweed knickerbockers, and looked fresh, brisk, and British. The pony stood near, comfortably tethered upon a patch of appetizing ground. It was as simple, as ordinary, and yet as unfamiliar as Snow-white's housekeeping might have seemed to a casual tourist happening upon that cottage in the wood.

Martin glanced upwards. He evidently possessed the hermit's instinct for those delicate noises which herald the approach of new life. When he saw her standing on the hill, he smiled at her and cried, "Wait! I am coming to show you the easy way down."

She watched him as he came up the steep and

invisible track with the effortless stride of a being whose powers are perfectly adjusted to his needs. When he was at her side, he said, "Well! in the morning light, I wondered whether I had dreamed you. You, I suppose, were quite sure that you had dreamed me?"

"Acknowledge that you are difficult."

"That remark connotes rather a severe self-criticism, doesn't it?"

"Oh, no," she said, "I am justified. Consider! all your circumstances are so strange. You have so long been parted from the world that you forget. This chapel, for instance—serving no village, no farm even—all by itself in the pathless hills! Who could have conceived of its existence? It is unreasonable, and yet appropriate: like Malory, perhaps, but not like life."

He replied, "It is like unspoiled life: the life of the West and the North, and the wild and ardent hearts which they have bred. These secret little chapels that they build, desolate places alone in the wilds, far off from any habitation—are they unreasonable? To say so, were cynicism indeed! They were meant to serve God, not man: to offer, not to ask. 'Tis the Celtic spirit, I think: the austere sentiment of lonely adoration. One sees the same thing in Brittany, you know. Cornwall has yet the wrecks of one or two; but she does not use them, of course. Her Methodism finds a nicer nook between the grocer's shop and the police-station. As for this place, I found it one day in my wanderings; a forgotten ruin, so miserable that it was not even picturesque. The door was broken down, and sheep

came in for shelter. I bring them here still in winter when the snow is very deep——”

“Into the *church*?” exclaimed Constance. She had considerable reverence for the externals of the religion in which she did not believe.

“Yes; into the church! Why not? I cannot think that the Lamb would refuse a roof to His poor relations in their need. He, who was born in a stable, must be very patient with the habits of the beasts. Of course I clean up after them. One likes the work—it brings Bethlehem to the English hills. Once, a little lamb was born here; right before the altar! That was a wonderful night; Nature at work renewing the eternal symbols. The snow was so deep that everything was very silent: but I heard the *Gloria* in the air!——”

She stared at him in growing discomfort; her doubt as to his sanity had returned.

He said, “Oh, yes! Of course it seems mad; I know that. But do not be afraid—my manias are quite harmless. There was no other way for me; nor will there be for you, I think, when once you have grasped. The world has come to that point in its perversion of reality, at which one can hardly be natural unless one is insane. I am not the first person, after all, who has tried to domicile the truths of one plane in the symbols of another——

“‘And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountain green?
And was the Holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pasture seen?’

Do you remember that? Blake knew—as he

knew all things! He, who touched the sky with his finger, would not have been surprised."

She said, "I don't understand one bit! It is like hearing the Middle Ages through a gramophone."

The Watcher asked her anxiously, "Is that a patch of time when men were near the real?"

She answered in confusion, "Perhaps. I do not know."

They descended to the chapel; and again, with shaking heart, she entered the door and knelt down. Then her lodger, as if friendship itself must give way before this mighty opportunity, seized her mind, her powers, in his old passionate spirit of domination. He threw himself, as it were, and these with him—humble, eager, and full of joy—at the feet of that Power which had been brought to a point in this place. By her side, another spirit rose beyond him; transfigured, made ardent, by that same vivid and penetrating love.

When they were come out, she said to Martin, "Ah, what is it? what is it? There is more here than any mere relic, any dead symbol, I think."

He answered in the voice of one who tells his dearest secret, "Yes; you are in a lover's lair——"

"But what is it, this illusive Thing you love?"

The Watcher whispered, "Why, the Idea! What else could one love?"

Martin, to her surprise, corroborated him, saying, "Your mind is still clouded by practical things. The breath of the world has tarnished it. If it were not so, you could hardly help but see: for the 'elusive thing' which you have such difficulty in

accepting is just the one Thing that truly exists. As for loving it, am I not a priest? And are not all priests in their essence just lovers—deeply in love, but only with ideas?”

She, thinking of the ministers of many denominations whom she had met in the course of her work, could not agree with him.

“Oh yes, they are!” he said. “At least, the real ones, and the others do not count. I’ll tell you the life of a priest. He watches and waits and serves the Beloved Thing, and steels his heart against the misery of seeing it despised and rejected of men. And after a time it happens that he cannot bear the waiting and the watching any more, and so he runs away with his darling to a desert and a secret place, there to enter into possession of his joy. That is the story of the hermits, and of many and many a person who is supposed to have a morbid hatred of his kind. Humanity is insulted, and says bitter things of them; just as many a mother is insulted when her son first casts his eyes upon a woman and wants to leave his home and make a nest for her somewhere in the world. He feels the impulse—he knows he has got to go on—and so do we. It is the next stage; to leave the Mother of all of us, and turn from her to the one and only love for whose possession she has raised us up.”

“Is that what brought you here?”

“Yes! Even before I found the Cup, I think that I was destined to come. Sometimes, down there, I dreamed I was a poet; and then suddenly I awoke and knew I was a parson. One couldn’t combine them; so I aped St. Francis, stripped off my clerical

clothes, and went wandering. Because I was detached, my destiny came; the love-token was put into my hand, and I was forced to find a nook where I might hide it."

He broke off, and looked at her with authority. "You are judging me!" he said. "But why shouldn't I act thus? I defy you to say why I should not have done it."

"You," she retorted, "are judging me—and through me, the race! And why, pray, should not I have done it?"

"How can I say? You have not unveiled your idol."

She answered, "Her name is Life; but unbelievers have another word for that aspect to which I made my oblation."

"Was it a happy love?"

She glanced back, and then said, "No. Not really happy; only exciting. Since I have seen you, and because you are sharp-edged and simple, I know that my worship fell short. It was ugly and had no shape."

"Oh, no!" he said with great gentleness, "if it was worship, it could not have been ugly. You may have seen it in ugly terms, of course. Wasn't that it? Real worship is always beautiful; the eternal Object of it sees to that. But we, when we would judge what we are doing, will mix ourselves up with the picture; we do not stand far enough away——"

She interrupted him. "But there *is* no standing far away, when it's life. That is the terrible part! One lives up to that religion; it is no mere academic creed. One must plunge in, bathe in it. It is like the initiation of Mithra; every adept must be

baptized in the hot, horrible torrent of blood, endure it to the dregs. Sometimes, you know, that leaves a stain; an unexpected stain, which cannot be effaced."

The sharp blue eyes looked at her; and then he answered quietly, "I know. It is horribly painful; but not in the least criminal, of course."

"My initiation——" she said, and stopped. Then she began a different subject. "Did you notice the child who was with me last night?"

"Yes: an animal thing. That's all right! There are many such up here. They are left over; they linger in the corner. Sometimes they are fresh-created by mistake."

"She was."

"Ah, well, you must not be fastidious! Your goddess is not always in her best bib and tucker; cannot be always on her knees. She must work, and sometimes soil her hands in the process. As for me, because I have lived close to the breeding earth for many years, I have been taught to abandon that delicacy which demands a constant crop of lilies but cannot tolerate manure. It is all so splendid, so holy! Oh, it *really* is—even one's own experience! The true lover, I fancy, can afford to see his mistress at the dust-bin and love her none the less; and so it is with Life, with God——"

"That's different."

"No, not really. Right through existence, from beginning to end, and in every relation, one always as a matter of fact loves in the same way."

Thinking of the foolish enthusiasms of the past, she said, "No! I hope not!"

“Oh yes, but we do,” he answered, “Why, isn’t that just our job; to get the little loves right, so that the big love may be in order too? ‘*Ordina quest’ amore, O tu che m’ ami!*’ Friend, lover, toy, ambition, and sacramental divinity; we really turn the same face to them all. Watch a woman with her sweetheart, and you may guess pretty accurately her attitude to her God. Don’t you know? Some love in gusts of overpowering devotion; and some steadily and quietly, like a well-trimmed flame. Some give—give—give, all the while, and never ask back. These, I think, are already divine. Some cry, ‘Love me! only show that you love me!’ just that, every minute of the day. Some love sternly, sulkily, but unquenchably; they turn the arrows of Eros upon themselves, and wound themselves cruelly, drawing the barbs through their flesh, with a strange, fierce joy. And that which each does in the human relation will govern his actions towards the Absolute too.”

She looked at him, rather puzzled. “I never thought of it that way,” she said.

The Watcher stirred within her, and muttered, “Of course! It is a training-ground, a school. What else could it possibly be? The Idea must be there, underneath. Why did I not perceive it before? This, then, is the meaning of the foolish and deluded human loves.”

Martin went on. “You see, all that—the joining up of things, the matching of the outside with the inner meaning—one learns in these quiet places, as nowhere else. In the cities it is difficult and confusing: but here the silence helps it, and the meek

determination of the earth. When one is quite alone, one hears it say so many beautiful things. This is the secret of that contempt of the bustling, practical world, which comes with such great simplicity to the saints. I think I shall never quite forget the cleansing of my own eyes on the day that I brought the Cup to its home. It was a grey morning, and misty. The sky was soft; and behind its softness one divined a gleam. All the world seemed a little different, I thought; I was so warmed towards it by That which I held to my breast. I wondered to myself what was its place in that love; and how near the dutiful and patient plants, the little simple beasts, were drawn to Him. Then I looked up, and knew: for I saw across the meadows and the forests the majestic figure of a Priest, who passed to and fro with unhurried steps and fed his creatures, some with bitter bread and some with sweet. All the flowers spread their corollas at his coming; all the little creatures raised soft faces and opened trustful mouths for the receiving of this Host. And it was of their substance and of his. Now, I see this God, this Priest, in all his aspects. I see him laughing in the riot as Dionysus did; I find him passionate as a lover in the oratory, austere as a judge in the confessional, gentle as a mother at the grave. Shall I not attribute to him the same range of emotion as I find in his creation? Why limit his immanence and its effects? 'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows'; as surely, he shares our conquests and our joys."

"Oh, no," she said; "not that! Think—they are so childish, so absurd!"

“You have no right,” exclaimed Martin, “thus to stigmatize the pleasures of your God. How arrogant we are, turning back upon our parents, imposing our little creeds upon their source! Remember, if Omnipotence enjoyed a game of marbles, He would not be less, but the game of marbles would be more. Is it not the Holy Ghost who looks through our eyes at earthly beauty, and guides the hand of the artist, the bridge-builder—yes, and of the cricketer too? Does He not exult in the tempest and taste rapture in the dance? Have you ever thought, that as we can only know Him in moments of ecstasy—like knowing like—so the Divine Life must be one long ecstasy of Being, marked by the spinning of the worlds? And are we ever so godlike as in the moments when we abandon ourselves without condition to those rhythms of the universe?”

“A dangerous doctrine!” she said. “Sometimes that abandonment breeds what the world calls sin.”

“Yes, because the world generally judges sin backwards; by its bodily seeming, as if one could sin with the body alone. Absurd! You might as well say that your clothes could sin of themselves! The body is nothing, after all; only a little heap of dust, wrapped round to hide the soul.”

Then, because his last words roused in her vivid and overwhelming memories, and in her lodger the ecstatic recognition of a fellow-exile who really understood, she said to him suddenly, “I think that I am going to tell you something.”

He replied, “I thought you would have to, when I saw you come.”

“I *know* that about the body—about the dust—

truly know it, I mean ; and it has made everything seem unreal and useless, except the times when I manage to forget."

The Watcher corrected her, saying, " But has it not disclosed the real ?"

" Such knowledge anticipates death," said Martin gravely.

She answered, " Yes ; and it comes of meddling with the fringe of things. Life was so dull, so flat, so lonely ; I thought that I must have adventure, must anticipate. I could not be quiet : I longed to know. I did not think it would be real—could be ; and now I am possessed by a reality from which I can never escape."

" If you loved it, surely you wouldn't wish to escape ?"

" I don't *love* it."

Martin said : " The things one does not love are better left alone."

" But I did not think that it was really there. How could I, on our sane and normal earth, where everything fits, and every crevice is concealed ? How could I conceive that the dust would break down—at a word, a ceremony, a wish, a song—and another universe intrude ?"

" Really," he said, " if your materialism was so narrow and so arrogant as that, one cannot be very sorry for its fall. I know that little knot of case-hardened and well-educated rejectors of experience from which you have come. They are like a party of old ladies sitting in the drapery department of the Stores, who see a man rush hastily through bearing a pile of tin saucepans. When he has gone,

they rub their eyes and decide that he must be an hallucination, because tin saucepans have nothing to do with drapery. They forget that the universe too may have other departments——”

“I can’t; for my tin saucepan is always there.”

He said very gently, “Will you not tell me?” and she, drowning the clamorous voice of the Watcher, who was insulted by this too sudden dip into homely metaphor, told him. The sun had broken from its morning mists, and poured radiance upon a singularly definite earth; and there, sitting in the narrow line of shade beneath the north wall of the chapel, with the delicious roughness of the heather caressing her bare hand, and in her ears the soft noise of the pony’s steady munching, she related the history of her evocation and its answer, of the column of dust and its wild-eyed inhabitant, of her horror and her wavering will, of the invasion of the Watcher and her bewildering dual life. As she told it, the tale assumed for her a shape that she had not perceived in it before. She apprehended a thread within it: the history of a progress for both of them which, had she been a Darwinian, she might have explained to herself as the natural result of a changed environment. She saw clearly for the first time the slow humanizing of the Watcher, which had turned him from an intruder to a friend—warm interest replacing his chill curiosity, sympathy modifying his supersensual contempt. In herself also she saw a change; the liberation within her of something, some power, which could dispute his dominion, could meet him on his own plane.

At the ending of the tale, Martin said to her, "Well, you have found a destiny! Little cause for discontent with that goddess of yours. She has treated you handsomely enough; given you no casual help from her stock-pot, but served you a special *plat*. You know, I suppose, what you are in for? The saving of souls has always been looked upon as a fairly big business; but you have got something less usual than a soul to save."

"Do you think so?" She stared at him.

"Think? It is obvious!"

"But how to do it?"

"How? Oh, don't worry about that. Just live. Your goddess has a way of solving these problems as she comes up to them. Sometimes she cuts her way; but she always does something, always goes on, always arrives."

Constance replied rather sadly, "It is easy to be optimistic here."

"Oh, no; not easy. The horizon, even here, is overwide; and one sees many grievous and difficult things. But Hope is one of my three duties; and without it the other two could hardly be performed."

She exclaimed, involuntarily, "How *sure* you are! And this lodger of mine; he apprehends your secret, he loves it too, although I cannot find the link and understand."

He replied, "There is nothing odd in that really. It belongs to his world, of course. It came to the spirits in prison as well as to the seed grounds of earth. The curious thing—the interesting aspect—is that he was forced to come here to find and recognize the liberating hand."

“Behind those terrible myths! How *could* he find it there; in symbols that deal with nothing but the most hideous animal accidents of our nature—dying, torment and blood? Surely the real, the divine—what one longs for, what one needs—is a reading of reality that shall be radiant, permanent, serene: that shall offer a promise of deathless and beautiful things?”

He took her by the shoulders. “Poor squeamish child!” he said, “go back to Nature. Watch her at the eternal game of death and birth. Life, you say, is your idol. Listen to her, then, as she expounds existence. She is a difficult mistress; she offers no self-evident syllogism to the pupils that she loves. She has but one formula, and that a paradox. It is the paradox of creation—the folly of the Cross.”

* * * * *

In the afternoon, as she led the pony down the hill, she knew herself too to be led, in a new spirit of acceptance, back again from the heights to life, to work; to the constant struggle for beauty, shape and significance. Behind her in the mountain, the light burned and the Cup reigned on its little altar; remote, magical and serene. A ray of that light went with her, illuminating certain recesses of her spirit which had lurked in the twilight till this day. As Martin bade her good-bye he had said to her, in a low and diffident tone, yet almost with an accent of entreaty,

“Oh, learn to love! Do, please, learn to love. It's such terrible waste if you don't. You are made

of the stuff that does things thoroughly; and this is the one thing which is worth doing well."

These words had moved Constance strangely; making her feel humble, cowed and ineffectual. They had even brought unwilling tears to her eyes. Somehow, they reminded her of the Shining Tree, and the more actual image of creative pain which had crossed it. They addressed themselves to the sleepy inhabitant which had roused itself at that moment to struggle for the possession of her will. That inhabitant took little interest in her personal wants and failures. It was eager to endure all that might be before it; eager to co-operate with life.

Vera met her in the garden, joyous and muddy. "Tanta," she cried, "I drowned a chicken. And the mother hen *did* squeak."

CHAPTER XII

A LECTURE AND A DEMONSTRATION

“Memento homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.”—*Roman Missal*.

MRS. REED munched a biscuit, and thought of transcendental things. The resulting sense of beatitude might be attributed in part to the exquisite crispness of a cream cracker which had come from a newly-opened tin; in part to the serenity of spirit which is natural to any woman who is sure that she knows what she means by a Categorical Imperative.

Ra lifted a slate-blue nose from the protective ambush of his tail, and snuffed the air; preserving a judicious mean between appetite and dignity. Helen broke off a small piece of biscuit, offered it to him, and carefully removed the inevitable crumbs from the recesses of his fur frill.

Mr. Reed, watching these attentions with the slight sensations of jealousy which they always provoked, said, “You will spoil that cat, my love! If he were a baby, you could not fuss over him more than you do.”

Helen, who was completing Ra's toilet with a

brush and a comb, stopped and answered, "He has all Egypt in his eyes! What British baby brings such credentials as that? Also, he may come into the room during the lecture; and I prefer that he should look his best."

Mr. Reed moved uneasily in his chair, and fumbled for the stick at his side. His wife went to him, took each hand firmly in her own, and helped him to his feet with the unemotional precision of a hospital nurse.

"Twenty past eleven!" he said. "Your young friends will soon be here. I think I'll be going."

The woman who supported him waited patiently until the stick was adjusted to his liking. Then she put one arm about his shoulders, caught up a cushion with her other hand, and led him across the room. There was upon her face the guardian look of a creeping anxiety, an apprehension which has not yet been allowed to attain full consciousness.

"Poor old dear!" she said. "It seems a shame to turn you out like this; but you will really be more comfortable in the other room. I lit the gas-stove, and the rug and hot-water bottle are all ready. You will feel quite cosy; and as soon as the class is over I shall come and get you ready for lunch."

"A very good arrangement—very good arrangement indeed," said the old man slowly. "I take my morning nap while you young people have your class. What is it? The state of the dead, eh? Ah, very interesting, very interesting indeed! I should have enjoyed it if I hadn't been quite so deaf. Never do to deprive you of your pleasures, you know! You would mope shut up all day with an old fellow like

me. As it is, we shall both be satisfied. Just as it should be."

Helen was by no means sure that she was wholly satisfied. Her husband seemed, she thought, more somnolent, less alert than usual; and she regretted the necessity of immuring him in a gas-warmed room for the rest of the morning. She said to herself that it would certainly lower his vitality, and he must have a little stimulant with his lunch. Also, Mrs. Wetherbee had taken a ticket for her lectures; and whilst the growing expenses of beef essence, Benger's Food, and new-laid eggs forbade her to refuse the two guineas, she feared that they would prove to be hardly earned. Between these diverse anxieties, the mood of serenity departed, and the material world surged in upon her with peculiar obstinacy. She was depressed by this exhibition of the power of circumstances; and set about the arranging of chairs, the placing of the ritual glass of water on the table, in a state of mind which—in an inferior woman—might almost have become fussy.

Mrs. Wetherbee arrived first. She carried a large new notebook, and a fat stylographic pen of the kind known as "Teddy Bear." Her demeanour struck Mrs. Reed as excessively inappropriate.

"Well!" she said as she entered. "Now I am going to improve my mind and find out what you clever people really mean by it all. I was determined to come this autumn. Last winter, when one went out to tea, one never knew what the women were talking about. Besides, I always like a lecture; the questions afterwards are such fun. Muriel is coming. I saw her motor trying to run into an

omnibus as I arrived. She has got Felix with her. Quite the old-fashioned Calvinistic idea, to teach children about hell before they've heard anything about heaven. It is about hell, isn't it? No? Well, it sounds like it. I hope you're not going to show any pictures of those peculiar gods. As it is, I expect the poor child won't sleep for nights. Here they are——"

Muriel came in, holding Felix firmly by the hand. She said to Helen, "You do not mind my bringing him, do you? He has promised to be quite good. Being Saturday, he does not go to Kindergarten to-day. He will not understand—one does not wish it—but I should like him to breathe the atmosphere for a little while. Atmosphere is so important in its influence on the developing mentality of the child."

Felix removed his gloves, coat, and cap very carefully; revealing a thin little body clad in a pale green jersey and short serge knickerbockers to match. He cast a searching glance into the corners of the room, peeped under the table, and then said, "Where is Ra?"

Mrs. Reed answered, "I am afraid that he is asleep just now in my husband's room."

Felix observed, "When I'm a bigger boy, I shall do like that, and sleep in another room when ladies talk. Father does, and I've quite decided that I am going to be a man too."

Muriel said hastily, "He is a little fractious and disappointed to-day. Andrew wished to take him to see the royal procession this afternoon, but I preferred that he should stay with me. Children are so easily

impressed by mere military display, and acquire false standards of greatness. I tell him that when he is bigger, he will understand the unimportance of these things. Then, he will see more essential beauty in the curves of Darwin's forehead than in a whole regiment of life-guards."

Felix murmured regretfully, "Yes, but not lovely prancy horses and bands and things."

"I expect Andrew was disappointed too," said Mrs. Wetherbee. "He enjoys taking the child about with him so much."

"Oh, no," answered Muriel. "He gave the ticket to Miss Tyrrel. He likes to take her out on Saturday afternoons when he can; she is so very good-natured, and appears to appreciate almost any little expedition of that kind. It is a change for her, of course, after being shut up in that shop all the week——"

"You are very unconventional, my dear," said Mrs. Wetherbee.

"I try to be," replied Muriel simply.

The presence of other people prevented Mrs. Wetherbee from making the observation which she considered adequate. She therefore contented herself with an inarticulate sound which the more worldly persons present had little difficulty in translating.

"Miss Tyrrel," said Phœbe quickly, "is also unconventional, I think; though not, perhaps, in quite the same way. She is one of those strange and always interesting persons who appear to have no attachments to existence. She wanders in a desert of her own."

“The truth is,” answered Mrs. Wetherbee, “that none of us knows where she wanders; or, for that matter, where she comes from. It *may* be a desert; or it may be something very much the reverse. That is the worst of London. In the country such a state of things would be impossible. The Vicar would call, and find it all out. I’ve been to her shop once or twice. Pure curiosity, and I’m not ashamed of it. There she is, very sensible and business-like, in an extremely becoming overall. Always on the spot, always attentive, no silly air of ‘Don’t forget that I’m a lady.’ I asked her to tea last week, and she came; talked pleasantly for an hour and a half and gave me an excellent pattern for a pinafore—economical to cut out and easy to wash—which I own surprised me. And when she left I knew nothing about her. Nothing at all! By no means the usual thing with reduced gentlewomen.”

It was Phoebe who said, “One hardly conceives of her as that. Circumstances do not seem to belong to her, nor she to circumstances. She is wholly detached, wholly alone. Unless, indeed, she has links to life of which we know nothing.”

“Well, that is what I am sometimes afraid of,” replied Mrs. Wetherbee. “Not that I have any reason for saying it. But when you find a good-looking woman of that age entirely unattached——”

“It proves,” said Muriel, “a certain wonderful aloofness from existence.”

“Not always, my dear. Aloofness of that kind may come from cussedness in the young; but it is generally the result of compulsion where it exists in the mature.”

Phœbe observed very gently, "I feel so sorry for her! One divines that she is not really happy in her solitude. Probably she has never made her peace between the spirit and the flesh."

Mrs. Reed, at last seeing an opportunity, remarked in her sweetest and most penetrating tone, "At best that is but an armistice between irreconcilable foes."

"Oh no—I think not," replied Phœbe firmly. "That is a mistake which the contemplation of materialism is so apt to induce. But I see more and more of late that spirit in its purest manifestations is bound to express itself by means of the carnal veil."

"I had not supposed," said Mrs. Wetherbee, "that Freddy Burroughs possessed such educational genius!"

There was a general sensation of surprise when it was observed that these words had caused Miss Foster to exhibit a quite commonplace embarrassment. Her pretty face grew pink, and she looked almost maidenly. Muriel, whose rather disintegrated nature contained several kindly patches, said instantly,

"I think it is so kind of you to go about with him as you do. After all, an uncongenial friendship is bound to tax one's tolerance, exhaust one's spiritual strength. I wonder sometimes whether Miss Tyrrel experiences anything of that kind with Andrew. One can hardly suppose that they have much in common."

"If a woman is lonely enough," observed Mrs. Wetherbee, "she has something in common with the

crossing-sweeper ; but she would be rather surprised if she were told what that something was."

Mrs. Reed was glad when the rest of her pupils assembled and the lecture at last began. She had prepared it carefully ; and it combined mummies, metaphysics, alchemy, and the Book of the Dead in a very impressive way. Some of the ladies present were puzzled, but all were interested.

"The Egyptian Under-world," said the lecturer in hieratic accents, "calls to us for recognition across the chasm of five thousand years ; and now, when dogma crumbles under our touch, the eternal realities of the immortal soul's progress and transmutations—the gates through which it passes to the Central Fire, the crucible whence it emerges to be united with Sol its source—appeal to us as the most rational of all over-beliefs. . . ."

"Do they?" said Mrs. Wetherbee as she made her first note.

"The birth of Horus is for us the birth of the deified soul ; for this is the *mysterium magnum* of existence, the sanction of the Great Work, that Osiris and Horus are truly one. Death is the coming forth of the philosopher's stone from the crucible of life. How joyous a moment, when the emancipated soul, purged from its baser elements, breaks from its envelope and is delivered into the hands of Thoth ! The illuminated mind can but hail the deaths of those whom it loves with triumph and delight ; for there is a sense in which every living being wrapped in matter is but a mummy, till death comes to undo the swaddling-bands of carnal things. Then will the beneficent action of salt, sulphur, and mercury,

those loving attendants about the fiery sepulchre of the grosser nature, permit the Artist to pour forth the tincture of eternity; and draw out from the furnace the golden Osiris-soul, which shall return in its splendour and purity to the ineffable Osiris-source."

"How beautiful!" said Muriel.

The other ladies sat, for the most part, with their mouths slightly open. Even Mrs. Wetherbee was silenced; for Helen, exalted by her own eloquence, spoke with a dreamy and solemn fervour which her astonishing symbolism did little to impair.

* * * * *

When the lecture was at an end and the last of her pupils had departed, Helen fetched a small can of hot water from the bath-room, and went down the passage to the little bedchamber in which her husband sat. She heard a faint scratching sound within, and then a mew. As she opened the door, Ra rushed out, and fled to the darkest corner of the corridor.

She said in astonishment, "Why, what have you done to Ra? He seems quite frightened."

Mr. Reed did not reply; and the hiss of the gas-stove made the room seem curiously quiet. He sat huddled in his chair, stooping forward a little. His eyes were half open, and his heavy head rested on one shoulder. When she was close to him, his wife saw with horror that his tongue lolled from between his lips.

She dropped the little can, and felt the soft warm touch of the water as it poured over her ankles and soaked the thin thread stockings that she wore. She

thought vaguely, "How stupid of me! I shall have to fetch a duster, I suppose." But she did not move—could not—and presently the water spread upon the varnished floor, forming a shining pool which stretched from her feet to those of the corpse. It lay between them like a barrier. She knew that the barrier was an illusion; but it represented a Rubicon which she could not cross.

CHAPTER XIII

SIGHT-SEEING

“. . . I spoke as I saw :

I report as a man may of God's work—all's love, yet all's law.

* * * * *
. . . What, my soul? see thus far and no farther? when
doors great and small,
Nine-and-ninety flew ope at our touch, should the
hundredth appal?"

BROWNING: *Saul*.

THE idea of friendship, as also the idea of fatherhood, was vaguely connected in Andrew's simple mind with the necessity of giving treats. Hence, when he was disappointed of his first intention, and forbidden to take Felix to see the return of the Polish Emperor from his luncheon at the Guildhall, he naturally and immediately conceived the notion of offering to Constance the pleasure which he might not give to his son.

The result had been odd and unexpected for both of them. Constance, hitherto, had left these pageants on one side; as events hardly affecting even the fringe of her consciousness. But Andrew's solid acceptance of the thing as pleasant and important, as something which counted in the Londoner's life, had stirred her to interest; and the Watcher's in-

evitable questions concerning the necessity of running in crowds to see the ever-decaying bodies of other little creatures carried by, had even urged her to a justification of the performance.

In spite of her extended experience, she was still bound by the emotional limitations of the citizen. The return from the hills to the hive had not been wholly destitute of joy. When she could forget the cold Ring set about her, the adorable and incomprehensible Truth which had somewhere, somehow, pierced the dream to tease her vision and elude her grasp, she resumed that vicarious arrogance which is the birthright of the London child; and her new-found adoration of beauty gave a touch of poetry to her pride. Westminster Abbey, the Whitechapel Road, the river, the shops, the streaming traffic, the blue and golden lamps in the magic dusk, each seemed to her now significant and delightful things, fully charged with the spirit of life. Even the joyous clatter of Smithfield market—the sixpenny rabbits and ninepenny pines, the shops devoted to instruments of murder, the magnificent offices of the London Offal Co.—she had held worthy of exhibition to the Watcher, whose nascent perceptions they confused.

He said, “The chemical side of life—the building up of all your fragile tissues to make them last until you have to go away—all this seems to give great pleasure; you seem to think that the manner of it matters a great deal! It is surprising, but I am glad. I think it is in the ecstasy of eating that many of you come nearest the Idea. But having been so kind to your bodies and cherished them, you must find it

very hard at the finish to put them on one side. I suppose, however, that there are also many places where you may purchase food for the upbuilding of the soul?"

At that, in a dutiful spirit, she had shown him a church. Of course it was empty, for there was no service in progress; and she felt that he was becoming unreasonable when he drew her attention to this fact. The place was well kept, though naturally enough it seemed a little dingy when one contrasted it with the bright life of the theatre, the drawing-room, and the street. But there was a thick expensive sanctuary carpet; and an extremely handsome reredos behind the altar, carved and painted, in a smart archaic style, with Early Italian seraphim bearing a long curled scroll. "*Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the Company of Heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious Name,*" said the scroll in golden Gothic letters. It flung this superb declaration down the chill and desolate church, which seemed to laugh cynically in reply.

Outside in the sun, the spirit of praise might be active; and with it the angels. That web of ministering love which men call natural forces, there played without hindrance about all living things, inviting the crescent soul to adoration. Here, the stiff militant rows of red hassocks, like vigilant constables ready to check the results of a possible spiritual enthusiasm, reminded intending devotion that an established religion looks to comfort and decorum, even in the affairs of the soul.

"So people in general do know that we exist?" said the Watcher. "Really know it, have even gone

so far as to give us names, and talk about us as if we were true? I am surprised. And here, they say that they unite with us? Unite in what? Nothing seems to be happening. There is no aspect of reality here. If there were, surely some of you would feel it and care about it; as he did, whom we found in the hills? But you do not truly wish us to be with you—you would only be frightened and astonished if we came—you crowded peoples, who build such dismal places as this out of respect for a Reality that someone once told you about. It were better to go back to your eating and growing and begetting." Then he had whispered rather sadly, "To laud and magnify! How great a destiny! Helping the Idea—loving it and increasing it. Strange, mad little people; to find so great a concept, and write it up, and leave it all alone!"

Such experiences as these had not encouraged Constance to hope that the royal procession could make any pleasing impress upon so critical a creature, who displayed, despite the varied opportunities that she had offered him, such astounding tardiness in the acquirement of common sense. As for her, she looked as a child might for some glittering regal thing, for an exhibition part splendid, part amusing, and for the presence of a crowd, which always delighted her. When she stood by Andrew at the window in Oxford Street, where two admirable seats had been reserved, and looked down on the wide gravelled road and the thicket of heads on either side of it, peering, anxiously, for the first sweep of the soldiers, she caught their infection, and became in her turn absurdly eager over this trivial passage of a

doubtless trivial personality from one end to the other of the town.

Andrew was pleased, and encouraged her, saying, "Nearly time now! I think I hear 'em cheering. Hope he will get a good reception; these foreigners think a lot of that. By Jove! there are the Guards already! Here he comes."

The crowd bristled, as if a breeze had passed over it; and down the centre of the wide pale street the solemn Life Guards came trotting, with the steady, unhurried air of dramatic things. And in the midst of the pageant—its very eye—guarded and carried as a sacred relic through the streets, there was a little old and wearied man, whom all Europe knew to be diseased, and whom some pitied, some despised, but none ever revered. The flashing and murderous swords of his bodyguard went before and behind him, as a warning to the people that this one ebbing and imperfect life should be protected, even at the sacrifice of other growing lives. The little grey man was almost swallowed up by his huge carriage, and by the imperial richness of the cloak that propped him in his place. He raised a claw-like hand to return the salutations of the people.

Now here, as it seemed, was a manifest sham and absurdity; here was something, an inconsistent wreck from the savage ages, which pure and emancipated spirit could never understand. Where, indeed, could it touch eternal matters: this temporary erection of impotent dolls? Once it had passed, and the cheering had died, Constance herself thought it but foolishness; pathetic perhaps, but evidently ripe for the destroying hand of that progress which talks

so much about the trowel, but always seems more ready with the sword. Therefore it was with amazement that she perceived the Watcher to abase himself with an eager comprehension; as if here again he recognized something which had immediate relations with reality. He, it was plain, did not see the little huddled invalid, the remnant of a too adventurous youth, who had set out upon his progress supported by stimulants and bore it by reason of a careful disposition of hot-water bottles. As the vision of the initiate passes unheeding beyond the bread and wine, and sees unveiled the Object of all love; so he saw Sovereignty, the ruling and governing Idea, behind its poor image, and hardly perceived the shabbiness of the symbol through which he gazed.

Andrew, at her elbow, had whispered, "By Jove! the poor chap does look rocky. They say he can't last very long."

Within her mind the Watcher said, "But this will last for ever and for ever! It is eternal, it is true, it is a showing of the Will."

She answered, "No. You are mistaken. The tendency of social evolution is against it. We are eliminating these things from the modern state."

He said, "You cannot eliminate the Idea, though apparently you find it very easy to forget."

"No, of course not. But monarchy has lost touch with the real. It is just a survival now; a picturesque sham."

"It is all one—all part of It!" he exclaimed. "And that is why, in spite of all your talking, you cannot, and never will, shake off its spell. Love—

law—authority—they all belong! They are the thinking, the living, the loving of the Will. Do you not see the great rules, the huge lines of it? The meshes of the eternal web? Love, and the Graal: law, and the King! If you do not, what is the use of being here? And what is the instinct that brings you all to look upon this sight?"

She had a glimpse of it then; was moved by the mighty ideal of government, and by this small insistent emblem of a stability which owed nothing to the individual, but transcended persons, asserting itself as an actual expression of life. It was the aggregate reality of the State brought to a point and expressed in personality; as the ideal truths which man is to assimilate must always be expressed.

They had an early tea together, with the friendly and irresponsible sense of picnicking which is peculiar to London's Saturday afternoons. She already knew the exact amount of sugar that Andrew liked; and he was astonished that she should so easily remember a fact which Muriel had never learned. Then, because it was one of those soft October days when languid pleasures seem the best, they walked into the park, and sat there. The gentle greyness of the landscape pleased Constance, lulled her mind. London, when she dons her veil of citizenship, is always very friendly to the soul. The sky, she noticed, had the hint of coral pink in it which only great cities seem able to impart; and against it the shrouded forms of the houses, the great mass of Saint George's Hospital, stood up with a mild but invulnerable dignity. The motors and

carriages as they passed were grey too, and had grey people inside them. For this hour, the illusion of colour was taken away from the world; and she obtained a new sight of it, freed from the chains at least of one tyrannous sense. This, she thought, might indeed be a part of that dreamy universe, that projection of omnipotent Will, held in a ceaseless state of flux by the thought that informed it, which the Watcher's vague statements seemed to describe. Even such traffic as there was went dimly and silently. She gazed at it with sleepy eyes. When suddenly a rider brought his shadowy horse to the railings, and disclosed him as being brown after all, there was a touch of faerie in the transformation; and she said gently and vaguely,—

“Isn't it strange and colourless this afternoon? When that horse came up and disturbed things, I was beginning to think that all the world was grey.”

Andrew replied, “Afraid we shall have a foggy night. Anti-cyclonic weather!”

“It is beautiful—I love it!”

“Yes—pretty effect!” said Vince, “but these early autumn fogs are nasty things for people who are weak about the chest.”

She returned automatically to the plane which her friend called actual and said, half to herself, “I suppose they are. I must be careful of Vera. At the beginning of the winter she so easily picks up a cold.”

“Ah?”

“My little niece, you know, who lives with me.”

“I *didn't* know,” said Andrew, astonished.
“Awfully sorry—no notion of it. Poor little kid!

Why didn't you tell me? She might have come with us to see the show."

"She has gone to the Zoo with some other children."

They were her landlady's sons; but she did not think this detail essential.

"I'm awfully glad," observed Andrew presently, "that you've got a little girl to look after. It's an interest. A woman all alone, no ties, no future, nothing to pet; one doesn't like the idea of it. Against nature! But children are ripping companions even when they're not your own."

She had never looked upon Vera in this light. She felt that she had been corrected: and, to her ears, there was a new note of humility in her assent.

"Can't be bored by kids," continued Andrew happily, "they're a sort of everlasting interest: coming on all the while—developing, don't you know—and so on. Look at Felix! The boy in him just breaking out. A bit hard on Muriel, after having him at her apron string for so long; I'm afraid she doesn't like it altogether. But life is life: it can't be helped. You must bring your little niece to tea one day. Good for Felix, having other children to play with. Teaches them to give and take a bit, don't you know."

"I—don't let her go to parties," said Constance hastily.

"You're quite right—it excites 'em. I don't mean a party. Just a feed of bread and jam and a few games."

The soft grey city was spoilt for her now; and the pleasant idle companionship. The Watcher said,

“What is wrong, and why are you grieved? Is not this man your friend, and are you not together? And is not this what human beings always desire? You tire me; you are so full of confused wishes and curious little griefs. I cannot help you; for I cannot find the thread.”

She rose, in spite of Andrew's expostulations, with the evident determination of saying good-bye. It had come into her mind that she might call on Mrs. Reed before returning home, and thus Vince would be unable to escort her to her lodgings and make the acquaintance of the child. She had wished, if she might, to preserve her simple relation with him, as a solitary woman about whom there was nothing to be said. But Vera carried with her the note of squalor and confusion which wrecks Platonic friendships, and causes even the most cultivated and tolerant of hostesses to experience a certain searching of the heart.

CHAPTER XIV

DEATH AND THE WATCHER

“And I, Fire, Acceptor of Sacrifices, ravishing away from them their darkness, give the light; not a natural light, but a supernatural, so that, though in darkness, they knew the Truth.”—*The Divine Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena.*

THE door of Mrs. Reed's flat stood ajar; and Constance, having rung the bell and received no answer, pushed it open and went in. The sitting-room was empty; and the chairs stood in disorder, as they had been left after the morning's class. She was surprised, and uncertain as to her next action; for even were Helen absent, she had expected to find Mr. Reed dozing as usual before the fire, with the blue Persian cat upon his knee. Whilst she stood considering the matter, Ra appeared from some recess of the establishment, and rubbed against her skirt with an excess of affection which suggested extreme loneliness, if not actual hunger and thirst. She stooped to stroke his head, and he raised himself on his hind-legs to meet her hand; an unprecedented act of condescension. Then he purred twice, mewed once, walked to the closed door of the bedroom, and sat down on the mat.

Constance knocked, waited for a reply, and then opened the door a little way; but Ra would not enter alone. He rubbed against her skirts with increased vehemence, and looked at her with imploring golden eyes. She opened the door wider, and then saw Mrs. Reed, who knelt before the gas-stove. Her beads and scarabs hung round her neck and jangled a little as she swayed to and fro. The air of the room was thick and hot, as if the stove had been alight for many hours. Constance, astonished, halted upon the threshold; and then perceived the huddled corpse in the chair, sleeping persistently, despite the swaying wretched woman at its feet. Death, it seemed, extending his right hand very gently, had dealt a shrewd blow with his left; tearing away the tidy surface of existence, and disclosing certain raw realities beneath.

“What is this?” said the Watcher.

Constance whispered, awestruck, “I think that it is death.”

She felt his movement of withdrawal; but resisted it, saying, “No! That would be cruel. We must not leave her alone.”

Mrs. Reed stopped swaying, and looked at Constance without surprise.

She said apologetically, “I found the door ajar.”

Helen answered, in a slow, monotonous explanatory voice, “Yes—it does not matter. You see, I am quite alone now. Yes, quite alone. I went out to see if I were really alone; and there was nothing left. And then I thought perhaps—if he wanted to come back, you know. But that’s a mistake, too. I make a great many mistakes to-day. Of course

he's here. Oh yes, he's still here. He is waiting ; he does not like to go alone. I must not forget that."

Constance, made stiff and awkward by her sensations of horror and amazement, moved towards her ; but she raised herself upon her knees, and shuffled towards the chair. She took one of the dead man's hands between her own, and began to stroke it. "One must hold on to life by something," she explained, "as long as one can. Yes, as long as one possibly can."

"Even by death?" whispered the Watcher.

"You see, he is all mine ; quite mine. I earned for him and arranged things. People think me intellectual, but that is only for odd times. I always washed his hands and brushed his hair. I did keep him nicely, didn't I? His hair is wonderful for his age ; so thick and silky." She played with it for a little while, then dropped it and said wearily, "But I have nothing to do now—nothing at all—so that nothing really matters any more."

Then Constance found the voice of conventional consolation, and said, "But you will always have a beautiful memory of the years you were together : of the happiness you gave him, and all you were able to do. You have nothing to be sorry for, nothing to regret. You loved one another so well."

Helen stared at her. "Did we?" she answered. "Perhaps we did."

"And it is so much better for him to go like this : to be saved from all the weariness and pain."

"Is it? I don't know—I can't see any farther," said Mrs. Reed. Then she exclaimed in a tone of

horror, "It has all gone black! Once I believed in such beautiful spiritual things. I seemed to see them. I thought I should rejoice when he died. I always taught people to do that. But now—don't you understand?—it is this that is real—this—this." She clutched the dead man's arm; and the corpse nodded towards her and then fell back in the chair with a soft thud—"And it's going to decay! I can't believe it; but it will. I shall sit here alone; and somewhere in the ground this will dissolve, and terrible things will happen under the earth. And it will go; and the bones that I have never seen will be left. I shall not recognize them; and they will be him—and the thing I know will have gone! The greedy earth will eat it. I can see that going on. As long as I live, I shall never see anything else!"

She spoke with passion, and Constance found no words in which to reply. The sight of Helen's neat universe, abruptly ruined, appalled her. It seemed fatuous to offer hints for reconstruction in the face of so utter a wreck. She wondered whether life were full of such events; of mistaken creeds, crushed by the first contact with actuality; of ordinary people, who did not seem to matter, rising at the touch of death to a sudden dominion and ruling the living from under the poppy crown.

She looked at the quiet body, which resisted with patience the onslaught of rebellious grief. Its invincible serenity, in that feverish room, was an earnest of its remoteness. Her vision was clarified, so that she passed by its animal aspect and saw it in its truer relation; as a poor and battered house, ennobled by the memory that it once held one who afterwards

became a king. She passed in imagination from this heated and cupboard-like place, where opposition to the Idea had quickened to agony. She saw this dead body under the simple and eternal categories; against the amphitheatre of the sky, where no artifice cloaks the august and rhythmic processes of nascent, crescent, and cadent life. Then she perceived how very beautiful, how very intimate, it was; as if earth in claiming her handiwork, had blessed it. She was lifted again into the peaceful dimension where the spirits of death and of life subsist side by side in perfect unison. She and the Watcher together rested, as it were, in this lucent place; aloof from the tormenting illusions of mortality. They accepted the vicissitudes of the body, detecting therein certain majestic harmonies which drowned the sharp cry of those from whom this music was wrung.

They were at one in this wide and calm vision of things. But there were odd and irreconcilable differences in the reaction to which it urged them. The Watcher, it seemed, endured the situation unwillingly. He was stirred and grieved by the incurable torment that he witnessed; and, alarmed by his own sadness, wished to be away. But Constance, though she felt herself to be raised with him beyond the mortal dread of death, felt also a deep dissatisfaction, a miserable shame, at being so lifted and fenced from her sisters, who were yet immersed in the agonizing sea of separation. She felt a sudden divine desire to be down amongst them, to renounce in their favour her strange inheritance, to share their mistakes.

Her goddess lifted that obstinate veil of hers, and looked her between the eyes. It was a glance of

peculiar penetration, and carried with it a peremptory command. She was infected by a sense of homeliness, by a longing to stay, to stoop, to help. She was in the ranks, and there was an obligation upon her to raise the fallen as well as to prosecute her own advance. Orders were on her, and that mysterious inhabitant of hers started to attention at the call. She must cast down the barriers that she had loved and merge her experience with this life and this death. "*Oh, do learn to love!*" said Martin. She wanted to now; she was willing, even in this unattractive school, where a shabby, sallow woman muttered crazily over the death of a tedious old man.

Suddenly she lost herself; and found instead the mighty battle. She was on her knees beside her fellow-soldier, her arm was about the shoulders that carried themselves usually with so important an air, and she was whispering scattered senseless fragments of that immemorial language which all men speak in the presence of death.

Helen turned and clutched her spasmodically. "Oh, it's black—it's black," she said, "and I'm angry—so angry with death. I've been a textbook for other people all my life; and now I'm done for, and life has torn me up."

Constance answered, "Dear, you are dazed and bewildered at the moment. Do not try to think. It has been a terrible shock; but presently you will see clearly again."

"I see now. I had never seen death before. This is final: this is the end."

"That is an illusion which will pass away."

“Oh, I know,” said Helen wearily. “I used to say those sort of things.”

As they sat cuddled together on the floor, Ra climbed suddenly upon their knees and thrust a cold and importunate nose into his mistress’s face. He was a true cat. The neighbourhood of the dead induced in him a passionate appreciation of the society of the living.

Constance said, “Have you fed Ra?”

Helen replied indifferently, “What does that matter? He will die too.”

“Shall I give him his dinner?”

Mrs. Reed took no notice. She was again stroking the dead man’s hand.

Constance took the cat into the little kitchen, found his plate of cold fish, filled his milk bowl, and went back again to Mrs. Reed.

The Watcher whispered, “How it hurts! Poor, poor little men and women; how horribly you suffer in your blindness! Always the same thing; the everlasting want of one another. So this is the terrible cry that comes from the spinning earth; the wailing of the souls who are left behind!”

“Oh, what can I do for her?”

“Tell her to let go. She is clutching as well as loving. She is fighting with the Will. After all, she will die too. She has forgotten that.”

“That is one of the things which no one can remember when they want to. It is all blurred for her now.”

“How strange! Does Death cover the eyes of the living when he steals the souls of the slain?”

“Look at her! She thought she had the light.”

“But it is still there,” he said, “and the Idea within it. Death cannot kill the real; it changes nothing. All is well.”

“Can’t you tell her?”

He answered, “No. This pain comes of humanity, and its healing must come by way of humanity too. You are immersed in it; you are bound to it; you know it. You must see to your own affairs. I know, I see, that this must be the great matter. It is a cruel illusion; yet many great things are born of it. It is your touchstone of truth. But here you must help one another. It is not for the deathless to interfere.”

She, humbled by a knowledge of her own ineffectuality, of the uselessness in this primary situation of all her theories of life, could only hold the hands of the half-stupefied woman, keeping her as it were by mere physical contact in touch with the human side of things. They sat in the dusk, listening to the hiss of the gas-stove, clinging to one another; weighed down by a sense of finality, but without any conscious thoughts. There was nothing to say, and nothing to do. Constance felt all about her a world of miserable women, sitting helplessly beside the dead bodies of those in whom they had rooted their lives. Her little heaven seemed stagnant beside the vivid torment of these sisters in purgatory. She longed to join hands with them, and share their pain. Sacrifices were going forward; and she stood before the altar of life without an offering.

She saw now—faced by this most ordinary of events—that her quest of life should have been, not a curious seeking out of adventure, but rather a

deliberate nurture, a devout acceptance, of the parents of all Being—love and pain. She saw them as they stretched through the height and breadth of creation; the sheltering Arm and the cleaving Sword. Together they made that Cross whose divine folly she had resisted with such a petulant contempt. Helen, with her silly creeds and her black despair, had them. She justified herself by their presence: she, and a thousand other writhing and tormented souls, who little understood the divine quality of their anguish, the destination of that mourning procession into which they had been pressed. They walked a rough road, which wounded their feet. They cried under the pain, not recognizing in these ugly scars the birth-mark of the royal line. As for Constance, she knew that the measure of her serenity was the measure of her failure in the Way: and, sitting between the living and the dead, she wept tears of a genuine contrition because she could not weep more.

The clang of a bell roused her. The neighbouring church was ringing to evensong. Then she perceived the gathering darkness, woke to practical affairs, and said to Helen, "You will want some help, won't you, and arrangements made? I must go, I think, before it is too late, and send someone to you. Do you mind being left alone for a little while?"

Helen answered, "No—no. I shall be quite busy. There are things—plenty of things—that I must do."

She looked at her husband. "My old dear shan't be neglected," she said brightly, "I am beginning

to remember a little. He must not feel lonely, you know."

She heard Constance go, and the door click behind her. Then she rose and rambled heavily into the kitchen. Ra was asleep in his basket. She looked at him for a moment with pleasure, for he was a living thing, warm, soft, and exquisitely groomed: the only remaining creature that she loved, the only helpless thing dependent on her care. As if even in his sleep he divined her presence, he cocked one ear and raised his nose a little way that she might rub it. She was very glad of his existence. He had always been adorable. At this moment he was important too. But for him, she would be alone with the dead.

Then she remembered that this good-fortune of hers put the dead man at a disadvantage. It was he who was solitary now in the midst of the living. That was unendurable: that she should yet be surrounded by visible and homely things, whilst he, who had always needed them so much, went out from amongst these domestic consolations. She owed him, at the very least, a parting gift.

She stooped, and seized on the cat with firm and merciless hands. "My old dear shan't be lonely!" she muttered. "It is so terrible to be alone: to—be—altogether—alone!"

Ra only cried once—a long, thin cry—and then lay quite still.

CHAPTER XV

NEW FACTS FOR CONSTANCE AND ANDREW

“Pilgrimage to the place of the wise
Is to find escape from the flame of separation.”
JELALU-'D-DIN.

AS tiny pebbles flung at random may cut a more cruel wound than the heavy missile thrown by a skilful hand, so it is often the little word, the little action, which most deeply scars the heart. During the following days, Constance became aware that two such trifles had hit her mind with a sharp and stinging impact; leaving little bruises which she was not able to forget.

One had been tossed, in all kindness, by Andrew, in the moment in which she had told him of Vera's existence. That genial materialist had then affirmed, casually as one endorses the unquestionable truths of life, the sanctity, delightfulness, and immeasurable importance of all growing, budding creatures; the enviable lot of their protectors. “I'm glad that you've got a little girl to look after. It's an interest.” An interest! She—poor Constance—had thought it an embarrassment, and thus missed an opportunity of selfless joy. Deceived by the shabbiness of the

symbol, she had lost the secret gift. It was stupid; and she hated stupidity.

Andrew, because he was her friend, had not even suspected this. That a child could be other than an occasion of happy service to those who watched it, that it could possibly be regarded as an obstruction, a complication of the individual life, had not occurred to him. The healthy dependence of bodily creatures on one another, the family link, was his way of seeing things. This pebble, then, had made a hole in her carefully constructed defences; and through it she caught sight of the great and sunny landscape from which she had fenced herself.

The second blow was sharper.

Mrs. Wetherbee, coming to the bookshop on Monday morning, in pretended search of a magazine which she knew that Lambton's did not stock, discovered Constance in the act of making up accounts, and naturally concluded that she was at leisure.

"I've just come from poor Mrs. Reed's," she said. "I heard of the old man's death on Sunday night; Phœbe Foster called at her flat during the afternoon, and she opened the door an inch or so and told her, and then slammed it in her face. These clever people are so unpractical that I thought I'd better go round this morning and see if she had made any arrangements for the funeral. I put my foot in the doorway, so that she couldn't shut it on *me*; it is a very good thing to be forced to see people when you are in trouble. Well! I got into the sitting-room; and the first thing I saw was the dead body of the cat. It seems it died the same evening, quite suddenly. Extraordinary thing, that it and the old man should

go off together like that. I wonder if she is quite sure of her milkman. I don't know which of them the poor thing is more upset about. She couldn't look at it, and she wouldn't talk. I told her that she could have a grave for it in my garden if she liked. These horrible modern flats have no provision for that sort of thing; and you can't expect a woman to put her last link with life into a sanitary dust-bin."

Constance felt sick when she heard this story. She had little doubt as to either the manner of Ra's death or his place of burial. Evidently, it had not entered Helen's mind that one could refuse even the least appropriate of sacrifices to the beloved dead. She had put her creed into practice; a circumstance which always fills the creedless with amazement and unwilling awe.

Miss Tyrrel faced the thing in dull bewilderment. She writhed, also, under the weight of a profound mortification; for this, which seemed to her so morbid, so insane, so unreal an act, was accepted by the Watcher with a sympathy which he seldom extended to the normal proceedings of a civilized society. He saw here a plain and natural manifestation of that friendship for the dead upon which he had insisted so unpleasantly when she sat with him in the graveyard amongst the fells; and the absurdity of sacrificing a pet animal instead of an expensive wreath of flowers did not strike his limited imagination. She had held herself his teacher; but here, as in the adventure of the Cup, she was baffled where he divined a guiding thread. She groped for it; and, stretching wild hands in the dark, came on strange

forms, amazing living things, which defied her mania for classification.

There was worse behind it. She might endure the superiority of the Watcher, for he was a supernatural being with whom she could hardly compete. But in this dim strange tract of country on which she had stumbled, in which the most ordinary objects and events seemed charged with menace for those who dared to walk alone, she had been forced to learn from persons whom she had scarcely thought it worth her while to teach. Helen and Andrew—the one earthy, the other absurd—had taken her hands and brought them into sudden contact with certain unnoticed realities, aspects of that experience, that life, which she had so loudly demanded and so utterly missed.

Even now, her touch upon these things was vague and clumsy. She was encased in the plate-armour of her own personality; fretted within by her rebellious will, but curbed and held safe by her well-educated egotism. These other people, these foolish givers and lovers, were unfettered. They rushed out to the encounter of dreary responsibilities, childish sacrifices, and hideous griefs. They had much to endure, and little to show; but they lived, were at one with life. It was the only grace she had asked of her goddess; and now she knew that it had been refused.

When the day's work was over, and Vera had been put to bed, the imperative inner voice, which paid little attention to her tastes, urged her to return to Helen, to serve her if she might. Constance went unwillingly; for an attempt to gain admittance on

Sunday had failed, and this rebuff had wounded her young self-conscious sympathy, even induced a certain bitterness. She felt that her difficult attempts at consolation had their importance: it was amazing that Mrs. Reed should not desire them. Now, she forgot this righteous anger: and something that was almost diffidence took its place. She was going to school, in a new spirit of humility. She even bought a large bunch of white chrysanthemums on her way to the flat, that there might be some visible excuse for her visit.

She was surprised when the door was opened quickly; more, when Mrs. Reed said to her, "I am glad that you have come again." She glanced hastily about her as she entered, not knowing what she might see; but the little sitting-room looked much as usual. There was no evidence of death. Mr. Reed's spectacle-case and Ra's brush and comb had not yet been put away.

Helen said, "When you knocked at the door, I was afraid that perhaps it might be Mrs. Vince."

"Has she not been?"

"No: but she will come—she is sure to come, isn't she?" said Helen wistfully. "And then—it will be difficult. I must be so very careful what I say."

"Why?"

"She believes in me; she thinks I am spiritual, you know. I must never let her see it's all gone black. Then, she would lose it too, just as I have. She would never believe in mysteries again. I must prevent that from happening if I can. I have been thinking and thinking, and I know that I have got to

pretend. It will be something to do; and I must, because I am responsible, you see. '*Death, the Magnum Opus of the Divine!*' Oh, one should never see it, if one wants to think of it like that. It's all emptiness. The symbols just melted away; and there was nothing—nothing behind!"

The Watcher murmured, "I suppose this must always happen when death touches the teachers of your creeds. And yet they go on!"

Helen continued, almost as if she would reply to him, "But I taught it; and now I have got to stand up to it! It sounded so splendid; I felt so sure that it was true. One seemed to see it; and now I see emptiness. But they mustn't. They are young and hopeful. It helps them: and perhaps for them it may go on being true."

"Perhaps."

"You never believed in it!" said Helen. "You always seemed to have a secret of your own. That is why I want you now so much. You are solid—just yourself—just alive and warm—and I can say what I like; foolish, dreadful, hopeless things. But with the others, what am I to do? They fed on me; they had no experience; they were convinced by the rhythm of the words. To tell them the truth would be cruel; and I don't think being cruel can be right."

"It would not be right to teach them your new lie."

"Is it a lie?"

("Why can she not see it?" exclaimed the Watcher. "Are blindness and suffering also of the essence of the Idea?")

"Is it a lie?" said Helen again. "Oh, I hope it is! Only, there's nothing else." She approached Constance, held her arm, looked into her eyes. "You know something, don't you? You are different," she said. "Oh, tell me if you know it. If only he is all right—if he lives and is not lonely—I don't think that I mind being hurt, having nothing to do."

Constance answered, "I know so very little: I too am blinded. But somehow I am sure that we are all together in one friendship; the living and the dead. You have only got to wait a little while. Presently the light will come back, and you will know."

"No. It will never come back for me any more. But that does not really matter if my old dear is all right; and if I am able to pretend."

The bell rang sharply; and Mrs. Reed went, almost with alacrity, towards the door. Her mood had changed, and she looked expectant.

"I knew," she said, "that Mrs. Vince would come!"

Constance heard a heavy footstep, and the sound of an umbrella placed with decision in the stand. Then Mrs. Reed came back, and Andrew followed her into the room.

"I came," he said, "for Muriel. Bad headache—awfully sorry—not fit to go out. Wanted to know if there was anything we could do." He sat down awkwardly, and eyed Constance. "Rather expected," he remarked, "to find *you* here."

Helen looked crestfallen. In the midst of her misery, one corner of her mind had remained aware of her importance, both as a teacher and as a

widow. She had supposed that she would be an object of interest as well as of sympathy to her followers; having yet to learn that popularity seldom survives in the presence of grief. Moreover, Muriel's avoidance of her in the hour of desolation wounded her heart as well as her pride. She was fond of her; and had thought of Mrs. Vince's delicate personality as one may think in moments of weariness of soft cushions and unattainable scents. The mere fact of her prettiness would have made her visit comforting; would have restored to Helen's darkened universe something of the light of life. But Muriel had a headache, and the other woman understood.

She rejected Andrew's advances very gently; wanted nothing, would tell him nothing. The arrangements, she said, were made. No; not cremation. The—other—was not so bad. She looked appealingly at Constance, who interpreted the message as a request to remove Mr. Vince as quickly as she might. He rose, as she had expected, when she did, shook hands warmly with Helen, and muttered hastily, "Awfully grieved, don't you know? Dear old Reed—man I always respected! One of the best!"

He opened the door and Constance would have preceded him; but Helen clutched her hand, held her for a moment, and Vince went out into the little hall.

"Come back!" she said. "You will come back, won't you? Promise that you will come back. You see, the others are no good."

Constance replied humbly, "I'm no good either. But I want to help you if I can."

She was reminded, curiously, of Vince's first overtures of friendship. She seemed destined to take Muriel's leavings; to console them for their idol's indifference. It was hardly the part she would have chosen; but life thrust it into her hand, and she knew that she must not reject it.

"I rather fancy," said the Watcher reflectively, as they went down the long flights of stairs, "that you make it worse for yourselves by being so obstinate about it, do you not? I see the Will plaiting you together, forcing you to interpenetrate each other's lives, to pass through, to let go, to move amongst experience, perpetually to lose life and to find: and you will not—you make yourselves rigid—you resist! You clutch at one another, crying, 'Mine, mine!' and then you must be torn apart——"

"But don't you see," she answered, "that they *care* for one another? If only I could learn to care like that!"

"That is so foolish! Do you wish to suffer? Stupid little creatures; swept so quickly through the dream, and feeling your chance encounters to be important, and making such a fuss! Does no one amongst you love that which dies not—that which is before, instead of that which is behind?"

Vince replied for her, saying, "Shocking thing, that poor woman left all alone! Nothing to look forward to."

"Only her death."

He looked at her with concern.

"It has evidently upset you a bit," he said. "Not like you, to have these morbid ideas. Shouldn't think about death; might as well think about the

dentist. Trying things, these visits. Muriel funk'd it, poor girl, when it came to the point—said it left such a mark on the subconscious mind—so she sent me along in her place. I fancy she was afraid Mrs. Reed might show her the old chap's body; these people have such queer ideas. One thing, her views and so on will be a comfort to her now. Not like a woman without any religion."

"She's very wretched."

"Bound to be!" replied Andrew, "bound to be, poor thing. After all, he was her husband."

"D'you think that makes any difference?"

"Why, of course!" said Vince, astonished. "A man, don't you know, who marries a woman, sticks to her and so on—she's bound to repay that with affection. Husbands and children—one takes care of you, and you take care of the other—and so decent women even if they're clever always love 'em at the bottom, and it is just at times like this they find it out."

Constance brooded a little, and then said, "It is because she took care of him that Mrs. Reed is so desolate now. Being his wife does not come in, really."

"Always counts—must do! After all, she had the protection of his name."

"Do you think one would mourn for that?"

"It counts—counts more than you think," said Andrew again. "Of course, poor creature, it's all the worse for her because she has no family. Pity she didn't adopt a child, as you did! Most sensible thing I ever heard. Admire you for it. Muriel is most interested. Anxious to talk to

you about education, character-building, and so on——”

“I know nothing about that.”

“Just as well—just as well! Bad for boys, all this modern drivel; and worse for girls in all probability. Give her plenty of dolls and teach her plain sewing, and she'll never miss the myths and Nature study and all the other rot.”

“I should like her to turn out satisfactorily.”

“Of course you would. Main object of your existence; bound to be! Something to leave behind you. Just my feeling about the boy. Must keep an eye on him; see that he gets a proper chance in spite of the women. Easy enough for you; got it all your own way.”

“She is rather a difficult child.”

“I like them to have spirit. Shows they are healthy. Namby-pamby children are no good!”

“She isn't that!”

“I'm awfully keen to see that youngster,” said Andrew, “I believe she's a ripping kid. When can I come?”

It was only nine o'clock; Vera looked her best when she was asleep. Constance, swiftly reviewing many dangers, chose the least.

“Come now,” she said. “We are nearly there, and you can have a peep at her in bed.”

They climbed the shabby stairs, came to her sitting-room, and Andrew helped her to light the duplex lamp. Its smell did not seem to annoy him: but he looked with pity and surprise at the poor and dingy room, at the worn carpet, at the paralyzed venetian blinds. He wished all women to be com-

fortable, and was shocked by this glaring testimony to the poverty of his friend.

It came suddenly to Miss Tyrrel's mind that Vince was the first guest to be admitted to her lodging since the April night on which she had brought the Watcher home. He sat by the fireplace, in the chair whence that wild-eyed thing had first gazed with fear and amazement on the life in which it was entrapped. He too came as an inquisitor, demanding admittance: but for him there were no paradoxes, no difficulties, above all no mysteries—only the plain, straightforward, natural things. How comfortable a destiny, she thought, to see life single-eyed, and see it wrong!

She crept to the bedroom, assured herself that Vera slept, and called Vince softly to her side. They stood together, looking in silence at the head sunk deep in its soft pillow; at the scattered locks of black hair, so like Miss Tyrrel's own, and at the little cruel face that they framed, which seemed to have come from some alien strata of life.

When Andrew turned to his friend, there were tears in his eyes. He took her hand, and squeezed it.

"Thank you," he said, "for allowing me to come."

CHAPTER XVI

TWO LOVERS

“Mortis vel vitæ
Brevis est vox. . . . Ite : Venite.
Aspera vox Ite,
Vox est jocunda, Venite.”

Fourteenth-Century Epigram.

IT was mid-December, cold and snowy, and the Christmas season was in full swing. Lambton's overflowed with children's books, colour-books, day-books, anthologies, works of vague piety in pretty covers, and reprints of the many classics which all give and none wish to receive. There was Law's "Serious Call," in pink brocade with pigskin labels—a new and dainty style—and Congreve's Plays, looking so respectable in pale grey buckram that old-fashioned mothers often bought the volume for their elder girls. The shelf of illustrated fairy-tales for grown-up people was emptied daily; and that containing more solid books for the children's use was nearly as popular.

Miss Tyrrel and her assistants lived at high pressure, struggling to anticipate the unformulated wants of peevish customers, leading on the more generously disposed from shelf to shelf, probing and where

possible changing the minds of the many ladies who knew the book they wanted, but could remember neither its author nor its name. The more bookish side of the business was now in abeyance. Its frankly popular aspect triumphed; and the rows of old county histories, the early printed classics, the Fathers, and the excellent collection of rare and curious memoirs of the old French Court, were hidden by piles of cheap Ruskins, the new sixpenny Ibsen—for which a great sale was expected—"By Airship to Dante's Inferno," the latest romance of the religio-scientific school, and the "Baby's Shakespeare," illustrated in auto-lithography by members of the International Society. There was an incessant crackling of brown paper, as the parcels were folded, tied, and heaped upon the floor to await the delivery van. Exercise, mental and physical, hardly ceased, save for the slack interval at lunch time, from ten in the morning until an hour or so after the shutters were put up for the night.

Helen Reed, who had been engaged at Constance's suggestion as an extra assistant during the busy weeks, found that she had little time in which to brood upon the destinies of the individual soul. She was continually at the orders of persons who seemed unaware of her intellectual importance and utterly ignored her point of view. Their acceptance of her as an ordinary shop-assistant was insulting; the impervious ear which they turned to her advice disappointed her; but the resultant irritation restored her interest in life, and Constance felt that this first step in philanthropy was not to be wholly unsuccessful.

It had its disadvantages. She was compelled to act as a buffer between Helen and Mr. John, who detected in Mrs. Reed an unbusinesslike inclination to direct the public attention to those thoughtful works which are always published at net prices, and therefore represent a small profit hardly earned.

"Your friend," he said, "has a very superior—indeed a clever—appearance; which is of course a great point in a business of this kind. It is a pity that she is so irresponsible. She seems unable to grasp the importance of pressing the Christmas stock on the public as much as one can."

"She is inexperienced at present."

"It isn't inexperience; it is idiosyncrasy," replied Lambton. "I watched her with an old lady yesterday. *I* should have made her buy 'The Gracious Gardens of our Land'—a book that ought to be going very well. Instead of that, Mrs. Reed actually allows her to order Danby's 'Development of the Spirit of Man.' Single copy; small publisher; net book; hardly pay us for the trouble of supplying it."

"I'm sure," said Constance meekly, "that she tries to get people the books they really want."

"One doesn't run a house of this kind on the people who know what they want. One runs it on the people who are persuaded to want what they see."

"Still, she takes an intelligent interest in literature; and that does encourage the customer."

"Not the right sort of customer," said Mr. John crossly. "Only the cultured misers who buy cheap copies of good stuff. I hate intelligent assistants; they always try to sell what they like."

He walked away, and the Watcher asked her, "Is there any reason why you should try to sell anything else?"

She was reminded of Martin's rule—"The things one does not love are better left alone"—but even he, she supposed, had hardly intended this austere maxim to apply to commercial affairs. In these hasty, busy days, with their constant scrimmage between customer, cash-box, and order-book, it was easy to forget Martin and the impracticable things for which he stood. Even for her lodger and his whims she had little attention to spare. The active interests of the moment overpowered his influence. His demands upon her senses were easily repelled, his anxious questions seldom touched her mind. Few women can realize the riddle of the universe when confronted by the more pressing problem of how to serve four impatient customers at one and the same time without rousing their tempers or making mistakes in their bills. Miss Tyrrel's consciousness was monopolized by the practical and had no time for the real. It danced upon the surface; seized by a myriad things, but seldom resting long in any one. Sometimes as she crept wearily to her lodging she wondered why she did it; but the answer to this question awaited her within.

The imprisoned Watcher, who had begun to suspect in life some constant factor which spirit might attain to understand, was bewildered anew by the baby turmoil, the outrageous insincerities of trade. Peeping through her eyes, when she could spare them from the duties of poring over the ledger or hunting through the disordered shelves, he saw

this shop, this scrap of a seething world, at its uttermost point of self-realization. It was become a little throbbing centre of those absorbing and scattering forces, that systole and diastole movement, credit and debt, which is the expression of life in the body, the business, and the love of man ; perhaps, too, in that of God. The shop collected and distributed. It gave, it took. It was fed, it brought forth. It reminded him that all the puzzling knots of infinity had been theatres where this one play was ceaselessly performed.

Day after day, carts came to the door, and deposited great packages of Christmas stock ; repeat-orders of the best selling lines. Then cords were cut, the outer cover, the inner padding of old newspapers removed, and out came the potted thoughts, the little diagrams by which men try to register ideas. There for a few hours they lay upon the tables, meek victims of the lust of men, waiting till one out of the thronging purchasers should snatch their bodies or dare to pry into their souls. It was an omnivorous public ; and parcels that began with "The Red Rose of Eros" often included "Ghosts," "The Bab Ballads" and "Alice in Wonderland," and ended with a copy of "Holy Living" or "The Little Flowers of Saint Francis," which was very popular in limp brown suède tied with a triple-knotted string. Thus the books went out into new lives, to form new concepts, new combinations, or at least new ornaments of the more cultured kind ; and others poured in, a constant stream, to take their place. The Watcher longed for some equilibrium to be struck ; for some moment when the ceaseless flux

of things should hesitate if only for an instant, that he might recapture the lost knowledge of that Reality which is at rest. But it never ceased; it was life. Suddenly he realized the need, the joy of death; and desired it greatly for these tired people whom he had accepted as his friends.

They had, as he noticed, odd consolations, quaint hints of reality thrust in upon them as they hastened to and fro. At the least expected points, the veil was lifted, and suddenly the light broke through: a strong and shining beam, in which the dust danced gaily. The Watcher was greatly interested in the case of Phœbe Foster, who came often to the bookshop since Helen had been added to its staff. Mrs. Reed's friends vaguely supposed that in enriching her employer they were somehow helping her; a course which offered all the advantages of a bazaar and none of the disagreeables of unremunerative charity.

Phœbe, then, frequented Lambton's at this season; most often in that slack interval about two p.m. when the luncheon table competes successfully with the shop. She seemed of late to be the seat of subtle changes. There was a shifting of values; as if certain forces long suppressed and half forgotten were rising, slowly but irresistibly, to a domination of her personality. In this conflict, her self-assurance, her intelligent freedom of speech, were worsted. Her acquaintances saw with astonishment a new and inarticulate Phœbe emerge; a gentle, shame-faced, and primitive thing, who was no longer able to speak of the unspeakable with the scientific indifference which is proper to her type. Muriel, who was distressed

by her friend's condition, attributed it to some obscure psychic disease; to the sudden uprush into conscious life of unfortunate ancestral traits latent in the subliminal field.

"It is," she said, "a case of Pernicious Atavism; all the more acute because her education has held it in check so long."

Expert opinion is not always correct. About a week before Christmas Phœbe came to the bookshop. There was upon her face a bashful radiance which seemed to mark a new stage in her infirmity. It was like the humble yet fiery joy which might invest the newly inspired apostle of some singularly ecstatic faith. She kissed Constance and Helen with fervour, in spite of the disapproving presence of Mr. John.

"How splendid it is," she said, "to be a woman!"

Helen replied, with a touch of her old solemnity: "I cannot attribute great importance to the accident of sex."

"Oh, can't you?" exclaimed Phœbe. "I can—an enormous importance. It is more than important, really. It is deeply and wonderfully significant: mysterious almost."

Constance said, "Yes; that's true. Horribly mysterious. Full of splendour, and full of evil too."

Phœbe looked at her with soft eyes that were full of a slightly patronizing sympathy, and spoke in the gently authoritative tone of a person who is quite sure of her ground.

"No," she said, "not evil; that's a mistake. In itself it is wholly beautiful because it's a vital, un-

changeable thing. Much too noble and beautiful to be evil as well."

"I hope," said Mrs. Reed, "that you are not going to be led away by merely sentimental views of life."

"Some sentiments count," replied Phœbe obstinately. "They arise in the soul, and show one the meaning of things. And there is a strange enhancement of life that comes from them—from realizing one's essential womanhood!" She looked at the other women appealingly. "You don't know!" she said, "or you would *have* to agree with me. I wish I could describe it to you. It is extraordinarily interesting—I mean, of course, from the psychological point of view."

Helen observed, "These transitory ecstasies are seldom important to the soul."

"Oh, not transitory!" answered Phœbe. "I knew you did not understand. This is *true*. One can always tell the difference: at least, I can. Nothing else matters. It changes the values of life: makes everything perfectly plain." She thought that she saw signs of amusement on Constance's face, blushed, and added hastily, "As one penetrates below appearance, it is in the simple and elementary things that one finds the deepest metaphysical meaning, I think. And then——"

Miss Tyrrel did not hear the end of the sentence. The shop door had been pushed open; the bell rang, and she turned automatically to attend the incoming customer. He stood for a moment with the pale light behind him, staring into the shop. She stared back at him, vaguely conscious of the arrival of some

familiar, unexpected thing ; whilst he continued his keen peering into the dimness, as if his coming had some finer objective than the mere spending of money and garnering up of books. The Watcher, too, moved eagerly in her mind, as to the encounter of a friend ; and before she had time to sift these sensations, Martin had discovered her and taken her hand.

She said, "*You*—here—in a city? It's incredible!"

He answered, "I—in a city! Well, why not? There's a hiding-place for everything here."

"But why have you come?"

He said in a lower tone, "Because I dared not wait longer."

She looked at him then. Her first thought was that he was curiously alive, with a white and ardent life which made the spirits of her companions seem but smouldering flames ; her next, that he was very near to death.

He met her eyes. "I see," he observed, "that you have guessed it. I am going. Is it not splendid? So quickly! It came on me suddenly, and I knew that there was no mistake."

She saw the unpeopled hills, the deserted shrine, the extinguished light, the Cup unguarded and alone, and exclaimed, "No! you cannot go. You must not!"

"Needs must, when marching orders come."

"But you, with a guardianship that cannot be forsaken: that *you* should be snatched!"

"I too."

"How cruel it is! We are all slaves to this!"

"Slaves?" he said. "Slaves to death? What a

strange idea! Why, it is our one earnest of liberty! Without that, how could we be more than self-conscious mildew, cumbering the wholesome surfaces of things? And it is actively beneficent, too: the way, the truth, the life. The real life—not the dream. It was through death that the Cup came; it is the true discipline of the secret.”

“But not for all.”

“For all,” he answered. “Each of us lives towards that initiation; every instant of our day, it is going on. We can’t be deprived of it—we can’t miss it—however stupid and cowardly, however evil we may be.”

“And you are glad to go? You, with your wonderful life?”

“Why, yes. There was a wise physician once who said, ‘The misery of immortality in the flesh, he undertook not that was Immortal.’ So, how could we want it? How awful a fate: to wait the home-going ship even in the Fortunate Isles, and never sight it! The Wandering Jew is really the only denizen of the only hell.”

“But you—so soon—*why* is it?”

“I always knew that it would not be long; and this winter the snows have been heavy. It has been an arctic business there these many weeks; an everlasting fight with the drifts, and plenty of rescue work among the flocks in evil nights of the storm. I’ve come near to anticipating my burial many a time, and it has put on the clock rather quickly; that is all.”

“Is it inevitable? Are you sure?”

He answered mockingly, “Do you wish to hear

the name that is given to this particular method of crumbling?"

Then she saw with dismay the purest spot in her world shine out, adorable, only to be snatched from her.

The Watcher exclaimed, "What! will *you* now clutch at the dying, and risk the blackness and the pain?"

She turned from him and considered anew the radiant face of Martin; that thin and eager face, smiling into the very eyes of corruption. She looked with him, and saw Death, the faithful servant of true lovers, preparing the bridal chamber of the soul. Martin leaned forward, with a gesture of gratitude and ecstasy, to the fruition of his long desire.

He was glancing about him now, full of the zest for little things which is peculiar to the utterly detached. He said, "So this is the place! I have often thought of it—and of you—since the day on which you came."

Helen and Phœbe were looking at him with a very human curiosity; for this was the first time that they had detected Miss Tyrrel in the possession of a friend outside the limits of their own set.

Phœbe said to Mrs. Reed, "Do you think—I wonder! She has never mentioned him; but they seem to be great friends. It would be so nice. I am sure that her life is not a very happy one."

Helen replied, "No. But no life is really happy."

"Oh, it may be—it can!" exclaimed Phœbe quickly and clumsily. "If you give yourself; give yourself altogether, I mean; and join in. Then, you find your place and are at peace."

Mrs. Reed received these words in silence. They were delivered with an accent of authority, which she disliked. But Martin, who had heard them, turned and smiled. Phœbe smiled back. There seemed, instantly, some link established between them; as if they had common possession of a secret which the others sought in vain.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s it! It seems such a simple recipe, doesn’t it, when once one has tried it?”

“It’s wonderful—it transforms the world.”

“Yes; it really does fulfil the whole claim of the philosopher’s stone. It confers eternal youth, transmutes dull matter, turns the dust to gold.”

Mrs. Reed said with eagerness, “You are evidently interested in alchemy.”

Martin, who was considering Phœbe’s gentle and radiant face with approval, answered indifferently, “Sometimes its language is useful, and approximates to the truth——”

Phœbe interrupted him—“But truth isn’t words; it’s not definite and discoverable. It is just a new way of seeing the ordinary things.”

Martin said, “Yes: the way of love, that’s all.”

Phœbe, the word once mentioned, seemed to experience a certain relief. She looked at Constance; as if there, too, she might expect a measure of comprehension.

“I came to tell you something,” she said. “Only you wouldn’t understand me. I’m—going to be married.”

The Watcher muttered, “Another link to be torn apart. Another pain. How *mad* you are!”

“Of course,” continued Phœbe hastily, “you

understand, I would not do it in the ordinary, conventional way. That would be disgusting. It is because we feel the inner, personal link so strongly! Because I have become convinced that we complete each other's lives. If we fell out of love, we should separate. I told Freddy that. A mere material prolongation of a tie whose reality had gone would become blasphemous; the sin against Eros."

"I suppose," observed Martin, "that by falling out of love, you really mean falling out of passion, don't you? How can one fall out of love, any more than one can fall out of heaven? It may be very tiresome, very onerous: generally is, I think, in the end. But it clings tight; you carry it with you, even to the deeps; and it flames up when it is wanted. *Flamma æternæ caritatis.*"

"Yes—I think—I mean, I'm sure—it is like that, really," replied Phœbe, addressing him directly, and in a very low voice.

The shop bell rang again; and she became alert. "I expect that must be Freddy," she said. "He promised to call for me at half-past two."

Mr. Burroughs entered. He bore himself with a new, possessive air; at once absurd, charming and pathetic. The ladies congratulated him, and he answered with conviction that he was a lucky fellow.

"I've got a taxi at the door," he said. "And I thought, Phœbe, that we might run down to the Palace and hear the new singing-girl—she's got a matinée to-day—and then tea at the Carlton and stroll home in the dusk. That is, of course, if you are quite sure you'd like it?"

Helen, who knew Miss Foster's tastes, waited with

interest for her reply. But Phœbe agreed with enthusiasm. She was radiant, plainly eager to be gone. Freddy waited upon her with great care and gentleness, hooked her fur coat, and adjusted her muff-chain comfortably beneath the collar. She accepted his ministrations with obvious pride.

Martin nodded at their departing figures, and observed, "That's all right; the simple but most excellent way! Later on, it will hurt; and then her chance will come. She will emerge: a completed animal—or a transfigured saint."

Constance said in a low tone, "Oh, why did I miss it? That's the way in—to give up one's will—to be touched like that, with respect, by someone who cares!"

He answered, "It is very agreeable; but for some there is a better and a harder way."

CHAPTER XVII

CONSTANCE AND THE REAL

“ . . . It is our own notion of the First and only Fair, yet embodied in a substance, yet dissolving again into a sort of imagination. . . . It is beyond me ! ” — NEWMAN : *Callista*.

MARTIN sat by the fire. Once he shivered a little, and coughed suddenly; and Constance looked at him with terror. It was an evil night of sleet and icy winds. He had come to her lodging cold, wet and exhausted; but with that invulnerable radiance of his untouched by these outward disabilities. The Watcher looked at him with sympathy, with envy almost; comprehending the haste and ardour of the escaping spirit, hot-foot for the Real. Martin now shone for him with a simple light; the more noticeable amongst the cloudy personalities of the town. He was assured in his possession of something to which this comfortable, wage-earning horde had never attained: something which even Phœbe, lit by her selfless passion—even Constance, with her eager peering—could not see.

The source of this splendour was not far to seek. The shrine of the Cup stood upon the table between them. Its doors were closed; a heavy covering of

tooled leather shrouded the jewelled angels and winged animals, and the mystical plaits that went about them, from an inquisitive world. Even thus disguised, as it were, in travelling dress, it seemed alien as any pilgrim angel amongst the nomad's tents, from the busy, shabby civic life into which it had been thrust. So remote and starry a thing might be actual in the City of Sarras; it was impossibly fantastic in cheap lodgings near Notting Hill.

Yet it stood there, as it had stood upon its altar, defying the competition of material things whilst meeting them on their own plane; a tangible link between two worlds. The spasmodic thunder of the motor omnibuses in the main road, the rattle of the lighter traffic, the crescendo of the postman as he came house by house down the street: these sounds, broken at intervals by those sudden, hateful, inexplicable cries which puncture the London night, had but thrown into a greater relief the deep silence in which the Graal dwelt apart, ringed in by its invulnerable reality.

She had exclaimed, when Martin stood with it in the doorway, "Oh, not here! Not here! There is no place for it in this world."

He had answered, "This world is its home."

"No, no! The pure earth, the clean country, perhaps. Not this foul city."

"This foul city," said Martin, "is many worlds, not one. It lies fold upon fold; and white folds are hidden amongst the rest. And where there is one mind left that can love it, it has a resting-place."

"Can you find such a lover, such a safe guardian, *here?*"

It was the Watcher who answered this question ; crying out in her mind humbly and urgently, casting himself down before this Exile of Eternity, clamouring for the control of his friend's human forces, that therewith he might serve, even from the deeps of the dream, the Idea which he loved.

Now, they sat, as it were, by consent, in silence. Martin's words, the Watcher's answer, had loosed activities too urgent to find issue in speech. Constance glanced perpetually from him to her other guest and back again ; trying hard to orientate her mind amongst these incredible adventures. She knew now the reason of his coming : knew, resented, and opposed it with the whole strength of her will. She was beset by emotions, alive with them. Each, by turns, claimed dominion ; announcing itself as the accredited agent of that Self which sat shrouded within. They grouped themselves, as it seemed to her, into two camps : the army of human things, spread very widely, terrible with the banners of life, and over against it a little company most strange of aspect, to which as yet she could not give a name.

There came first from the camp of humanity that sad vague longing for the warm touch of common life—for respect, protection, the peaceful domination of a cruder, stronger will—which had tugged so cruelly at her heart in the moment of Phœbe's sudden exhibition of normal and irrational love. It urged on her the joyous necessity of a descent to the sweet and trustful intimacies of the earth ; to no fierce appeasement of instinctive passions, but rather to the gentler commerce, the domestic pieties, of mutual help. It whispered, *Væ solis !* and glossed

this bitter warning with a reminder of the years that she had missed. It suggested to her, as no mean objective, the completing as far as might be, upon this human plane, of a life that was clearly incomplete.

She foresaw the careful forging, the consolidation, of friendships; of the human, social link. She saw Andrew, through the long years, coming to her for the understanding which he could never return: Muriel, taking an affection that she would not repay. She conceived of herself giving and spending—a centre of selfless activities—accepting on every hand love, obligation, duty in the sacred name of Life; and of Life herself as rewarding the faithful initiate with new and mysterious gifts. She saw also the one blot upon this prospect—Vera—and decided that she, too, must become the object of a wholesome but not inconvenient interest; material for the builder's hands. All her late adventures had but seemed to endorse the propriety of these emotions; their vast opportunities, the finality of the experience on which they converged. They broke it to her, as it were, that the little things of life were—taken collectively—worth while for the little animals which life had bred: that the amenities of camp life mean more to the private soldier than the far-off Idea for which his war is waged.

This powerful attack was met by other forces whose action she would have resisted had she dared. Their battle was set against the claims of individuality; against all the tossing banners of the senses, however cunningly disguised. They came, like auxiliaries from oversea, borne on a strong

tide, cold and pure, that seemed to have risen in the soundless deeps. And as a great ship, coming by canals into the heart of fertile country—where the watery path runs fine between the serviceable mangold fields—will bring landsmen certain tidings of the hidden sea, a hint of far-off adventure lurking in the tarry ropes: so with the intrusion of this company from unseen immensities, Constance felt upon her face the chill spray of the formless ocean beyond time.

She knew but too well whence came these urgent powers. Once she had been shut with them in the chapel of the fells; and they had poured forth upon her, overwhelming her judgment and her will. Then, she had fled their arms, though she could not escape their remembrance. They had followed her; they were not to be eluded. They pursued, they caressed. They held torches, from which a new radiance was cast on the army of life; so that its ranks took another proportion, its very standards shone with strange tints.

The centre, it seemed, of their influence, its symbol, was that enshrined Chalice which Martin, leaving the dream, must leave behind. Its coming had brought close to her this terrible yet adorable world; it threatened to impose that world and its unknown obligations upon her mind. She was determined to refuse its presence: she would not permit her life to be deflected by an accidental encounter with a relic whose very meaning she did not understand, whose legend her intelligence refused.

Her unrest was accentuated by the Watcher's

distress. Possessed by the vision of an unimaginable Beauty, feeling close upon him the very benediction of that Idea which he had ignorantly pursued through eternity with such utter unsuccess, he yet clung to the friend whom he loved. With an odd touch of human feeling he now desired for her the happiness which she had chosen rather than that tranquillity which his reason would have accorded to her. She was bent, clearly, on tasting it to the full: this tangle of love and death, this terrible combination of intimate union and utter loneliness. Since she was set on it, even to his own despite he would help her. And yet there was the one Love, the one Will, the beautiful, the adored, the unattained; only to be reached by him now in so far as he could drag her with him on the way. But she did not wish to go, she would not lend herself to his adventure; and she too, as he dimly discerned it, had her rights. The Watcher began to taste something of man's awful choice between his neighbour and his God.

When the silence had lasted a little while, Martin said to her: "Suppose you talk to me about it?"

"It?"

"The problem that is pulling you apart. Air it a little. It is a splendid opportunity, you know, because I am going to die. Confessors, I think, should always be dying men."

"Detached." She corrected him.

"Am I not?"

"You are a lover," she said, "and a fanatic, which is the same thing. You will show no mercy, because

you are convinced. But I'm not, and I don't wish to be."

"Your lodger is."

"But there is another side to my life—a real, warm, actual side—and I want to live it. You would think it commonplace, foolish, unworthy; but it's alive, it means that I matter to another human being. It means that one is not alone. I have tried solitude. I can't bear it. And you would drive me back to loneliness—for this!"

"You would not be lonely."

"I should; alone with invisible things, the most terrible solitude of all. And now, I am nearly happy. Let me be. I've got a friend—a stupid, ordinary friend who is kind—and another, a foolish woman who's lonely, whom I can help. It is something to lean on and something to do; something solid in life. Oh, I know it seems absurdly vague and scrappy; I know that it will go when we are dead. But I want it now, all the same."

"Well, why not?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I'm afraid. I think that when the white light is poured on it, everything will change. There will be a shifting of values and deepening of shadows, a lighting up of hidden things: and I shall not be able to go on. And yet, surely, my little satisfactions are innocent and reasonable on their own plane? May not my heart know what loyalty, gentleness and gratitude mean? Once, I gave my body the privileges of womanhood. That's over; but my life is not over. It goes on, and there are all the subtler senses to be fed, the delicate joys of action and intercourse to be

tasted, the savouries of the emotional feast! I suppose they seem incomplete and unimportant; but they are important to me."

"They are small. You would find that a bigger love would answer best."

She understood him, and exclaimed, "Don't make me take it! I can't. You do not know. I will not have it. I am not worthy."

"No one is worthy. Was I?"

"I think you must have been, because you love it. But I don't think that I love it; and I know that I don't want it."

"You don't know that—you can't—because you don't know *it*," he said. "And you never will know it until you care a bit. It's worth your while, too, just for the beauty; the intense, the incredible romance. Why, this, the discovery of it—and you've got to discover, you know, to do your own hunting from the first—is the most splendid, the most thrilling, the greatest adventure in the whole world! It's the one love-affair that never wears out. It's ecstasy on ecstasy—the world re-made for you. *Fiat lux* fresh every morning, and new things gleaming in the ray. How dull not to have it in your universe! The dream and the discipline—the everlasting rapture and the never-ending quest!"

She caught for an instant his excitement; trembled under it. She had a glimpse as he spoke of that high romance, that splendid passion. Martin's phrases played upon her nerves as music might. She blushed and breathed quickly, because they were beautiful and exalted her. She heard behind them the wild, solemn and exultant song with which the

ages move to their destiny beneath the hand of Love.

Then the walls of the room ran back into perspective, and caught her as in a vice. The piercing music faded: the sullen noises of reality returned. She said to herself "Don't be a fool!" and to Martin "No. It's no good—I dare not. It is too overwhelming. Against my will, against my belief, it crushes me."

"It is," said Martin, "very inconvenient; and that is what you really mean. You are afraid of it; afraid of being deflected, of hitching your waggon to a star and being dragged, perforce, up stony hills. Don't be a coward!"

"I am not; but I can't react to this."

"That inhabitant of yours can—will. It is his chance. Do you owe him no duty?"

"That's dreadful, too. Here, he is too strong for me. He is pushing, eager: he divines things ahead. And I am confused—in clouds! Won't you help me out—tell me—explain?"

"Enter the atmosphere of reality: you will get your explanation there. That is all I ask you to do; and all that he asks. You are stifling him with your frittered emotions, your little inconsequent loves and hates. Get into the clearer air, the purer light; and from there, love life as much as you will."

"That is impossible," she said, "this is a strong thing, a terrible thing, pulling: but the other, the thing I really want, is pulling back. They are both life, I suppose; they should both be in it. But they can't be—for me. I am sure of that."

"Best not to be quite so sure," answered Martin,

“And to trust life a little when you cannot see your way. There is a cosmic economy, you know, as well as a political one; the angels have their reserves. Here is your opportunity—a unique one—a very mighty thing. Take your talisman: live from that centre, love from it. Throw down the barriers, merge yourself in this. Don't quarrel with it because you do not see how it is going to fit. The wind that bloweth where it listeth never fits in. As well quarrel with that, because you do not see how you are going to extract from it the oxygen that you need. You can't get it any other way, you know; and you can't get the Real except in its rare penetrations of the dream. *Et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*; and we said, “How very inconvenient, how disturbing, how hopelessly incompatible with practical life!”

“Well, it *is*,” she said obstinately. “It makes a cleavage; you cannot blend it with the rest.”

“Not a cleavage; it is plaited right through. The very essence, the actualization of life!”

“But Earth's got to be in it—in human life—I think.”

“That's the whole point; the miracle of the link. The only place where earth is sanctified and safe.”

“And how,” she asked, “is your link to be kept safe in the flux and tangle of the dream? How, when we come to the concrete, am I to preserve your relic of reality, here, as it should be kept? Where is the altar, the solitude, the adoration?”

“I am glad you put the one essential last. As for the rest, they matter nothing. It pleased me, whilst I could, to make things orderly and appropriate; to

evoke again the atmosphere of the age that had loved it best. But of course the whole world—more than the world, all Being—is just a sanctuary for this.”

His eyes were upon the shrine. They seemed to look through and beyond it, into the very eyes of the beloved: as if he had already begun to make his farewell to the dear visible sign of his joy, and passed in imagination to the secret moment of rapture, the extinguished torch, the silent embrace.

Presently he said in a meditative voice, considering as it were from far off her curious case, “How odd it must seem to the angels! There you are—you, the clean and glorious soul of you—imprisoned, fettered, peeping out. And you, who might break the fetters, might escape to the sunshine, the splendour, the dalliance for which you were made, are held back because you have persuaded yourself that your fetters are delightful—educative—even *necessary*—toys.”

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “the pretty words! They make me restless—they remind me of the bars. But if I am imprisoned, it’s in a strong and cunning fortress. How can one slip the fetters? How can one escape?”

“If you’re honest you will know, when the hour strikes for it. Each goes out by his own gate. It is always just wide enough to let one through; impossible to prophesy anything more than that. Yield yourself to love—don’t shirk it—that is all! You are on the very verge of waking, you know. You have fear and amazement; and that is the initiatory touch, the peep through the bars. But awe is for those who only look upon the mysteries.

There is rapture within, and satisfaction of every desire: a place of refreshment, of light, and of peace."

The Watcher cried in her heart; torn between this fierce all-satisfying love—the appeasement of his torments, the End of Knowledge, the unknown object of his quest—and the troubled dim-eyed woman, bent still on feeling her way by the touch of material things along that pathway to reality which he discerned, straight and shining, before him.

Martin rose.

"Well, you have got to do it," he said, "you found the Cup, and you recognized it—you, or your lodger. You are the only efficient guardian; merely because, in spite of yourself, you *know*."

"But can you trust me with it? Anything might happen." It was her last, unavailing wriggle under his hand.

"Yes; and if it does, it is all right."

"Don't you want to tell me what to do?"

"No. Why should I know best? I have finished my trust. I hand it on. Now, it is yours. You hold the key. Not for me to dictate."

As he was leaving her, she ran before him, barred the door.

"I am afraid," she said, "to be alone with it! Oh, how wise the people were who invented rites and priesthoods, to shelter them a little and stand between. I cannot endure the light, the power. Shut in the room with it, day after day; alone with the Real! It is too strong. I dare not."

"The rites and the priests," he answered, "are no good, once one cares. Then, no shelter avails."

"I fear it."

"So gentle," he said, "and so passionate! His feet amongst the lilies, his head girded with the thorn. Humble, yet omnipotent. Desirous, and elusive. The most intimate of mysteries; the most mysterious of intimates. A servant of his servants, drinking with them the loving-cup of pain. Transcendent personality, self-limited to the small powers of your soul. . . . Is it this that you fear?"

The Watcher cried, "No! It is this that I seek, that I love!"

She put her hands over her eyes then, desperately: as if she feared to share his piercing vision, would draw across his only windows the heavy curtain of the flesh. That by this action, she blinded herself also, did not weigh with her. She was at a moment in which too great a darkness seemed less terrible than an excess of light. The blessed dimness shut her in, soothed her. It lulled for an instant the torment of her unavailing thought. Only Martin's last words echoed, phrase by phrase, in her empty heart. Each sentence struck sharp and clear, leaving a little hammer mark upon the soul. She trembled, sick with apprehension of that which she could not see. But she was faintly conscious of strong and tender hands, as it were, that held her; and of her own helplessness within them—a weakness that was peace. The meshes of the Will were close about her. She divined them. They were plaited into amazing patterns which she could not understand. They clasped her crumbling body firmly, linking it with the furthest fringe of things.

The darkness thickened, and the silence. Far

away, as in a dream, she heard the sound of a soft-closing door.

Then within her mind she felt the gentle movement of the Watcher. He said, "Dear child, poor little one, have no fear: do not resist. I am your friend; I desire your happiness. But without the Idea, happiness is impossible in a world that contains both Death and Love."

She stayed yet a little longer in the darkness, hesitating on the verge of the new life. When she looked up, she was alone with the Graal.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MISTRESS OF NOVICES

“ Oh, rash one, pause, and learn my name ;
I know not love, nor hate, nor ruth.
I am that heart of frost or flame,
Which burns with one desire—the truth.

“ Thou shalt indeed be lifted up
On wings like mine, ’twixt seas and sky ;
But canst thou drink with me my Cup ?
And canst thou be baptized as I ?

“ The cup I drink can only rouse
The thirst it slakes not, like the sea ;
And lo, my own baptismal brows
Must be their own Gethsemane.”

W. H. MALLOCK: *The Veil of the Temple.*

DURING the ensuing days, Constance perceived with astonishment the unchanged demeanour of visible things. Like most neophytes of the mysteries, she had vaguely expected them to react to the incredible conditions in which, with her, they were now placed. For the second time in her experience, the walls of the world had been broken. Once they had given way before the assault of a supersensual curiosity. Now they were dissolved by the presence of a relic—a symbol—

wherein, unimaginably, Personality and Idea were brought to a point, and pierced, as a flaming sword, the barriers of time and space.

A terrible and starry perfection dwelt with her now. Yet such was the stubborn quality of the dream, that the shabby room, the shabby daily life, were much as usual. The long, exhausting hours of work: the cheap and hasty lunch—two poached eggs and a penny roll, eaten amidst the perennial crumbs and cocoa-stains of a thriving tea-shop—the homeward tramp through the sodden streets: the grate which smoked persistently since the northerly winds had set in, the pile of mending with which she never could keep pace: all these things were still there, in the forefront of her consciousness. The strange light which shone in her home did not alter their values. They appeared insensible to its rays. Even Vera, as recalcitrant to spiritual forces as the least animate of things, seemed unaware of any change in her environment. The snowy season had added a chronic cold in the head to her usual disabilities, and she took full advantage of this weakness in pressing her claims upon attention and indulgence. She spoke greedily and persistently of Christmas: and mentioned the exact profit in food and toys which the landlady's children usually extracted from this celebration of Holy Poverty.

“I've used five hankies to-day, as well as all the times I did without; and hundreds of sniffing. Billie had a little gun last Christmas—one you can hurt with when it shoots. Tanta! can't I have a little gun?”

“What would you do with it?”

"Hit things. Billie hit a puppy and it bled."

"That was cruel."

"Don't care!" said Vera. "I *want* to hit things. And cats. And sparrows. *Do* let me have a gun and try to shoot."

"We will see."

"Oh, I know about seeing," cried Vera stormily, "the toys you see about are the ones that never comes. I want to shoot. I want to hit things like a boy. *Say* I'll have a gun; or else I'll suck paint off my soldiers and be sick when you isn't here."

"Santa Claus," said Constance with authority, "brings whatever he likes. People have to take what they get, and say Thank you: else he does not come at all another year."

Vera muttered rebelliously, "Billie says there ain't no Santa Claus." Nevertheless, she was half convinced and retreated.

The Watcher, contemplating the scene, said, "Strange! yet I suppose that this also has its place in the Idea?"

Constance exclaimed, "Yes: but where, but how? Where is the beauty, the love, and the law? I want a link, a guide."

He answered, "Is it not here?"

It was: but because she could not apprehend it, it exasperated her. She stood, as it seemed, outside the true field of its power: perceiving the light, dazed by it indeed, but untouched by those chemical rays whose fringe reached the Watcher, were received by him with so humble a thankfulness. He said to her, with disappointment,

"I had thought that it would have made you very

happy; that the real might have solved the discords of the dream. But, since it does not, I think you had best leave it alone."

From the depths of her spirit, another voice replied, "I cannot."

"Far better," he said. "It is not for you—it does not belong to your world. I see that now: I had forgotten it. The stir and effervescence of this life are against an understanding of its quietness. You must wait for the settlement of death. It belongs to us—it calls us—it awaits *our* knowledge. You cannot cope with it from the midst of the dream."

The inner voice answered, "If we cannot, why is it here?"

"Some of you may. To do so you must leave all else, I think, and go away, as Martin did, into a secret place where there can be no scattering of your love. But you hate solitude: and this is a solitary's affair. So, leave it alone until you die. Turn to the life that you wished for, for which your body was built. That is best. Try your own recipe. Be happy with the other little creatures. I wish you to be happy. In this, too, there may be some secret elixir, some syrup of truth. I will help you. You shall forge links, and join with the others, as that man and woman did who looked at each other with so quiet and strange a joy. We will put the difficulties away. I see them where you cannot. I am determined to undertake your life."

She listened to him with astonishment: for he seemed at this moment almost human. He had moved far from his old attitude of arrogance, impatience, curiosity. He spoke as some generous

parent, some indulgent friend, might speak to a weaker comrade, to a dear and petted child: forbidding, for very kindness' sake, the austere and honourable quest, and offering in its place the pleasant valleys, with all that they held of homely, dulcet life. He was for the hills. He longed for them; and she knew it. But because of his friendship he would forego them yet a little. He was on her side in this; for her immediate happiness, for all the human cares and pleasures that she loved.

It was the irony of the situation that this eagerness, this sympathy in him, provoked in Constance's mind no gratitude, but rather a stubborn opposition: an unwilling opposition, which, though it hurt her, she could not repress. It was forced on her by that Inner Inhabitant of hers: the tiresome, unaccommodating thing whose waking moments she had learned to dread. In the presence of the Cup this dweller of the innermost kept, as it seemed, incessant vigil. It, too, loved, revered Life—fertile, strenuous life—but loved it as a pilgrim loves the highway, not as an animal desires its lair. Where she, with the Watcher's approval, would have lingered, it was for a forward march. Whither? It could not tell her: could only cry, "On! on!" where the Watcher now said, "Rest, enjoy, be passive; do not seek to understand."

"No use," she said to him then, "to try to understand it. I cannot. But I feel the pressure none the less."

"Is not your normal chance of pain—love, death and loneliness—enough for you?" he answered. "Must you share our torment, too? I can never rest till I

know the Idea in its fulness, because it is my End. I have but a forced option: to suffer or to understand. I think that is what you mean by heaven and hell. But why add this burden to your own, poor blinded little prisoner of the dust?"

"Prisoner within the dream," said the imperious Voice again. "But, when the dream is over—what?"

"Time enough for that!" observed the Watcher. "Here you are conditioned by it. It is the Will. Since you cannot annihilate your selfhood, it is best to accept its limitations. Live. Run to and fro. Enjoy your toys."

The urgent voice replied, "Too late! I have been set upon the road."

"I will help you to turn back."

"Once," said the voice, "you were for my liberation. You saw its possibility, and urged on me its joy. You mocked at her blindness: condemned her transitory toys."

"I did not love her then."

"'Tis a short-sighted love."

"You taught it," said the Watcher.

Tossed between these combatants, Constance found but little enjoyment in the position in which she was placed. Whilst they fought, the Cup reigned in its silence: and she recognized in it the true arbiter of her fate. She had taken it grudgingly: determined, if she might, to defend herself against its assault. Now, there began to happen to her one of the most disconcerting of all experiences: the steady pressure of an influence which is purer than oneself. Soon, she realized that it is vain to desire to sit in darkness,

once one has assumed the guardianship of a great light. That light pierced the doors which hid its material symbol: it grew, unawares, upon her consciousness. She began to understand something of the mood of those old mystics, who imaged in the Flaming Chalice the utmost secret of their love.

The interests, the values of temporal life slid from her as she gazed at it: so softly, that she knew not they had gone. Her will, her vision were chained upon this point, where she looked on the eternal self-renewing of that Creative Agony which is the only fruitfulness. From its midst, as from the midst of a furnace, a voice cried to its mate: and there was that within her which answered the call. Through the window of the Graal, through the sad colours, the cloudy, faulty glass, she now gazed upon that Ocean of Reality, that soundless sea, whose waves had teased and buffeted her blinded soul. She was gathered to a contemplation of that still activity. She felt the searching tide of that inexorable yet compassionate love. She was of it and within it: saw, in the mental light that bathed it, the tiny and various flotilla of life, as it moved upon the quiet bosom of Eternity: the very foundations of its being submerged and supported in these mighty and unsuspected deeps.

All the pageant of creation was shown to her then, as in a picture: the beautiful, the cruel, the sublime, the obscene. She saw the plants in their still and lovely acts of worship, the vivid marvels of dappled beasts and glancing birds, soft fur and sharp talons, clash and encounter, hatred and joy. Life bred them, cast them forth, and claimed their dust. She saw the teeming poor—maimed bodies, stifled spirits, blinded

eyes—patiently, stubbornly starving and breeding: the cross-bearers of the race. She saw their rare brethren, the toilers of the spirit, enduring all anguish that they might give birth to an idea. She saw the wise and the foolish, the dreamer and the worker, the creedless and the credulous, critic, fanatic, artist—those who went log over taffrail and sextant in hand, and those who voyaged without reckoning, sailing because they must. She saw also the crowded, aimless vessels behind them, drifting inert before the kindly breeze.

Seen thus, the thing had an amazing aspect of simplicity: an air, amidst all its fussiness—the trimming of canvas, the eccentricities of the helm—of moving towards one, inevitable, end. One wind filled all the sails, though each wide-swinging compass might give to it a different name.

To be faithful to their chosen course was plainly the one duty of these navigators: to steer by their sealed instructions, each one of them, however bizarre the evolutions which those secret papers might ordain. In the terror, wonder, and majesty of that voyage—each sailing spirit on exploration bent, yet homeward bound—courage was seen as the supreme virtue of the seaman. The demands of the individual, the mean and peevish cry for pleasure, self-expression—for smooth waters, favouring tides—sank to nothingness.

She looked deeper; considering her own life, her own path upon that sea. She studied it dispassionately: glancing backwards, as it were, upon her wake. She saw it begin with daring and high courage; the setting forth upon the crest of an

erratic wave which had carried her far into the deep. Then she saw the long and solitary days in the rough waters, the constant effort, the monotony, the fatigue: and then the twisted course, when she had tried to snatch at a chance of smoother going, when she had disguised her flag that she might range with companion ships and leave her isolated voyage. In the cold pure light of the Cup, in the great vision of the measureless spaces, these natural and human actions, these concealments, adjustments—little tackings to and fro in search of consorts, comfort, change—suddenly took on an unendurable aspect of meanness. To choose your course and forsake it, she saw as the unforgivable sin. She had called Life her goddess: she had dared to take rank as a worshipper at that shrine. Yet her behaviour towards Life had been against all the canons of divine courtesy. “Honestie,” says Richard Rolle, “es Maystresse of the Novyces.” It was Honesty who now stood before this postulant: and her scourge was in her hand.

She said to herself, “I knew when I took it that something would happen. But this! That I should have to pay now—so cruelly—so late!”

“What now?” said the Watcher. “Are you not satisfied yet?”

“No. I can’t go on being comfortable and dishonest. It shames me. I have got to go straight.”

“Straight?”

“No concealments. Tell the past.”

“Well, what then? Is that also a grief?”

“It is hell. It’s final. It cuts me off.”

“Then don’t do it.”

"I must," she exclaimed. "It's my way, my path. I have got to go on. I can't bear this accusing light. It is too pure. It's cold, but it burns me."

"But how strange an idea," he said, "that you should mind showing the other little creatures the actions of your past! Mere things that you have done: impulses of the mind and movements of the body. These, surely, have no importance, once they are complete? Yesterday's dinner is digested now: it does not count any more."

"It reveals the taste that chose it, I suppose. And I am different because I ate it: my make-up is changed."

"But people know you—see you," said the Watcher. "Does a description of the processes that you have passed through alter the result?"

She answered sadly, "It does, for some of them. And that is why one has to tell."

"But these actions of the past, these things that made you—they are in the Idea—they are aspects of the Real. So, why fear to reveal them? At the utmost you do but reveal the making of your soul."

"I don't wish to reveal it!"

"Then do as you wish. Keep silence, and be happy."

"No, I must not."

"You shall." He opposed her: flung against her determination his strange and lawless will. She fought under it: with a sense of wild triumph in thus meeting him, setting at last the purest flame of her humanity—its justice, dignity, and truth—against the contemptuous love which counted these things

as nothing, if by chance they jeopardized her present ease. She was going to give up that ease: to give up everything in existence that she cared for. She was in the act of expelling from her life all friendship, dainty pleasure, social joy; the one way of escape from the hateful, sordid round. In this exalted moment she was glad. Nothing counted now—nothing at all—against the supreme necessity of orientating herself to that cold, adorable, and all-compelling light.

The Watcher said to her, "How strong you are to-day! And how foolish! Why should you wreck your little peace for That which you can neither see nor know?"

It was the obstinate dweller of the innermost who answered, "Blind obedience is as much my business as loving vision is yours."

"I cannot understand you," he said again, "nor the meaning of this thing which you would do. Time is a dream, and your passage through it is illusion. All that exists is you, within your Now. Where, then, is the importance of your past?"

"One may have done things in it that the world thinks wrong."

"Wrong? What is *wrong*?" said the Watcher.

She turned from him to the shrine again; as if she would extort from it some consolation, a promise that should carry her through the bitter waters towards which she was set. But the light for her was cold, inexorable. It called her on, but only that she might share an inheritance of pain; as the red cross called the Crusader to the plague-stricken ship, the parched desert—shipwreck, misery and thirst—but

gave no certain promise of the Holy City at the end.

When she was out in the street, and the door was shut on her; when she waited for the blue and orange omnibus which went once in ten minutes to the corner of the terrace in which the Vinces lived; there came on her the natural revolt against a destiny which seemed so determined to wreck her temporal content, whilst offering no eternal compensation.

It was Sunday afternoon. The streets seemed stagnant. A respectable ennui brooded about the shuttered shops. It was that awful hour in which the city ceases her courtship of visible things, to discover that she knows no fairer love to take their place. Constance felt herself to be doomed to just such a condition: to a perpetual wandering, in silence broken only by the muffin-bell, down grey and muddy roads, between blank walls and prosperous houses which sheltered happy people from the world. She did not want to do it. It was forced on her, as Sunday is forced on an unwilling population, in the interests of an ideal which she could not accept.

She reviewed the situation: looking for some mitigating circumstance, some opportunity of an honourable compromise with fate. She began to reassure herself: remembering Muriel's liberal point of view, that openness of mind which was ready to receive all things even at the cost of retaining none; her insistence on the true dignity of womanhood, the importance of individual concepts of life. Muriel, who loathed conventional standards of morality, would feel bound to pretend a certain sympathy; or,

at the least, to say she understood. All then might be well: courage and honesty vindicated at a trifling cost. These considerations upheld her during the journey: and she rang the bell with alacrity, almost with cheerfulness, when she arrived.

Muriel received her graciously. She was alone; and sat as usual upon the floor by the white-tiled hearth where a small wood fire was burning. Her slight and charming figure composed well against the Persian rugs, the pale, unbroken surface of the wall. Her wheat-coloured hair shone and flickered; as if it were infected by the spirit of the flames. Constance, big and solid, heavily and plainly dressed, determined upon a hateful sincerity, depressed and very tired, was conscious of the absurdity of her encounter with this dear and pretty thing; this adorable butterfly which she was about to place upon the judgment-seat.

"I am so glad," said Muriel as she entered, "that you came in this afternoon. You have saved me from writing you a note: and in the stress of this terrible season one is always grateful for that. Is not the tyranny of Christmas one of the least desirable legacies bequeathed to us by our ancestors' over-beliefs?"

Constance, obsessed by her horrible errand, full of fear now that the moment was so nearly come, longed only for immediate opportunity of speech. She also wished to kiss Muriel before it was for ever too late. Instead, she sat down and replied vaguely and calmly, "It is a busy time."

"One does not regret the expenditure of energy: for energy is always beautiful in some way, one feels

that. And the celebration of a Birth—a fatherless Birth! Seen in the light of our modern concepts, it might well be the typical Feast of Womanhood!”

“Yes,” said Constance eagerly. “Yes—it might. I’m so glad you think that—I felt sure——”

“But the acquisitive faculty of man has seized on it,” continued Muriel, “and there its poison lies. It has become a festival of greed—of our most materialistic instincts. Our intellects may revolt, but tradition addresses itself to the subliminal mind and there meets a too-willing response. Is it not degrading? Do you know that I—yes, even I—have felt forced to send away six hampers and several dozen picture post-cards this year?”

Constance refused to be deflected. “I wanted to see you, if I could, before Christmas came,” she said, “to tell you something that I——”

Muriel interrupted again. “I hoped that perhaps you would come to us for it,” she observed, “unless you are engaged to other friends. In fact I was going to write to you to-night. I haven’t mentioned it to Andrew yet: but I know that he will be pleased too. He was telling me that you lived in furnished rooms: and I felt sure you would find a certain difficulty in getting your meals at such a time. Here, we shall of course make no changes in our menu. I could not stoop to that. I should not wish Felix to associate ethical ideas with alterations in his diet: and there is no reason why his digestion should be upset because he is celebrating under an allegory the emergence of his spiritual powers into conscious life. So you must only expect our usual simple fare;

but better a dinner of herbs than a drunken landlady, after all."

"It's very kind," said Constance rather breathlessly, "but I'm afraid I could not come. You see, there's Vera."

"Of course: that was one reason why I invited you. The children will amuse one another. And besides, I am anxious to see her. An adopted child is always an interesting experiment. One obtains the result of pure theory, unthwarted by that terrible parental instinct which seems to militate against all educational reform."

Constance answered, "I cannot bring her to this house. It is unthinkable. Once, I intended that you should never even know of her existence. I wished to divide my life: to keep her apart. But now I feel, before we go any farther—I should like you to understand, to know the truth. Vera is not an adopted child: she is my daughter. I came here to-day determined to tell you that."

"Do you mean—have you been married?"

"No."

Muriel looked at her: first with great surprise, and then, to her own intense annoyance, with an uncontrollable horror. In her attitude towards both sin and religion, she had always exhibited that breadth of mind which is the prerogative of well-read inexperience. Now she remembered, for the first time after ten years of this intellectual freedom, that her father had been an archdeacon of the Established Church. Memory, in its most sardonic mood, reminded her of much that she had said in the interval concerning the pure nature of maternity

and the unimportance of the sexual tie: but this did not mitigate the dreadfulness of a visitor—worse, an intimate—who confessed to the possession of an illegitimate child.

Constance went on speaking. She seemed to be talking about it: explaining her point of view. But unconventional opinions on such a subject are only decent in those who have never put them into practice. Muriel did not listen. She was thinking hard: trying to square her natural feelings of propriety with her official theories of life. They refused to adjust themselves. Those violent and irrational prejudices which she recognized as rising from the subliminal mind, as representing with a painful accuracy the Victorian ancestors whom she despised, took charge of her consciousness. They said very plainly that it was impossible for Mrs. Vince to continue Miss Tyrrel's acquaintance.

Presently, without looking at her visitor, she stretched her hand towards the bell. Constance got up, and went away.

CHAPTER XIX

CONSTANCE, ANDREW, AND THE TRUTH

“‘Truth,’ I cried, ‘though the heavens crush me for following her; no falsehood, though a whole celestial Lubberland were the price of Apostasy.’”

CARLYLE: *Sartor Resartus*.

I N the evening, Andrew came to her. She looked at him as he entered, surprised that he should so quickly have undertaken this embarrassing visit of farewell.

She said to him at once, “Muriel has told you, I suppose?”

“Yes—yes; she told me at dinner-time,” replied Andrew. “At dessert. So I thought I’d just come round to say, I’m so awfully sorry it’s happened, don’t you know? You must have had a beastly ten minutes of it. No notion that you meant to confide in her in that way. Very fine of you, of course—very straight—one admires it. But a girl like Muriel—all notions and no knowledge, so to speak—well, one hardly *expects* her to take a tolerant view of these things.”

“I thought, I hoped perhaps, as she was so unconventional——”

“Well, yes; that’s just where it is,” said Andrew.

“Just where people are apt to make a mistake. She talks like that; but at bottom, she is the usual thing. Wish now that I had warned you! I never thought of it. Really, as a matter of fact, she’s just wrapped up in the boy. An intelligent mother; that’s her idea, and that is all she means—though, mind you, she doesn’t know it—when she talks about Woman and the Race. Contrives, somehow, to forget the rest. In theory, she thinks it doesn’t matter, because she has always lived in a comfortable, married sort of world. But when the thing is forced on her notice, and not quite in order—well, don’t you know?” He became red and embarrassed.

“Yes, I see it now. But I *had* to tell her.”

“Quite realize your feeling. Christmas, and all that. Still, it’s a pity.”

“But *you* are not shocked?” Her wreck, it seemed, was not the total loss that she had feared.

“Well,” said Andrew, “in a way, if you’ll forgive my saying so, one guessed, don’t you know? Little niece, and so on. So papal! Quite a natural idea, mind you, and in my opinion quite a justifiable deception. So much better for the child, if you can keep it up. But shocked—that’s hardly a man’s feeling. Very sorry, for your sake, of course. Hate to think of it! Can’t bear to see a woman badly treated and left in the lurch. Like cruelty to animals; makes one sick! It’s a beastly shame, the way some cads behave. And one has no hold over them, worse luck. . . . Poor girl—poor Constance!”

She said very quickly, “Don’t pity me! I was not badly treated.”

But he thrust the subject on one side. There was determination as well as delicacy in the action. Constance perceived that could she but rest at this point, she might preserve not only his friendship, but that more precious asset, his respect.

Nevertheless, she insisted, "Please make no mistake. It was my own fault—I did it!"

"Girls get infatuated," said Andrew, "and then they lose their heads. Ignorant of the world—very properly so, of course. They don't know what's before 'em. By Jove! I often wonder that more of them don't get into a mess."

"I was not infatuated."

"Eh?" He was astonished.

"It was altogether different from that; and I am going to make you see it. I won't keep you with half-confessions, foster pathetic illusions, let you be kind. This is not a confession, either; for there's nothing in it of which I am ashamed. You shall understand; and then you can sympathize, or leave me, as you please."

He expostulated. "Only gives you pain, raking it all up like this. And makes no difference, really. These things, old stories, between friends—far better to leave 'em alone."

"Between friends," she said, "there has already been too much concealment. And it isn't an old story; it is I myself."

"Not your real self," replied Andrew soothingly.

"My *real* self. My real, hungry, active self, that longed to live. Don't you know—can't you imagine—what it is to have powers, and ache to use them? To sit idle and vacant, and see your

chances of legitimate satisfaction—of life—grow hourly less? Listen! I come of middle-class intellectuals; of the sterile class. I, with this body——”

She stood up before him, deep-bosomed, the perfect maternal type; and he thought of Muriel, eager, nervous, narrow-hipped.

“When I was twenty-seven,” she said, “I could read in six languages, and I hadn’t lived. I wanted life. I was proficient in the higher mathematics, and I knew nothing. I wanted to know. Can’t you realize the fate of such women as I am; whole, sound women, perfectly matured creatures, penned, cooped up, wasted?”

“Yes, it’s rough luck,” said Andrew slowly, “when girls don’t get their chance. A wholesome woman wants a husband.”

The words were kindly meant; he was all for excusing her. But they disclosed, instantly, the ground upon which she faced him; that foundation of mutual contempt on which the relation of the sexes is raised. They lit antagonisms. He ceased to be Andrew, the friend whom she would enlighten, comfort, and keep. He became Man, who dared judge the vital womanhood which life had placed at his mercy, and who should now, she was determined, hear her case. Something took charge, spoke. Constance, amazed, saw her life unroll before her as she defended it; and suddenly perceived a nobility where once she had only supposed a mistake.

“And if no man needs us,” she said, “what would you have us do? Read French novels? Had I not a right—the right of all living tissue, the

right of all conscious flesh—to dip myself into life, deep in ; to touch the ground, stir the muddy depths if I chose ? I did it, and paid for it. I don't regret it. Love ? This had nothing to do with love. I had machinery at my disposal—the powers of an expert—creative powers. I chose to use them. There's the result !”

She held up the washed and faded frock that she had been patching. “ Nothing very grand, was it ?” she said, “ I know that. Don't blame me ; blame the accursed and artificial world. What man of my own class, what being on the upward grade, would have done that which I asked ? Would you ? No ; you would have talked about chivalry, and left me to find a navy to father my child. Anyhow, I made her ; and it's the soundest, solidest, humanest bit of work that I ever did. I'm justified now, my body is ready for death, because I have handed on the torch. It hurt, too ; and so I was sure that it was right. *She shall be saved in child-bearing.* Paul knew something when he said that.”

She stopped, rather breathless. She wondered what had driven her to this astounding candour. Andrew was gazing at her ; trying, plainly, to extract some endurable meaning from her words. His first sympathy was crossed by a crescent anxiety. When she paused, he said to her, “ Why in God's Name didn't you marry the man ? I suppose he wanted to marry you ?”

“ No.” She was herself again.

“ More blackguard he ! What was he ?”

“ I don't know,” said Constance slowly, “ I never knew his name.”

“Never knew his *name*? Great heavens!”

“Is that unforgivable?”

“But—how *could* you?”

“Oh, because I longed for life!” she said—“for something actual and aboriginal; something that one could not alter by thinking about it. I was sick of thin theories and diluted dreams. I had been booked too long. I wanted to get down to the processes of creation; to take my turn.”

He said again, miserably, “How *could* you do it?”

“I could, just because I had to; because the pressure of life was too great. First I was inquisitive, and then I was on fire. I don’t know why; I don’t know what happened. On one side it still seems beautiful, though the lining was hideous enough. I wanted the great spaces of the world; I saw them there, stretched out, waiting. I went towards them, and found—the dust-heap.”

Andrew writhed. “Why,” he said, “have you got to tell me all this?”

“I don’t know. It’s a sort of honesty, I think. You—you represent the human side—you’re *it*. I must explain to them, clear it up, before I go on——”

He resented the necessity: thought her selfish. Curious how women loved the confessional! Poor devils of priests—he pitied them. But he was in for it now. He braced himself, and she went on.

“The father of my child was a man—just that. I don’t know any more. I went down into the crowd, because I wanted the intense uncivilized thing. But he threw open the gates of life and I saw the workings of it for a moment. I entered into that

part of my inheritance, anyhow; I didn't know then about the other part."

"What other part?" said Andrew, in a dull, uninterested voice.

"The thing behind; the real."

"This seems to have been real enough, God knows!"

Amazement and chivalry, compassion and disgust, fought in his slow mind. He was deeply unhappy. The loss of an ideal is a serious matter for practical men. He still wished to be very kind, very friendly. One does not turn on a woman when she confesses to incredible—even to horrible—acts. The past, after all, was past. But he did not look at Constance as he spoke.

She saw it. She saw his wretchedness. She came up to him, and put her hands on his shoulders; her first familiarity of touch. It was a dominant action, and coming at this moment he found it both astonishing and unfair.

"Oh yes!" she said, "I am going to touch you; with my body, at least. That is different; and if you understood it, you would leave off being disgusted and grieved. I know you think me soiled, tainted; little better than——"

He stopped her and denied it; too clumsily.

"Oh yes, you do!" she said. "Poor Andrew! How little you understand it all! About as much, I suppose, as a breeder of white rabbits understands the evolution of the cherubim. One has got to work out one's own way, you know; and life, mere physical life, is the raw material of that, nothing more."

"But need you have done *this*?"

“What else,” she asked, “was I to do?”

Vince answered almost sharply, “I don’t see that—don’t see that at all! Nowadays, there are so many opportunities for educated women; useful careers open to them, and so on. Very different from what it was in my poor old father’s time. Then, there was some excuse—— I don’t say you need have sat at home doing fancy-work all day. Single women do a lot of good.”

“Oh, a lot!” she said bitterly. “Paint, and scribble, and cosset the imperfect. Games, to distract their attention and make them forget! But I know what I’m for—what Life is for. I’m ready; I am here. Look straight at the big thing, the movement of it; the living, teeming world. Is not the gift of life great and holy? What else counts? And isn’t this potting question of our individual rights in it poor and mean? What do I care who my child’s father may be? What does he do in it? Starts the machinery which ends in birth. His part is over then, and *I’m* left in charge of the race. Rights of woman? Haven’t we got them? Do we not stand side by side with God and share the very pangs of creation?”

“It’s all very well talking like this,” he answered. “Claiming your rights, and the law of nature, and all that. I’ve read these notions in books, though I never met anyone who acted on them in this sort of way before. But there’s more than you in it; there is the poor little kid. One thinks a bit of her, don’t you know? No name, and so on. No getting over these things; it’s bound to crop up later on.”

“Yes,” she said gravely, “I know it. I owe her a

great debt. Vera, the price of truth! Oh, I counted the cost, I had no illusions; but even at that price, I *would* know!"

As she spoke, she remembered another voice, which had once cried in her mind, "I *will* know," and recognized a fellow-victim of indomitable curiosity.

"And even then, with that, you still think it was—well—a right sort of thing to do?"

"Sure it was right, from the place where I was then," she insisted. "And that's the point. You see, I only knew that edge of reality, and I had to live up to my vision. I lived the whole of my animal life, fulfilled that part of my duty; that's all. To eat, and not to reproduce; to take life, not to give it; is that fair? Where I did go wrong was in not walking straight on from that point; not accepting my portion, giving myself up to my job. I didn't care enough—I don't now—and so I tried to be happy instead of thorough. I looked on the path that I had picked for myself as dreary. It was; but that did not matter, of course. And then, quite slowly, I left off being honest; attending to my responsibilities. You came, and Muriel, and the rest. I was lonely, and I wanted you all so much. But the honest thing, the big fact of my life, was Vera——"

"Just so!" said Andrew, cheering up a little.

"But big facts are poor company. Living alone, supporting an illegitimate child; that is what my big fact meant in the concrete, nothing more. Women need little things as well. D'you remember that evening at the play, when you were kind and deferential, and gave me sweets? I couldn't bear

it that night, going back to the squalid solitude that I had made. It was then I determined that I would keep you somehow—you, and Muriel, and the others. I loved Muriel. I wanted her: oh, far more than I have ever wanted you! I could not forego her: the pleasure of her presence, her refinement, and the pretty life to dip into now and then. So I took advantage of your ignorance; kept quiet. I knew that the child would divide us, once I let her; that she would grow up like a barrier, to shut me from friendship and joy——”

“Yes,” said Andrew, “they do, somehow. Odd thing, if you think of it. First Muriel and I, and Felix coming between us. Now you and I—and this little kid! We always seem to split upon the child; it’s always the key of the situation. I could have stood all Muriel’s rot—indulged it, liked it, laughed at it—if I hadn’t seen it being worked out on the boy. And you, this affair of yours,—she pays the price, really, don’t you know? She represents it. Always before one! Impossible to forget!”

Constance replied, “Truths have to become incarnate before they count. At least, for solid folks like you and me.”

He had been speaking to her with a touch of the old confidence; but he caught the note of cleverness in her answer, and remembered that in their new relation it was clearly out of place.

“Oh, come, my dear girl!” he said kindly. His tone was too kind; an intimation that the angel had come to earth—to muddy earth—and might be treated without ceremony by those who should still choose to handle her.

She said, "Well, that is all. It was good of you to come. Now, you had better go home."

"It's quite early."

"No matter."

She stood up before him, plainly intending his dismissal. He rose and took his hat.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked easily.

"You won't."

"Now, why on earth not?" said Andrew. "Don't be foolish! I rather fancied you might try something of this kind. You mustn't imagine that I—that it makes any difference between *us*. Muriel; well, that goes without saying. Can't expect a woman to take a broad line in these things: above all with her female friends. There's the boy to think of. But you and I are old enough to take care of ourselves, aren't we?"

"Yes," she answered, "we are; and to know what we want. I wanted two things—your respect, and my own. I couldn't have both, it seems——"

He reassured her. "You're mistaken—quite. Afraid I may have spoken hastily. One was surprised, just at first, don't you know? You mustn't take any notice."

"I know!" she said, "you're very sorry for me; and you are going to be horribly charitable about it, and never remind me of the past. You will condescend to come to my home, though I may not enter yours. And you think that is worth while? Why, a curate could do as much! Go. Do you hear? I won't have you. I can bear solitude; yes, and remembering too. But no more compromise!"

I have been alive for a bit. All these years; and I never knew how dead I was!"

She stopped, and laughed at him. "Oh, and if only you knew why I did it!" she said. "Why I told you—had to be honest! If you knew the rest of the tale! How mad—how wildly mad—you'd think me."

Andrew replied, "Well, you are a bit cranky to-day. If I don't see any objection in coming, why the devil should you mind if I come?"

"My affections have still their independence. They shan't accept outdoor relief."

He did not understand this, and therefore resented it. He was confused, for the interview had not taken the course which his illusions had led him to expect. There had been something pathetic, almost respectable, in his idea of Constance's fall from virtue. He had seen in the little girl a possible link between them; had looked forward to his own broad-minded acts of kindness, to an enduring connection which should be faintly flavoured by a natural gratitude on her side, a tolerant comprehension upon his.

But it was all very different from this. She did not want him; it was she, after all, who usurped the prerogative of virtue, and cast him off. A disappointing woman. In this respect he had once thought her an exception to her sex.

Nevertheless, as he went down the long flight of stairs he said to himself, "I'm damned if I don't send that poor little kid a jolly Christmas present, all the same!"

As for Constance, when he had gone her high courage left her quickly. It is one thing to burn

your boats when they have brought you to the invasion of a desirable country, another to destroy them when they have cast you upon the arid shores of No-Man's-Land. She had obeyed orders blindly. No more came. In this ghastly moment, when she knew herself solitary in the world, cut off by her own honesty from her kind, the Cup gave to her no comfortable light.

She sat huddled before it—before the closed doors of the shrine—in the empty and hideous room. She hated that triumphant chalice which had brought her to this miserable pass: hated it, as children hate in their gusty wrath the masters whom they are impelled to obey.

The Watcher within whispered words of affection and grief. But he was a spiritual thing: she could not touch him. It is only at the end of our education that we can learn to find our comfort in a voice.

CHAPTER XX

HOW CONSTANCE KEPT CHRISTMAS

“Êtes-vous couverts de blessures mortelles, que l'amour vous embrasse, et vous voilà sauvés.”

RUYSBROECK L'ADMIRABLE : *Les Virtus.*

ON Christmas Eve Constance returned late from the bookshop to find Mrs. Reed sitting before the fire, with Vera, rolled in blankets, in her arms.

Helen said, “I came in after supper to see whether you would want me at the shop to-morrow morning. Mr. Lambton had not decided when I left. The child was awake: I heard her crying: so I could not help going in to see whether there was anything I could do. Sometimes, you know, a little drink of water will send them off to sleep. But she seemed so restless that at last I got her up, and stayed a little while to comfort her.”

Constance unpinned her hat, took off the cheap fur and ready-made coat of grey tweed, went to the mirror and patted her hair into place.

“Half-past ten!” she said. “What a day! I'm sorry you have had to wait so long. No: we need not go to-morrow. All the arrears are cleared off at last: I've been doing up parcels ever since we closed.

You are free till Monday now. Let me take Vera back to bed: you must be tired out! She is far too heavy to nurse for more than a few minutes at a time."

"I don't think she is very well."

Constance parted the blankets and looked at the child more carefully. Vera slept with her head sunk forward, her mouth open. Her face had an odd and waxen pallor: there were brownish shadows under the eyes. Every now and then she gasped for breath and curious twitchings ran along her limbs.

At once, the Watcher stirred eagerly, and whispered, "The child is very sick! Perhaps she will die: and then, you will be free to live."

Helen said, "Let me keep the little thing for the present. I am not over-tired. She's sleeping now: she likes the warmth. If we move her, she may wake again."

She replaced the blanket with infinite gentleness; brooding over her burden with that profound and impersonal love which comes naturally to those who have been disciplined in the service of the weak. She looked, in spite of her uncomfortable attitude, utterly contented and utterly at rest. Constance felt herself cast out from the magic ring which was made, easily and naturally as Giotto's circle, by the woman's arms about the suffering child. She, the mother, whose sublime opportunity was here, knelt at Helen's side, agitated and helpless. Confused and horrible emotions—hopes, fancies, fears—chased each other through her mind.

"I am glad that I came in to-night," said Helen. "It's so terrible to be alone when anything one

loves is ill! You will let me stay now, won't you? You may want some help later on."

"Oh, I can't do that! It may mean sitting up all night with her: and you have had a hard day, you need rest."

Helen answered, "Rest? Why, I have had nothing real to do since October! And I like it—I like to feel that I am useful. It takes the loneliness away. I can do something, perhaps, to ease the child a little. You see, I am used to nursing—I shall know exactly what to do. They are much the same—old men and children. Please let me stay! I—am so very fond of little girls!"

Towards midnight, Vera left her sleep and broke into bitter moanings. There was no longer any doubt as to the grave nature of her malady. As the Christmas bells began, Constance made up the fire, set about the heating of blankets, the boiling of water, and entered upon a night of struggle and suspense.

Helen had gone out, in search of a doctor. She was alone with the three mighty forces which disputed dominion over her life.

There was first the hidden Cup. It reigned in its austere silence, sequestered from the troubled plane of human endeavour, surveying it. It gave her no help. Contrasted with the actual griefs, the harsh problems of life and death which she felt clamorous about her, it seemed unreal, an incredible thing.

There was the child in her arms, appealing at this moment to all that she had of responsibility and protectiveness, of simple natural love.

There was the Watcher in her mind, vividly conscious of an approaching crisis. He sought, it was clear, to govern her weakness, to save her from the worst consequences of ideals which he found quixotic, even insane. His attitude was marked by an affectionate vigilance: he was like a kindly guardian, determined on the social salvation of some young bewildered creature, who is ready, in spite of prudent counsels, to sacrifice its happiness to some wild notion of honour or of truth.

All his supersensual powers of discernment concentrated now upon her service, he perceived in Vera the one tangible obstacle to that full and pleasant life which she desired and he would help her to attain. He saw her chance at hand: his chance to act for her, to straighten the tangle of her life. That incomprehensible past which militated, as it seemed, in this mad world against all pleasurable intercourse, could be shut down, annihilated by the friendly hand of death.

The child was desperately ill. The Watcher, for whom physical symptoms had no meaning, yet discerned unerringly the loosening of the ties which bound her little spirit to the dust. As a life she was without value: ugly, evil, an abortive thing. He felt that it was reasonable—clearly implicit in the Will—that the imperfect should be swept from this teeming world in order that the perfect might have air and food and space. The Watcher was unaware of any reason why the principles of natural selection should be applied in the jungle and neglected in the home.

Eye to eye with him, Constance saw it too: her

freedom, the disappearance of many embarrassments, social and financial; of the dreary and difficult future from which there was no other escape. Then, the emergence of new opportunities, a fresh lease of that life—those chances of free action—which she loved. She saw the kaleidoscope abruptly shaken, and new and glittering pictures made, with this one bit of ugly glass eliminated from the scheme.

Then she realized with horror the prospect which she had been contemplating so calmly: the prospect of her child's death. She could not help but contemplate its possibility: for the Watcher, with authority, held this picture perpetually before her mind.

He said to her, "Why be disturbed? All is well. Death is acting in your interest. You do not love the child."

"No," she replied, "I don't: but I want to. If only I could!"

"Then, since you do not love, where is your reason for clutching? Why keep and cherish that which you do not even need? In this, you are more foolish than your fellow-creatures. Surely it were best to let her go?"

"I cannot. You do not understand. Death is the one thing in which we may never acquiesce. We are bound to fight it: keep it at bay. Human life is sacred."

"How absurd your illusions are!" said the Watcher. "Human life? What do you mean by life? The crawling dust? Is *this* sacred? If you mean the spirit which it imprisons, that cannot die; it can only emigrate. And what is the differ-

ence between one side of the veil and the other? They are both in the Idea."

She answered, "Perhaps that may be true—I do not know. But I must go on: must keep her as long as I can. She is a bit of life—my bit of life—given into my care. I've got to save her. I know it is unreasonable, but I must."

"Even as a life, she is not worth saving. She is twisted, imperfect: she will never grow, never be beautiful, never transmit the Idea."

It was true: she knew it.

"Where then," he said, "is the value of this distorted thing? Of its little scamper through the dream?"

"It must have a value, somehow, somewhere. Each of us counts."

"How convinced you are of your importance! Yet each one of you—at a touch, an accident—may crumble to the dust. And another soul will come, snatch your dust for its clothing, linger a little while, and then away. This is your destiny: so, why not accelerate the process, help the Will? Imperfect, misbegotten things embarrass life—confuse it. Surely it were best to expel them from the dream?"

She answered, "Perhaps: but I can't have a hand in it, I must not interfere. I may bring forth, but I dare not undertake to destroy: to permit a destruction that I can by any possibility prevent. That is beyond my province—and life's. We can only hand on."

He disdained to answer her. His will, as she felt, was already active in this matter. Even whilst he disputed with her, he was pressing the child's spirit

from existence : forcing it as it were into the shadowy dimension beyond the confines of the dream. It came to this : if she were passive, Vera would die. She had but to acquiesce, and the issue was already decided. If she would save her, it could only be at the sword's point ; all her will, all her strength, infecting that little feeble body and fighting in it and for it against the oblique charity of her friend.

She was appalled by the strength which he brought to bear on her defences. At his coming, he had desired nothing but an extension of his own powers, an appeasement of his own curiosity. These she could meet on their own level, combat if she chose. Then, vaguely, he had shifted his centre of interest. Her comfort, her joy had been objects at least of sympathy, if not of care. These he had discussed, desired, but could hardly influence. Now, suddenly, he saw action ahead of him. He intended a definite outcome of the situation in which they were placed : and she was face to face with the strength of an immortal spirit which has at last found something to serve and to love.

He said to her incessantly, "Leave it to me ! Let me have my way. Be passive, and I will direct your life. Let the child die ! Let her be pressed from the dream ! She impedes you. It is better that she should go. Then, you will be free to make links with the other little creatures, to reconstruct existence as you choose. This also in the light of the Idea is but foolishness : nevertheless, since it is that which you have chosen you shall have it. But you must—you shall—be thorough, fulfil the essentials of your dream."

She listened, bewildered. Vera moved, sobbed a little, and whispered, "Tanta, I'se very badly hurt in my inside."

She turned to the child, seeking vainly and desperately to mitigate her pain. She wanted to do it—had to—and the human act of ministration at once drove the inhuman influence away.

Vera's mouth was drawn down in the sad grimace of anguish. She whimpered, feebly, each time that she tried to breathe. Her knees were drawn up under her flannelette nightgown, making queer angles beneath its shabby folds. It was disease in its most *macabre*, least lovely aspect: violently intrusive, deliberately grotesque. There was nothing poetic; nothing to relieve the ugliness of this ill-staged encounter with death.

But Constance perceived no squalor in the picture. She was concentrated upon the duel which she was so suddenly compelled to fight. She forgot the intense fatigue of a body which had been employed in arduous labour for very many hours: forgot the hesitations and confusions of a spirit which was called to save, at all costs, the one impediment to its own liberty and ease. She was there, confronted by a human need. She met it. Strength arose in her, she knew not whence, to fight for this dreadful little life. As she worked, the inward voice spoke words of encouragement. She hardly heard them: as soldiers in the ecstasy of battle are unconscious of the commands which they obey.

But in the midst of her labours—the wringing out of fomentations, the arranging of pillows to keep the weight of blankets from Vera's tortured little frame

—she became aware presently of a change in the room, in the air of it. These determined acts of menial service had, as it seemed, introduced her automatically to a new dimension, where she found her senses to be adjusted to the rhythm of a more extended life. On this suddenly-revealed plane of being, all the old objects of her perception had their place: but they were no longer quite natural, quite earthly. The walls and furniture, the hasty litter of bath and kettle, towels, pillows, rugs—the fire, which burned like an ardent vision in the unsubstantial grate—were thin, strange, and shadowy: yet the life which they decked seemed profoundly, amazingly real.

As once before, in the adventure of the Tree, she had penetrated appearance: and stood suddenly surrounded by truths. These truths, she observed, were sparsely distributed. They were four in number: herself and Vera, the Watcher and the Graal. These things hung, actual, in the Abyss of Being: they were at once veiled and supported by the webby matter of the dream, which shook and trembled incessantly about them. The misty earth, the papery houses, the shrine and the hearth; these were there only that they might demonstrate or conceal the thing which mattered—the choice which she must now make, the adjustment of her soul, her immortal reality, to the three companions who went with her on the way.

Suddenly, the will of the Watcher was upon her again fiercely. He put the thing before her with remorseless logic, saying, “Since appearance, movement, change, the life and death of the body are but illusion, why fight to avert the meaningless but in-

evitable sequence of things? Check this absurd impulse whilst yet there is time. Let be. Do not take sides: do not trouble. Can you not trust me to create for you a happy dream?"

That terrible fatigue which is the mother of fatalism was creeping over her. She had done what she could. Vera dozed now amongst her pillows. Constance's hands were idle; her tired brain at the mercy of her friend. It would be a desperate business, as she saw, this battle: a battle in which she must meet and conquer the insidious counsel as well as the assertive will.

Where, she wondered, were the light and strength which the Cup might have shed upon her in this crisis? What was it in her heart which blinded her now to that pure radiance, shut her ears to the cry of that love?

But she knew, even whilst she complained—cried—prayed for succour, the reason of her loneliness. This was her hour, and she must meet it alone. She had been flung, as it were, into the crucible: the fire and the water must do their work. Her will must stand free, unswayed, between good and evil, and make its choice. The evil voice, disguised as friendship, cried in her ears. The divine voice was silent. It waited to pronounce judgment on the issue of the day.

Yet she was not wholly solitary. She had at her hand an auxiliary: the strongest of auxiliaries—a weak thing for which she must fight. She and Vera stood together in this struggle. It was impossible to separate their interests. She saw it: saw them side by side, two human souls, poised

amongst the powers of the air. She forgot the combat, forgot her own power of choice. Her whole consciousness, her whole will, was merged in that of the child, which stood at the very boundary of life and death. This was a mother's business: the moment of encounter, perhaps, for which that mother had been made. Constance, at this hour, forgot all else. She did not want heaven or earth; life or love. She was gone: she was not there: she ceased to count. The floods burst. Love—divine love—the selfless passion for imperfect things, came on her. She perceived herself to be greatly blest in suffering, struggling for this. To give oneself for the unworthy: that, in this world of infinite gradations, was the only thing worth doing. Was it not the very pivot of creation; the Secret of the Graal?

Mysteriously, she found herself initiated into its fraternity: sharing, from far off, in that ecstasy of pain. Measured by this standard, her wretched little sacrifice, her baby struggles, seemed contemptible: but its light fell on them, helped them, lent them its own splendour. It gave them, as it were, a consecration. This circumstance did not make her happy; did nothing to smooth the path that she must tread. She did not want that: asked for no personal reward. She was on the right side in this eternal battle. She knew it, and it was enough.

She understood now why all knightliness, all honour—the pure quest of perfection—had ever centred in the Graal. She seized, adored and acknowledged it as the only thing that mattered: the folly, the quixotry, the humanity of the Cross.

Its transcendent chivalry, its joy in anguish, shamed her. In her own quixotic fight with death for the useless life which would but spoil her own, she drew near it: and there found her lost maternity, her selfless love.

The sun rose, hard and frosty, upon Christmas Day. Its rays pierced, red and level, between the houses, and lit the chill streets, where the lamps of the night offered to it the faint and evil opposition of artificial things. It shone into Constance's room, where there were no visible preparations for the honouring of the feast.

The doctor had come and gone, leaving a verdict which obliterated all memory of times and seasons. Suspense was in the air. Vera's state was declared to be critical. The very forces of disease, it seemed, were on the side of the Watcher: works must be joined to faith if she were to be saved. Already the faint scent of drugs, the piteous make-shifts of a nursing which is conducted of necessity on the most frugal plan, had made their invasion. The place was littered with evidences of the battle of the night.

Yet even here, in this unlikely corner, upon this shabby stage, the Crib was set, the birth of love was honoured. The light of the Cup shone now, white and ardent, on a lodging which had become a shrine: wherein, under an image, the essence of its worship was preserved. It was companioned by that antique symbol of incarnate divinity: a weary, selfless mother wholly concentrated on the well-being of her child.

But as she brooded over her daughter, tended her,

Constance knew that she had but entered on the first phases of a relentless struggle. Something, indeed, she had conquered. Once for all, she had dismantled the hard citadel of self. But the Watcher was not defeated. He remained at large, very active. He did not submit to her decision : he combated it still. In the spirit of that civilization which exterminates savage tribes for their own good, he declared war—the war of the wisest—on his friend.

In the cold street a belated singer, dragging his way back towards the grateful paganism of home, hurled at the irresponsive houses the first stanza of a Christmas hymn.

“ Christians, awake ! salute the happy morn
Whereon the Saviour of the world was born ;
Rise to adore the Mystery of Love.”

“ Dear me ! I did not know they understood it,”
said the Watcher.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HELPERS OF THE HOLY SOULS

“ Intravi, et vidi qualicumque oculo animæ meæ, supra eundem oculum animæ meæ, supra mentem meam, lucem domini incommutabilem: . . . Qui novit veritatem, novit eam, et qui novit eam, novit æternitatem. Charitas novit eam.—*Augustini Confessionum*, VII. 10.

THE New Year was come. Vera's sickness had lasted for nearly ten days: with fluctuations of hope, with sinkings and rallyings, as the silent battle for her life went on. Her mother's strength was poured out in this struggle, as if in the travail of a new and more terrible birth.

The snowy weather had left them; and a dark fog brooded all day in the streets. It invaded the house, adding to the difficulties of the nurses and to the misery of the sick child, struggling for breath. Constance, whose weary mind was at the point in which any superstition seems more natural than reason itself, was almost prepared to see in this some new machination of the Watcher, whose malignant love still sought to free her from the life-giving chains to which she clung.

She was tired, sick at heart, desperately anxious. All that she cared for now was the saving of her

child, living for her : yet she doubted whether her vitality—though she gave it to the uttermost—would avail against the terrible strength of the Watcher, who never tired, never wavered from his attack. She wanted to save that vitality too : that she might devote it to Vera's service, to her education, her happiness, her career. Every atom of the child's body, every movement of her evil little mind, was precious to her. Both, she was determined, should reach such perfection as she was able to give.

But life, whose resources, whose kindness, she needed so greatly at this moment, seemed inclined to an increasing hardness, an enmity even. It was not for nothing, as she saw, that she had made her home into the sanctuary of the Graal. Upon every aspect of existence it imposed its difficult interpretation : dominated the future no less than the present. The forces of the world were set angrily against it. It turned to them an implacable face ; and demanded the same loyalty in its friends.

It was a stern nurse. True to the tradition of chivalry, it inculcated the great and military virtues, valour as well as love ; crying *Cibus sum grandium : cresce, et manducabis me*. She was reminded of a cathedral of old France, visited in the happy days of her ignorance. There, as she remembered, in a porch that was the very picture-book of faith, St. George and St. Martin stood sentinel on each side of the great entrance : as if to assure intending initiates of the Ineffable that only by courage and charity could they attain to the mysteries within.

As she sat in the foggy room, by Vera's bedside, watching the clock for the moment at which tem-

perature should be taken and medicine given, she reviewed the difficulties, the problems, the changes, which had flowed from its custody.

Her friends were gone: all but Helen, in whom disclosure of the truth had but awakened a deeper sympathy, an almost envious love, which enfolded mother and child together in its embrace.

Her work, she knew, would go. Mr. John had not as yet taken action in the matter: but Miss Tyrrel's frank and abrupt disclosure of her motherhood had shocked him. He could not decide upon the right way to take it. Her enforced absence during the child's illness had kept the matter in the foreground of his consciousness: and shown him, at the same time, the extent to which he relied upon her services. One may be sorry for Mr. John at this juncture. He disliked the sudden necessity for managing his own affairs, and naturally extended to its cause his general sensations of resentment. He wished very heartily that the subject had never been mentioned to him. Miss Tyrrel's behaviour had been tactless: he hated decisions, and this indiscreet and unnecessary confession had thrust on him a forced option of singular difficulty. She was an excellent manager, and very cheap. But Mr. John knew that the sums which are saved in salaries are often paid for heavily in reputation: and Constance was left in little doubt as to the course which he would finally adopt. "With our large school and theological connection," he said, "we are obliged to be so very particular."

The Watcher observed, "You see—you see! Oh, very foolish child! what is the use of being honest

—of being true to the thing that you call life—when life itself is inimical, and the other creatures will not understand?”

Loneliness and poverty, then, she saw clearly for the future. She did not flinch before them. She only wished that she had greater strength for their encounter: that some limit might be set to the dreadful and growing fatigue which dimmed her energies and narrowed her outlook upon life.

Small things also conspired to hurt her; to pull at her powers of endurance. Not least amongst them had been Andrew's intolerable kindness. He had heard from Mrs. Reed of Vera's sickness: and his persistent and extravagant gifts of invalid luxuries which she dared not refuse, had at least made possible the child's ultimate recovery. That she should owe it to him, this longed for and ruinous event, was an irony which she found very hard to bear.

As she sat by the bed, therefore, she considered all these matters: and, peering into the dimness ahead of her, wondered what would be the outcome of the fight. She looked to it with zest, whatever it might be: for now her old love of life had received a stimulus which it had never known before. She was bound to the earth—bound to the chariot of the years—by the blessed link of sacrifice. Vera needed her: would monopolize in the future her time, her strength, her love. She was very glad.

About two o'clock, Helen came in. She now replaced Constance at Lambton's for a few hours every day; and called at her lodgings at lunch-time to see whether anything was wanted for the child.

She said, “You are looking very white and seedy

to-day, Con. The strain is beginning to tell. Hadn't you better go out and get some air? The fog is so thick this afternoon that shopping is at a standstill: so I need not go back just yet. But it is not dangerous: and, after all, anything is better than a sick-room atmosphere when one is feeling over-tired."

Constance answered gratefully, "I should like to go for a little run! And there's a new prescription, which must be made up this afternoon. She has the first dose at five. I might take it as I go, and then call for it later on and bring it in."

She felt a sudden longing for space and silence, for some release from that inward struggle which was but exacerbated by the presence of the child. She put on her things quickly, and fled out into the street: not trusting herself to look back at Vera's thin and wasted body, flat on the mattress, the cropped head which tried feebly to raise itself, the heavy eyes which followed her as she moved towards the door.

The child broke into a wailing cry when she saw herself about to be forsaken.

"Tanta! don't go. I wants you. Wants a shook-up pillow, and a fairy tale of giants. Wants to be fedded with a little silver spoon!"

Helen said, "Darling, I'll tell you tales and feed you. I will get you everything you want. Tanta's going for a little walk, but I shall stay with you all the time."

But Vera whimpered fretfully, "You isn't Tanta. Wants *her*. Other peoples is no good."

Constance took with her that imperative cry:

holding it tightly, savouring it, turning it in her mind. It warmed her towards existence ; gave her new strength.

She descended the stairs, and went out into the roadway. The fog surged up before her, yellow and impenetrable. It wrapped all things in the soft folds of its mantle. At first she was blinded by it : but after a moment of careful staring, she saw the high dim cliff of a house against the tawny sky, and then a spectral cab that went slowly past her. The man drove with one hand, and with the other slapped his chest ; for a little wind blew from the east, and it was bitter cold. She walked a few steps towards a radiant haze which shone very softly in the distance. Presently she discovered it to be the fish-shop at the corner, which was lit with a bluish splendour by its great electric lamps. It seemed full of jewelled things : mackerel, like little peacocks of the sea, glittering upon the slab, and the triumphant rose-colour of the mullet, and many little elfish silver creatures which caught and threw back the lovely broken light. The mysterious beauty of the world, all the strange shapes of it, the incredible, exquisite detail ever apt to break on one's vision from such a corner as this, seized her, and aroused in her a sudden agony of love. She perceived in herself a new and abnormal sensitiveness to this divine play of light and colour : a wild desire to hold it tightly, a wild strange fear lest it should be snatched away.

But it could not be snatched away. This, at any rate, was hers : none could deprive her of it. The body and the heart might go hungry, but the eye could never be starved. How she loved the world !

The adorableness of it—its intimacy—came home to her, after ten days of concentration on the battle with disease. Its dust and hers were of the same company. In loving it, she loved her own people: her nearest kin.

Then she remembered that, after all, she was but the foster sister of the pretty things she worshipped. She had been put to nurse, as it were, amongst them: but some time she would shed her dust and go away. The thought of death smote her with a sharp pain, and left behind it a sickening sense of fear. Her life, even in the greyest days, had possessed that quality of organic completeness which prevents the idea of one's own death from being more than a polite assent to a proposition which is universally received. Now, she knew not why, she thought of it as an actual, personal process: a strange circumstance, for in spite of hardship ahead of her, her zest for life had never been greater than at this hour.

The Watcher seized on the horrid thought, and forced it again and again upon her mind, saying to her, "Sometimes in the battle it happens that fool-hardy warriors are killed. Then, they must forsake the lovely world, and all the excitements of the dream."

He did not frighten her: it was so obviously implicit in the very scheme of things that she should live.

She came to the cash-chemist's: gave in her prescription, and then turned to continue her walk. But the fog had thickened: it closed about her, brown and heavy. The effort that she had made

the driving of her weary limbs in quest of air, seemed but a foolish travail, when this was all the air to be obtained. She hesitated. She might wait in the shop for the preparation of her medicine, then go home: but the atmosphere of drugs, the odd and aromatic smells, were, at the moment, hardly to her taste. In spite of smarting eyes and difficult breath, she walked a little way, vaguely. Then a thicker wave of fog settled upon the streets, and she decided that it were better to turn backwards after all. The possibility of losing her way had suddenly occurred to her: and the awful consequences for the sick child who waited for the medicine at home.

She turned, as she supposed, completely round; began with assurance to retrace her steps. But in a moment, her foot felt the kerb; she came with a jolt into the gutter-way, and was on the roughly macadamized surface of the road, possessed by the absurd but fear-inducing sense of being irretrievably lost. The soft silence of the fog was all about her, and converted the narrow street into a limitless desert. She walked on. All her idea of direction had vanished: and it was only after a period which seemed very long that she felt another kerb-stone rising against her foot, and was upon the pavement again.

She edged from the roadway, slowly and carefully; till she came, with sensations of shock, on the wall of a house. When she had crept by it for a little way, an edgeless and colourless figure appeared in the mist: another woman, who also as it seemed was hugging the friendly wall. They proceeded side by side for a short time: and presently the wall was

broken by a door. The woman stopped there, rang a bell, and said to Constance, "There will not be many here to-day!" Perhaps because Miss Tyrrel did not answer her, she added, "We are not really very late."

The door opened a little way of itself and stood ajar. The lady pushed it wide open: entered: and held it, that her companion might pass. Because she was lost and very tired, because of the thickness of the fog, and her longing for some place of refuge where she might at least be still, Constance went in. She was blinded and stifled: wanted breathing space. The other woman preceded her: and she followed, up a flight of stairs and then through another door.

Behind it she found, as she had vaguely expected, a small and perfumed chapel. The fog, shrouding the electric lamps, filled it with a hazy golden light. Upon the simple altar were twelve candles: twelve misty flames, like globes of dim fire. A few ladies knelt at the chairs in the centre aisle.

No priest was present: but in the plain choir-stalls which lined the little nave, there were perhaps a dozen women. They looked somewhat like Quakeresses of the old school, before chocolate brought smartness in its train: somewhat like respectable French women of the bourgeoisie, brought from the recesses of a somnolent provincial town. They wore black woollen dresses, with little capes fastened upon the breast; and large old-fashioned bonnets which covered the hair and were tied beneath the chin, surrounding the face with an upstanding black *ruche*. Incurably humble

and demure, she judged them : full of kindness, but without initiative.

As she seated herself upon a chair near the door, one of these quaint and gentle persons—evidently prosecuting some ritual already begun—cried in a thin pure voice, with a wailing cadence hardly of this world, “*Hei mihi, Domine!*” and the other voices responded in the far-off accents of a selfless and delicate lamentation, which even in its grief still remembered the language of hope, “*Ad Dominum, cum tribularer, clamavi : et exaudivit me.*”

“When I was in trouble, I called upon the Lord : and He heard me!” What a strange statement, made with an air of utter conviction by these sequestered and unearthly women, living, unsuspected, behind walls which fringed a busy London street! Were they, she wondered, speaking for themselves : and what was the intention of the ceremony on which she had chanced ?

At the ending of the psalm, the note changed. The high clear voice which had chanted the antiphon cried suddenly and fervently, “*Requiem æternam dona eis Domine!*” and its companion voices answered, “*Et lux perpetua luceat eis.*” Then another psalm, and another, and always at the end of each that same bitter and imploring cry.

She began to understand it. She had come upon one of those places, scattered throughout Christendom, where the Ritual of the Dead is ceaselessly performed. The Church, by these delegates of hers, was doing what she could for those emigrant sons and daughters who had gone out into a new world. She was afraid for them, knowing that they shared

her imperfection : she yearned towards them, pitiful, longing to help them if she could.

Requiem æternam dona eis ! A whole generation of mourners joined, as it seemed, in this impassioned prayer. Give them rest : they shall have it ! We, the living, will work for it. Rest and light—more light ! We have lit these little candles to mitigate their dimness if we can. All the things which we have not ourselves—can never get, never enjoy—these we ask for them. Our own deprivation we can endure. But help the poor dead, the lonely dead ! Give them the calm illumination which we long for and always miss. We cry in their name, for we are one with them. Soon, we shall be with them. They are here too : they implore us as we speak. We send our hearts before us, and our ineffectual wills, over that brink which we, too, shall presently pass. We rush ahead of our experience : unite ourselves to those already there. We ask nothing for ourselves. We only assert our right to ask for them : to use our bodies for the bodiless, our voices for the silent, our tears for those who cannot even weep.

Behind the veil of misty light, Constance seemed to divine them ; the poor and helpless dead, waiting so anxiously upon the supplications of their friends. In the fog, where bodies became as phantoms, and every standard of reality was at fault, it was easy to believe in them : to feel all about one, caught perhaps in the fog of personality, the mighty wistful company of souls, called by the familiar rites to lean out from their country into this. She discerned their very gentle prayer for help : she too was impelled to ask

for them light and a clear horizon, a release from the strained ear, the strained eye, from the ignorance and helplessness which constitute the condition of the lost.

Then she thought of the sick child at home, hovering, itself, upon the edge of this multitude. Should Vera die, could she ask these things for that elfish, cruel creature: that little heap of appetites and habits which her own starved appetites had brought to birth? What was Vera, once her active little body had been cast away? An incompleated thing, for whom the lesson of the flesh remained unlearned.

In the quiet chapel, where the chanting of psalms had now given place to soft-recited prayers, Constance regained the clear vision which had forsaken her during the preceding busy days. From this spiritual place, she looked temperately out upon life. She saw her battle with the Watcher tending to its crisis. Because something of the atmosphere of infinity was caught between these walls, he had gained in strength. He rose and dominated her. She felt her own increasing weakness, saw that he was her master, and trembled for the little child whom she would save. There could be, it was clear, no amicable termination of this contest: no final living side by side, all three of them—she, Vera, and the subjugated lodger within. He would not tolerate that.

Then she saw something else: a new and terrible solution, which had not occurred to her before.

The Watcher must be expelled from the dream: compelled to relinquish his hold on material things.

This was the one way to be rid of his influence: the sole solution by which Vera's safety was assured. If he stayed, he would have his will of the child: push her remorsefully from life. His hatred of her intrusive personality was the complement of that blind and narrow love which he lavished on his friend. Her mother's strength could not avail against him: but that mother might yet win a more splendid victory if she would.

She might go, and drag him with her from the field. So tightly was he enmeshed within her being, that only thus could he depart. She saw it now, in this place of light. Her very soul and body must be torn asunder if she would extricate him from the fetters of the dust.

There was no longer room in life for her and Vera. One or other of them must perish. This cruel truth grew, and filled her consciousness. Gradually all other truths—hopes—plans—melted before it; leaving it in possession of her mind.

But she did not want to die. She wished, she longed to live for her daughter's sake: to offer, if she might, reparation for the coldness of past years. She had schemed it all—her care, her tenderness, her courage—begun, already, to taste its joy. She was going to concentrate herself on Vera: Vera, who without her guardianship was helpless: a nameless child, cast upon the world. Could such an act of abandonment as this deliberate death be called her duty? Could this be the solution towards which she was being pressed? She exclaimed within her mind, "I cannot bear it! What a choice! To forsake her, or else to let her die! Where could

she go? Who would take her? How cruel—how inexorable—They are!”

“You see!” said the Watcher, “your sacrifice would be a useless one. And even if it were not, would you indeed give your very life for this? Go, in order that she may live in poverty and imperfection—move to and fro—add to the ugliness of things? How gross a folly! You, who love it all so much, to go for ever from the dream!”

She answered him meekly, pleading with him: for now he had her at his mercy, and she was not ashamed to sue him for her life.

“You see,” she said, “the pass to which you have brought me. Is this love? Will you not have patience yet a little—wait—give me time? Do not kill me! Do not force on me this action! I do not *want* to go.”

He answered, “I will not wait, for I see the future. I see that since you will not yield, it is best that you should die. If you live, there cannot be a happy outcome: only eternal effort and wasted sacrifice.”

“That too may make one happy. You do not understand.”

“I do not understand your wild illusions. They weary me: I want to go away. I can no longer bear this squalid corner, these perverse sufferings and unworthy loves. To love the Cup, and the reality behind it; that were comprehensible. It is indeed your destiny, your only joy; but to this, it seems, you hardly can attain. Therefore, if you would live, let go, that I may extricate you from your ugly tangles. Then we will wander freely through the dream, and look for beauty, happiness, and life.”

She steeled herself against him: and he, sadly conscious of the alienation of his friend, said, "Ah! let me go! I loved you: and I longed to help you. But I cannot make you happy, because you resist. Therefore you must die and release me; for I am very weary of this confused and hopeless world."

There had been an interval of silence in the chapel, when the Vespers of the Dead came to an end. Suddenly it was broken: as it appeared, by a litany of some kind. Constance was still deep in the fear and amazement which her discovery had induced: hoarding as it were her courage for the awful hour which she discerned ahead. Hence the opening phrases went past her very softly, without attaining to her consciousness.

But presently she woke from her dream, called forth by the high and urgent voice which led these poignant ceremonies. She heard it cry with a strange accent of authority—a certainty that its invocation could not be in vain—"All ye orders of *Blessed Spirits!*" and the congregation took it up, finished the phrase, "*Pray for the faithful departed.*" They had gone, it seemed, beyond the limit of their first petitions. The supplication of divine omnipotence was over. Now they extended their appeal, humanized it, claimed the help of the triumphant dead in caring for their poorer kin.

"Saint Gregory—Saint Augustine—Saint Ignatius!" cried the appellant voice: and the eager chorus followed with its supreme demand, "*Pray for the faithful departed!*" None were excused from this duty. One after another, the torch-bearers of the faith were claimed, petitioned: and with so

assured an accent that Constance almost expected a quiet presence to answer from beyond the radiant mist.

It went on, that roll-call of the happy dead; and with each name the reiterated, imperative, united cry for help. They called them down into this little chapel, claimed their kinship: insistent on the necessity of their suffrages, expectant of their brotherly aid. They were reminded of their humanity, these elect and shining spirits, snatched from the study, the brothel, the battle-field, the court. "You," these intent and amazing women seemed to say, "you, even more than we, should work, should plead for them. You have achieved: you have entered the Light: you are *there*. We do our best, but we are so far away. We lack your transcendent opportunity. Therefore we remind you of your fraternal obligations—*all ye holy doctors, popes, and confessors, pray for the faithful departed.*"

The woman who knelt alone, struggling with her terror and astonishment, trying so hard to acquiesce in the sacrifice which she must make, was inexplicably consoled by this intimate colloquy; this assurance of the reality, the friendliness, of the populations who awaited her beyond the veil. It was but another aspect of that world of the dead which the Watcher had divined amongst the Westmorland hills: whose friendship he had pressed on her then. How peaceful, she thought, was the lot of this army, resting thus in the ever-renewed memory of the race. Here—the fretting duties of the dust accomplished—was perfect unity, the social link, the unhindered love. It seemed as though death alone could convey

the fulness of life. Constance felt herself to be initiated into a mighty society: held, welcomed, and sheltered by it. Her terror passed away.

She turned on the Watcher. "You," she said to him, "have nothing to do with this! I am not afraid now. All is well! I see that it does not matter where one is in it: living or dead, this side or the other of the veil. You said that to me once. I give it to you again. But Vera must stay; because she has not finished, is not ready to go out of the dream."

He was astonished: a little crestfallen. "Do you mean," he said, "that you are glad to go, as Martin was? You, who cannot see the light?"

She answered, "Yes! I believe I am. Glad to make a good departure—a death that is worth while! They shan't be ashamed of me if I can help it—the people on the other side."

She was very tired now. She could dispute with him no longer: she only wished to sleep. The litany continued, and she listened to it idly: till suddenly, from out its rhythmic supplications came one, startling in its supreme assurance, which obliterated the walls of the chapel—the very ramparts of the world—and set about those who could make it the splendours of a house not built with hands.

"That Thou wouldst be pleased to admit them to the contemplation of Thy adorable Beauty, we beseech Thee to hear us!"

These captives of time and space, from the very deeps of their prison, offered this selfless prayer for those who had passed from their sight. She rose on the wings of it: she, for whom that prison door

stood open. She asked it for herself, and for the Watcher : for all the spirits of the living and the dead.

This was what she wanted ; what all men wanted. This was the link still lacking, to unify the scattered actions of her life. But one must, as she saw it, share in that Beauty, contribute to it, as the one condition of true sight. Did the Watcher, she wondered, see it? Had he done so, it had surely purified his love, satisfied his thirst for reality, stilled his unrest.

Others had the vision in some measure. It was here in the world for those who had learned to see. She remembered Martin: remembered the sacred Thing to which she had given an unwilling guardianship: remembered Helen, sanctified by a foolish agony which she did not understand. Then, turning on herself she asked, suddenly, passionately, the one question of the awakened soul, "How can I serve it? What can I give?"

The Inner Inhabitant was ready to reply to her: but she knew the only answer before she heard its voice.

As she went out from the chapel, hushed, shaken and bewildered, there stood by its entrance one of the demure and black-gowned sisters of the choir. She looked at Miss Tyrrel with friendliness, as if divining in her some quality appropriate to the rites.

Constance said, "What is this place? Who are you?"

The woman answered in the sweet and nervous accents of the cloister, "Madame, we are called the Helpers of the Holy Souls."

CHAPTER XXII

HOW THEY WENT HOME

“And at the end of woe, suddenly our eyes shall be opened, and in clearness of light our sight shall be full.”

JULIAN OF NORWICH: *Revelations of Divine Love*.

IT did not surprise either Helen, the doctor, or the landlady that Constance's illness should follow close upon the convalescence of the child. She had not spared herself. Her devotion had even verged upon foolishness; including as it did an indulgence of the patient's caprices, an attention to her mere happiness, which no student of modern therapeutics could approve.

During these last permitted days of her physical existence, she was ceaselessly obsessed by the desolating consciousness of awakened spirit that she could never, under any circumstances, love enough. In the life to which she went, as she conceived of it, love would be effortless, a joy. It would spring, and she with it, to its Source. In the life which she must leave it had been a high and splendid duty: difficult, full of enticements for the courageous soul. But she had neglected that transcendent opportunity, been blind to its romance: and her act of reparation did nothing to assuage her remorse.

Hence, she devoted herself feverishly, whilst she could, to the satisfaction of Vera's smallest fancies; waiting on her, playing with her, never absent from her room. For this, she relinquished, as she knew, her final chances of communion with the adorable world from which she went. It meant something to an impassioned lover of beauty to forego her last opportunity of seeing the spare trees in their dress of hoar-frost, the misty glory of the river when the light begins to fade, the miracle of Oxford Street at the moment in which its lamps flash splendid in the dusk. These familiar and exquisite sights, always friendly to her weary eyes, were going. Her very eyes were going: all her senses: time and dimension: shape and colour: sound and space. There were moments when she could not bear it: when she cried out in agony against her fate. To die in furnished lodgings is not pleasant, even to the amateur of death. Her regrets were made the more tormenting by the fact that she here suffered, in their extremest form, all those squalors and discomforts which are incident to our departure from the dust.

The Watcher, in the midst of his own eagerness to be gone, was very sorry for his friend. He anticipated for her no happy future: her spiritual blindness, as he saw it, would be as great a drawback to the enjoyment of Eternity as his own supersensual prejudices had been to the comprehension of Time. She would exist, as he knew, in the Real for ever and ever. What could she do there: this creature who had not even been able to contrive her own comfort in the dream? To know: this, for him,

was still the great matter. He perceived in Constance a deep ignorance of the conditions on which she must be cast. He would yet have offered her place for repentance, had she desired it: for now he was almost soft-hearted where this one woman was concerned. But she was intent on his departure: and even in the darkest hours, she did not flinch.

She struggled to expel him from her spirit: longing to be herself, to be at peace, to regain the sole possession of her senses before she laid them finally away. He too fought within her against the clinging fetters of the flesh: eager for home, anxious to be gone from a lodging where he did not any longer feel at ease. The battle tore at her body, racked it, with a fever which no medicines could still.

She lay, hour after hour, alone in the dreary room. She gazed vacantly at the faded pictures, counted the drab daisies upon the slate-coloured wall. Time was marked only by the perfunctory visits of the landlady, who "looked in" to bring useless and unpalatable nourishment, and see whether there was anything required. Once every day, Vera came to her: and this was the moment towards which she lived. When Constance sickened, Mrs. Reed had removed the child to her own lodging: delighted to have again the whole custody of a living thing that she could tend.

She had said to Miss Tyrrel during the first days of her illness, "You must not worry about Vera whilst you are laid up. She is quite safe with me, and I am so pleased to be able to take her: I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much. It makes such a difference, beginning the day by dress-

ing her, and ending it with putting her to bed. Having her little clothes to mend and her feeding to consider—you cannot think what that all means when one has been living alone, with nothing to arrange for but oneself.”

“Would you like it always?”

“Always,” answered Helen. “Sometimes, I feel that I must keep her: must have something to serve. I cannot bear to think about the moment when I shall have to let you have her back again.”

“Perhaps that moment will not come.”

Helen looked at her nervously. Oh no—no!” she said, “you are quite mistaken. You’re very weak just now, and it makes you depressed. But the doctor said to-day that he is sure there are no complications: as soon as your temperature drops, you will have nothing to do but get well.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then—oh, *then* I hope she would be mine,” said Mrs. Reed. Fear and excitement strove together in her voice. “And—of course, it won’t happen: it is absurd to think of it—but if it ever did, I should do my best for her: my very best. And I wouldn’t steal her from you. I should always remember that she was really yours. She should never be allowed to forget you: I promise that!”

It was a promise which carried little conviction. Helen spoiled the little girl, who already began to turn to her; pleased by her new and undisciplined life, and resenting with her customary violence the quietness and restraint which were imposed during her morning visits to Constance’s room. Vera had the animal’s instinctive hatred of the sick, and could

hardly be persuaded to submit to her mother's feeble embrace.

That mother, therefore, saw herself in the act of withdrawing from a world which did not seem to need her any more. She was going very quickly: helped thereto by the Watcher, who wished that her earthly pain at least might end. She had cast him from her mind: he no longer governed her vision: but he could not leave her, because he loved.

Mrs. Reed had looked in at lunch-time, and found her sleeping. She thought the omen a good one, and crept quietly away: for the day was fine and she wished to take Vera for a little walk. She arranged the bedside table, placing milk and medicine within reach; and warned the landlady that Miss Tyrrel was best left undisturbed unless she rang her bell.

When Constance awoke, the afternoon was waning, and her room was grey and dim: being filled with a wintry twilight which made this place of departure seem one already with the colourless dimension of the dead. She looked about her, rather puzzled. The place seemed strange. It was so very large and shadowy, and she so small: smaller than her body, she thought. In some subtle way, she was changed: yet she could not capture, analyze her new condition.

Things were becoming queer: very queer indeed. She did not put it more definitely than that. She was not frightened: but she was annoyed to discover that her mind was too weak to grasp the strange experience to which, plainly, she had come—the last of her adventures, perhaps.

Opposite to her bed was the little cupboard, in

which she had locked the shrine of the Cup. She wished that she could reach it, unlock the door, and look within. Somehow, she fancied, that might explain things: give her something to rest upon, something that would not display the confusing qualities which now invested all visible objects of thought. She stared at the cupboard very hard. Presently she found herself going towards it, quite easily. Then, as if she were looking through some glassy substance, and in the very act of looking penetrated that on which she gazed, she found herself in the presence of the Graal.

She had forgotten everything else: was not strong enough to attend to her body any longer. The teasing question of life and death, of the conditions of the transit, passed away. She did not think of asking herself on which side of that veil she existed, because the veil had disappeared.

She and the Chalice faced one another: but not the cup of cloudy glass which she had known. It had taken on the splendours of reality: and she smiled, for she looked Perfection in the face. It shone close to her, yet unseizable. It shone through the whole world; a lens which focussed and poured out upon that piteous sphere of effort the benediction of the Uncreated Light.

“Humble, yet omnipotent. Desirous, and illusive.” She wondered whence she had obtained those words. They came back to her now, suddenly comprehended. They were all that remained within her mind. Her eyes were opened on eternity: easily, naturally, since they were shut for ever on the illusions of the earth. She perceived Reality

at her door, ever near her, patient and unsleeping, awaiting the recognition of its child.

She saw it: but not alone. Even in her act of departure she must, it seemed, carry out the redemptive duties of her race. As Dante, gazing into the eyes of Beatrice, there saw reflected the Light Divine: so the Watcher, gazing into the soul of his friend at this crucial moment of transcendent victory and earthly loss, was permitted to see the transfigured Spirit—the inmost inhabitant—where it sat, like a Mater Dolorosa, holding upon its knees the slain self by whose death it was redeemed.

It seemed to him now a very holy thing and full of wonder. He did not know that its sacrifice was commonplace enough. There was no one to tell him that, judged by the stupendous standards of humanity, any other action had been a sin: that Constance's passion took no heroic rank amongst the sublime adventures of the dust. In the human aspect of her death: in its determined quixotry, its profound and unrewarded love: he recognized, astonished, the key to all the mazes of the dream. Out of this agony there was reflected for him a ray of that divine Personality which he, the ignorant and impersonal investigator of things, had little suspected to be the energizing light in which alone it was possible to see God.

In that light, eternity was remade for him. The awful boredom of the Infinite, its incomprehensibility, had passed away. He no longer noticed that he did not understand, for the desire to know was gone. He looked again, detached from the dream, on the busy tangle of organic things: on a world

founded on the illusions, supported by the considerations, of matter, growth and sex. But now he saw no paradox, no confusion: only as it were a furnace, whence, now and then, the Will drew forth a perfect spirit made for Its own delight.

He heard now the voice of that Love in which all subsists, crying through eternity with a sad voice and urgent to its many errant sons. And the most faithful of all answers to this appeal did not come from the infinity which is Its home; but was dragged and distilled from the turmoil of life, from the midst of that sacrificial torment which he had so bitterly and ignorantly regretted for her whom he had learnt to call his friend. There, in the healing of division, he saw perfect union attained. He, who had now all knowledge, saw himself outstripped by those who had a very little love: and saw also in the satisfaction of his own lust of curiosity an end which even the meanest human soul had hardly held consistently through life.

But he had loved her a little. He had followed her faithfully. He had done for her his mistaken best. Now, he abased himself before her: before the spirit of a tired and broken outcast, whom even earth had held to be impure.

Her poor and weary body had fallen asleep: and from between the lips of it her soul came out, as gladly as a little bird from its cage. It was the soul which he had watched and loved as it struggled to burn in the difficult air of the earth: but had hindered, because he never understood. Now it shone very brightly without flickering: having sloughed off the tedious apparatus of the flesh. It

shot up, a penetrating flame of love, straight to that Heart of Being which all creation eternally desires.

And he, who had torn so violently from out its prison the white soul of her whose life he dared to judge, took with it his last lesson, and his release. He was initiated into heaven, and stood there beside her: humbled, glorified, redeemed by that humanity into whose august secrets he had tried to look. The dream was over. It faded before the splendours of the Real. He rose from his sleep, wide-eyed, to see the sacred spirit of man brought forth from a column of dust.

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