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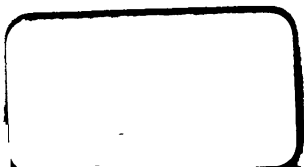
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The Brocklebank Riddle

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**THE
BROCKLEBANK RIDDLE**



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THE BROCKLEBANK RIDDLE

BY
HUBERT WALES

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**THE
BROCKLEBANK RIDDLE**



THE BROCKLEBANK RIDDLE

CHAPTER I

A PARTY OF THREE

IT is desirable, for two reasons, that the plain facts concerning William Brocklebank should be laid before the world. In the first place, the vague rumors which have obtained currency, passed with a smile and a shrug from lip to lip, tend to envelop the matter with an atmosphere of quackery and charlatanism, and to bring upon his relatives and friends undeserved opprobrium as cranks and tale-bearers. In the second place, the public can legitimately claim a moral right to a disclosure of the facts: for they do undoubtedly provide knowledge—definite proof, available to the normal senses—upon a subject of vital importance to human beings, which hitherto has resisted all attempts at investigation. Upon my mind,

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at least, when I think of the amazing events which I watched at close range, now that the nerve- and brain-strain, the awes and fears and tense emotions of the time, have passed or are passing, I find that there is left the indelible impress of one tremendous fact: the reality, as a separable entity, of the essential intangible being, of that sum of mind, character, and consciousness that we call the human ego.

The knowledge, indeed, has not been attained as the result and reward of careful, patient research: it has been reached through what we must call accident; and by a singular irony—though an irony which is very explicable when the facts are understood—the accident was brought about through the agency of one who not only deprecated inquiry upon these subjects, not only sneered at those who took part in inquiry, but denied that there was anything to inquire about.

I confess that I approach my task with diffidence. I know that, however careful I may be to confine myself to a simple statement of what occurred, however scrupulously I may guard against any temptation to exaggerate or to color, however moderately, plainly, and straightfor-

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wardly I may write—I know that, despite every effort I can use in those directions, I shall have difficulty in obtaining credence. That is not said by way of complaint. I recognize that I am the victim not of men, but of circumstances, which must bring me in contact with the skepticism lying at the base of human character. It is within our daily experience that individuals are credulous to the last degree, but the race as a whole is skeptical. Anything new is approached invariably, indeed, inevitably and no doubt wisely, with suspicion. Most of those living to-day can remember the dubious shake of the head, the air of superior wisdom, of practical common sense, with which the first stories of human flight were received. It is that attitude of mind that I must be prepared to meet. For I have to tell of things that have not happened before within the knowledge of man.

It is, as I have indicated, a curious, but a comprehensible, irony, that the central figure in these events, and the agent immediately responsible for them, should have been a man who embodied in the absolute this characteristic of skepticism. I suppose you would search the

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world in vain for a more thorough-paced materialist than William Brocklebank. He believed in nothing whatever but what he could see or touch or reach through the medium of Science; and he regarded physical life, life on this planet, as the be-all and end-all of personal existence. Indeed, he objected to the very word skeptic, as applied to himself: he said that he did not doubt; that he knew, that he was certain.

Had such a man been a pessimist, he would have resented the fact of his own birth. But he was not a pessimist. On the contrary, he was genial and happy, bubbling always with an irrepressible sense of humor. I have never, I think, known anyone who combined so hard a philosophic standpoint with such innate cheerfulness of disposition. He had had his full share of troubles, but he regarded life as highly desirable; he was thankful for it, he clung to it; it represented, as I have heard him put it, "our one chance." Accordingly, he resented, not birth, but death. Particularly he felt that anyone who died young, or in the amplitude of physical powers and capacities for enjoyment, had been defrauded of a birthright. He could not be moved in argument:

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he might admit isolated points, but you would find him, at the end of it all, imbedded like a concrete wall in his original position. I have sometimes felt irritated by his profound belief in his own infallibility, and by its implied relegation of all who differed from him to the category of fools, or of sheep following fools. That faith in continuity which informs mankind as a whole, whether it be the fruit of religion or of reason or of simple intuition, he brushed aside as the idle speculation of people who "think what they want to think."

Among this class—though he never said so—I knew that he included me. He listened patiently and politely to any views I might express; but he regarded me, I felt sure, as a reasonably intelligent being weakly engulfed in the vortex of conventional beliefs. I am a busy man; my life has been occupied in the main with the affairs of the world in which I find myself; but such thought as I have given to deeper problems has not led me to agree with Brocklebank. The human personality, it appears to me, is relatively so big a fact, that it cannot have evolved to endure only for a space of time immeasurably short in the infinite. One's

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sense of proportion is outraged by such a supposition.

At the time of the occurrences which I am about to narrate, Brocklebank's age was forty or forty-one; I was a year or two younger. For over a decade we had been in partnership as corn merchants. Starting with slender resources, we had passed through anxious times; which had left their mark upon us both, but we had slowly built up a prosperous and lucrative business. To-day, any of our friends in Mark Lane, as well as our correspondents in Buenos Ayres and Odessa, will testify, I think, to the substantial position and the sound repute of the firm of Brocklebank & Reece.

My partner was a man of medium height, strongly built, with heavy rugged features. Though I was the taller of the two he could give me two stones and still turn the scale against me. His somewhat small eyes appeared, even in his serious moments, to have a smile at the back of them, and there were little creases radiating from their corners, and a deep perpendicular groove on each side of his mouth, produced by muscles continually relaxed in laughter.

Brocklebank had married some five years before

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the time of which I write, and from that hour had regarded the fact of my continuing bachelorhood as open to humorous treatment. His wife, whom I knew well, was a small person, though by no means diminutive, with a pretty face and form and a pair of the most attractive, semi-serious, gray-green eyes that I have ever seen. She had no lack of individuality, yet she was essentially a dependent woman. Nothing could have made her a suffragist. She needed someone to lean upon, and Brocklebank's substantial form and concrete character suited her admirably. She had an abounding belief in him and accepted him wholly. Any course which William Brocklebank proposed, any view which he held, was to her mind necessarily sound. He had gained his ascendancy, so far as I could see, by the simplest means. He never opposed her or contradicted her: if she got angry with him, or made some suggestion obviously impracticable, he even appeared to agree with her, to regard her annoyance as the just resentment of a sensible woman burdened with a pitifully brainless and incompetent husband. His belief that she would subsequently come to see her mistake for herself was always

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justified, but he never called upon her to acknowledge it. Strongly contrasted as were their two characters, I have never known a happier marriage.

So we come to the events of last August. In that month, for the first time during our connection in business, my partner and I decided to take a holiday together. In previous years the question as to which of us should remain at his post over the dog days had always been a delicate one; and, for my part, whenever I had consigned Brocklebank to that duty, particularly since his marriage, I had started on my travels with a feeling that I was behaving shabbily. This year, however, circumstances had conspired to obviate the annual difficulty: the affairs of the firm were jogging along a straight road, there were no important outstanding matters likely to need attention in the immediate future, business was exceptionally slack, and we had a capable manager to leave in charge. Accordingly it came about that, when the afternoon boat train drew out of Charing Cross station, on the 3d of the month, it carried among its passengers a party of three, consisting of the Brocklebanks and myself. We were on our way

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to catch the night train at Paris for Aix, and so on to Chamonix.

During the long journey Mrs. Brocklebank and I realized a certain comradeship, as fellow-victims of my partner's irrepressible sense of humor. He made each of us the butt of his jokes in turn, with perfect impartiality, and always expected the other to take sides with him.

It is among my misfortunes to possess a set of vocal organs peculiarly incapable of accommodating themselves to the French accent; and this Brocklebank knew.

"One of the main reasons why I brought you on this trip, Chicken," he said to his wife at one point, "was to hear Reece speak French. It's a privilege not to be missed."

Later on, Mrs. Brocklebank curled herself up on the seat of the railway carriage, in the hope of getting some sleep, and incidentally revealed considerably more stocking than she knew.

"Judging from Rachel's interesting attitude at the present moment, Reece," said Brocklebank, surveying her, "you wouldn't think she was twenty-six years of age."

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She dragged her skirt over the limb. "You're a beast, Billy," she said.

We were none of us experienced mountaineers, but we were all fond of climbing. By the time we had been a fortnight at Chamonix we had accomplished all the minor mountain walks, and had made two or three excursions over snow from Pierre-Pointue and Montanvert. Our ambitions grew, and ultimately the question of attempting the ascent of Mont Blanc itself was broached.

"I don't see why we shouldn't do it," said Brocklebank, at dinner one night. "Scores of people get up every year, and they can't all be experts."

"Of course it's not what alpinists call a climb," I said: "it's a long, heavy pull."

Brocklebank finished his soup.

"The snow looks soft, doesn't it?" he said, "like great pillows. It would be a restful place to end our days on."

"The main thing to guard against is the weather."

"Baedeker," Brocklebank contradicted, "says it's the guide's charges."

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I ignored this, and added after a pause: "We are in pretty good training by now."

"And even if you did slip over a precipice," said Brocklebank, "you would fall fairly light, Reece."

I was too habituated to remarks of this kind to take any notice of them.

"I am quite willing to make the attempt, if you are," I said, at length. "I suppose it would cost us ten or twelve pounds each."

"How do you make that out?"

"The guides and the bill at the hut. Perhaps two of us could do it for a little less."

"There's a reduction on taking a quantity. Who runs this mountain? Could we get up a syndicate to put a screen round it and charge for a view of it by the minute, like a trunk call on the telephone? A funicular railway is sure to come, but I wouldn't underwrite the shares. We want something new."

Mrs. Brocklebank had said nothing since the conversation turned upon the subject of Mont Blanc. Now she suddenly intervened. "I simply won't sit and listen to it any longer," she cried out.

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"It *is* rather cheap," I agreed.

"Oh, I don't mean Billy's nonsense. Everybody knows he can never talk anything else."

The little lady was evidently slightly ruffled.

"What, then?" I asked.

"I mean this talk about you two going up Mont Blanc."

Brocklebank said nothing.

"I don't think there would really be any cause to be anxious," I said, as gently as I could. "We wouldn't go unless the weather was good, and you would be able to watch us nearly all the way, through the telescope on the veranda."

"It's not *that*. How idiotic you are!" she snapped out. "But I've been thinking about it, and hoping to get up, ever since I came to Chamonix. And now you are calmly talking as if I were to be left behind. . . . To watch you through a telescope!" she concluded, in a withering tone.

Brocklebank was smiling over his fish. I thought he intended to leave me to get my foot out of the sticky patch in which I had planted it. However, he came to my assistance. "I never suggested it," he said.

"Well, somebody did—Mr. Reece did."

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"Reece, your turn."

"Oh, my foolish and irrelevant remarks," I said, "don't affect the question at all."

He looked at me, for a moment, almost seriously. "Don't you think she could manage it?" he asked.

"It's a grind," I said.

"I'm quite sure I can climb as well as either of you," said the lady herself, still glowing with an outraged sense of justice, but somewhat mollified, it seemed, by a tardy disposition to acknowledge her claims, "I've proved it again and again."

"I believe you can," said her husband, and then returned to his fish. "Anyhow," he added, after consuming a mouthful, "if the Chicken gets tired, Reece, you can carry her. There's not much of her."

CHAPTER II

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

THAT, apparently, settled it. I do not remember any further question arising either as to whether we should attempt the climb, or as to whether Mrs. Brocklebank should come with us. We made our preparations; and three days later, accompanied by two guides and a porter, we struck upward among the wooded slopes on the farther side of the river. It was difficult to realize, as we followed, fifty yards in the wake of the guides, along a wide, well-worn track, occasionally crossing shallow streams, occasionally making our way among the recumbent forms of lazy, ruminating cows, who had strayed under the shadow of the trees to escape from the fierce heat, that we were indeed already started upon the ascent of the highest mountain

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in Europe. From time to time, as we went up, we met parties returning from short morning walks, and on each occasion felt a childish, but no doubt inevitable, glow of satisfaction from the consciousness of the superior hazard and arduousness of the enterprise upon which we were set. Our guides and ropes and ice axes, and the hour at which we were starting, must evidently have declared our purpose to these various people; but only once did we hear it remarked upon. That was when a girl turned, just after she had passed us, and said to a male companion: "She's going up Mont Blanc!"

"Evidently you and I are going for an afternoon stroll," said Brocklebank to me.

About three o'clock we reached the edge of the Glacier des Bossons, and here for the first time the ropes which the guides were carrying came into use. We picked our way among the fissures, using natural snow bridges where the clefts were too wide to step across. Here and there we had to climb heavy, dislocated ice blocks with the help of our axes, and at one point were driven by the barriers confronting us to make a considerable detour. It took us over two hours to cross the

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glacier, though it is barely a mile and a half in width; but ultimately we reached the solid rock on the farther bank.

“If you feel equal to it, Rachel,” said Brocklebank, turning to survey the valley of Chamonix far below, the line of Aiguilles to the right, and the distant block of mountains over Argentière, “Reece will now repeat the French names of the various points of interest that can be seen from here.”

A little farther on we came to the hut on the Grands Mulets. It is built upon a small island of jutting black rock, surrounded by reaches of snow and ice, which stretch above it and on either hand apparently interminably. This was our refuge for the night. We retired early to the rooms which were allotted to us, and endeavored—for my part, at least, with scant success—to obtain sleep in our novel environment.

In the morning, it appeared from the guides' statements, that the sky had overclouded after sunset and a few flakes of snow had fallen. It was again clear, but they made some objection to proceeding on the score of the change in the weather during the night. This attitude Brockle-

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bank rightly diagnosed as one likely to prove amenable to some additional pecuniary treatment.

"They know we are keen to get to the top," he said, "and that we can't go without them. Human nature could hardly be expected not to try to strike a bargain on such favorable ground as that. They'll probably stop us several times on the way up to say that it's too risky to go on under another twenty francs."

He went to speak to the men, who were talking in another room, and presently returned.

"They say we have got off with fewer guides than we are supposed to take by their regulations, and they estimate the extra work at twenty francs each and ten for the porter. We must also take an additional bottle of wine. That's for the men who ought to have come but haven't, to be consumed by proxy. It's crude, I admit," he said, putting his hand into his pocket with a look on his face that was very characteristic, as if he were trying to prevent himself laughing too much: "this gross coin business eats into the glamour."

"One can't blame them for going for the money," he said cheerfully, when this matter had been satisfactorily disposed of: "it's all they get. If

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there is any honor and glory to be distributed, they stand in the shade. You hear of an alpinist making a first ascent of some mountain: they put his photograph in the papers and a short biography of his career, and you picture him standing alone on the giddy summit. When you look into the details, you find that he was tied to a man on each side of him all the way up. But those are only mentioned incidentally, they are part of the mountaineering appliances."

His wife cast a whimsical look at me. "Think of a man who can make jokes at this hour and in these circumstances!" she said.

I was entirely of her mind. I knew no one but Brocklebank whose sense of humor could have triumphed over the external conditions of the moment: for we were eating a rough repast and drinking indifferent coffee, by the light of a smelly oil lamp, in the shivering half hour preceding daybreak.

"Why not?" he asked. "The world doesn't stop revolving because we are going up Mont Blanc."

By 4.30 we had started on the second and final stage of the ascent. We were now roped together

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and walked in single file, one of the guides leading, followed by Brocklebank, with his wife behind him. I came next, and the porter and the remaining guide brought up the rear. For a time our course was intersected at intervals by crevasses, which obliged us to follow a serpentine path.

"If you slipped down one of those, Rachel," said Brocklebank, once, when we had halted for a few moments, while the leading guide cut some steps, "you would emerge in forty years in the valley below, looking just as you do now, and an aged man of the name of William Brocklebank would come to identify you."

The ascent for some distance was gradual, but the heavy snow made walking difficult. Four hours after leaving the Grands Mulets we had reached the edge of the Grand Plateau, which meant that we had covered about half the distance to the summit from our starting point of the morning. But it became evident that the guides were not satisfied with our progress. They kept exhorting us to proceed, if possible, more quickly. As we went on, I noticed, with some surprise, that the member of the party who was delaying us was not Mrs. Brocklebank, but her husband.

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The rope between the former and me, and between her and Brocklebank, was always slack, but between the latter and the leading guide it was often taut. Sometimes the guide seemed actually to be pulling him.

We were now surrounded by snowfields. On every hand the interminable white swept away in great smooth bosses and hollows, save here and there where jagged shoulders of black rock protruded from their mantle. We were bearing, during this part of the climb, to the right, away from the direct line to the summit, and presently began the steep ascent of the Col du Dôme. For some time I had experienced a difficulty in breathing comfortably, and as we went up the Col, the difficulty grew rapidly worse. We had reached an altitude of 14,000 feet, and the rarified atmosphere at that height proved far more trying to lungs unaccustomed to breathe it than I had anticipated would be the case. My mouth became almost intolerably dry and parched; and I can remember with what joy I welcomed even a grimy lump of sugar which the guide behind passed to me. Mrs. Brocklebank, just in front of me, was walking wonderfully; but I was growing

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more and more dubious about her husband. He stumbled once or twice and picked himself up, apparently with an effort. And then, a few minutes later, when we had climbed perhaps half the distance of the Col, I saw him spread out his hands, drop his ice-axe, and fall on his face in the snow, jerking the leading guide backward.

We went up to him quickly and turned him over. He was gasping for breath.

"I'm sorry," he said, with difficulty—"I can't do it—Go without me—Pick me up—coming down."

His wife dropped beside him, and put her arm under his head.

"Of course not, Billy; of course not, dear," she said. "We must get you down. We ought never to have come. Give me some brandy."

I saw that she was right, that all thought of reaching the summit must be relinquished. Brocklebank's grit, I suspected, had carried him, as it was, far higher than he was in a physical condition to go. I knew that men apparently robust often discover constitutional weakness in circumstances of stress. The effort of breathing at a high altitude had evidently strained some

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vital organ, probably his heart. I have little medical knowledge, but I did not like the look of his face: neither, I could see, did the guides.

Mrs. Brocklebank poured some stimulant between his lips. It revived him temporarily. We raised him to his feet, and managed, with difficulty, to get him some distance lower, perhaps two hundred feet. Then he collapsed. He could not stand even with our support. Indeed, he was manifestly and alarmingly very ill.

It was clear that we could not carry a man of his bulk down the mountain. Had there been no snow and no glaciers, it would have been an impossible feat. It was decided, therefore, that one of the guides and the porter should descend to the Grands Mulets to obtain help and a stretcher, while the remaining three of us stayed beside him. I tried to persuade Mrs. Brocklebank to go down with the guide and wait for us at the hut, but she would not leave her husband. It was then ten o'clock. The men told us that, if everything went favorably, they might make the double journey in six hours. That meant, of course, that in the best of circumstances, we could not hope for their return until four in the afternoon.

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They slipped down the slope at a speed which appeared to me to be dangerously fast even for experienced mountaineers, and were soon lost from our view.

Then began an exacting vigil such as I trust I may never again be called upon to endure. A shoulder of the mountain blocked out the view over Chamonix. All round, save for the few protruding black rocks, unbroken snow closed us in—a party of three with a sick comrade, shut off by that white barrier from sight and sound and touch of the world below us. I shall never be able, I think, to feel again that snow is beautiful: it must always appear to me cruel, inexorable. It was bitterly cold, and we had to keep constantly on the move, for fear of frostbite; but the torture of our position came from the sense of our helplessness, from the inertia that was forced upon us in face of a need for action becoming every moment more urgent. We felt—we knew—that if Brocklebank could be got quickly to a lower level he would have a chance to recover, but that, minute by minute, while he remained at this high altitude, the chance was diminishing.

We scooped out the side of a hummock of snow

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and laid him in the hollow, placing the softest of our bundles under his head and covering him with the little spare clothing we had with us. That was literally all we could do. Once or twice he muttered a few unintelligible words, and then gradually lost consciousness. Mrs. Brocklebank kept chafing his hands, imploring him to speak to her, to give some sign that he understood that help was coming, would soon be at hand, and that he would be taken down to the valley. At one time she raised him, with my assistance, into a sitting posture, propping his back upon the wall of snow we had made, because she thought he might breathe with less distress in that position; but soon she decided that it was too cramping, and once again we laid him at full length. Every now and then she put her cheek to his lips, an agony of apprehension in her face. I walked away—I could not bear to see her and to listen to her—and went so far that the guide called me, in a warning voice, to return.

We had plenty of provisions, but it was difficult to induce Mrs. Brocklebank to take any sustenance. I forced her eventually to choke down some wine and a few scraps of food.

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"If I need it," she said, almost fiercely, "how much more does he? We are doing *nothing* for him."

I made no reply. For some time a cold fear had pressed on my heart. I maintained outwardly a sanguine attitude, and from the expression on Mrs. Brocklebank's face, every time she withdrew her cheek from his lips, I knew that he still breathed; but I began more and more to question if it were possible that his vitality could withstand this long-drawn-out ordeal. As I looked at him, lying perfectly still, I recalled, with that gulp in the throat, that sudden consciousness of the capacity to weep, which assail a man in emotional crises, that he had said, only a few days before, that the snow looked soft, a restful bed for one's final sleep.

After hours of fruitless effort to make him respond to her words of entreaty and endearment, Mrs. Brocklebank sat up and took his head on her lap. One foot was curled under her. It emerged from her short skirt and lay sideways on the snow. Shod in a heavy boot studded with nails, it still looked pathetically small. Then, very quietly, she began to sob. Sitting so, amid

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the waste of snow, bending over the stricken husband upon whom she had been wont to lean confidently and confidingly, her shoulders moving with her silent weeping, she made, I think, the most touching little figure I have ever seen.

I dropped down beside her and tried to take her hand. She snatched it away. "A baby or an old woman could hold my hand," she cried fiercely. "A *man* would do something."

I knew she was distraught, yet the taunt struck home. I asked the guide, for the fifth or sixth time, if it would not be possible, between us, to get Brocklebank a little lower. He shook his head stolidly, as before. We could not move him far enough to benefit him, was his argument, always repeated in the same tone, and if we changed our position the ascending party might have difficulty in finding us.

I had tried to put away from myself the hope that the rescuers would arrive at the earliest possible moment; but when four o'clock passed and there was no sign of them, the disappointment was none the less keen. A few minutes later, however, the guide, who had descended a little way and was standing on a knoll, gave a shout

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and pointed downward. I joined him and saw, far below, a thin line of men. They were creeping up—very slowly, it seemed. Presently we could see little clouds of snow rising about them, as they dug their axes into the mass to drag themselves up the steep slope. Never, I think, has a sight given me so much joy as did that serpentine coil of human forms, drawing nearer. They were carrying, we saw, among other articles, not one stretcher but two—a precaution, no doubt, to meet the chance that another of our party might have succumbed during the long interval of waiting.

In half an hour from the time we first sighted them they were swarming about us. I did not count their numbers, but there seemed to be a great many of them; and not all, I perceived, were Chamonards. Our messengers, it seemed, arriving about midday, had found the hut full; and everyone there, staff and visitors, mountain parties setting out upon or returning from excursions, had volunteered his assistance. I had felt, I confess, before that time, no particular admiration for mountaineers. I had looked upon them as a class of men bent upon risking their lives in

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enterprises of no conceivable utility to mankind. But I shall always remember with deep gratitude that experience of their instant readiness to come to the assistance of any of their comrades in difficulty or distress.

A Frenchman I noticed in particular. I did not know his name, but he was evidently a capable alpinist, to whom the ascent of Mont Blanc would hardly suggest a climb at all. He undertook the direction of the measures for carrying Brocklebank down; and it was largely due to his organization that the descent was made both safely and quickly. Darkness had begun to fall, however, before we reached the Grands Mulets, and the oblique crossing of the Glacier de Tacconaz which completed the journey was made by the light of lanterns.

A spectacle somewhat eerily picturesque we made, no doubt, as we crossed—a long line of black objects, each carrying a lantern casting an oval of yellow light upon the snow. A single guide was leading, carefully choosing the way and occasionally stopping to cut steps for the stretcher party immediately following. Then came the rest in single file. Save for two guides, Mrs.

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Brocklebank and I were last. I had walked behind my companion for the most part of the descent, but just towards the end I unroped myself and went beside her. Her wonderful strength and courage were at last yielding to the mental and physical rigors of that long day. The strain of our terrible vigil, it was now evident, had told upon her heavily. She leaned upon me more and more; it was necessary practically to lift her up the rocks on the farther side of the glacier; and when at last we reached the hut she was in a state of exhaustion bordering on collapse.

A doctor who had been summoned from Chamonix was waiting for us. His examination of Brocklebank was very brief.

I was not unprepared for what he would say. A strong intuition had told me that, during the latter part of the descent at least, if not during the whole journey, the bearers were carrying a lifeless burden. When I saw the doctor's bearing and expression, as he carried out his few tests, my arm closed round Mrs. Brocklebank.

"I can do nothing," was his pronouncement.

He turned away, shaking his head slowly. "He

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should have come to me before he attempted the ascent," he added.

"I think your assistance is needed here," I said to him. For Mrs. Brocklebank had fainted, and lay inert in my arms.

CHAPTER III

THE CASKET

THOUGH stunned by the shock and overwhelmed with grief, Mrs. Brocklebank did not break down or become hysterical. In the days following the tragedy there was much to be done, and her assistance, when I needed it, was to be relied upon. She stated her wishes and gave me necessary information simply and quietly.

“He must be cremated,” she said, as soon as we had returned to Chamonix. “He wished it; and I promised him that, if I outlived him, it should be done. And his ashes must be strewn in the garden at home, to help to nourish the flowers that he loved.”

These were just such instructions as I should have supposed Brocklebank would leave, if he left any at all, but her words came as a relief to

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me. I had feared that she might wish to remove the body to England—an onerous and costly undertaking, and one springing, in my sense, from a somewhat morbid sentiment.

Four days after the tragedy Mrs. Brocklebank and I saw the coffin placed in a train for Geneva, and took our seats—the only mourners—in one of the carriages. I had little fear that my companion's self-control would prove unequal to meet the strain of the ordeal in front of us. The last few days had brought home to me, with personal force, the essential dependence of her nature; but they had also impressed me with a sense of the fine grit and courage enclosed within that small frame of hers.

The undertakers met us at Geneva, and we drove to the Crematorium. It was a long drive, but I do not remember that we exchanged a single word during the course of it. Mrs. Brocklebank sat with her hands tightly clasped on her lap, gazing for the most part straight in front of her. My heart ached for her. A few days earlier she had been tossing aside with indifference or with partly simulated vexation her husband's cheerful banter, happily entrenched in the knowledge of his

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tenderness of heart, as perfectly content with her lot as mortal could be; now, with such suddenness that the change was difficult of steady realization, she was following his lifeless body, her heart gripped by the consciousness that, in a few minutes, even that would be reduced to a little heap of ashes.

We turned in, at last, through a pair of tall, iron gates, and presently drew up before a plain, new building of somewhat ecclesiastical design. While the coffin was being carried in, Mrs. Brocklebank clutched my arm, and there was sudden fear in her face.

"Won't you stay here and wait for me?" I said to her. "It won't be long."

"No," she answered; "let me come."

We followed the coffin into a small chapel, entering by a door facing down the middle. It was almost square in shape. Along the right side were a few rows of chairs, with high windows above them. The floor on the other side was unoccupied, and the windowless wall carried a number of urns on tiers of ledges. Facing us, at the opposite end of the chapel, were double doors of some dark wood, fitted with handles and bars of polished brass.

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The bearers waited in front of these. They were opened, and then the coffin was carried through and placed upon trestles on the farther side. I had a momentary glimpse, beyond, of what bore the appearance of a heavy iron shield, covered with bolts and clamps, built into a wall. Then the doors were again closed.

We turned into one of the files of chairs and sat down. From this position we could not see through the doors when they were open. Presently certain sounds reached us from the chamber into which the coffin had been taken—sounds of tapping and of hammering.

"What are they doing?" asked Mrs. Brocklebank. Her face was very pale and her voice low and tense.

"I don't know," I answered. But I knew.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour elapsed while we waited. Then the doors were opened a little way, and one of the attendants came into the chapel and approached us. He asked if we wished to see the cremation.

Mrs. Brocklebank dropped upon her knees. She did not speak, and the man waited.

"No," I said hastily.

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He was turning away, when Mrs. Brocklebank stopped him with a quick gesture.

Still kneeling, her face bowed in her hands, she spoke to me in so low a tone that I had to bend close to her to hear. "You go," she said. "They are all foreigners—strangers—none who knew him—none who cared. You go."

It was an office I would gladly have escaped; but I understood her feeling, and I thought my nerves were fairly steady. So I rose and followed the man through the doors.

The coffin and the trestles had disappeared. I stood in an open space. And immediately I was aware of the glare of the furnace. Where had been the iron shield, that I had seen for a moment, was now a mouth of fire. One looked, as it seemed, through an opening of the wall, into a lurid infinity of wreathing blaze. Hungry yellow flames, coming apparently from every direction, darted and lapped; and the sound of them was like a distant wind roaring in a forest, or like innumerable bird-wings fluttering.

In front, upon a metal slide, the feet pointing to the flames, lay the body. Whether it were the effect of contrast, or whether it were a fact, one

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had the impression that the rest of the chamber was only dimly lighted. I was conscious that several men were standing in it, waiting; but they seemed to be shadows, scarcely discernible in an outlying gloom. My vision was caught and held by the central glare, and by the recumbent form, in its white clothing, thrown by the issuing radiance into clear relief.

I took a few steps forward, to look, for the last time, upon the features of my friend. Hushed and immobile—the striving personality, with its needs and passions and fierce energies withdrawn—they lay peaceful, as if molded in wax.

I returned to my former place without speaking. The outlying shadows moved, came into the glare in front of me; I was sensible, for a few moments, of two or three men stooping; then the metal slide, carrying the body, moved forward, easily, silently, into the furnace.

There were some moments following which made an exacting demand upon strength of nerve. Through a small talc window, one had an impression, amidst the blaze, of knees drawing up, of limbs turning, of a whole frame in contortion. The suggestion of a living thing writhing in agony

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was terribly vivid. It was necessary to summon to one's aid, by the force of will, the simple knowledge that a leaf, even a sheet of paper, when thrown into a fire, will curl and twist before it is consumed. Presently the movements ceased: very quietly, as something that had reached a profound inviolable peace, the body sank upon the floor of the furnace and was hidden by the flames, still wreathing, still darting and lapping, still hungry.

I turned back into the chapel, and the doors were closed. It was the most awful spectacle I had ever beheld: yet it was satisfying, even comforting. It filled me with a sense of completion. Physical life, whether one regarded it as whole in itself or part of a chain of progressive existence, was over, and there were no ragged tails remaining.

An hour or two later we were given a casket containing the ashes. It weighed only a few pounds. Mrs. Brocklebank took it in her hands. There was a sad irony in the reflection that the body of a man, whose life had been lost because four men could not carry him down a mountain, was now easily supported by the little hands of one slight woman.

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While we were driving back to Geneva, I felt a light touch on my arm. "I can't think what I could have done without you these last dreadful days," Mrs. Brocklebank said. "I want you to forgive me for something I said on the mountain. You know what I mean. It was unjust. Nothing could have been done by anyone. I didn't know what I was saying."

"Of course I knew that," I replied, laying my hand for a moment on hers. "There is nothing to forgive. It was simply that we made a terrible mistake in attempting such a climb without finding out that we were all sound."

"But he seemed so strong. I never knew his heart was weak."

"That's the trap. It is often the most seemingly robust people who prove, under a strain, to have vulnerable points in their constitutional armor."

We were driving down a hill. In the distance, across the blue lake, we could discern quite clearly the cold white mountain which held for us such tragic memories.

"Sleek and cruel—beast!" Mrs. Brocklebank burst out with sudden fierceness. "It looks so

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gentle, just like a great white cat, curled up and hiding its claws. I shall always hate Mont Blanc, I shall always hate Switzerland, I shall always hate snow."

"We will go back to England to-morrow," I said.

Our departure had to be postponed for yet another day, however, in order that a leather case might be made to hold the casket.

During these stressful days, passed in her company, I came to realize more and more how serious a permanent loss Mrs. Brocklebank had sustained, quite apart from the immediate grief, which time no doubt would assuage. The natural dependence of her character was brought home to me personally. She relied upon me, and upon everything I did—as she had relied upon Brocklebank—with the simple trust of a child. How she would fare, now that she was called upon to face the world alone, was a question which imparted a deeper appeal to the sudden sadness of her lot.

It presented itself to my mind with especial force as I looked across at her, sitting on the opposite seat of a railway carriage, during the long night journey to Paris—a small figure, with a

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softly pretty face and quiet, unhappy eyes, holding on her knees the leather case containing the casket. It occurred to me that, in all probability, she had never opened a Bradshaw in her life, and that, if she had, she would certainly have been scared by the mass of figures. Throughout the whole journey she did practically nothing on her own initiative. "We get out here," I would say, and out she would get; or "We will have dinner now," and to dinner she would come; or "We shall not break the journey in Paris, but go straight to the Gare du Nord by the Ceinture Railway," and she accepted it as information. I might have been taking her to Kamchatka, for all she knew definitely to the contrary.

"You must try to get some sleep," I said to her, at one time. "I will take charge of the case."

She allowed me to put a pillow under her head, in a corner of the compartment, and obediently made some attempt to do as I asked, but it proved to be useless. It was, indeed, all but impossible to compose one's mind in the tragic circumstances of the journey. The contrast with that of a few weeks earlier gripped our thoughts with painful and terrible insistence. Then we had been a

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party of three, setting forth hopefully and happily upon a long anticipated holiday; now there were but two of us, and the casket we carried contained all the earthly remains of the member of the trio whose unconquerable good humor had broken the tedium of the way.

When we arrived in London, on the afternoon of the following day, Mrs. Brocklebank was very tired. I took her home to Byfleet, returning subsequently to my flat in Paddington. Brocklebank had built the Byfleet house a year or two previously. It was of a good size and well situated, the trees about it providing a suggestion of seclusion. Besides the main building, the grounds contained a garage and a gardener's cottage. From the front windows there was a delightful view over the weald of Surrey. It seemed rather a roomy abode for its present small owner. The thought passed through my mind, as I walked back to the station, that, unless the estate should work out unexpectedly favorably, she might be obliged to let it; and I felt that she would possibly be happier removed from its crowding associations.

Brocklebank's death had delayed my return to business by nearly a week. The Mont Blanc

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ascent had been essayed as a culminating adventure to crown our various smaller climbs, and we had intended to leave Chamonix on the following day. As events had turned out, by the time I again set foot in Mark Lane, eight days had elapsed since that disastrous morning. A second night had been spent in the hut on the Grands Mulets, three more in Chamonix, two in Geneva, one in the train, and one in London. This calculation was rapidly evolved by my brain, as I worked my way among the crowd of hurrying anxious-faced men on the pavement, all bent, as I was, to their places of business.

I was much preoccupied—for Brocklebank's death would necessitate a re-shuffling of the affairs of the firm, besides the ordinary routine work that needed to be caught up after an absence—but as I passed through the outer office, it struck me that the clerks looked at me rather queerly. Their eyes expressed an odd mixture of fear and concern, such as one might have expected to see on the faces of people who questioned one's sanity. I paid little attention to the circumstance, putting it down to the exaggerated awe, mingled with a sense of personal importance

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which takes hold of a certain class when it is brought in contact with death, bade them "good-morning," without stopping, and went up the stairs to my own room.

As I entered my private office, I felt—as I always did, when I returned to it after an absence—some parental pride in the happy combination, which its appearance suggested, of practical up-to-date utility with reasonable comfort. It was a fair sized room, nearly square, with a large window in it and two doors, one of the latter leading to the landing, the other—a swing door covered with baize—communicating with the office formerly occupied by Brocklebank. The chief article of furniture was a large double, flat-topped desk under the window, bearing in orderly arrangement various receptacles for papers and those contrivances which the inventor's brain has made indispensable to the modern man of business: a table installation of the telephone, an electric plug lamp, and a news transmitter, ticking out coils of tape into a basket on the floor. The hard utilitarian effect of this was softened, however, by a good Axminster carpet, chairs upholstered in dark green leather, a bright brass fender and

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fire-irons, and by wall-paper and paint which toned in with the general color scheme.

I sat down at the desk and looked through some memoranda which I found there. My hand was on a speaking-tube, for the purpose of summoning the manager, when I heard footsteps in the adjoining room. I stopped to listen, thinking that if the manager were there, as was probable, I should be saved the trouble of using the tube.

The steps approached. I put down the mouth-piece and turned to face the incomer. The communicating door was pushed open, and William Brocklebank walked into my office.

CHAPTER IV

THE IMPOSSIBLE FACT

FOR a space of time, measurable, probably, only as some fraction of a second, I felt no surprise. Something had happened which had been a daily, and more than daily, experience for the last ten years of my life; and, for that fraction of time, I accepted it without emotion. It is possible that this momentary interlude of simple acquiescence only served to increase the severity of the shock when the real and appalling nature of what had occurred broke upon my mind. For it was followed, before Brocklebank had taken two steps within the room, not by amazement merely, not by stupefaction, but by fear, fear in a measure beyond my power to express—cold, debilitating terror. It was as if all my knowledge and sense of things were torn from me, as if the very ground which supported

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my feet were swept away, and I were suddenly naked and helpless in a universe of trembling mystery and awe.

Among all the instincts common to humanity the fear of the sight, of the voice, of any indication of the presence of one dead is alone inexplicable. There is no manifest reason for its existence. Such instincts, for example, as those which bid us cling to life and protect the young have an object which is immediately accessible to the mind. The whole scheme of progressive being rests upon the sound working of those and similar intuitive forces. But why this universal fear of the dead? What would be the effect, supposing it were removed? Should we discover truths which would unfit us for the practical, steady conduct of the affairs of the world? Is this fear the guardian of the veil? Whatever be the answer, some answer there must surely be, for there is nothing purposeless in nature. I can testify, at least,—from the effect produced in me when Brocklebank walked quietly into my office,—both to the reality and the force of this instinct of fear. Had it been possible to escape, I would have run from him, run till I dropped from exhaustion.

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He was speaking as he came in. "I thought I heard your step—" he said, and then broke off. "What on earth is the matter?" he called out. "Everybody looks at me to-day as if I were some new species of prehistoric beast. Why, good heavens, man, you are going to faint!"

He went to a cupboard, took out a bottle of brandy and poured some into a glass. He put it to my lips. His hand felt warm, it was solid: and that evidence of his materiality, so far from reassuring me, only added to my horror, by its inexpressible outrage to the facts of my experience.

I closed my eyes for some minutes. The room was silent; I could hear, from some other part of the office, the clicking of a typewriter, and from the world without the muffled but insistent roar of London. I hoped that, when I looked again, the figure of Brocklebank would have vanished, that it would prove to have been a delusion of the senses, some nightmare, some phantasmagoric production of my own mind.

But when I opened my eyes, he was still standing in front of me, the bottle and glass in his hands, an expression of some anxiety on his face. He seemed to have lost weight, his features were

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paler and less rugged; he had, as one says, fined down. Even his hands struck me as whiter and more delicate, more sharply chiseled. His hair had become distinctly less gray, and seemed smoother. It was as if he had passed through some refining fire.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

I nodded.

He put away the bottle and glass, and sat down. "Well, now," he said, "it seems to me—I don't know whether you may be of the same opinion—that the existing situation lends itself to some explanation."

I found that, by closing my mind against the mad impossibility of the man's presence, and fixing it rigidly upon the simple, present fact of it, I could talk to him.

"I quite agree," I said.

"A man doesn't nearly faint at the sight of another man without some reason."

"Of course not."

"You will admit that it is a little painful to the feelings of the other man?"

"Tell your story first," I said. "I don't feel up to talking at present. And I want to think."

THE IMPOSSIBLE FACT

"What do you want to think about? Whether you'll tell the truth or not?"

He had come, as he generally did, in such quick, half humorous hits, very close to the fact.

"At any rate," I answered, "I shall not tell you any lies."

"We agree to eliminate lies. So we can get along. The last time, before to-day, that you and I had the pleasure of exchanging salutations, if my memory serves me, was near the summit of Mont Blanc?"

"Perfectly right—if mine serves me."

"You are not sure?"

"I don't feel sure of anything to-day."

"Well, let us begin at the beginning and check our impressions. We went to Chamonix—you and I and Rachel?"

"Yes."

"We did some small climbs?"

"Yes."

"We took reasonable refreshment, from time to time, at various small mountain hostelries?"

"We took meals."

"Finally we started up Mont Blanc?"

"Yes."

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"We had two guides with us and a porter?"

"Yes."

"The porter's business was to carry the extra wine for the guides?"

"So you said."

"We didn't reach the top, did we? I'm hazy about that."

"No; you developed a heart and broke down."

"I remember falling. And you helped me some way down?"

"Yes, amongst us."

"And then I gradually lost consciousness?"

"Yes."

"Did I become delirious?"

"Yes, slightly."

"I was feeling pretty bad, I remember, but I didn't intend to die if I could help it. I knew I had years of life in me, and I wasn't going to throw them up."

My fear of him, though always in some degree present, was slowly yielding to interest in his story. He paused; and I found that I was waiting intently to hear what he would say next. Was I to learn, when he spoke again, the answer to the great riddle? Was he about to lift the veil that

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had never been lifted or penetrated by man? Certainly there was nothing in his manner to suggest that his narrative was hovering over the plunge into immense mysteries. But I could hardly imagine that Brocklebank would be serious even if he had to tell of the crack of doom.

"You gradually lost consciousness," I reminded him. "What happened then?"

"I saw white all about me when I came round," he answered, "and I thought I was still on the snow. Then I found that the white was ceiling and wall-paper and bedclothes. In fact, I was in bed."

My mind was still projected upon other planes of existence. "I don't understand," I said. "Tell me what it was like."

"I can't speak any more plainly," he answered: "I say I was in bed. If you want a description of the handsome and interesting figure I make when I'm tucked in, you had better ask Rachel. And I never felt more relieved than when I found you had got me down: I'd had enough snow. What a fool's trick it was," he suddenly interjected, "to go gratuitously up into territory of that kind,

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when there's as good an earth down below as anybody could want!"

I brought my mind back to earth. I still had to deal, it was evident, with the materialist of old; and that very fact made the mystery of his reappearance only the more bewildering and unnerving.

"For a time," he proceeded, "I lay peacefully, and thought of champagne and oysters and the new piece at the Gaiety and getting the sixth at Longfleet in two. But presently I looked round, and then I found that I didn't recognize the room. That in itself didn't surprise me much, because I knew Rachel wouldn't want her room turned into a hospital for the sick and incapable, and that you would naturally put me into another. What *did* surprise me was that there were no bottles and medical stuff about, and no good-looking hospital nurse to come and soothe my brow with a soft white hand. Except for my clothes on a chair, the room was as neat and tidy as a new pin. Not only was I the only occupant, but there were no signs whatever of those thoughtful attentions, that waiting on you hand and foot, to which a man recovering from a grievous sickness feels entitled."

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He was obviously telling what he at least supposed to be the truth, and I found myself following his statement with deepening interest, grotesquely impossible though it was to reconcile it in any way whatever with the facts of my experience. I could receive his story only as a simple account of what had recently befallen him, isolated from anything and everything that had gone before.

"After a time," he went on, "I thought the best thing to do was to ring the bell. A chambermaid came and tapped at the door, and appeared to be either deaf or stupid, for I had to tell her to 'entrez' three or four times before she 'entrezed.'

"'S'il vous plait,' I said, 'café complet, immédiatement.' That was a practice sprint. 'Et prie Madame Brocklebank to come ici à moi bientôt. Voilà!' I always drop in a 'voilà'—it helps them.

"She just stared at me—very much as you stared at me when I came in just now. So I put my request even more carefully and politely, and with an extra 'voilà.' Then she said, 'I don't understand.'

"I was surprised—I admit, I was a little hurt—for, as you know, I have a certain grasp of the

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French language. However, it didn't matter, as she appeared to be able to speak English. That astonished me. I had come across plenty of foreign waiters who could speak English, but never a chambermaid.

"It simplified matters considerably. I asked her in English if she would kindly request Mrs. Brocklebank to come and see me as soon as possible, and tell her that I was feeling much better.

"'What name did you say, sir?' she asked.

"'Mrs. Brocklebank,' I answered.

"She went away. About ten minutes later she came back and said that there was no lady of the name I had given staying in the hotel.

"It was evident that my reckonings had got seriously astray somewhere. But I kept my head; I did nothing silly. I apologized to the chambermaid for giving her so much trouble and asked her to go and inquire for you. She did so, and returned, as before, after a similar interval, with a similar piece of information."

There was something in Brocklebank's expression, as he said this, that, in spite of my excruciating sense of horrible incongruity, touched me

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with an inclination to smile. "What did you think?" I asked.

"I won't put my thoughts into words," he replied. "It was a scurvy trick that I hadn't looked for on the part of the wife of my bosom and my respected partner. It also occurred to me that I might be the sole survivor, and that they were breaking it gently. I thought the idea might be, in my precarious state of health, to make me believe that I had never had a wife or a partner.

"While I was thinking this out," he continued, "the chambermaid went to the window and pulled up the blind. I asked her if she could oblige me with the time.

"It's half-past eight, sir," she said.

"Night or morning?" I asked.

"Morning, sir," she answered. She was well trained.

"I was lying facing the window, and when the blind had been drawn up, I was troubled by the view. There were no snow peaks visible to the unaided eye, but a great many chimney-pots. I sat up in bed, but still there were only chimney-pots to be seen, interminably.

"I'm sorry to be a nuisance," I said to the

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chambermaid, 'but would you mind telling me where I am?'

"'You are in the Great Northern Hotel, London,' she answered, just as calmly and politely as when I asked her the time.

"'Thank you,' I said. 'Do you mind saying that again?'

"'You are in the Great Northern Hotel, London,' she said.

"I lay back in bed. I saw no reason why I shouldn't have been brought back to London. But why the Great Northern Hotel? And why was I alone? What had become of the people who had deposited me? Where was Rachel? Where were you?

"If my mind had become affected as a result of the Mont Blanc experience, that was a good reason for not putting a strain upon it. So I decided to leave the questions for later consideration. The chambermaid, at any rate, was treating me as an intelligent human being, if one, perhaps, a trifle lax in his habits. She asked me if I would like my hot water.

"'Do I really look to you to be well enough to get up?' I asked her.

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“‘Oh, yes, sir,’ she said, very brightly, and without the hint of a smile, ‘you look quite well this morning.’

“‘You’ve had them worse?’ I suggested.

“‘Oh, much worse,’ she said.

“She was going out; but I intended to make her laugh. ‘Just one moment,’ I called to her. ‘Was I *very* bad last night?’

“The training yielded: she made a plucky struggle, but the smile got through. ‘I don’t know,’ she said, with some difficulty; ‘I wasn’t up; but I think you *must* have been.’

“She brought the water, and then I got up. I felt quite sound in wind and limb, but I was surprised when I looked at my clothes. By some means, whether nefarious or otherwise, I had come by a very new looking tweed suit and other articles of wearing apparel that I had no recollection of buying and paying for. However, there was nothing missing, they fitted satisfactorily, and they were such as a gentleman could be seen in. Moreover, it was those or nothing; and since the law doesn’t permit you to appear naked in public places, I put them on.

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"Then I went downstairs and interviewed an obliging clerk in the office.

"'It must seem a curious question to you,' I said to him, 'but would you kindly tell me how long I have been staying in the hotel?'

"'You came in last night,' he answered.

"'Quite sober?' I said.

"'A little tired,' he replied, 'but we saw no reason to refuse you a room.'

"'What name did I register?' I asked next.

"He pushed over the book and pointed to the entry. I read it: '*William Brocklebank, Byfleet,*' in my own handwriting.

"Then I sat down and thought."

If it were possible for a state of affairs, initially inexplicable beyond all human experience, to become more mystifying and more terrifying, this statement, which my partner made with the bubbling sense of fun inseparable from his nature, produced that result.

"When did all this happen?" I asked.

"Yesterday morning."

"That was the 29th. You lost consciousness near the summit of Mont Blanc on the 22d; you recovered it in the Great Northern Hotel, London,

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on the 29th. There are, therefore, seven clear days for which you cannot account."

"You state the position," he said, "with the accuracy that I should expect of a business man. There are seven clear days for which I cannot account. And it is precisely those seven clear days for which I ask you to account."

"I can't."

"You can't!" he exclaimed. "But, good gracious, man, you got me down the mountain—you must know what you did with me."

"I tell you," I reiterated, "as solemnly as I can speak, that I can't account for those seven days."

"You don't know how I came to be at the Great Northern Hotel?"

"I don't."

"Does Rachel?"

"She doesn't."

"Does anyone you know?"

"No one."

"Shades of Cook and Gaze!" he said. "This secret is worth money. I can't have flown. I wasn't well enough. Besides, I haven't got my pilot's certificate."

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"Have you no recollection whatever," I asked, "of anything that happened in that interval?"

"It hardly amounts to a recollection," he answered, "but I have some sort of dim sense of being in a train."

"A boat as well?"

"No, I only have the feeling of a train."

"But you must have been in a boat."

"My own impression, for what it is worth," he said, "is that I must have been insensible till I reached Dover, and after that have gradually recovered consciousness, but very slowly at first."

I was conning this, when suddenly I realized that all such speculations were utterly idle, beside the inexplicable, the appalling fact that he was alive. How could the man whom I had seen dead, whom I had seen cremated, be sitting opposite me, talking, joking? As the full sense of the monstrous, inscrutable riddle flooded my brain, I grew dizzy and dropped my head into my hands on the desk.

I felt his fingers on my shoulder. "Cheer up, Reece," he said: "there's some more brandy." I started up as if he had struck me.

"What did you do yesterday?" I asked.

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"In the morning I went out to Byfleet."

"You found the house shut up?"

"Locked, barred, and bolted."

"Your wife didn't return until the evening,"

I explained, "and the servants only a few hours before. What about the afternoon?"

"I came to the office."

"Came to the office!"

"Did you expect me to retire from business because I'd had an accident in the Alps?" he asked.

"Or did you think I shouldn't be able to resist a Picture Palace? You mustn't get an idea that I'm an invalid, Reece," he added, with an air of relieving my concern. "I'm perfectly well. It was lucky that I did come," he went on. "I got an offer over the telephone of a cargo of maize in the steamship *Drainula*, due into London in about a week, and I thought it best to close with it. The market's rising pretty fast: it's up a full point this morning."

"Did the clerks say anything to you when you came in?" I asked.

"Not in words. They looked foolish—not quite so foolish as you did, but sufficiently so. Still they avoided personal remarks. Not that

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there wouldn't have been some excuse for them. Doesn't it strike you that my personal appearance has improved? This illness has done me good. Rather a violent remedy, but an effective one! I was getting heavy. Now you would call me a handsome fellow to-day. The classic Greek lines!" he added, standing up.

The telephone bell in his room rang. He went to attend to it. Two or three minutes later he returned.

"I don't believe that man Johnson is any good at all," he said. "He keeps ringing me up and ringing me up, but the business he does isn't worth the cost of the calls. Well, you have had my story," he proceeded, sitting down again. "Now for yours."

I felt that I could not tell him yet. I could conceive that he would support the shock of hearing of his own death as well as any man in Europe; but even in his case, one could not, without giving time for thought and becoming convinced of the necessity, impart such information. I was so unstrung that I dared not, at that moment, trust any of my impressions. I must first, I felt, see Mrs. Brocklebank and obtain her confirmation

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of my recollection of the events at Chamonix and Geneva.

"I want you to give me another day," I said.

"Why? To concoct the lie?"

"No; to make sure that I shall tell you no lie."

"What shall you do in the meantime?"

"I shall go out to Byfleet and talk to your wife."

"Why shouldn't I go out to Byfleet and talk to my wife?"

"You might kill her, if you did."

"You can't expect me to believe that," he said.

"Perhaps I shall have learnt all you can tell me before to-morrow. But as you are evidently in a delicate state of health, you can have your day of grace."

Once more his telephone bell rang. "If that's Johnson again," he said, as he pushed open the communicating door, "I shall tell him to go to the devil."

I waited while he conducted a long conversation, evidently not with Johnson. I waited and still waited, until at last I heard him leave his office and go down the stairs. Then I sent for the manager.

"The clerks and you," I said to him, "were

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surprised when you saw Mr. Brocklebank come into the office yesterday.”

“It gave us a bit of a turn,” said the manager, “just at first.”

“Yes, of course. My telegram, as you can see, was sent under a misapprehension. Please apologize to the staff, on my behalf, for any shock I may have caused them.”

“Certainly,” said the manager. “There are one or two matters,” he began, looking at a slip of paper in his hand, “which I didn’t think it necessary to trouble you with on holiday. Simpson’s account is badly overdue, and I don’t hear very favorable——”

“I’ll attend to them later,” I said. “Just do what I asked.”

For a moment he looked at me curiously. I inferred that my face told him more than my words. Then he left the room on his errand.

When he had gone, I sat down at my desk. As yet the power to think would not come to me: I was merely stupefied, stunned, more shaken in nerve than I had conceived I had it in me to be. Though Brocklebank had left not only my office but the building, I could still see his face, always

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smiling, I could still hear his voice, always breaking with spontaneous, irrepressible amusement. The ghastly jokes shivered like strident chords through the fibers of my being. It was as if a coffin had lifted its lid and laughed.

CHAPTER V

THE VOICE OF THE DEAD

AFTER dictating a few letters, more for the sake of keeping up appearances before the staff than for any care of business, I left the office. I did not intend to return that day. Moreover, as my steps took me farther from the building, I became more and more imbued with a horror of returning. Nevertheless, before I reached my flat I realized that I must go back, at whatever cost, and go back at once. Certain words which Brocklebank had used recurred to my mind, and their obvious interpretation made me shiver with apprehension of the possible effect of my own thoughtlessness.

When this perception flashed upon me and I came to take my bearings, I found that, in the turmoil of my thoughts, I had strayed to a point

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miles away both from my flat and from Mark Lane. I hailed the first empty taxi-cab I saw and jumped into it before it had stopped, shouting the direction to the driver. My anxiety to get back was now so great that the horror of re-entering the building which had been the scene of my appalling experience of the morning was, for the time, beaten down and forgotten.

I found, to my inexpressible relief, when at length I reached the office, that Brocklebank, so far from having taken the precipitate step I had dreaded, had been passing his time in the regular and systematic conduct of the firm's business. Indeed, he had done much of my neglected work as well as his own. He had had a long interview with the manager, dictated letters, seen callers, been on 'Change, finally lunched and returned to headquarters in the mood of a man well satisfied with his morning's work.

My anxiety relieved, the horror of him returned. Only with the utmost difficulty could I force myself to open the door of his room and go in. He was seated on a corner of his desk, smoking a cigarette and making calculations in a small notebook.

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"We ought to come out of the *Drainula* deal very well," he announced. "Unless my arithmetic is astray, we should see what Mason calls 'a gratifying profit.'"

I closed the door. "You said something this morning," I reminded him, "about learning all I could tell you before to-morrow. Did that mean that you are thinking of going out to Byfleet to-night?"

"Your penetration is uncanny, Reece," he answered. "It's not a bit of good trying to deceive you."

"You *are* going?"

"Of course. I've sent a clerk to the hotel to pay the bill and get my things."

"Just now?"

"Just gone."

I pointed to the telephone. "Countermand the instructions for one day," I asked.

"But why? Think of poor Rachel, cruelly parted all this time from the apple of her eye."

"You saw the effect that your sudden appearance had upon me," I said. "I am a man, and not usually nervy. If you go down to Byfleet

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without warning, you will subject your wife to precisely the same kind of shock."

"Your idea, then," said Brocklebank, after a moment's reflection, "is to go down yourself first and prepare the ground for the star turn?"

"If you like to put it that way."

Brocklebank pondered. "It's a queer business," he said, at length. Then he sat down at his desk, unhitched the telephone receiver and placed it to his ear. "Three, five, four, three, North," he said.

I made no further attempt that afternoon to reach my flat. It was necessary, before everything, to see Mrs. Brocklebank. When I left the office, I proceeded quickly, again on foot, direct to Waterloo. On my way there, I was invaded, not for the first time, but with greater force and insistence than heretofore, by a sudden, vivid, and alarming doubt of my own sanity. My mind repictured, in minute and graphic detail, the scene in the Crematorium at Geneva, imprinted indelibly upon my memory for its awe and for its terrific beauty. I saw the glare of the furnace, the fluttering, wreathing flames, the body amidst them, for a time wrestling and contorted, finally

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sinking, as in calm and conscious triumph, to a peace that could not be broken. Yet, if I was to accept the apparent evidence of my senses, those limbs were now moving, those lips were now laughing, in the world of men. For a moment I faced the awful thought of a living man, a man in a trance, introduced by mistake into the incinerating chamber. It was true that I had not seen the body finally consumed; I could not swear of my own knowledge that the ashes we had brought home were the ashes of Brocklebank. The supposition that a solution could be found in that slight break in the chain of identification swept off my mind almost as soon as it had touched it. Even if so appalling a mistake had been made, the possibility of escape was beyond thought. It was inconceivable that anything born on this planet could live for a minute, shut down, closed within a chamber heated on all its sides to a fierce glow of livid red.

I returned to the consideration of the plain apparent fact. It could not be true. The man whom I had seen dead, whom I had seen cremated, could not now be alive. The explanation of these conflicting circumstances must, therefore, be

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sought subjectively: it must have its seat in my brain. Either I had not seen Brocklebank dead, or else I had not just been talking to him. So the matter came to present itself to me, with increasing force, as I jostled my way among the crowds of people all hurrying in the direction I was following, as I pressed among them through a platform barrier at Waterloo and took my place in a train for Byfleet.

I perceived that, when a man loses his reason, he does not himself become aware of the fact. He is not suddenly able to say, "I am mad." Others know he is mad, but he does not know it himself. He conceives himself to be acting perfectly rationally. The fact, therefore, that I did not think I was insane, that I was prepared to trust my senses, was of no necessary value. Casting back through the course of the day, I could fancy that people were humoring me. Some, certainly, had looked at me strangely—the manager, the clerks, Brocklebank himself, one or two men whom I had met outside. I glanced at the other occupants of the railway carriage. Two were reading newspapers; a third—a thin man with a sparse gray beard—was

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scanning me, I thought, with some suspicion. He immediately turned his face away when he caught my eye. I wondered in what way I should receive the first intimation that I was not regarded as a responsible being, how much longer the body-politic would permit me to walk the streets, a free man. As the train was slipping out of the station, I hastily bought an evening paper and pretended to become engrossed in it. Then I found that it was open at an advertisement sheet and that I was holding it upside down. When I looked up, the thin man was again watching me.

I know not to what state of distress I might have been carried by this line of thought, had not a shaft of the saving grace of humor come to my help. There is a beneficent dispensation which enables the human mind, faced by something beyond its compass and intolerably strained, to find refuge in trifles. I had personally undertaken all the expenses of the bearer party and the cremation and other incidental charges in Switzerland, telling Mrs. Brocklebank that I would repay myself out of the estate. I knew, at least, that those out-of-pocket disbursements were no hallucination. But how, it now occurred to me, could

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I ask Brocklebank to pay for his own cremation, or what Court of Law would support my claim?

I was still nursing the feeling of resentment which possesses the breast of the Briton who is deprived of his rights, though against whom I was unable to determine, and had forgotten the thin man with the streaky beard, when the train reached Byfleet. I got out and walked up to the house, which was only a mile or so distant. Mrs. Brocklebank was expecting me, for I had sent her a telegram earlier in the day. I found her seated at an escritoire in the drawing-room, writing replies to letters of condolence. She looked pale and pathetic in her black dress and very small and solitary in the large room.

She got up quickly and came to meet me. "It is good of you to come," she said. "I feel so, so miserable here alone. People come and see me. They are very kind. But they don't know and they don't really feel. *You* know, you were there, and you understand."

"I am afraid you mustn't put it down just to kindness on my part," I said, looking down at her flower-like face as I held her hand, "though I hope I would often have managed to get out to

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see you in any case. But to-night I have come for a purpose."

"About Billy's affairs?" she asked.

"No, not even that."

"What, then?" She looked up at me, some new fear, some vague alarm dawning in her big gray-green eyes, already unhappy and fearful. I noticed for the first time—again realizing that disposition of an overstrained mind to concentrate with exceptional intensity upon small things—that there were wonderful little yellow dots in the irises.

I could not tell her yet. "I've passed the strangest, maddest day of my life," I said, "and I feel shaken to pieces. Will you give me some dinner first? Afterwards we will talk about it all."

"Of course. I'm so sorry. You're looking——"

"What? Worried, scared?"

"Yes—somehow."

"At any rate, *you're* a fact," I said suddenly, half smiling.

"A fact? Why, how could I be anything but a fact?"

"I mean you're real; I see you; you exist; you are not a figment of my mind."

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"I don't understand."

I saw that I was beginning to frighten her unnecessarily. "Sit down," I said, and pushed her gently into one of her own chairs. "Now, will you just tell me," I asked, taking a seat beside her, "quite shortly and simply, exactly what happened at Chamonix?"

"Why you know as well as I do," she exclaimed, astonished.

"Yes, but I want you to tell me—to confirm or correct my impressions."

"All the time from the beginning?"

"No, just the last few days."

"From the day we went up Mont Blanc?"

"We *did* go up Mont Blanc?"

She looked at me incredulously, almost with alarm. "You can't have forgotten."

"No, I have not, but tell me as if I had. What happened?"

"We got nearly to the top—at least I think we were not very far from the top—when Billy broke down. He couldn't breathe. We had to wait hours in the snow before help came. He lost consciousness, and, before he could be got down, he—he——"

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"He died?"

"Yes." Her voice was breaking and her eyes had filled with tears.

"I'm *so* sorry," I said gently. "I'm not asking you to rake up all this out of mere wantonness. I have a reason for it—a very good reason indeed—as you will understand presently."

She blinked away her tears.

I felt heartless, but I was obliged to press her still. "What happened afterwards?"

"We took him to Geneva," she answered; "he was cremated; and we brought his ashes home."

"Where is the casket now?" I asked.

"I put it on the table in his dressing-room."

"Will you take me to see it?"

"Yes."

Quite simply, without question, she led the way upstairs and opened the door of a small room on the first floor. The casement windows were wide open, letting in the soft air of the August evening. A pair of thin green curtains fluttered a little in a light breeze. On the dressing-table, where formerly Brocklebank's brushes had rested, stood the beautiful little chased bronze and silver casket which his wife had chosen to hold his earthly

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remains. Some vases of flowers had been placed about it.

"I hardly think," I said, standing in front of the table, "from the views I have heard him express, that he would have wanted his ashes to be treated like sacred relics." Involuntarily I used the past tense.

"I know," she answered; "but I can't help it; I can't scatter them yet."

I held out my hand and asked her for the key.

She hesitated.

"You can trust me," I said. "I am not going to scatter them for you. I want to see them—that's all."

She gave me the key, and I unlocked the casket. I had the feeling, as I lifted the lid, that nothing I might see would surprise me. Were there to be disclosed the interior of a jewel case glittering with gems, such a sight would at least be far less amazing, far less inexplicable than the terrifying mystery which that day had brought forth. Were a newborn babe, curled in a bed of cotton-wool, to meet my view, I should be able, I felt, to accept it unemotionally. There was about me a sense of an unreal world, where the ordinary bases of

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reason and experience which govern expectation had no value.

What in fact I saw, when I looked into the casket, was some pounds of white ash, a little of it fallen to powder, but most in small fragments of delicate and beautiful honeycomb structure.

I closed the case and returned the key to its owner. However I might be disposed to doubt the worth of my own impressions, it was impossible, in the face of this concrete evidence and of Mrs. Brocklebank's confirmation, to regard the events at Chamonix and Geneva as illusory. It was necessary, therefore, if the riddle was susceptible to a subjective explanation, to suppose that I had been living in a dream all day.

"Do I strike you as behaving normally?" I asked my companion suddenly, when we had returned to the drawing-room.

"You have been asking questions that seem unnecessary," she replied; "but you say there is a reason. Otherwise you do."

"Do you mind hitting me?"

"But why?" Her pretty face expressed suddenly a charming combination of surprise and amusement.

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“Never mind why. Just do it.”

She clenched her little fist. “Oh, I can’t,” she demurred.

“Yes, yes. See how much I can stand.”

She struck me two or three hearty blows on the chest, and the game made her laugh.

“Why did you want me to do it?” she asked again.

“Wasn’t it a happy thought to make you laugh?”

“Why really?”

“To see if I should wake up,” I answered.

After dinner, when we were once again seated in the drawing-room, I decided to break my incredible news. We had had coffee, and the maid had retired with the empty cups. The room was bathed in soft light shed from electric standards under pink shades. Through the open window came from time to time the low hoot of an owl in the distance, but the house itself was silent.

“I am going to give you a very great shock,” I said. “I don’t know whether it will be a shock of joy or of amazement or of alarm, but it will be a shock.”

“Yes?” she asked, her quiet eyes, holding as

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always a mysterious; indefinable charm, fixed on me with vague apprehension.

"Your husband is alive. I have seen him to-day."

I was watching her closely while I spoke. The first emotion that showed in her face was joy, sudden and ineffable; then it was blank incredulity; then, as with me, it was fear.

A moment or two later she brushed all these emotions aside and gave a little forced laugh. "But of course it's impossible," she said.

"I have talked to him," I said, quietly; "he has been at the office." Though I spoke with all the cogency and gravity I could command, I realized suddenly that she could not believe me. One is obliged to believe one's own eyes and ears, but the word of another, however trusted, cannot be accepted as sufficient authority for the occurrence of something outside human experience.

I waited some time for some further remark from her, but she made none. There was no longer any fear in her face: she was thinking, puzzling.

"You don't believe me, of course," I said.

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"I think you have been deceived by some resemblance."

"It is not a question of resemblance," I said. "In fact, he has changed a good deal. But he has been at the office to-day, working as usual. Among other things, he has made an important purchase of maize, and I think the transaction, in the present trend of markets, ought to show a fair margin of profit."

She drew a little back in her chair, and the fear again began to show in her face; but now it was fear, I felt, not of my news, but of me.

"You think I am mad?" I said.

"No," she answered; "no, not that."

"Well, you think I have been suffering from hallucinations to-day?"

"Yes," she said.

"I don't wonder," she added, a moment later: "it has been such a strain. What has had to be done has all fallen on you. And it has happened so suddenly that we can't believe it, now we have got back to the places where he used to be. I have had the same feeling: it seems he *must* be here. Again and again to-day I have thought I have heard him, almost seen him."

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I perceived that she must necessarily think this; that nothing I could say could convince her to the contrary. Yet it was of the first importance that she should be made to understand. Brocklebank could not be kept away indefinitely; and his appearance, in the present state of her mind, would be almost as great a shock to her as if I had made no attempt to prepare her.

I rose from my seat and walked to and fro in the room. I knew that she was watching me with anxiety, that she was shrinking from me, that, in spite of her disclaimer of doubts of my sanity, she did not feel utterly sure.

I stopped abruptly. "Where is the telephone?" I asked.

"In the morning-room."

"Will you show me?"

"Yes."

Still regarding me, I could see, with misgiving, she got up and took me across the hall to a room used partly as a library and partly as a work-room. In a corner by the window was a Sheraton bureau, the flap lowered and covered with papers and writing materials. A telephone standard stood on the ledge.

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I rang up the local exchange and asked for the Great Northern Hotel, London. It was a trunk call, and some minutes would elapse before the connection could be made. I hitched up the receiver and closed the door of the room. Mrs. Brocklebank was standing by the bureau. She watched me curiously and in silence, the vague fear still in her face, but changing in quality, mingling with mystification and with a certain strained, chill apprehension. I had some idea in my mind that she would ask me why I had given the Great Northern Hotel, but she said nothing.

In about a quarter of an hour the bell tinkled. I sat down at the desk and took the receiver.

"Is that the Great Northern Hotel?" I asked.

"Yes," came the reply.

"Is Mr. Brocklebank in the hotel?"

"I'll see, sir. What name, please?"

"Reece."

There was a further interval of waiting. I could hear steps coming and going, snatches of talk on cross currents, a continual buzz of the wires. Then came the voice I knew: "Hello?"

"Is that you, Brocklebank?"

"Yes."

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"About that cargo of maize you bought. I ran into Bracebridge as I was leaving the office. It seems you forestalled him. If you would like to unload at a small profit, he's your man."

"I'm not so keen. Did he mention any figure?"

"No, but he'll leave you a margin. What did you give? I can't remember."

"I bought at various prices. It's a mixed lot. I'll get the note I made. Hang on a minute."

He went away.

I turned to Mrs. Brocklebank. She was now very pale, her breath was coming quickly and audibly, and her hands were clasped tight on her breast. I motioned her to a chair beside me. She shrank and hesitated. My heart went out to her; I knew that the words she had heard me speaking must have filled and shaken her with a gathering sense of something beyond human understanding. But I could not, for her own sake, release her from the ordeal.

"Come," I said, imperatively.

She took the chair beside me. I gave her the second receiver. Her hand shook as she put it to her ear. Her eyes were indrawn and tense, filled exquisitely with dread of the unknown.

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The time of waiting seemed interminable. I could feel each separate beat of my heart. The wires buzzed and buzzed and somebody shouted, "Not much, my dear." Out of the hum and confusion, certain sounds detached themselves by degrees, became definite, coherent: footsteps approaching quickly, little clicks from the movement of the telephone instruments at the other end. Then, like a shot out of chaos, clear and certain, came Brocklebank's hearty voice: "Still there, Reece?"

I managed to make an affirmative reply, but my eyes were on the woman beside me.

"I can't find the note," the voice went on. "I must have left it at the office. But there's no hurry. The market's with us, and no fear of a slump just yet. I'll see Brace——"

I heard no more. Mrs. Brocklebank had flung the receiver from her as if it had bitten her. She sprang from her seat. She was white as death and trembling from head to foot.

"What *does* it mean?" she cried.

I took both her hands in mine and held them tight. "I absolutely don't know," I said.

With her, as with me, I could see, the appalling

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mystery of the thing was intensified by the commonplace manner of it. This voice, coming over the telephone, talking business jargon, was more terrifying by far than if it had reached us through some supernatural agency out of the vault of space.

She took her hands from mine and put them over her eyes. For some moments she stood motionless, except for her lips, which were moving, moving quickly: she was praying.

When the human mind comes to a blank wall, when it is faced by an apparently unanswerable interrogative, when it faints and fails before it, there is an instinctive appeal to the knowledge which it is obvious must lie behind and beyond. Every mystery, however inscrutable to us, however distracting, must have its solution, every riddle its answer; and that answer must be known to the cosmic intellect. Mrs. Brocklebank, out of the chaos into which she had been thrown, out of the helplessness of the pigmy wisdom of men, was struggling to grasp and to link herself to that supreme intelligence.

In those exacting moments, she was far from accomplishing her purpose. She could not con-

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centrate, could not think: she was distraught, incoherent, dazed, and lost, like a child crying frantically amid thickets and shadows. Her hands dropped from her face; her lips ceased to move. For a few moments her eyes rested on the telephone, were caught and held to it by a spell of terror. Then, with a little cry that cut through me, very low, as of some dumb, helpless creature in pain, she turned and fled from the room.

I followed her to the drawing-room. She had thrown herself upon the sofa, and was lying there, face downwards, moaning and shaking, her hands pressed over her ears.

CHAPTER VI

A GLIMMER FROM THE LOST DAYS

I HAD intended to return to London by the ten o'clock train; but Mrs. Brocklebank was evidently in no condition to be left, so I made shift for night clothes and stayed at Byfleet until the following morning. During breakfast, I told her exactly what had occurred on the previous day and related Brocklebank's own story of his experiences.

"You will have to face it," I said, at the end. "He will have to come. I can't stop him. Besides," I added, "there is the question of ways and means. We can't wind up the estate of a man who is signing his own cheques."

She had not slept much, I felt sure, but she had regained her outward calm and looked dainty and charming behind the silver tea-pot and breakfast

A GLIMMER FROM THE LOST DAYS

service. I noticed that she was again wearing a black dress, so little had the scene of the previous evening, in spite of its terror, impressed its reality upon her mind. As I spoke, she was pouring out a cup of tea, doing it in a peculiarly graceful way which drew one's glance instinctively to the small white hand holding the tea-pot, all its muscles and tendons temporarily strained by the weight.

She filled her cup steadily, then put down the tea-pot and met my eyes with a look in her own of utter abhorrence, mingled with appeal: "But I can't live with a man who is dead."

"I don't think you can," I answered. "But you must see him. He is not stupid. He will realize that the thing is impossible."

She was silent for some seconds. "If he comes alone," she said presently, "I shall run out of the house—I couldn't help it—even if I had to sleep in the woods."

"I will come too," I said.

"Will you promise never to leave me alone with him, never for a moment?"

"So far as it rests with me," I answered.

Suddenly she dropped her knife and fork and stared at me wildly. "Oh, but he *can't* come!

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What are we talking about? We're mad. He's dead."

"I wonder if that is it?" I said. "I wonder if we are mad?"

She continued to stare steadily at me, but without seeing me, her expression slowly changing. She was facing, I knew, as I had done on the previous day, and probably for the first time in her life, a serious doubt of her own sanity.

At last she dropped her eyes and got up, leaving her breakfast unfinished. "I can't think," she said, "I dare n't."

A few minutes later, when I went out to get my hat and coat, I found her in the hall. She was standing at an oak table, looking through the morning's post—evidently an exceptionally heavy one.

"But what about all these letters of condolence?" she asked. "What *can* I do?"

I was at the door, smoothing my hat on the sleeve of my coat. "Do nothing yet," I answered, and then put on my hat and walked away down the drive.

Indeed, I could not help cherishing the desperate hope, in spite of the confirmation of the telephone

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call to the Great Northern Hotel, that the whole bewildering and unnerving business of the day before might prove to have been hallucination. When I reached the office, I entered my own room and closed the door very quietly; then crept stealthily and fearfully to the baize-covered swing door and listened. For some time I heard nothing, and my heart leapt with the strengthening hope that he might not be there. I pictured myself entering the room and finding it empty—empty with that still and solemn emptiness which indicates that the owner will never return—opening the drawers and going through the papers, calling the manager and explaining away, in a terse, incidental sentence, my remarks of the previous day. As the hope gathered power, I realized how unutterable would be the relief should it indeed prove that my brain had been playing phantasmagoric tricks with me.

Presently my ear caught the sound of a shuffling of papers; and then, following this slight sound almost immediately, I heard Brocklebank's voice.

Quite clear and indubitable, it came through the panels of the door: "Dear Sir, Replying to your

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favor of yesterday's date, we can only repeat that, anxious as we are to meet you, we are working on the finest possible margin——”

I left my place by the door and went and sat down at my desk. He was dictating his letters. All my absurdly gathering hopes had fallen to the ground like a house of cards. I knew now precisely what had been the position of affairs in the adjoining room during the interval of silence. Brocklebank had been seated on one side of the desk, reading a letter, a shorthand clerk on the other, his notebook in front of him, his stylo in his hand, waiting.

I remained in my own office till I heard the clerk leave Brocklebank's room. Then I pushed open the swing door and joined him.

“Hello!” he said, without turning his head. “How did you get on at Byfleet? And are you still bent on keeping up the mystery?”

I found that my fear of the previous day had been replaced by—or rather, was temporarily submerged beneath—a feeling of sharp irritation. Knowing what Mrs. Brocklebank had undergone, knowing what I had undergone myself, I felt some sort of quick insensate annoyance against the

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man whose incredible presence was responsible for this pain and stress.

I took a chair by his desk. "Look here, Brocklebank," I said, "whatever shock it may be to you, you've got to be told the truth, and you've got to help. The shock to us has been appalling."

"I ask nothing better," he answered, with the utmost good humor. "It's what I have been waiting for."

I paused, wondering how I should approach what I had to say. Then I decided to make no approaches at all, but to state the fact baldly.

"You have no right to be here," I said. "You are dead."

He received the information, as I expected, with perfect equanimity. For a few moments he made no rejoinder, thinking evidently that I should add something to my statement.

"You are very laconic," he said, at length. "Am I to hear nothing of the circumstances of my regrettable demise?"

"It is my impression," I replied, "that you died in the snow on the Col du Dôme before help came. If not, you died on the way down. You were

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certainly dead by the time we reached the Grands Mulets."

"Who said so?"

"A doctor from Chamonix who had come up on purpose to attend to you."

"And you buried me?"

"We cremated you."

"It has evidently done me good," he commented. "I feel better than I have done for some time. That indigestion I used to get has taken a very welcome departure. I can eat anything now."

"You don't believe me?"

"I have never been noted," he said, "so far as I know, for undue credulity. But even a credulous individual might draw the line at believing he was dead, when he was sitting in his office."

"Then how do you account for what I have told you?"

"If you suppose yourself to be talking seriously, there's only one possible explanation."

"You mean you think I am out of my mind?"

"Temporarily touched. Your memory can't be trusted out alone. Try a tonic."

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"That is very much what your wife said when I saw her last night."

"If you talked to her as you have been talking to me, being a sensible woman, it is what she would naturally say."

"But her reason for saying it was not the same as yours."

"Well, at any rate, you can't have said anything to her much madder than that I'm dead."

"In her view, I did."

"What?"

"That I had seen you and been talking to you."

This answer evidently surprised him. He remained silent for some seconds. He was manifestly puzzled.

"Then you deliberately offer that as your reason for leaving me," he said presently: "that you thought I was dead?"

"I do."

"And Rachel thought the same?"

"Yes."

"She went into mourning and that sort of thing?"

"I found her last night replying to letters of condolence."

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“And that is the reason why the clerks looked at me foolishly the other day, and why you nearly fainted?”

“It is.”

Again, for a few seconds, he was silent. A smile crossed his features. The humorous possibilities of the situation evidently appealed to him. Then he appeared to toss the whole matter aside.

“It’s a mad world, my masters,” he said, and drew towards him the firm’s letter-book, which was lying open on the desk before him.

He turned over the thin crimp pages quickly, without apparently discovering what he wanted. Then he put his mouth to a speaking-tube and called up a clerk.

“Why don’t you keep this book properly indexed?” he said to the young man, when he appeared. “Find me the last letter to Malcolmsons.”

The clerk did as he was ordered. Brocklebank read through the letter.

“Yes, that’s all right,” he said. “You had better tell Bates to write to them in the usual form, saying we shall be glad of a reply to ours of the twentieth.”

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He closed the book and handed it to the young man, who retired, carrying it with him. Brocklebank picked up a newspaper and ran his finger down a list of prices; then he called up someone on the telephone and made an appointment.

I felt as I watched him—as I had felt almost from the moment of his reappearance—that the most bewildering and distracting factor in the situation was the perfect normality of his behavior. It was that which imported to it so peculiarly vivid a sense of the uncanny. Had he been wild or extravagant in his manner, deviated even a little from his customary habits and trend of thought, one would have found his presence somehow less horribly and grotesquely incongruous. For my own part, so far from being able to emulate his behavior, I found it utterly impossible, in an atmosphere so deeply charged with mystery and awe, in a position surely unique in the history of man, to carry out anything beyond the merest routine of office work.

Having concluded his conversation on the telephone, Brocklebank turned again to me. He appeared to be surprised to find that I was still sitting by his desk.

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"Look here, Reece," he said, "you are getting moony. I grant that the thing wants explaining. I daresay the Society for Psychical Research would find it interesting. But business is business, and this is an office."

It occurred to me suddenly to put his apparently unaltered consciousness to a stringent test.

"Just one question," I said.

"Let it be a short one."

"What do you believe in?"

"I believe," he answered, "that to-morrow is Sunday, and that if you keep on talking to me, I shan't be able to get cleared up to-night and have a round of golf with a sound conscience."

"I'm going in a minute, but I want to know your views."

"On what?"

"On life and death, existence generally."

"That won't take long," he said. "I believe, as I've often told you, in four things, and four things only: the infinity of space, the eternity of time, the indestructibility of matter and——"

"And?"

"And that the ace of trumps will always take a trick."

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I got up. "And when we die? What happens then?"

"That's the end of you, Make the most of what you've got."

I returned to my own room. More than ever I was confounded. Brocklebank's final remark appeared to overthrow the last conceivable explanation, however much one was prepared to postulate. Even admitting the miraculous, even granting that he had risen from the dead, the riddle remained a riddle. Here was a man who had died, who, to my knowledge, had passed beyond the veil. Yet he still said that death was the end of all things. He could contribute nothing better than that to the discovery of the great secret.

Later in the day he came into my room.

"You asked me this morning," he said, "to state my religious convictions. I don't know whether you thought that I might be able to tell you something about heaven, in advance of your admired entry into the celestial sphere. At any rate, since I saw you yesterday another shadowy recollection has come back to me of something that happened during the time I was unconscious.

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Perhaps it may serve your turn. I have a hazy feeling of being in a shop. It was a good sized one: one of those with several departments. And I have a dim impression that somebody said, either then or at some other time, 'It's only sixteen,' and that the remark surprised me. Make what you like of it."

CHAPTER VII

THE ONE WELCOME

IT need scarcely be said that I took my seat that evening, opposite William Brocklebank, in a train for Byfleet, with a mind strained and anxious and profoundly distrustful of the upshot. Mrs. Brocklebank's distress and terror on the previous evening had been too real and too deep to allow one to think that it could be possible for her, in existing circumstances, to live under the same roof as the man she had married. The feeling imbuing her appeared, from my angle of view, not only comprehensible, but inevitable. I should have been surprised had she shown any other. I knew, of my own experience, that it struck to the core of one's being and that it was certainly enduring. For though I had schooled myself to talk to Brocklebank and to pass time

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in his society, the fear of him which had gripped me at his first appearance never left me. Moreover, it was slowly assuming a new quality, or perhaps slowly discovering its essential quality. It possessed me now, less as terror, than as repugnance. Unjust to him though I felt it to be, I found that I was becoming more and more disposed to shrink from him with distaste and distress, as from something unclean and unholy, something physically or morally unsound. I was sensible, too, that this feeling was growing and that, unless I could check and control it, it would ultimately amount to absolute loathing, such as would make his presence intolerable.

Yet, as he was fond of pointing out, his personal appearance had undoubtedly and very considerably improved. His features were sharper and clearer, less heavy; his skin was smoother. His bulk had decreased; his proportions were more symmetrical. Indeed, the thought which had struck into my mind at his first appearance persistently recurred to me: it was as if he had passed through some refining fire. Some refining fire!

I looked across at him. He was reading the

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Westminster Gazette and smiling at something he had found there. He did not read the *Westminster Gazette* because it went far enough for him, but because he could not find any newspaper that did. For his politics were as hard and uncompromising as his philosophy. I may do him an injustice, but I have sometimes thought that it would have afforded him no little gratification to see all those who live on an unearned income, who, as he phrased it, "consume without producing," delivered to the public hangman. He had not had an easy path himself, he had had to fight his way through; and it is possible that at the bottom of his mind, though he would not have admitted it, there was some resentment.

He was reading and he was smiling, his eyes twinkling, their corners and the corners of his mouth creased about with lines of laughter; yet changed to a strange degree, chiseled to a finer finish, wonderfully rejuvenated.

Once again my mind went back to the awful scene in the Crematorium at Geneva. He had, in very fact, before my eyes, passed the ordeal of fire. But if this were the result—if we could assume the miraculous, and this were the result—

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what then were those fragments that I had seen in the casket, those fragments of honeycomb structure, pure white and infinitely delicate, ready to crumble at a touch? I could not face the problem without a swimming and reeling sensation in my brain. I believed that I was still sane, but I knew that when a man begins to lose faith in the evidence of his senses, his reason is poisoning on a precarious balance.

Brocklebank, for his part, though I warned him of the reception he must expect, appeared to have no misgivings that his domestic affairs could fail quickly to settle themselves upon a comfortable basis. He had complete faith in his ability to restore his old ascendancy, to re-win from his wife the old confidence and trust.

"Rachel," he said, as we were walking up from the station, "is one of the small problems in this world that I understand. I have been led to believe that you are not a married man, Reece; but against the time when you decide to see the error of your ways, I will give you a trifle of advice: You can do anything you like with a woman, so long as you don't contradict her."

"But there are some things," I pointed out,

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"that are contradictions in themselves. I have told you, your wife thinks that you are dead, that you have no present existence."

"If she expresses that opinion," he replied, "it will appear to me to be a very sensible remark. But I shall take means, as we jog along, to convince her to the contrary."

We had entered the grounds of his house while he spoke. As we walked down the drive, a black spaniel emerged from a shrubbery and stood in our path, giving unqualified signs of the strongest disapproval and animosity. Brocklebank called to him. The dog immediately dropped on his stomach and came crawling towards us, wagging his stump of tail in the dust and giving vent to sounds of groveling apology. We walked on, and the spaniel drifted behind our legs. Presently we again heard an unmistakable growl. Brocklebank turned upon the animal angrily.

"Coster, you damned fool," he cried, "what is the matter?"

Once more there was the fawning and cringing, a black shape squirming in the gravel. Then the dog jumped up at my companion, in happy recognition, and ran off ahead of us, barking and leaping.

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Brocklebank had no latch-key, so we rang the bell. He had, in strict truth, a latch-key, but it was of no use to us. He balanced a small bunch of keys in his palm, while we stood waiting.

"When we find the owner of those keys," he said, "we shall probably find someone who can unravel the mystery. I found them on the dressing-table in my room at the Great Northern. All I can tell you about them is that one of the keys fits a small kit-bag which I also found in the room, and that the kit-bag was labeled with my name and address in a very elegant handwriting which I don't recognize."

A thought shot into my mind. "Were there any printed labels on the bag," I asked, "as well as the written one?"

"Not a sign of one. It was brand new. I must have had it in the carriage with me."

"I wonder," I said, reflectively, "if we could trace the cabman who drove you to the hotel from Charing Cross, or wherever it was you came from?"

"What would be the good?" said Brocklebank. "He would be pretty sure to tell you, like everybody else, that I behaved like an ordinary Christian: hailed his cab, told him to drive to the hotel,

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paid his fare, and gave him an unsatisfactory tip. It's no use, Reece," he added, with his chuckle, "you can interview every cabman in London, but you won't get any information about the next world."

As he spoke, the door was opened by a maid. She stood, for a few seconds, staring at him, open-mouthed; then, without any warning, she shrieked and fled, with a swish and flutter of skirts, across the hall and out of sight.

"First sight of the ghost," said Brocklebank; "rather unnerving!"

We entered the empty hall and hung up our hats. In a corner, partly hidden behind an oak chest, a portmanteau and a suit case were resting. I had noticed them on the previous day.

Brocklebank stood in front of these with an affected air of rapture. "My long lost luggage!" he exclaimed. "How grateful and comforting to the sight of a man is the luggage from which he has been sundered!"

"Mary," he called out, "Mary." He had to shout several times, and I had to second his efforts, before the maid who had admitted us at last

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emerged, with extreme reluctance, from the servants' quarters.

"Glad to see you again," said Brocklebank, cheerfully. "Shake hands. . . . No ghost, you see. Now, just take those bags up to my room, will you? Go easy—they are rather heavy—one at a time, and get someone to help you. We have the greatest difficulty here, Reece," he said solemnly, "in preventing our servants from overworking themselves."

The girl was content as soon as she realized that he was material—not only was she content, but he had even succeeded in making her smile. The very fact which, to us who had been with him at Chamonix, invested his presence with such terrifying mystery, appeased her.

I turned, and noticed that Mrs. Brocklebank had crept out of the drawing-room. She was visibly and distressingly very frightened, but was controlling herself rigidly. Brocklebank followed the direction of my glance and saw his wife. He greeted her with a shout of welcome.

"The return of the fatted calf!" he called out, breaking into his running laugh. "I mean, the return of the prodigal husband, who can't give

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a satisfactory account of his time! Have you killed the fatted calf?"

He took a step or two towards her. I don't know whether he intended to attempt to kiss her or merely to take her hand. Before he could reach her she started back, shrank from his touch, farther and farther, quite slowly but steadily, keeping her eyes on him, to a corner of the hall.

"I can't believe it's you, Billy," she said from her distance.

He took no umbrage. "Neither can I," he said. "When you go to sleep on a mountain in the Alps and wake up in a bedroom in London, your ideas get a trifle mixed."

"Supposing," he went on, the next second, looking across the space dividing them in a way I knew very well—a way which suggested that he had been brought to review his previous opinion by a remark of hers—"supposing it isn't I? Supposing I'm making a mistake? Supposing it's somebody else? I never thought of it. Supposing I'm only imagining that I live here and have a wife with little brown curls in front of her ears? Reece says I've changed."

She forced herself, with evident difficulty, to

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look straight into his face. "Yes, you have changed," she said slowly. "I think you have improved."

"That's the worst blow of all," said Brocklebank, with an immense affectation of dolor. "She used to say—she used to say," he repeated, turning to me, "that I was perfect. But that was when we were honeymooning. You may find in the course of time, Reece, that a honeymoon produces more lies to the square minute than any other period of a person's life."

Recognizing, evidently, that he could not immediately break down the barrier of fear that had arisen between them, and that it would be a mistake to persist in his attempts, he turned into the drawing-room.

"Don't go," Mrs. Brocklebank whispered to me, in intense agitation, as we followed him. "Don't leave me. Remember your promise."

Brocklebank walked to the window and stood for a few minutes looking out. Then he looked round.

"Well, tell me how things have gone on?" he asked. "How's the garden? How are the roses? Have my buds taken?"

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A shadow of more poignant fear, of sudden, intense awe, came into his wife's eyes. I knew what thought had given it birth: I remembered her words about the ashes. "I have n't looked," she said.

"Have n't looked! Good heavens," said Brocklebank, "I must go at once."

He was on his way to the door, when a little girl of four, escaping from a nurse, came running and tumbling into the room.

She threw herself at Brocklebank. "Oh, Daddy," she cried, breathlessly, "naughty Mummy said you were n't coming back."

He sat down, picked her up, and laid her face to his shaven cheek. "So naughty Mummy said I was n't coming back?"

"Yes, never any more," said the child, winding a small arm round his neck, "never, never any more." She looked across at her mother with some resentment and a great deal of triumph.

"At last," said Brocklebank, raising his head, "I've found someone who seems glad to see me. Reece nearly fainted, Rachel gracefully backed out of my presence, Mary had hysterics, even Coster thought about it. But here is someone

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who is glad I've come home. Isn't there?" he said to the child.

She hugged his shirt collar as hard as she could with both her arms and gradually insinuated her lips to the neighborhood of his ear. "What did you bring me?" she whispered.

Brocklebank burst out laughing. "It's no good, Reece," he said: "there's only one way to the female heart. You must make up your mind to it. You've got to buy your passage."

During this scene, Mrs. Brocklebank's face expressed a medley of changing, contradictory emotions. The fear was there all the time; it never left her. But over it, about it, there was something else: a trembling, struggling, evanescent joy, a wild, fluttering desire to believe the incredible. Her soft, pale cheeks were faintly touched, as with dawning hope, by a tinge of palpitating color. It was a conflict between her reason and her heart, between her sense of the unearthly and the claimant call of the things of earth.

It lasted only for so long as the child was present. When the latter had been carried away

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in the arms of a scared, white-faced nurse, induced with great difficulty to enter the room, pale horror again settled in her face.

Brocklebank was once more on his way to the door, when she stopped him with a remark made with an evident effort.

"I have put you in the corner room, Billy," she said.

"Thank you," said Brocklebank, formally. "I hope I shall be comfortable. Isn't she a charming hostess?" he said to me, in a stage aside. "But why not my old quarters?"

"Oh, I can't!"

He accepted her point of view quite easily and cheerfully, as it had always been his habit to do. "Of course—very reasonable. Who could be expected to sleep with a ghost? I wonder I have courage to sleep with myself."

He went out, still laughing, and Mrs. Brocklebank walked to a window-seat, sat down, and gazed into the garden. As I looked at her sitting there, her pretty form outlined against the evening light, so graceful, so young, so simply charming and modern, I felt that there was something almost diabolic in the force that had caught and hurled

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her into this veritable maelstrom of swirling, terrifying mystery.

"It is so terrible because he is so real," she said, speaking at last, as much, it seemed, to herself as to me. "If he did something strange, if he came through doors without opening them, I don't think I should mind so much. But he just walks and talks and laughs as he always did, and now he has gone to look at his roses."

I said nothing; and presently she broke out again: "He *must* be dead. I saw him dead. I saw him in his coffin."

"I saw more than that," I reminded her.

"Yes," she said slowly, as if absorbing the full sense of the words.

Suddenly she sprang up and came over to me, her big, deep eyes aflame with appeal. "Mr. Reece, what can it, *can* it possibly mean?"

My utter helplessness numbed me. Even more than I had craved to pierce the mystery on my own account, I longed to be able to satisfy the urgent, instinctive claim for enlightenment in her eyes and in her voice.

"He says," I replied, hopelessly enough, for I knew the information was of the smallest value

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while the vital central problem remained unanswered, unapproached, "he says he thinks he remembers being in a train and in a shop, and that somebody said 'It's only sixteen,' and that the remark surprised him."

"But he can't," she said, a sudden hush in her voice, her eyes looking deeply into mine, "he can't have been in a train *alive*."

I could merely answer: "He can't be here. Yet he is."

She appeared to put aside, as I had had to do, the unanswerable interrogative, and to turn her thoughts to work backwards from the present. She sat down at a little table, rested her face between her open hands, and stared straight in front of her. "'It's only sixteen,'" she repeated. "What could that have meant?"

Brocklebank passed the open door of the room, calling in that he was going to dress for dinner.

"Don't hurry, Reece," he said. "There's only leg of mutton."

I went to the window and stood for a few minutes looking out. It was a quiet evening and very clear. For miles I could see in front of me ridges of pine and heather and flaming gorse and bracken

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turning to gold. I could fancy that it was smiling, that the whole face of nature, hiding her secrets, was softly laughing, because she had flung at us, out of herself, somehow, somewhere, this monstrous riddle.

I turned back into the room. Mrs. Brocklebank was still sitting at the little table. "It's only sixteen," she said again. "What could be only sixteen?"

"A child?" I suggested. "No, you wouldn't speak of a child of sixteen as 'it': you would say 'he' or 'she.' A distance perhaps? It was only sixteen miles and he thought it was——"

The sentence was broken by a roar of laughter from the floor above. Mrs. Brocklebank started up.

"Rachel," came Brocklebank's voice, "what, in the name of fortune, is *this*?"

We went out into the hall. William Brocklebank was coming down the stairs, carrying in his hands the casket containing the ashes of William Brocklebank.

CHAPTER VIII

"TILL DEATH US DO PART"

"GET a fork, Reece," said Brocklebank, "—you'll find one in the tool shed—and fork in the stuff as I throw it. I don't suppose it will do the roses any harm."

He was holding the open casket within the crook of his left arm and dipping his right hand among the contents. "That looks like a bit of the skull," he said, taking out a fragment and crushing it lightly to pulp between his fingers.

He had obtained Mrs. Brocklebank's consent to his purpose only with great difficulty. It seemed to her, I could see, almost a sacrilege that this man who had come back should touch the dust of the man she had loved. Had he proposed to deal with it in any other way but as he himself had directed before his death, she would certainly

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have withheld her permission and would have fought him with all her strength had he refused to give way.

For my part, this experience, in the waning light of an August day, was so appalling, so ghastly, so unearthly, that I fear my share of the work was carried out in no very efficient way. It was made all the more horrible by Brocklebank's incessant crackle of laughter. He crumbled the light substance to powder and threw it in handfuls over the soil, much in the way that an agriculturalist throws seed, talking all the time.

"This is probably the first time in your experience, Reece," he said, "that a man has scattered his own ashes. Where is the brain? Is the brain scattering or is it scattered? A nice metaphysical problem!"

Suddenly I ceased to prick and turn the earth, and looked across at him. "What *do* you make of it, Brocklebank?" I asked.

"Manifestly we are burying someone," he answered without the smallest change in his demeanor, still strewing the ash. "This is a funeral, Reece. Try and look solemn."

At last the nightmare of a task was finished.

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Brocklebank took the fork back to the tool-shed and I returned into the house with the empty casket. Mrs. Brocklebank met me in the hall. She caught my burden from me and gathered it to her breast with an exquisite and pitiful feminine movement—this last relic that remained for her of the dead past. I saw tears collect in her eyes and fall on the polished lid. Then she ran upstairs, still clutching it to her heart.

I could gauge her feelings exactly by my own. The peace and happiness of the past had become a memory to be kept green with all the more sanctity, it stood out in clearer and deeper colors, by its contrast with the terror of the present. Loss had seemed a supreme disaster, but loss was what now she craved beyond anything on earth. Death, which awhile ago had seized her mind as a cold and cruel force, revealed its beauty, its beneficent mystery, in the livid light of this horrible, unnatural return, this hideously real return.

I kept my promise to Mrs. Brocklebank. All through the evening I did not leave her once alone with the man who had returned. It was an evening that I shall not easily forget. We both had the feeling that we were sitting with a dead man—

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a dead man who made jokes. The sense grew upon me that he had no right to be there, that he was something monstrous, that we, living our normal lives, were outraged by his presence. Not only had we to sit and talk with him, but we had to face the prospect of the long hours of the night beneath the same roof with a vitalized corpse. Mrs. Brocklebank made an early excuse to go to bed. Her hand felt cold when she put it into mine and there was mute appeal in her eyes. She was evidently terrified by the prospect of the solitude of her own room, but she faced it to escape from the dreadful constraint of a situation to the last degree false and unnerving. I quickly followed her example. I could manage to put up with Brocklebank during the day, but I had no fancy for his company at night. As I looked at him, in the subdued rosy light, seated in a low chair, enveloped in a mist from cigarettes which he smoked incessantly, I became possessed by the feeling that he might disintegrate before my eyes, that he might burst into dissolving fire, that I might see him again, as I had seen him before, slowly contorted amid wreathing, lapping yellow flames.

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I think he remained downstairs an hour or two after I left him. I lay awake for some time, listening for the sound of his footstep passing my door, but I did not hear it. My mind was so disturbed that I had little expectation of being able to pass a normal night, but eventually I fell into an uneasy sleep.

Almost immediately, as it seemed, I was awakened—a shriek of terror ringing in my ears. As I started up in bed, I heard it again, even louder and more penetrating than before, more agonized. I was hurriedly feeling for the electric light switch, when I became aware of a much smaller sound, much smaller and much nearer—a slight shuffle outside my door, a faint scraping, as of fingers passing over the wood. I heard the click of the latch; and then I knew that, in the darkness, someone had come into the room, someone who was breathing quickly, panting.

I switched on the light. Mrs. Brocklebank, with bare feet, clad only in her nightdress, was standing at the foot of the bed. She was in a state of very great agitation, trembling and sobbing.

“This is awful,” she panted. “I couldn’t help it. I heard him in his dressing-room. I bore it

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as long as I could—but he came near the door—I thought he was coming into my room, and I screamed. Then he *did* come in. I screamed and screamed and ran here. I'm so terrified—so terrified," she kept repeating, between sobs that shook her whole frame.

Through the chink of the open door I saw a shadow in the corridor. It was stationary, just on the threshold.

"Rachel!" called a deep voice. It struck me curiously that the voice was deeper than Brocklebank's.

Mrs. Brocklebank's agitation became indescribably distressing. She cried and cried, and flung herself about the room, seeking frantically for some outlet, some place of concealment. It was just as I have sometimes seen a bird sweep blindly about a lighted room, in its frenzied efforts to make its escape. Indeed, she was like some white sea-bird, wildly fluttering and skirling. Ultimately she disappeared, somehow, somewhere—hidden, I supposed, behind a piece of furniture, her little frame quivering and panting, her heart throbbing.

I waited, listening, hoping that the cause of her

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distress would have gone. But I still saw the shadow, motionless, and again I heard the deep voice. This time it called, “Reece!”

I sprang out of bed and went to the door, stringing myself up to a hot pitch of anger, partly real, but in major degree assumed to enable me to cover and control my own enervating fear.

Brocklebank, in his pyjamas, was standing in the doorway.

“For God’s sake, go to your room!” I shouted.

He was smiling broadly. To my distraught imagination it was not a smile that I saw, but a grotesque, diabolic grin.

“Are you aware,” he asked solemnly, “that my wife is in your room?”

“Yes,” I replied, again in a loud voice; “and I am aware that she will stay there until you go to yours.”

“But you don’t understand the position,” he said, still grinning, as it seemed, a long row of white teeth catching the light from the room behind. “By the unwritten law, in the existing situation I am entitled to shoot you. I stand at the present moment on the most favorable

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ground in the world. If you kill me, you swing; if, on the other hand, I kill you, I receive—I hope with becoming modesty—the acclamations of the crowd.”

Thereupon he proceeded to go through a series of antics—indescribably strident in the strained atmosphere of mystery and terror—imitating the gestures of a man bowing right and left to cheering people.

“Go back to your room,” I shouted again. “Leave her to me. You are making things worse every moment you stand buffooning here. Don’t you see,” I yelled, “that you are driving her demented? I am not quite sure that I am sane myself.”

“Neither am I,” he returned with a chuckle of laughter.

Then, to my unutterable relief, still croaking at his joke, he walked away down the corridor. Presently I heard his door closed.

I went back into the room. “Come out,” I said. “He has gone.”

Mrs. Brocklebank, shivering with fear and cold, great tresses of bright brown hair hanging loose over her shoulders, emerged from her hiding-

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place. She looked pitifully small and young and poignantly distressful.

“Go to your room,” I said, “and put on a dressing-gown. Then go down to the drawing-room. I will come too.”

She obeyed me without speaking. I put on a few clothes, and then, taking the eider-down from my bed, went out into the corridor and switched on a light. Mrs. Brocklebank joined me in a few minutes. She was now wearing shoes and stockings and was wrapped in a soft silk dressing-gown which reached almost to her feet. There were strained restless lights in her eyes, and she glanced uneasily into the shadows of the corridor, but she had regained her outward calm.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she said in a quick undertone, clutching my arm. “You must think me a goose to make such a fuss.”

“No, I don’t,” I answered. “Flesh and blood couldn’t stand it. To tell you the truth, I feel almost as unnerved myself. The position is impossible.”

The drawing-room, at that hour of the night, appeared cold and uninviting. Fortunately the material for a fire was laid in the hearth. I

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lighted it, and it was soon burning cheerfully. Then I pushed a Chesterfield couch close to it, made Mrs. Brocklebank lie down, and covered her with the eider-down. She let her head fall on the cushions and closed her eyes, but every now and again she shivered spasmodically. As I looked at her and saw her frame shaken from time to time by these convulsive tremors, like sudden squalls passing over a still lake, I realized, I think, even more forcibly than I had hitherto done, how terribly she had been frightened.

I drew an easy chair before the fire and sat down in it. I don't know whether I expected to be able to get to sleep, but certainly for some hours I did not succeed in doing so. Instead, my mind struggled ceaselessly in search of theories to explain the appalling problem that had fallen upon us like a bombshell. Consider the situation: a man and a woman thrown together by circumstances of unparalleled mystery, and driven, for the support of each other's company, to spend a night in the modern drawing-room of a modern house, with all the electric lights blazing. The house about was absolutely still, but within the stillness there lay underneath terror for my com-

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panion, and, in a minor degree, for me. A silver clock on the mantelpiece ticked quietly, the fire fluttered and fell, occasionally a coal settled in the hearth. So environed, I was confronted, be it remembered, by a phenomenon unique, so far as I knew, in human experience, and inexplicable by any available human knowledge. Perhaps for half an hour I had been straining after some solution of the riddle, when a strange, sudden fancy flared upon my mind.

Was it possible—and the thought, as it took shape, trembled through me in long vibrations, a thin, cold stream of queerly repressed excitement—was it possible that, not Brocklebank alone, but all three of us, had died upon Mont Blanc? Had each one of us in turn been overcome, either by the altitude or by the exaction of the long hours of waiting in the snow? Was it possible, in fact, that, though still surrounded by the same apparent conditions as on earth, we were in reality on another plane of existence, and that everyone who died had to pass through this bewildering experience, this distracting struggle to reconcile incredibly conflicting occurrences, before realizing the fact of his own death?

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To be sure we did not think we were dead. But neither did he. On the contrary, he insisted that he was alive.

Presently, somewhat to my surprise, I realized that I was smiling. If this—this environment indistinguishable from that surrounding physical consciousness—were indeed the secret of the veil, if this were the answer to the great riddle, it would be a very gentle irony, a very appropriate and complete retort to the rash speculations of men.

I looked round at my companion. Her eyes were closed, but I knew she was not asleep.

“Mrs. Brocklebank?” I said.

“Yes?” she answered.

“Do you mind if I ask you a strange question?”

“No.”

“Are you sure that we are alive?”

She did not reply with an instant and amazed affirmative, as she would naturally have done in ordinary circumstances. She thought about it.

“I remember losing consciousness,” she said, after the lapse of a few seconds.

“Yes?”

“But I thought I came round.”

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"So does *he*. That's what *he* thinks. *He* thinks he came round."

"But didn't *you* think so. Do you mean," she asked, starting suddenly to a sitting posture, "do you mean that you saw me die?"

"Lie down again," I said. "No, I don't mean that. I, too, thought you came round. But perhaps, in the meantime, I had died myself. If we are dead, we must have died about the same time, for neither has any recollection of the other's death. It had been an exhausting day; I remember I felt very much done up; and I am almost sure that, towards the end, one of the guides was helping me, just as I was helping you."

Mrs. Brocklebank again pondered for a while. Then she slipped a small, shapely forearm from the sleeve of her dressing-gown and encircled the wrist with her hand.

"But," she objected, "I'm—I'm solid."

"So is he, as it appears to us. And if you touched yourself in a dream, you would think the same and say the same. It is our own mind which makes things solid or not solid."

Again she did not immediately speak. From the expression of her face, it was evident that

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this strange possibility—which was curiously un-
alarming, which, on the contrary, was curiously
satisfying, carrying, as it did, the sense that the
gate which had loomed ahead, coming constantly
nearer, was passed, that one was safely through—
was taking hold of her mind as it had taken hold
of mine.

“We could write to Chamonix,” she said, at
last, “and find out exactly what happened.”

“But if this is death,” I replied, “we have to
assume an environment where every condition of
earth life is exactly duplicated. The Chamonix
we should write to would not be the Chamonix of
our physical consciousness: it would be its counter-
part in another state of existence. No one could
tell us of our own death but witnesses of it who had
since died themselves; and it is unlikely that there
would be any such in so short a time.”

“Oh, but I can’t believe it,” she exclaimed
suddenly. “I *must* be alive.”

“I know it has always been said,” I remarked,
“by those who go in for the study of occult science
and profess to know about these things, that most
people find the greatest difficulty in realizing the
fact of their own death.”

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“But where can we be,” she asked, “if we are not on earth? We must be somewhere.”

“Of course we must. I have heard,” I said, meditatively, “of dual existence, but I have not known quite what it meant. Supposing we have been transferred to some sister planet attached to some sister solar system in some other part of the universe—a sister planet which has developed on identical lines, and reached precisely the same stage in its history, as the planet Earth?”

Mrs. Brocklebank was frankly muddled. “I don’t understand it somehow,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t *understand* it,” I answered: “I am merely offering wild theories to meet a wild and incredible event. If it is a fine night, we can test that last hypothesis by looking at the stars, to see if they form the constellations we have been accustomed to.”

I went to the window, drew the curtains, and threw open the lattice. The air was clear and somewhat cold. Over a thicket of low, dimly outlined shrubs in the garden, innumerable points of silver light sparkled on a sable background. The window I had opened faced south. The stars appeared to be sprinkled over the sky in

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random profusion: I could see none of the big familiar constellations, neither Orion nor the Great Bear nor any that I could recognize. I felt my heart thumping. Had I indeed, with a blind shaft, struck the truth?

I stretched head and shoulders out of the window and craned my neck backwards. Then I saw, a little to the right of the zenith, a small sloping quadrilateral, accompanied by a single brilliant star—unmistakably Lyra—and, away to the left of it, also close to the zenith, a rough W composed of three bright and two dull studs of light—equally indubitably Cassiopeia. Looking again to the south, I distinguished on the ecliptic a great yellow star, much larger and clearer than any other above the horizon.

I drew back the curtains across the window. “Unquestionably,” I said, “we are in the solar system, and somewhere within the orbit of the planet Jupiter. Unless,” I added, as I returned to my seat, “we can assume the duplication of the whole universe as we have known it.”

I marvel to remember—now I come to look back upon that time—how long this trend of thought, this assumption of the possibility of our own

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deaths, seriously held us. That it did so hold us there is no doubt whatever. I have the clearest recollection that, when I went to the window, it was not in any light or perfunctory spirit, but with a curious and excited mind: I should not have been surprised to find the stars arranged in utterly unfamiliar formations. I can only offer again—in explanation of a mental condition apparently worthy of Bedlamites—the stupefying event which was preying upon our minds and the abnormal and eerie circumstances of our nocturnal vigil.

I sat for some time looking into the fire before I again broke the silence.

“No,” I said, at length, “it won’t do. If we were dead, it would mean that every single person whom we had known before and have since seen, was dead too. It would also mean that we had managed to escape seeing everybody previously dead except *him*. We are not dead: we are alive. That is to say, we are still passing through the stage of existence which began when we were born on this planet: there has been no change. *He* remains”—(in our snatches of conversation during that night we both of us avoided giving Brockle-

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bank a name)—“*he* remains the inexplicable, the misplaced, the impossible factor.”

I put more coals on the fire; and, for a while, I think we both dozed fitfully. For my part, it seemed that I never quite lost consciousness, yet I dreamt. I reached, at least, that strange, vague country on the borderland between imagination and dreams.

Towards morning I turned my thoughts from the apparently insoluble mystery engulfing us to the Brocklebanks' domestic problem. The events of the night had made it plain to me that the old conditions could not be renewed. Mrs. Brocklebank's feeling was not, I was convinced, transitory. Time might soften it a little, might wear down its sharper edges, but in essence it was ineradicable. I had often heard spoken the words, “till death us do part,” but it had not occurred to me before how deep a significance they could bear. Mrs. Brocklebank had fulfilled her compact, and it was not in her power to go beyond it.

It was obvious that the subject would have to be faced, that an arrangement would have to be made, and I imagined that it would fall to me to act as intermediary. I waited quietly until some

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sign that she was completely awake should come from my companion. All of a sudden she gave a little yawn. It was the most delightful sound, because of its simple naturalness, that had reached my ears since I came to Byfleet. I got up, switched off the electric lights, drew the curtains, and opened all the windows. Never in my life had I been so thankful to see the day.

"We can't explain it," I said. "We only know he is alive and here. Can you get used to the idea, do you think, gradually?"

She sprang up to a sitting posture and threw aside the eider-down. "How *can* I?" she cried. "How *can* I? I saw him dead. I *can't* be married to a man who I know is dead."

It was the answer I expected. Indeed, I had only put my question for form's sake.

"It seems awful," she went on, "but it's true: I don't only fear him, I hate him."

The words did not shock me; they did not even surprise me. The feeling she expressed fitted exactly with that sense of repugnance which was gradually and surely growing in my own soul.

"Then what is to be done?" I asked.

"If he stays, I shall go. I don't know where I

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shall go—I suppose I can earn my own living—I can return to my people for a time—but I shall go.”

“I don’t think he will drive you to that,” I said. I paused. “There will have to be some talk.”

She raised a face wan in the new daylight, and her big, appealing olive eyes looked up into mine, but she did not speak.

“You can’t talk to him?”

She shuddered. “No.”

“Then I must.”

“You have done so much,” she said. “Why should you be bothered any more with my affairs?”

“It’s my affair too,” I answered. “I can’t escape from it. Whatever it is, whatever it means, I’m marked down to see it through.”

I looked at the clock. It was half-past five.

“Well, then,” I said, “I think you had better go back to your room. You don’t mind now, do you, now it is light?”

“Not so much,” she replied.

I opened the door for her and followed her up the stairs. When we reached her room, I took her

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hand. "Don't be afraid," I said. "He won't come again. He is not like that."

She gave me a look of assurance. Then she went into the bedroom and closed the door.

CHAPTER IX

THE NIGHTMARE ON THE LINKS

WHEN I came down to breakfast, Brocklebank was already in the dining-room. He was in his usual good spirits.

"Hello, Reece!" he said. "Still alive! I thought I shot you."

He was dabbing a small cut on his chin with a pocket-handkerchief. "There's no excuse for it," he said. "I grow a lighter beard than I used. That's one of the advantages of cremation treatment. The trouble is, you didn't keep my razors stopped while I was away."

I picked up the *Observer*. "Don't read that leading article," he said: "it's poisonous."

"Have you read it?"

"No."

He went to the breakfast table. "The Chicken

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doesn't seem to be coming," he said. "We had better pour out for ourselves."

"I don't fancy she intends to come," I said.

He took the coffee-pot in his hand and looked across at me. "Where did you two pass the night?" he asked.

"In the drawing-room."

"Why?"

"Because we were afraid."

"What were you afraid of?"

"You."

He poured out two cups of coffee. "Look here, Reece," he said, "this was funny yesterday, but it's getting silly."

"It's getting worse than silly," I said.

"Whatever the pair of you," he went on, "may have dreamed you saw in Switzerland, it's a present fact that I'm here and, by the blessing of Providence, in the enjoyment of excellent health. That ought to be good enough for people with the regulation equipment of eyes and ears."

I sat down to the table. "It's just because it's good enough," I said, "that it's so intolerably uncanny."

"Well, then, what's going to happen?"

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"Frankly," I said, "she can't stand you yet."

He burst out laughing. "After last night," he said, "that statement may be considered a trifle superfluous."

"Put yourself in her place," I asked. "Call it hallucination or what you will, put yourself in her place. She saw you dead in your coffin."

He cut himself a large slice of ham. "It looks as if I should have to stay on at the Great Northern for the present," he said. "Some men would pay good money for such a chance to go on the loose; but I'm a home-loving bird and too old for skylarking."

I felt that I ought to offer him the hospitality of my flat. A month before, if a similar domestic situation could have been conceived, I should have done so without hesitation. In existing circumstances, his persistent presence at night was more than I could face. So, though with some feeling of shame, I remained silent.

"At any rate," he said, presently, "I'm not going to be done out of my day's golf. I've ordered the car for ten."

Before we started, I saw him stop at the door of his wife's room.

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"Rachel!" he called out. After an interval he apparently received an answer. "I'm going to play golf. After that I'm going back to London. You won't see me again for the present. There's a letter for you on your desk."

It was a considerate, in the circumstances it was even a fine speech. It puzzled me, almost as much as anything puzzled me, that, while he remained the kind-hearted man he had always been, the feeling of repulsion which he begot in me at his reappearance grew steadily in force.

As soon as we had taken our places in the car, there happened the first of a series of mystifying incidents which crowded that day. Brocklebank was at the wheel, and I was seated beside him. A chauffeur started the engine and moved out of the way. With some apparent difficulty, Brocklebank got the gear out of neutral, and then the car shot ahead—shot straight into a flower bed. It swung round and swept with equal precipitancy upon the bed on the other side of the drive. The engine was racing, but Brocklebank made no attempt to close down his throttle. I looked at him. To my amazement, he was clutching and straining at the wheel like a neophyte. I had

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been particularly distressed, I remembered, on the previous day, by the normality of his behavior. I could now have wished, for the sake of my personal safety and comfort, that he would contrive to show something approaching his normal management of the car. We lurched from side to side like a drunken man, finally bringing up with a crash upon one of the gate-posts at the entrance of the drive.

I got out with considerable alacrity. Brocklebank followed me. "Something seems to have gone wrong with the car while I've been away," he said. "I can't make out what it is."

The chauffeur, with a startled face, came running up.

"Has she been doing this long?" Brocklebank asked him.

"She was running all right yesterday," the man replied.

The damage, fortunately, appeared to be confined to a twisted mudguard. The chauffeur restarted the engine and backed the car out upon the drive.

"Does she seem to move all right?" asked Brocklebank.

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"I don't notice anything wrong, sir," said the man.

"You had better drive us, then. Mr. Reece looks nervous."

We got into the back seat. Under the chauffeur's control, the car slid out of the drive and ran smoothly and easily along the road.

"That gives you something to think about," said Brocklebank, with an enigmatical smile.

"I've got plenty to think about," said I.

Evidently he found that it gave himself also something to think about, for we neither of us spoke again during the short drive.

As it chanced, when we walked into the smoke-room at the Golf Club, there was only one man there, a man whom we both knew well. He was standing before a table, looking perfunctorily through an illustrated paper, evidently waiting for the arrival of an opponent.

"Good-morning, Reece," he said, when he saw me. "Do you think the weather is going to hold up?"

Brocklebank had come in behind me. The man looked at him at first casually, then more closely; then his face slowly blanched. His hand shook

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as he put down the paper upon the table. I have never, I think, seen the gradual birth upon anyone's countenance of an expression of such complete mystification and stupefaction. And, mingling with it, permeating it, one saw, as always, cold fear.

"Is—is that Brocklebank?" he asked, in a queer hushed voice.

"At your service," said Brocklebank.

"But—" The unfortunate man evidently found it difficult to speak at all, to keep his bearings, to control himself—"but we heard you were—very ill."

"No, you didn't," said Brocklebank. "You heard I was dead. Why not speak the truth?"

"Yes, we did hear that," the man admitted. "I'm glad it was only an absurd rumor."

"Neither dead nor ill," said Brocklebank, cheerfully; "particularly fit this morning, and just about to give Reece the biggest dressing he has ever had in his life."

He went through to the dressing-rooms. The man, still with a very white face, came across to me.

"I don't understand it in the least," he said, in

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the same hushed voice. "Can you explain? Only yesterday my wife had a reply from Mrs. Brocklebank, acknowledging a letter of condolence."

"I can't explain it," I replied. "There has been a mistake, as you can see for yourself."

"But his wife herself evidently thought he was dead."

"Yes, she did."

"And I understood you were with him at the time."

"Yes, I was. I thought he was dead. Everybody present did. The doctors did. You must take my word for it, Carrington, that I can't explain it. That's the simple truth."

"Coma? Trance?"

I let it go at that, though I knew it could not satisfy him when he came to closer reflection.

"It's lucky you didn't get him buried," he said, turning away. "I've dreaded that all my life."

Two or three times before we could start our game we had to pass through a similar experience. In the lobbies and dressing-rooms we were met by the same looks of stupefaction and fear, by the same questions. Brocklebank himself, it was evi-

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dent, fully enjoyed the power which his position gave him to frighten and mystify people. His supreme opportunity came while he was changing his boots. He was seated with his back to a high wooden partition. Upon the other side of it, apparently engaged in a similar occupation, two men were talking.

"Terribly sad about poor old Brocklebank," said one.

"I can hardly believe it," said the other.

Brocklebank immediately jumped on the seat and put his head over the partition.

"That's nothing," he called down to them: "I can hardly believe it myself."

I think that even my partner's sense of the comic must have been satisfied by the consternation of those two men.

By the time we reached the first tee, the report that a supposed dead man was about to play golf had run through the entire Club House and its offices. We were watched by a ring of caddie boys, workshop assistants, and kitchen hands, standing at a respectful distance; and at several of the windows I could see strained, bewildered faces of members looking out at us.

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"Do you still demand six strokes?" asked Brocklebank, rubbing the grip of his driver with a lump of pitch.

"Two, four, seven, eleven, fourteen, seventeen," I answered.

He was a good player, and I never started around against him with any great confidence of scoring a victory, even with my allowance of strokes. To-day he began with an amazing stroke—one common enough to beginners, but utterly outside my experience of Brocklebank's golf. He missed the ball entirely, did not move it from its place.

"Even the gods nap occasionally," I said, tapping a spot on the turf with my driver-head for the consideration of my caddie.

I drove off a ball, and then Brocklebank essayed a second time to deal with his. The result was scarcely an improvement on the first. The ball trickled a few yards from the tee and came to rest in a patch of heather. He made as bungling an attempt to extricate it as I have ever seen, forced it into an even worse place, and, after two or three ineffectual efforts to move it, picked it up.

We went to the second tee. To my amazement

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Brocklebank repeated, with some variation of detail, his display from the first. Indeed, as we proceeded, the perception was gradually forced upon my mind that my partner could not play, could not play at all. Every golfer, however good, will occasionally fall from grace, will prove unable on a particular day to produce his best, or even his average game; but Brocklebank's failure, on this occasion, was so complete, so abject, as to remove it entirely from the category of the ordinary ups and downs of a player's form. At first I had regarded his mis-hits with the slight, legitimate satisfaction of an opponent; but as the wretched series of hacks, taps, scrapes, hooks, and cuts continued monotonously from hole to hole, I became perplexed and alarmed. It was too evidently in some way involved in the horrible mystery surrounding him.

Ultimately we reached a hole in the neighborhood of the Club House. Up to this point Brocklebank had accepted his troubles, according to his wont, with perfect geniality. Now he appeared to take stock of them. We were searching, somewhat hopelessly, for his ball.

"How does the match stand?" he asked.

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"I've won the match," I said, "by ten and eight. This is the bye."

"I'll present it to you. Let's go back to the Club House: lunch may pull me together. I can't understand it, and that's the truth," he said, in a tone that, for him, was almost serious. "It's the most mysterious thing that has happened since I came round—this and the trouble with the car. It looks as if that accident had upset me more than I thought. After all," he added, reverting inevitably to a humorous point of view, "a fatal illness generally leaves some after effects."

I was struggling to extract from these odd circumstances of the morning something which might lead towards a solution of the riddle, when a man made a remark to me which threw my speculations into a new channel. It was while I was in the dressing-room, washing my hands before lunch.

"Who was it you were playing with this morning, Reece?" he asked.

"Brocklebank."

"Brocklebank!" he exclaimed. "I shouldn't have recognized him. He must have changed

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very much. I heard he had had an accident or something."

"Yes," I said.

My reply was terse, because a sudden and flaming thought had been started in my mind. I marveled that for two days no hint or shadow of it had come to me, that I had accepted without hesitation an apparent miracle, when a commonplace explanation was perhaps staring me in the face.

I went in to lunch, sat down opposite my partner of the morning, and looked at him closely. Undoubtedly he was changed—changed to a degree that could scarcely be attributable to ordinary fluctuation of health. Was it possible that it was not Brocklebank at all, that I had been the victim of a gross impersonation? Was this merely some clever rogue who, possessing some general facial resemblance, had learnt Brocklebank's history and studied his traits of character, and who had invented a story in order to slip into his shoes? I remembered how the claimant in the Tichborne case had deceived even the real man's mother.

The steward came and asked me what I would

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have for lunch. I replied vaguely, and was surprised, a few moments later, when a plate containing some edible substance was placed in front of me.

The conjecture held me, as others had done. It held me, indeed, longer than its merits warranted, because I wished to find it true. Ultimately, I was obliged to relinquish it. Presuming the cleverest impersonator, he could not have acquired, in flawless, unhesitating perfection, every one of Brocklebank's characteristics and mannerisms, he could not have become imbued with his minute personal memory, he could not possess his exact knowledge of every detail of the Mark Lane business. The inability to drive a car and to play golf had appeared, when the idea sprang hot in my mind, to tell strongly in favor of the theory of personation. But even that, I perceived on closer reflection, told, on the contrary, against it. For an impostor, it was clear, would not, voluntarily and unnecessarily, have placed himself in a position of having to attempt to do things which he would have known he could not do.

Beyond and above all such considerations, moreover, I was sure of my instinct. I *knew* that this

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man was Brocklebank—this man sitting opposite me, eating and chatting—as well and as certainly as I knew that I was myself.

In the smoke-room, after lunch I was faced by yet another puzzle. Brocklebank's talk became loud and boisterous and in inferior taste. There were a dozen or so men sitting and standing in the room, when another entered—one who possessed something of my partner's own cheerful and genial disposition. He knew the latter slightly, and had heard, apparently, only vague rumors of his death.

He came straight across to him. "Hello, Brocklebank!" he said. "Heard you were dead."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Brocklebank. "You behold," he added, getting up and standing with his back to the empty grate, "a brand snatched from the burning."

I walked away to the window. The last phrase, coming on a laugh from Brocklebank's lips, recalled, in violent contrast, the hushed form, the waxen features, the lurid and solemn scene in the Crematorium.

"My name is Shadrach the Second," he went on, raising his voice so that it could be heard by

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all in the room. "I've walked in the midst of the burning fiery furnace. I've listened to the sound of the sackbuts and psalteries. The fact that I am now addressing you must be ascribed to the holiness of my life. I was too good to die."

Though by no means given to excess, my partner had been accustomed, ever since I had known him, to consume alcohol frankly. To-day he had had two glasses of whisky and soda at lunch and a liqueur with his coffee. It seemed ridiculous to suppose that so small an amount could have affected his head. Yet his present demeanor and talk were attributable, charitably, only to a state of mild inebriation.

"Have you ever been cremated, Marriot?" he called out across the room to a man of ample contour. "You should try it. It fines you down wonderfully."

The room gradually thinned. "I never saw Brocklebank drunk before," I heard one man say.

My partner was still standing with his back to the fireplace. "Not going, Lightbody?" he said reproachfully, as the last man moved to the door.

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"Wait a minute. What will you have? Nothing? What will you have with it—soda or water?"

We were left alone. Brocklebank came across to me. "You are not popular to-day, Reece. You've cleared the room effectively; and now we can have a dance. Did you ever see me do a two-step?" He proceeded to scrape and shuffle about the floor, humming a tune. "'Come and trip it as you go, on the light fantastic toe.' If you'll give me the reference, I'll stand you a drink," he concluded, plopping into a chair.

We gave up the idea of playing an afternoon round. There was a train for London about three o'clock which we decided to catch. When I reached the door of the Club House, after changing, I saw Brocklebank sitting alone in his car just outside the shelter. I was about to go over to join him, when I remembered that I had not paid for my caddie and turned in the direction of the caddie master's shed.

"Brocklebank!" I shouted.

He did not hear me. A man passed me, on his way to the garage.

"Do you mind telling Brocklebank that I have

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to pay for my caddie?" I asked him. "Say I won't be a minute."

"Brocklebank?" he said. "Where is he?"

I nodded towards the car.

"That man in the car!" he exclaimed. "That's not Brocklebank. You are going mad."

CHAPTER X

DR. HEGIRAS

“**Y**OU are going mad.” The casually uttered remark of the man at the Golf Club recurred to me that night, as I stared at the picture above the mantelpiece in my study, and reviewed the incredible incidents of the three days which had elapsed since last I sat there. I heard it insistently: “You are going mad.” It seemed, indeed, that those days had been passed in no real world, but in a phantasmagoria, amid flimsy, wavering, changing figures, amid such stuff as dreams are made of. I could extract from them nothing that held, nothing that was certain, nothing that was constant, nothing that I could clutch and fasten to: everything was doubtful, shifting, evanescent. I saw myself, at one time, cold with horror because a dead man stood before me; at

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another time, stupefied and doubting my reason because someone told me it was not the dead man. I saw Mrs. Brocklebank, at one moment, shrieking and flying in an agony of terror from her husband; at another moment, weeping unconsolably over his ashes. I saw the man himself, one day, sitting in the office in Mark Lane, conducting the firm's business, quietly, methodically, and ably; and I saw him, another day, driving a car like a lunatic and playing golf like a baboon.

The sense of the uncanny unreality of it all came back to me with intense force. I was enveloped, as it seemed, in a slightly swaying haze—a mist that moved slowly back and forth, producing an effect of things appearing and vanishing and again appearing. I hardly knew from moment to moment whether my mind was distracted by the fear that Brocklebank was Brocklebank, or by the fear that he was not. Two members of the Golf Club had told me that the man I had played with was not Brocklebank. Yet, to my sense, he was Brocklebank beyond question. If they were right, then I was mad. If they were wrong, then still I was mad; for Brocklebank was dead.

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Steadily and irresistibly, as I sat and thought, the fear that had assailed me in the first hours and that had never wholly left me—the doubt of my own sanity—settled upon me. I saw that all this chaos of mystifying, changing impressions was susceptible to a subjective explanation, could be cleared away by the assumption of some disorder, some false focusing in my own brain. Moreover, I could not see how otherwise it could possibly be susceptible to explanation, how every one of its shifting and conflicting elements could be fitted to an objective solution, whatever miracle was supposed.

I did not think that I was mad in the sense that I had become permanently irresponsible for my actions. I did not imagine, as I had done at first, that people might look askance at me, might show a disposition to avoid me. But I could conceive that I had been subject to some hallucination, and might be so again. At some point, during the course of recent happenings, I could suppose that my senses had failed to supply me with correct information, had substituted other incorrect information. Had Brocklebank not fallen ill on Mont Blanc? Or had he fallen ill and not died?

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Or had he died and not been cremated. Or had he been cremated and not reappeared? Finally, assuming my mind to have received a true imprint of the events at Chamonix and Geneva, had I seen all the incidents of the last three days in accurate focus?

It became clear to me, as I paced about my room, that unless I could obtain relief from these preying doubts, the very condition of mind which now beset me as a fear would be in a fair way to be realized as a fact. The suspicion that one's brain was acting erratically was intolerable: it would be better, I felt, to know the worst, whatever it might be. Suddenly I sat down at my desk and snatched a sheet of paper. I wrote a letter to a young medical friend whom I could trust, asking him to give me the name of a recognized authority on cerebral disorders, and immediately went out and posted it.

His reply came the next day. It was characteristically terse and dry:

"Hegiras of Wimpole Street is your man. He can't make a mistake. If he says you are mad, you can take a ticket for Colney Hatch."

I had not told him, it needs scarcely to be said,

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that I wished personally to consult a brain specialist. That was a small assumption he had made on his own account.

I knew Dr. Hegiras by reputation. There was no doubt of his ability: if any man in Europe could answer the question that I needed to be answered, he was the man. But I was obsessed by the idea that I should be humored, that I should not get his true opinion. The very subtlety wherewith, on that account, I went about the business of making an appointment with him, I took to be an unfavorable symptom. I wrote from the office in my own name. But I stated that I wished for a consultation at the desire of my father, to whom I asked him to make his report. For that purpose, I gave him another set of initials and the address of my flat.

As soon as I had posted the letter I was struck hot by the thought that he would be clever enough to see through this piece of deceit, and that he would attribute it to the peculiar cunning characteristic of the mentally unsound. His reply afforded no hint of any such perception. It was a formal note, three fourths printed, giving me an appointment for four days later.

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I remember that, on the day named, when I stood at his doorstep and had already tapped with the polished brass knocker, I suffered a sudden revulsion of feeling. Here was I, a sane man, come to consult a specialist in diseases of the brain! What was I to do? What was I to say? The position, it struck me, was supremely foolish.

I had little time to think about it. The door was opened, and I was ushered into a dark hall, and thence into a waiting-room, also dark and heavily furnished. Even the illustrated papers on the table seemed somber. They were neatly arranged, as if no one had turned them all day. For my part, I felt as little inclination to read *Punch* as to study a treatise on logarithms. Fortunately I was alone; so I walked about the room, treading with almost uncanny softness on the heavy carpet, listening to a ponderous marble clock on the mantelpiece ticking. It ticked to ten minutes past the time of my appointment. Then the door was opened, and a soft-voiced man-servant spoke my name.

I followed him along the hall. He noiselessly opened another door. I passed over the threshold, and the door was closed behind me.

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The room I had entered, in contrast with the other, was well lighted. To my surprise, it appeared to be unoccupied. Then, from out a large chair, placed with its back to me, there jumped up a small, spare man with dark hair and a dark, close moustache, nipping off a pair of glasses and closing a book as he rose.

"Good day, Mr. Reece," he said. "Pray sit down. I am afraid I have got the best chair, but if you feel aggrieved we can change. Would it appear to you to be possible," he continued, resuming his seat, after I had taken the chair he had indicated, "if I may venture to ask your opinion, for a man who has once died to come to life again?"

I stared at him.

"You are quite right," he interjected. "Your impressions are perfectly correct. The position is as you suppose. You are consulting me as to your state of health: I am not consulting you as to mine. I was reading," he explained, "when you came in, a book on the subject of reincarnation—a small Indian work." He tapped the little volume in his hand with an outstretched forefinger. "The opinion of Oriental savants on such a subject is not lightly to be set aside. The

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people of the East are inferior to us in inventive genius, but the best of them are scholars and thinkers, who have studied metaphysics far more deeply than Europeans, and who, if one may coin a phrase, have the genius for the occult."

Bewildered as I was, I was suddenly, strangely, intently interested. "Are you offering that as a solution?" I asked.

"I am offering that as a solution," said Dr. Hegiras.

I took a few moments to think. "It won't hold water," I said. "Even if you accept the principle of reincarnation, a man does not return full blown to the world: he is born in the ordinary way and grows up gradually. Besides, he retains no recollection of his previous existence. Brocklebank—" I stopped, suddenly surprised to find that I had been assuming in my interlocutor a knowledge of the circumstances that had brought me to his consulting room.

"'Brocklebank'—you were saying?" he suggested, with an expression of detached interest on his face, handling his glasses.

"Would you mind telling me," I asked, "what put this subject of a second life into your mind?"

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"Presently, Mr. Reece, presently," he said, smiling courteously. "In the meantime," he insisted, "'Brocklebank'—you were saying?"

I had a sense of helplessness before his vivid, forceful personality. I was nearly twice his size, but I felt that he would quietly impose his will upon me, that he would conduct this interview upon lines of his choosing and not of mine, and that I should waste time and gain nothing by declining to accept his guidance.

"Brocklebank," I said, "can remember perfectly everything that happened before he died."

Dr. Hegiras laid his little book upon a desk with an air of finality. "You have quite convinced me," he said. "Your reasoning is perfectly sound. We may dismiss the theory of reincarnation."

I knew then, as clearly as if he had informed me of the fact in plain words, that the sole object of his original question had been to study my reply.

He sat for a few moments slightly oscillating the glasses, which he held between his forefinger and thumb, his lips pursed as if to whistle. Then he turned again to me. "Now will you tell me," he said, "quite briefly, but without omitting any

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relevant detail, this story about your friend Mr. Brocklebank?"

I had thought, before I came, that it would be unnecessary to take him completely into my confidence, that I should be able to get on with vague, general references to strange and unlikely happenings, leading me to become suspicious about my mental equipoise. It was very obvious, now, that such veiled truths would not do for Dr. Hegiras. I told him, therefore, frankly and as shortly as I could, all the circumstances connected with Brocklebank's death and return.

"A man," he said, when I finished, "whom you know to be dead walks into your office; and so you assume that you must be out of your mind. Is that the point?"

"That is the point exactly."

"I may say at once," he said, gently tapping the palm of his left hand with his pince-nez, "that because one takes a temporary impression of non-existent things, it is not necessary to postulate a disordered brain, or even a serious lapse of function. A man in a hypnotic trance, for example, sees things which do not exist, talks with people who are not present. The so-called Christian

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Scientists can make a man think that he has no pain, when, to medical knowledge, conditions of agonizing pain are present. Or, in other ways, you may suffer some temporary aberration attributable to some temporary cause. Let me examine you."

He put me through a series of tests, beginning with a minute inspection of my eyes, afterwards proceeding to strange and less pleasant experiments, such as thumping my knees, and otherwise pursuing his investigations to quarters of my anatomy which I had not previously suspected to be even remotely connected with my cerebral system.

He made no comment at the conclusion, but quietly put away the instruments he had been using. "And now," he said, "with your permission, we will resume our very interesting conversation."

We seated ourselves again in the easy chairs, and Dr. Hegiras brought the finger tips of his two hands together.

"No doubt, I may assume," he said, "that it is obvious to you that the man whom you saw cremated at Geneva is not now alive. Dead men don't walk about the world."

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"It *should* be obvious," I said.

"You hesitate. You are not sure of that?"
He looked at me keenly.

"How can I be sure of it, when my senses appear to tell me to the contrary?"

"Appear' to tell you. Quite so. Now, what was your object in coming to consult me?"

"I came because I thought I might have been suffering from hallucinations."

"Precisely," he said, with satisfaction. "That is what I wanted to get from you. You have a very vivid imagination, Mr. Reece."

"I didn't know it before," I answered.

"You should be pleased to discover it, even though it has played you a trick. A man is only half equipped who has no imagination."

"Do you mean," I asked, "that I have dreamt all this?"

"Not all of it. But undoubtedly there has been a period, between the time when you started to ascend Mont Blanc and the present, when your mind has failed to take a correct impression of the objects presented to your vision. In other words, your imagination has provided illusory objects."

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"But when?" I asked. "And how long would the condition last? It is going on still?" I demanded on a sudden, alarming afterthought.

The alienist smiled. "What do you see in this room?" he asked. "And what did I do just now when I examined you?"

I told him.

"That is my impression too," he said. "So I think we may assume it to be correct."

I returned to my previous question. "When do you think that this happened to me?"

"As to that," he replied, "I can offer only the roughest guess. Your own impressions of what occurred are all the data I possess, and it is precisely your impressions that are in question."

"Well, even a rough guess?" I pressed.

"There are several considerations that may guide us," said the specialist: "first, your probable state of health at any given moment; second, the extent to which particular observations of yours have been confirmed by other witnesses; and, third, the fact that the imagination of a generally balanced and responsible person does not readily create the freakish, the *outré*, the wild or extravagant, but, on the contrary, steps in to supply the

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expected and normal, when some event unexpected and abnormal has actually taken place."

Dr. Hegiras paused to adjust his glasses and to glance at a slip of paper—apparently a list of appointments—which lay upon his desk.

"For these various reasons," he proceeded, "I should eliminate the whole period while you were on Mont Blanc. I think that what you saw at that time was, in all probability, substantially what occurred. On like grounds, I should exclude the period that has elapsed since you returned to this country. It is evident that your partner is, in fact, alive and engaged in his usual occupations; for that does not rest on your testimony alone, but upon that of many others. What remains?"

"The time in Switzerland and in France," I answered, "after we descended Mont Blanc."

"A very trying time, was it not?"

"Very," I replied.

"And during that trying time, what was the most trying experience of all?"

I reflected for a few moments, and then replied: "The cremation."

"To be sure. Let me ask you one further

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question. When you entered the incinerating chamber, what did you expect to see?"

"I expected, of course," I answered, "to see Brocklebank's body cremated."

"You not only expected to see that, but you were as certain as you could be of anything in advance that it was what you would see?"

"Yes."

Dr. Hegiras closed his glasses, put them in his pocket, and looked at me sharply. "Now, I suggest," he said, "that you did not see that body cremated."

I returned his look without speaking, endeavoring, with a mystified sense, to throw my mind back to the time.

"I suggest," he added, "that you saw nothing whatever but a bundle of grave clothes and oddments."

CHAPTER XI

THE DOCTOR'S RECONSTRUCTION OF EVENTS

IT is one matter to be able to accept the idea of personal delusions in the abstract; it is quite another to regard as possible a concrete instance. I could not bring myself to suppose that what I had seen in the Crematorium at Geneva was a mere figment of my imagination. Moreover, in addition to the difficulty of believing that a patch of dream had been sandwiched into my waking life, objections to the doctor's theory on other grounds crowded upon my mind. I was so occupied in following the bewildering streams of thought which his words had set in motion, that for a few seconds I partially lost sense of his presence.

"I astonish you?" I heard him say.

I pulled myself together. "It seems incredible," I said.

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"Wherever we place the period of aberration, it will strike you in that light," he replied. "You have no need to emphasize unduly in your mind the particular suggestion I have made. At the best, as I have warned you, it is a shot at a venture. Nevertheless, so far as it is possible for me to form an opinion from your own impressions of fact, I am inclined to think that the time when, on all grounds, it is most probable that you became subject to hallucination, was the moment when you entered the incinerating chamber, and that the condition lasted at least until you left the Crematorium.

"Let us examine the position," he went on. "You had recently suffered a great shock, you had been placed unexpectedly in a position of responsibility and trial, and you had passed through a period which had made exacting claims upon your energies, both physical and mental. In that condition of mind, you were introduced to circumstances entirely new to you and peculiarly beset with awe and distress. Would it be surprising, when those considerations are kept in view, if your mind had failed to take an accurate impression of what you saw? You say that there

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was no coffin. Up to that point, perhaps, you continued to be normally responsive to your visual sense. Your preconceived ideas were not, by that alone, too severely outraged: you could accept it. You said to yourself that the body had been taken out. Let us suppose that there was no body as well as no coffin, remembering always the antecedent circumstances affecting your health, that might have put a strain upon you sufficient to cause the receiving and recording instruments in your brain to part company. You would receive an impression of one thing and record another. You expected to see a body, and so your mind would create one. And the rest you would construct from what you had heard or read about the process of cremation."

He put his proposition so cogently that, in spite of my strong instinctive repugnance, I could almost believe it to be true. Even if I could and did accept it, however, it appeared to me that the major mystery would still remain unsolved: insuperable difficulties would still confront us.

"But the attendant came and asked me to see the cremation," I objected. "He would not have

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done that if they had discovered that the coffin contained no body."

"Are you sure," asked Dr. Hegiras, "that he put his question in that way? Are you sure that he did not ask you to come into the cremating chamber?"

"No, I am not sure," I replied, after reflection. "But there was Mrs. Brocklebank. She was there too. She also thinks the body was cremated."

"Because you told her so: she did not see it."

"But the ashes?" I insisted. "The casket?"

"In a Crematorium," replied Dr. Hegiras, "there are many caskets containing ashes: you were often unobserved by any of the officials; and your cab was waiting outside. If our theory is correct, you were not at that time responsible for your actions; and who can say what perverse necessity you may have felt, when in such a state of mind, to provide evidence that a cremation had taken place?"

"But," I said, bewildered, "I saw the casket placed in Mrs. Brocklebank's hands."

"We are assuming a period," he replied, with a

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shade of impatience, "when your impressions were not to be trusted."

"But if Mrs. Brocklebank confirms me on that point?"

"If," said Dr. Hegiras.

I took another line. I felt that I was fighting for my sanity. "In my case," I said, "such a theory would only get rid of the cremation, not the death. Whether or not there was a cremation is of relatively little importance while the death remains."

"I agree," said Dr. Hegiras. "When I said just now that I thought your impressions taken on Mont Blanc were substantially accurate, I meant that they were probably as accurate as those of anyone present. But your partner is alive: it is therefore obvious that he cannot have died, as you supposed he did. I can only guess at what actually occurred. It is possible that the physician who examined your friend at the Grands Mulets hut, in awkward circumstances and in a poor light, may have mistaken a condition of catalepsy for death. Unfortunately, it cannot be denied that such mistakes have occasionally occurred, and that people have been buried alive

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in consequence. Subsequent examinations, in more favorable conditions, would be conducted by men whose minds were involuntarily biased in favor of the earlier opinion and would probably be perfunctory. A medical man, who is called upon to examine a body which has been pronounced dead, always approaches the task with the feeling that his work is unnecessary."

"But if that were so," I said, "what became of him? How did he come to disappear so completely and to turn up later in London?"

"You are asking me now," said the doctor, smiling, "not only to wander quite outside my province, but to take a very big plunge into conjecture. It is manifest that we cannot account for these things by the assumption of any ordinary flow of events: we must draw heavily upon the unusual, the extravagant, and the bizarre. Does no possible explanation occur to you?"

I pondered the matter for a few moments. "If he had come round when the coffin was opened," I said, "and for some unimaginable reason had gone away in a borrowed suit of clothes, the officials would have told me."

"Again I must remind you," said Dr. Hegiras,

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this time with something of an air of smiling resignation, "that no conclusion can be based upon your impressions at that time. It is possible that the officials may have told you something of that kind, and that you may have appeared to understand all they said to you. That is a possible explanation, but, for obvious reasons, an improbable one. I would be inclined, Mr. Reece, were I a betting man, to put my money on another horse. To account for his disappearance, I would stake on a certain trait in your friend's character. You tell me that he is fond of his joke; that he is so fond of his joke, that he can find scope for its exercise in circumstances that would appear the reverse of amusing to people whose sense of humor was less developed. Is that so?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Very well. Now, let us suppose that he recovered from his trance after he had been placed in the coffin, and after the coffin had been closed. A man of his physique, or even one of ordinary physique, would find it quite possible to force off the lid of a light shell such as is used for crematory purposes. I assume that it was a shell of that description?"

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"Yes," I replied again.

"Having extricated himself," Dr. Hegiras proceeded, "what can we suppose he did? An ordinary person, in such a position, would have been extremely frightened. Shall we be straining probabilities too far, if we suggest that Mr. Brocklebank may have seen in the circumstances a unique opportunity for scoring a laugh off his friends?"

"It would have been very like him," I admitted.

"That being so, and granting that our premises are correct, it should not be difficult to reconstruct roughly his course of procedure. Where was the coffin lying? Not, I presume, in his own room."

"Oh, no," I replied: "Mrs. Brocklebank was occupying that. It was in a sitting-room on the first floor—the floor below us."

"And there was nothing belonging to him in that room?"

"Nothing, so far as I remember."

"So that, if he was to get away from the hotel without disclosing the fact that he was alive, his first necessity would be to obtain some clothes. I can conceive some moments when, if a passing chambermaid had chanced to look round, she might

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have been considerably startled by the sight of the dead man peering through a chink of his door, waiting until the coast was clear. He would have to take chances, but we must assume that they favored him, and that he managed to snatch some clothes and other necessaries from a neighboring room and to get back to his own without being seen. Subsequently we must suppose him filling the coffin with an equivalent weight, reclosing it, and concealing himself until an opportunity of escape presented itself. That, no doubt, could easily be accomplished after dark, by means of the balcony supported on pillars, which is an invariable feature of the first floor rooms of Swiss hotels."

I was so interested in this unfolding of the possible course of events, as the doctor's mind reconstructed them, that it did not occur to me, at the time, that there was anything peculiar in the fact that I was listening to it in the consulting room of a great specialist, whose professional advice I had sought.

"Do you follow me?" he asked.

"Very well," I replied.

"We have reached a point, then, when your

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friend Mr. Brocklebank is outside the hotel, and a closed and heavy coffin is still within it. His object, of course, in taking the trouble we have supposed him to take, would be to make a dramatic reappearance at some effective time, to enjoy the bewilderment of his friends, and to tramp upon the wreaths and mourning cards and notes of condolence—all of which, in fact, he has done, but with an impaired memory. That latter fact must be accounted for by the supposition that, at some point in the course of his journey home, his illness recurred. It would be almost surprising if it had not done so, when we remember the ordeal he had passed through and the unusual strain he had immediately put upon himself. To explain his subsequent reappearance in London, we must assume that, at the time of his breakdown, he had the good fortune to fall into the hands of kindly people, who took charge of him for the rest of the way. It need not be supposed that he was again reduced to a state of stupor. More probably, he relapsed into a condition, very well known to medical science, when the sense of personality is imperfectly poised. His own hazy recollections indicate that he was at least partially

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conscious during a portion of the journey. By the time he reached London, he had evidently so far recovered that his unknown friends felt justified in leaving him. It was not, however, as we know, until the following morning that he found himself permanently restored to his normal state of health."

"But his recollection of being in a shop?" I asked.

"He had no clothes but those he was wearing. What would be your own first proceeding in a similar predicament?"

"And the bunch of keys?"

"Found in the pocket of the trousers he annexed."

"And the 'only sixteen'?"

"Oh, you mustn't push me too hard," said the doctor, rising; "particularly since my next patient has been waiting nearly twenty minutes. The boat train arrives in London in the afternoon, but he didn't reach his hotel until night. He could have done many things in the meantime. Perhaps he had himself weighed? Perhaps he was surprised to find that he was only sixteen stone?" He glanced at his own spare figure with a certain air of dry humor.

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I had risen also. "May I remind you," I said, "if you will not think me too inquisitive, that you have not yet told me how you came to know anything at all of the circumstances?"

"Ah, well, Mr. Reece," he replied, "you will understand that, in my branch of the medical profession, it is necessary to approach the business of diagnosis by a route different from that which serves in any other. Ordinary pathological tests are only of relative and subordinate value to me. I must get my patients to talk, and for that purpose I must find out what subjects they are interested in, particularly if there is anything weighing on their minds. When I received your letter, I put inquiries on foot, and soon heard the story of Mr. Brocklebank—not quite as you have told it me, but substantially so. It has evidently supplied the gossip of Mark Lane for days. Had your brain been seriously affected, you would not have been surprised to find that I knew all about it. A man with a mania takes it for granted that everyone he meets will open his subject. He supposes that it is what all the world is thinking about. It was a favorable sign when you asked me to explain. You postponed

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the question for a sentence or two, but you asked it. On the other hand, had I failed to take measures in advance, I might have been faced with trouble of the reverse kind: you might have proved to belong to another class entirely, the class which is secretive, the peculiar class which asks me to diagnose and at the same time does its best to balk me."

"I am afraid," I admitted, "that that is what I had in my mind to do."

"Illogical, isn't it?" he asked, swinging his glasses and looking at me with a quizzical smile. "I will take you a little further into my secrets," he went on; "and you may regard the fact as the best report I can give you. When a patient enters my consulting room for the first time, his mind is predisposed to see a grave man sitting at a desk. All the arrangements outside this room are purposely made to set up such an expectation. I take care that he shall see nothing of the kind. He may see, as you did, a small man sitting in an easy chair, reading a book or a newspaper. At any rate, he will see something quite different from what he expects; and the instant call upon him to re-order his ideas is an important aid to diagnosis."

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"How did I come through it?" I asked.

He smiled. "Without discredit."

"So may I take it that you give me a clean bill of health?"

"You are all right," he said, kindly. "But don't let this matter prey upon you. Whether or not I have hit the right nail on the head, I hope that our conversation may relieve your mind to the extent of showing that the problem is at least open to solution."

He held out his hand. I gave him mine. He burst out laughing.

"There is a type of monomaniac," he said, "exceedingly common in my practice: the man who is sane on all subjects but one—that of supposing that a doctor of medicine is a public philanthropist."

With hasty apology, I presented his fee. Still smiling, he pressed a bell. The soft-voiced manservant made his appearance, found my hat and umbrella, showed me through the hall to the street, and closed the door softly in my wake.

I had walked perhaps fifty yards, when I found that I was going in the wrong direction. I turned and retraced my steps. I was in no particular

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hurry, but I walked very fast, and continued on foot until I reached the corner of Tottenham Court Road. There I entered the Tube station and took a train for the city.

For a long time my mind was occupied in revolving the doctor's hypothesis. It was strung on a very exiguous line of possibilities, but I could perceive no actual flaw in it. It offered, it was true, no explanation of the reverse problem that was curiously presenting itself: the fact that people who had known him could be found to deny that the man who had returned was my partner; it did not account for the extraordinary aversion to this man that had taken possession both of Mrs. Brocklebank and me; and it made no provision for the circumstances that he could not play golf and could not drive a car. Those might in part be fancies, and in part the effect of real changes attributable in some way to the experiences through which he had passed, perhaps to the psychological condition to which Dr. Hegiras had alluded, the weakening of the sense of personality.

It was clear, however, that the doctor's reconstruction rested absolutely upon the presumption that I had suffered a mental lapse in the Crema-

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torium. That was the base upon which it had been raised. If it could be proved that what I had appeared to see had in fact taken place, the whole carefully and ingeniously erected structure would fall to pieces like a house of cards. I did not think that my eyes had deceived me: on the contrary, I still felt confident that I had taken a correct impression of an actual occurrence. The doubt, at any rate, could easily be set at rest by writing to the Crematorium authorities. I would write, I decided, that very night.

I had reached this conclusion, and had thrown back to the room in the Chamonix hotel where Brocklebank's coffin had lain, trying to weigh the possibility that he could have forced off the lid—I had a vision, I remember, of a gruesome picture in the Wiertz Museum at Brussels—when my thoughts were violently turned: indeed, the very base and fabric of them were swept away. Steadily, insistently, and with a far stronger force of conviction than at any time before, the sense grew upon me that I was out of my mind. These thoughts, these ideas that were turning in my brain, were the thoughts of a madman. It was preposterous to suppose that a great alienist,

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the first authority on his subject in England, had really been chatting with me, as I imagined he had, while we sat in a pair of easy chairs by the fire, that he had been spinning ghastly yarns and thumping my knees. Beyond doubt, I was losing hold of my reason. If he had indeed behaved in any such way as I conceived he had, it could only have been to humor me, to keep me quiet, because my brain had got stuck on a horrible fancy and wallowed in it interminably.

I flushed with sudden, burning heat, and as suddenly ran ice in my veins, as the awful sense took possession of me. It did not slowly dissipate and evaporate, as it had done before: it gathered strength, conviction, certainty. Dr. Hegiras had *not* talked to me of a dead man in his grave clothes peering through the chink of a door. I was appalled and sickened: all my physical being seemed to withdraw into itself, to shrink in shuddering repulsion from alliance with a disordered mind.

I do not know how I got through that afternoon. It remains only a blur in my memory. But I have a sense of hurrying through the streets in the evening, of pushing frantically among crowding

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pedestrians, of crossing roads under the noses of motor-buses. And I have quite a clear recollection that, when I reached home and entered the flat, my housekeeper met me in the passage, that she looked startled and said something. But I passed her without speaking and entered my study.

On the table I saw a letter. It was a small, square letter, addressed in a small, neat hand. The name was mine, but the initials were different. Someone had made a mistake, I thought vaguely. Then I remembered. It was Dr. Hegiras's letter to my supposed father.

I sat down at the table and took it in my hands. Its contents would decide an issue more terrible than that of life and death.

I tried to break the flap, but could not. The opening at the corner was small, and my fingers seemed all thumbs. Since running up the stairs I had felt giddy; and now the room began to sway about me and to spin round. Then it turned suddenly dark. I thought the lights had been switched off. In the midst of the chaos, I heard a thud. It conveyed nothing to me at the time, but I have since realized that it was made by my head striking the table.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST WORD FROM MRS. STUART

I SHOULD not have been surprised to find myself, when I recovered from the vertigo, in some new and strange environment. My attitude to things had become so distorted, that I expected the unlikely and was surprised by the expected. I do not know how long I remained in a state of unconsciousness, but when I recovered I was still seated at the table in my study, the unopened letter was still lying before me. I managed somehow to slit the fold with a penknife and to take out the enclosed sheet. But the writing swam before me: it was all a wavering, blurred confusion of words. I could tell only that the letter was short, and I drew some encouragement from that circumstance. A report wholly and definitely bad, I thought, would not have been communi-

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cated in a few lines: the shock would have been broken, the deadly truth would have been allowed to emerge gradually.

After waiting for a few minutes, I could read the letter. Its contents were these:

“DEAR MR. REECE,

“I have been consulted by your son, Mr. Lovell Reece, with reference to his state of health. I find him free from disease, either organic or functional, but he has evidently suffered some nervous shock. If he permits this to prey upon him, it may lead to more serious trouble. I recommend complete change of scene and occupation.

“Yours very truly,

“ARMITAGE HEGIRAS.”

No one, probably, who has not actually known the torture which I had been enduring for hours, can realize the intensity of the relief which the reading of this letter brought me. *I was sane.* I kept repeating, again and again, “I am sane,” till I could have shouted the words. The deepest and most satisfying pleasure that any human being can experience is, I believe, unquestionably

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the relief of pain—whether it be the abatement of some excruciating paroxysm of physical agony, or the removal of intense mental stress, as by the recovery of a friend from a desperate illness. One can take it, literally, in deep draughts, fill one's lungs with it.

I did not trouble myself to consider whether Dr. Hegiras had in reality been deceived by my device to obtain his true opinion, or whether he had suspected that he was addressing me direct: his letter bore on its face the stamp of sincerity. It followed that my impression of the interview with him was correct; that he had, in fact, put forward a series of suggestions, consecutive and interwoven, which might supply the missing pages of Brocklebank's personal history and account for his present existence in the world of men. As I sat and smoked that evening, I drew more and more to the view that, however its detail might vary from the fact, the explanation of recent events must lie in some such theory as the doctor had propounded. It was true, as he had said, that it was based upon a set of suppositions wild, strange, and bizarre; but we were dealing with circumstances in themselves wild, strange, and

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bizarre, and we could not reject a solution merely because it required the assumption of occurrences that lay outside the ordinary experience of mankind. Moreover, by a system of exclusion one was driven irresistibly into line with Dr. Hegiras. It is evident that when otherwise you have exhausted the resources of conjecture to explain a given set of circumstances and have failed to do so, any residuary field for supposition—though it appear utterly improbable—must contain the truth. I was not mad; I was not dead; Brocklebank was not an impostor. All those ideas could be thrown on the scrap heap. What remained that could make the existing position intelligible? Dr. Hegiras's suggestion that my partner had not died.

There was the cremation difficulty—the one relevant matter in the sequence of events following Brocklebank's collapse on Mont Blanc, as the alienist's keen mind had instantly perceived, which rested as yet upon my unsupported testimony. I went to my desk and wrote to the Crematorium authorities at Geneva. I gave them the date when I supposed the cremation had been carried out, and asked them to tell me what had

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taken place on that occasion. Four or five days would have to elapse before I could receive a reply. Keeping before me the warning of Dr. Hegiras, supplemented as it was by the remembrance of the horrible state of mind, unquestionably bordering on insanity, to which I had been reduced during the afternoon, I determined to banish, during that interval, so far as possible, Brocklebank and his affairs from my thoughts.

I was not able, however, as things happened, to carry out that design; and the reason for my failure was the intervention of Brocklebank himself. I think it was two days after my visit to Wimpole Street, certainly it was while I was waiting for a reply from Geneva, that he walked into my office, carrying an open letter in his hand and smiling broadly.

"Did you ever get a mysterious communication, Reece?" he asked.

"It depends on what you mean by mysterious," I answered.

"Well, something from somebody you've never heard of, and that you can't make head or tail of." He looked through the letter in his hand, laughing silently. "Listen to this. No, read it yourself."

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He passed me the letter. It was written on a large square sheet of note-paper with an embossed heading, giving an address in Hampshire and other items of information relative to telegrams and a railway station. It ran as follows:

“DEAR SIR,

“If you are alive, and if this letter reaches you, I entreat you to communicate with me. How important this is to me you will understand when I say that, if you will make an appointment to meet me anywhere in Europe, I will keep it.

“Yours truly,

“MURIEL STUART. (MRS.)”

In any circumstances, I should probably have regarded such a letter as this, written in an educated hand and apparently quite genuine, with a good deal of curiosity. But when I considered Brocklebank's recent inexplicable history, it excited in me something more than that. He seemed to be enveloped in a cloud of obscurity and suspicion that extended indefinitely, to radiate distrust. We who were closest to him had been mystified and tortured, these latter days, by the apparent fact of his living presence, had

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questioned the evidence of our senses. Now, out of the void, from some unknown hand, this same doubt was shot at him: "If you are alive."

I looked up and repeated the phrase aloud: "If you are alive?"

"You can't pretend to think that I'm not," he replied, with his laugh.

"Have you ever been to the Wiertz Museum in Brussels?" I asked, irrelevantly.

"That place full of mad pictures? I believe I have."

"Throw your mind back to it and see if anything emerges."

"What has this to do with the letter?" he asked.

"Something put it into my head when you asked if I doubted that you were alive."

"The connection isn't obvious."

"Tell me," I persisted, "if any picture struck you particularly, or has recurred to you since?"

"Undoubtedly," he answered: "a picture of a female, reading a small book in bed and displaying considerably more of her person than is customary. It's no place for a bachelor, I may remark."

"Nothing else?"

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"Oh, there were scores."

It appeared evident that the painting of a man forcing his way out of a coffin was not especially or prominently imprinted on his brain. I tried another line.

"Going back to the time about which your memory is almost a blank," I said. "You told me you could remember vaguely being in a train and in a shop. Can't you resuscitate anything else? Have you no recollection, for instance, of climbing down a balcony?"

"None whatever," he replied. "I'm not that sort of Romeo: I go in and out by the front door."

"Well, then—take another thing—you said you had a bunch of keys that wasn't your own. Have you anything else that doesn't belong to you?"

"Anything!" he exclaimed. "I've everything—everything I stood up in, that first day—every rag, every stitch."

"But any pocket things?"

"Odds and ends," he replied: "a useful nail file, a gold pencil-case, a little sovereign purse with sovereigns in it, and a Russian leather case with banknotes in it."

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"You seem to have made a fairly clean sweep," I said.

"What do you suppose?"

"Well, you must have stolen them."

"That worries me a good deal," he said. "I can't understand how a man in my position came to omit to take a watch and chain."

These disclosures cleared the path of one obstacle that had appeared to me to stand in the way of Dr. Hegiras's hypothesis: the necessity that Brocklebank should have means for a journey in his possession. I could understand that a careless man might leave small valuables and money in his room, when he was absent from it, but that he would almost certainly be wearing his watch. It occurred to me that—presuming the theory to be correct—we could easily discover his name through the proprietor of the hotel, who must have been informed of his loss. That would be of service, however, only to the extent of enabling us to return his property, for he would probably know no more about how he came to lose it than we knew ourselves.

"I suppose you are quite serious," I said, sitting on the edge of my desk and looking across at

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Brocklebank, as he leaned with his back on the mantelpiece, "I suppose you are quite serious when you say, as you often do, that you have no morals in the ordinary sense?"

"None in any sense," he answered.

"Why don't you steal habitually?"

"Because I have no need to and don't want to be locked up."

"No other reason?"

"None whatever. And precious few people, in my opinion, if they looked into themselves and spoke the truth, could say that they had any other reason. What they think is a moral sense is really an ingrained habit. It's also a method of self-defense against the natural acquisitive instincts of the unpossessing. I would steal anything, if I needed it and could do so with safety."

He left his place and sat down in a chair, rather heavily, as if he were tired.

"Of course, what Rachel and you think is absurd," he said; "but I don't mind telling you that it has struck me, the last few days, that there is something rather queer about this business."

I pricked up my ears. "What makes you say that?" I asked.

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"Little things. It's the accumulation of them. I seem to have been suffering from some entirely new illness that no one has ever had before, judging from the effects. I think I ought to write to the Royal College of Physicians. It might interest them."

"What things do you mean?"

"Well, look at that arm." He pulled up his sleeve to the elbow. "It's as smooth as a baby's. There used to be a good deal of hair on it. It's the same in other places. And the hair on my head has got smoother and thinner, much. In fact, I'm suddenly getting bald. And there was a small scar just below my right knee, where I cut it when I was a boy and it had to be stitched. I thought it was permanent. It has gone—completely, absolutely, not a trace of it left. But the strangest thing of all is that I can't sleep properly. I used to sleep quite well, except when Rachel kicked."

"Insomnia?" I said.

"No—just the reverse. I sleep too much and too heavily, but it doesn't do me any good. When I get up in the morning I don't feel as if I had been sleeping, I feel as if I had been fighting."

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I was not, it was evident, to be permitted to carry into effect my heroic intention to put Brocklebank's affairs out of my mind. I immediately began to ask myself how this new information bore upon Dr. Hegiras's theory. I could see no reason why, if he were right, these results should follow: why Brocklebank's hair should fall off and his scars disappear, why he should sleep heavily and ineffectually. On the other hand, if it were conceivable that he had come through a cremation alive— But it was not conceivable.

"What about this letter?" he asked. "What do you make of it?"

"It looks," I said, "as if it had come from someone who has heard either that you are dead and can't believe it, or that you are alive and can't believe it."

"But I don't know her, I've never heard of her; and this house—where is it?—'Illingham, by Petersfield,' is about as familiar as the mountains of the moon."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "she is one of your unknown friends who helped you to get back to England."

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"In that case, why should she doubt my existence? It won't do, Reece."

"The best way to clear up the mystery," I said, "would be to see her."

"I think so. What day will suit you?"

"Suit *me*! It has nothing to do with me."

"On the contrary," said Brocklebank, "I can't see her in a hotel. She might want to talk secrets. I shall have to borrow your flat for the event."

"Any evening you like," I said. "If you will give me the date, I'll arrange to be out."

"No such thing," said my partner. "I'm not facing it alone. You've got to be there. I might need your protection. I have a suspicion that my fatal beauty is responsible for this."

"The writer of this letter," I said, looking at it, "is not young."

"How do you know?"

"Victorian handwriting."

"I wouldn't trust it. There are many silly ways of pretending to read personality, and graphology is about the worst. I would rather have palmistry, I would rather have phrenology, because in both cases you get a chance of looking at the person's face and making him talk."

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"I say she is over fifty," I persisted.

"Are you betting?"

"Obviously not," I answered. "No woman would ever admit she was over fifty."

He took the letter and got up. "This is Thursday," he said. "Will Monday do?"

"Yes," I answered; "but I shall judge for myself whether I stay in the room."

Brocklebank nodded and went out by the swing door.

He received a reply, by return of post, accepting the appointment gratefully. This new incident, breaking inexplicably upon inexplicable conditions, could not but take a close hold upon one's mind and imagination. There appeared to be no reason to connect it with the mystery surrounding Brocklebank, but I found it difficult to escape from the feeling that in some way it might be connected with it. As I sat waiting for him, in my study, on the appointed evening, this feeling, without apparent cause, grew stronger. Why did his unknown correspondent doubt his existence? Why, if she knew of him at all, did she doubt that he was alive?

It was chilly for mid-September, and I had

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lighted a fire. It was burning cheerfully. As it flickered and fell and burst into brighter flame, its light and the light from the shaded lamps caught the gold titles of the books which lined two sides of the room. The remaining wall-space was occupied by a few engravings on a plain green background. The thick Axminster carpet was also of plain green, and the chairs were covered in shades of golden brown. My main object, indeed, had been to give the room a comfortable aspect, not only through its furniture, but through its quiet tones and harmonies.

I developed the fancy, as I looked round upon the various objects it contained, that it was possibly to be the scene of a momentous meeting. Out of the unknown, and with every circumstance of urgency, a woman was coming to meet a man who, in some way, whatever might be the explanation, had passed through an experience as mystifying and appalling as could ever have fallen to the lot of a human being.

Presently, as I waited, my thoughts drifted from speculations concerning the impending meeting to a review of the existing position. More than a fortnight had now elapsed since Brocklebank's

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reappearance. During that time, at his request, I had twice been to Byfleet to see his wife. Not only was her aversion to him, her dread of him, not weakening, it was becoming stronger. By no possibility, I was convinced, could she live with him again. What, then, was to happen? He could not be expected to go on indefinitely living in a hotel; and she, I knew, would decline to go on indefinitely occupying his house. It was an intolerable situation, obviously and urgently demanding to be terminated by a formal separation. It was evident that such a settlement could only be reached by consent. No court would give Mrs. Brocklebank a separation, no court would believe our story, whatever evidence we might adduce, in the face of Brocklebank's actual presence. It occurred to me that, if we *could* get it believed, she would be entitled, not to a separation merely, or to a divorce, but to a declaration that she was a widow and that her husband's estate should pass to his executors and be administered for her benefit. Brocklebank, for his part, would have to start his second life, as he had started his first, penniless.

The flow of my thoughts, at this point, was

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interrupted by the sound of the hall door-bell. I looked at the clock. It wanted ten minutes to the appointed time. That slightly surprised me, for Brocklebank was not given, in general, to overscrupulous punctuality as regards his social engagements.

I heard the swish of my housekeeper's skirts as she passed along the hall. A few moments later she opened the door of my study.

"Mrs. Stuart," she said.

CHAPTER XIII

A NEW MYSTERY

THE woman who entered my study would probably have attracted attention anywhere. She was tall and handsome, even majestic; and though her age could not have exceeded the middle thirties, her hair—so much of it, at least, as could be seen under her hat—was quite white. Her face which, otherwise, might have been merely interesting was made by its snowy setting truly beautiful. She was fashionably dressed, and appeared to be controlling some strong emotion.

She came up to me quickly, with a slight jingle of some chain or trinkets. "I don't know how to thank you enough, Mr. Brocklebank," she said, "and I don't know how to begin to explain."

"It is for me to explain," I said to her. "I am

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not Mr. Brocklebank: I am his friend and partner, Mr. Lovell Reece. My partner is living in a hotel at present. That is not a very convenient meeting place, and he thought you might prefer to come here. I expect him every moment. Indeed, when I heard your ring, I thought it was he."

She glanced at the clock. "I am early," she said. "The drive was shorter than I expected, and I was too anxious and unsettled to calculate carefully the time it would take."

Just then the telephone bell rang. "Do, please, sit down," I said to her. "And will you excuse me, for a moment, while I answer the telephone?"

She sat down in one of the easy chairs, carrying out even this commonplace change of posture with a certain natural grace and charm. She drew her cloak close over her semi-evening gown, and, as she bent slightly to the fire, I saw an involuntary shiver pass through her.

The call proved to be from Brocklebank, and his message, in the circumstances, was disconcerting. "After all," I said to my visitor, when I had put back the receiver, "I'm afraid it's Hamlet without the Prince. My partner has

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just rung up to say that he is laid by the heels with a sudden and violent attack of lumbago. He cannot even crawl out of his room, far less come here. He asks me to apologize to you and to make a later appointment for him, if you would care for one."

Mrs. Stuart became suddenly alert. "Lumbago, did you say?" she asked. "Oh, but I know all about that. It's a dreadful old friend. My husband suffers from it terribly. Tell him to take a few drops of oil of rosemary on a lump of sugar. It will do him good. It's splendid. It never fails."

She was so insistent that I was obliged to call up the hotel again and have her message conveyed to Brocklebank. When I hung up the receiver for the second time and again turned round, I found her watching me. There was something in her face that made it curiously arresting, that made it remarkable. She was evidently unhappy, but it was more than that that struck one: the expression of her eyes, at once intent and deep, as if she were looking, yet not seeing; listening, yet unconscious of the sounds about her.

"You said, didn't you," she asked, "that you

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are a personal friend of Mr. Brocklebank as well as his partner."

"Yes," I replied.

"That means you know him very well?"

"I know him," I answered, "as well as anyone, probably, knows him, except his wife."

"Yes; well, then," she said, "if I may, I will tell you my story, explain what brings me here. You can repeat it to Mr. Brocklebank, and perhaps he will write to me; or perhaps you yourself will be able to tell me what it means."

"I will do everything I can," I replied. "At any rate, for many reasons, I can promise to be a good listener. My partner showed me your letter."

She was still sitting forward in her chair, her hands clasped together, tight and strained, on her knees. "You can understand," she began, "that only something of vital importance could have urged me to the course I have taken. I am in great distress, Mr. Reece."

"I feared so," I answered; "I am sorry."

She opened a small chain reticule that she had with her, took out a folded piece of paper, evidently a newspaper cutting, spread it out, and

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passed it to me. "Will you read that?" she asked.

This is what I read:

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF AN ANGLER

"Our Glasgow correspondent telegraphs that considerable anxiety is felt in the neighborhood of Craighiel, a small West Highland hamlet, owing to the disappearance from the hotel there of an English visitor, Mr. Francis Stuart. Mr. Stuart, who is an enthusiastic fisherman, had been staying more than a fortnight at the hotel, engaging every day in his favorite sport. On Wednesday morning he came downstairs, apparently in his usual health, but, according to some witnesses, slightly distraught in his manner. After breakfast he left the hotel, without taking his fishing tackle, apparently intending to walk on the moor. From that time nothing has been seen or heard of him."

I refolded the paper and handed it back to my visitor. "I assume it refers to a relative of yours?" I said.

"To my husband," she replied. "Can you understand what that means?" she went on quickly.

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"To have someone so near to you vanish utterly, without a word of explanation, leaving no trace of any kind anywhere?"

I am not sure that, before that moment, I could have replied in the affirmative. I had often read similar paragraphs in newspapers, and had wondered vaguely how the facts related could be accounted for; but not until Mrs. Stuart spoke, her tone and her manner bearing eloquent testimony to the agitation of mind she had suffered and was suffering, did I become fully alive to the peculiar tragedy underlying the incomprehensible disappearance of a human being.

"It must be terrible," I said.

"It is almost worse than a death," said Mrs. Stuart. "That at least is definite: it is certain. But I am utterly in the dark; the strain of suspense is unrelaxing. And I have the fear of the unknown to contend with: all kinds of possible and impossible explanations keep crowding upon me."

"Then you are still without news of your husband?" I asked. "The paragraph, I noticed, is over a fortnight old."

"I am still without news," she replied. "I

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have exhausted every possible means of inquiry. No one in the world appears to have seen anything of him after he left the hotel at Craigiel. All his things, except the clothes he was wearing, were left behind, and his bill was unpaid."

"You have no theory even?"

"Yes, I have a theory," she said. "But,—but"—she looked at me with acute disappointment and appeal in her eyes—"can *you* not help me at all?"

"I!" I exclaimed. "How could I be in a position to help you?"

"Because you are a friend of Mr. Brocklebank."

"And how could he?"

"That is what I hoped he could tell me. I thought possibly he might have been a visitor at the hotel."

I shook my head. "He was nowhere in the neighborhood," I said. "He spent his holidays in Switzerland. I was with him."

I remembered, indeed, that there were seven days for which he could not account, for which no one could account; but the wildest flight of fancy could not suggest that he had spent them in the Highlands of Scotland, for no conceivable

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reason and without any consciousness of the fact.

Mrs. Stuart was silent for some seconds. "I had better tell you more," she said, presently. "You asked me if I had a theory. To explain it I must go further into detail. Will you be patient?"

"I shall have no need of patience," I replied. I left my desk and took a seat near her. "Is the fire too much for you? Would you care to take off your cloak?"

I had noticed that the little shivering fits had passed and that she was now flushed.

"Yes," she said; "thank you." She threw open her cloak and dropped it over the back of her chair.

It was now further manifest that she was a woman of quite unusual charm and beauty, cast almost in the mold of a Greek statue. The obvious youthfulness of her neck and shoulders, the graceful and confident poise of her head, the unbroken symmetry of her form, and the clearness of her skin threw her snow white hair into yet more wonderful and appealing contrast.

"My husband," she proceeded quietly, "is a

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very unusual man. You would get quite a wrong impression of him from that newspaper paragraph. He is a mystic, a philosopher, a student of the occult, a Theosophist. For eleven months of the year he lives a very secluded life. The twelfth month he goes fishing. That is his one hobby. I don't go with him. I attempted it once, and the fishing talk of the people in the hotel nearly brought me to distraction. Knowing my husband, as I do, for a thinker, for a poet, for a recluse, for a man wrapt up in the contemplation of the deepest problems of existence—that he can submit to this wretched, unprofitable chatter, can even take part in it, is a mystery that I have never been able to fathom.”

She had been gazing into the fire while she spoke. Suddenly she turned her face and looked at me. “Do you know anything at all about Theosophy, Mr. Reece?”

I was hardly prepared for a question of this kind. “I have heard of it, of course,” I answered. “It has something to do with astral bodies.”

She sighed slightly. “Is that really the extent of your knowledge—‘something to do with astral bodies?’”

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"Yes," I was obliged to admit, "and I'm afraid I don't even quite know what an astral body is."

"Most people," said Mrs. Stuart, "make the mistake of thinking, as you have done, that Theosophy is solely concerned with the occult. These researches into the latent undeveloped powers of mankind are only a branch of its work. To understand it as a whole you must know its philosophy, its universality, its Pantheism. That is the essential background."

"Will you sketch it in?" I asked.

"A drop of sea-water," she said, "may not be very important, but it is part of the ocean; a single individual may not be very important, but he is part of God. Very few people have any grasp of what they are. They should think of themselves, not as individuals, but as constituents of the whole. It follows that no one—no one at all—whatever he may believe, whatever he may do, whatever he may be, is outside the pale."

"I should be very sorry to deny it," I said.

"You are more of a Theosophist than you knew," said Mrs. Stuart. "But, as it happens," she went on, "I want to talk to you, not about that, but about what you referred to just now,

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about the occult side, about certain psychic phenomena—if really I am not taking your time. It is necessary to do so, both to show you how I come to be here, and to help you to understand what seems to me the most probable explanation of my husband's disappearance."

I leaned back in my chair, prepared to listen. I do not know to what extent the subject might otherwise have appealed to me, but, in the peculiar circumstances surrounding my visitor's presence, there certainly was no polite hypocrisy in the interest I showed.

"The physical senses," she proceeded, "are attuned to a physical environment: they can apprehend nothing else. In other words, they can take cognizance only of matter of a certain degree of density. Even ether, which penetrates everything and occupies all the inter-planetary space, is of a fineness outside their range. An expert scientist has no means at his disposal sufficiently delicate to enable him to become sensible of ether: he has simply to postulate it to explain other facts. So it would be foolish, wouldn't it, even in view of that one fact, to limit our notions of what exists to what our ordinary physical senses can

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perceive? We cannot close the door to the possible existence either of finer degrees of matter or of latent, more subtle powers within ourselves which may bring them to our consciousness. You would not, I mean, say that such a possibility is outside your conception? It is not like asking you to conceive an end of space."

"Of course not," I answered.

"Very well," she proceeded. "Now, what Theosophists have done—and what many others who have not used that name have done—is to develop these latent powers. It is nothing really so very wonderful. If you lived in an empty world, you would never probably develop your power of speech; but the power would belong to you just the same. For a similar reason, the majority of people never think of attempting to develop their more subtle, psychic capacities. The few who have done so have discovered a condition of things so bewildering to the ordinary man, so remote from his experience, that it seems incredible. A Theosophist knows that all around you, close to you, are objects which you cannot see, voices which you cannot hear. The dense physical covering you wear cloaks them as effectually as a diver's helmet, if

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you suppose it without a transparent face-piece, would cloak the sights and sounds of everyday life."

She paused, as if expecting me to say something. "You don't believe it?" she asked.

"I neither believe nor disbelieve," I answered, "but I understand."

"Well, let us go a little further. Theosophy divides all existence, including the part which our senses perceive, into seven planes. They interpenetrate each other, and are spoken of as higher or lower planes according as the matter composing them is finer or denser. We are sitting here," she went on, looking round, "in a delightfully cosy room, surrounded with books and pictures, and lighted by shaded electric lamps. If we could switch our consciousness to another plane, we might find ourselves under swaying palms by the margin of a lake. If again we could switch to yet another plane, we should find still other conditions about us, some environment, perhaps, that is beyond the range of our conception. If, finally, we could revert to the physical, we should perceive once more that we are sitting in this room. I don't ask you to believe—it is exceedingly diffi-

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cult to believe until you have had experience—but I ask you again if you understand, if you follow?”

“Yes,” I replied, “perfectly.”

“I put that point,” she said, smiling, “perhaps more carefully than was necessary in your case, because I didn’t want you to get an idea of a set of tiers occupying different regions of space, as people often do from the use of the words higher and lower planes. The lowest plane, the densest, is that which you and I at present occupy, the Physical. Next above it—nearest to it, that is, in point of the density of its matter—is the plane called the Astral. That is a misleading name, and I don’t know why it was chosen, for it has no special connection with stars. Next above that again is the Devachanic Plane. Then come the Buddhic, the Nirvânic, and two others. Every individual possesses, in addition to his physical body, bodies appropriate to each of these planes, composed of matter in ascending degrees of fineness. They interpenetrate just as the planes interpenetrate, but none of course, except the physical, is perceptible by the physical senses. When a man passes out of his physical body—

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when he dies, as we say—he functions automatically in his astral body, he becomes an inhabitant of the Astral Plane. At a later stage, when similarly he casts off the astral body, he functions in his devachanic body, becomes an inhabitant of the Devachanic Plane. So, in the course of æons which we cannot measure, he will ultimately reach the highest plane of all, merge in the heart of existence, become consciously God.”

Mrs. Stuart paused. “You must forgive me for troubling you with all that,” she said. “It was necessary, in order to make what follows intelligible. I have omitted all detail. The scheme is permeated—in my view, choked—with detail. There is much about karma, and reincarnation, and the seven sub-planes, and the quickening of the elemental essence, and many other things, but I have given you the outline. Now we come to what immediately concerns us. I have told you that, at death, everyone finds himself in his astral body, with faculties attuned to astral conditions. He has cast off his physical frame permanently. But there are some people—comparatively few in the West, but many in the East—who have acquired the power to function on the astral plane

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even during life—that is, while still possessing a physical body to which they can return. My husband is one of these. I have often found him, at such times, in a state of deep trance. He warned me of this before I married him, or, rather, he asked for my coöperation. It is, in fact, very dangerous for anyone to attempt these experiments unless he has about him someone who understands the physical condition which results, for it might be mistaken for death. I suppose doctors would call it catalepsy, and that is really temporary death. It is not absolute death; some tiny spark of life remains in the body, or it could never again be inhabited by an ego. Occult science has no more power than has physical science to introduce that mysterious spark of life.”

“But,” I asked, “if a man has reached a condition of existence which, if I have followed your argument rightly, is superior to this, why should he wish to return?”

“Did I say he wished to return?” Mrs. Stuart answered. “I didn’t intend to. He doesn’t wish to return, but if his physical body is alive he *must* return. His period of freedom from prison is

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limited. It is as if he were let out on a long chain, Some are able to stretch their chains to an extent which enables them to pass right through the astral plane and enter the devachanic—the heaven world, as it is sometimes called. It is said that a few have occasionally penetrated even to the buddhic. It is unnecessary to say that those who have temporarily attained those supernal heights, who have experienced that wonderful freedom and harmony, return to the gross, clogging, jarring conditions of physical life very reluctantly. But at least their scale of values has become rightly adjusted: they have no need to postulate for poor human beings any state of torment in excess of their present sufferings. They know that the worst is here and now. *This is the hell.*”

“This!” I exclaimed.

“Are you perfectly happy? Am I? Is anyone you know, even among those of means and leisure, let alone the masses? A few perhaps, in the heyday of youth and health and strength, are relatively so. The majority is always more or less conscious of its prison, of the constant drag, the insistent necessities, the lurking terrors of

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physical life. Watch the faces of people who pass you in the street—nearly all anxious, tired, worried—at the best, indifferent—rarely a smile. To a Theosophist physical beings are all struggling heavily to make their way through a slough of the grossest kind of matter, occasionally catching passing glimpses of lighter and freer conditions.”

I had been trying, all the time she had been speaking, to find some means of applying what she said to my own bewildering experiences. Here was a woman evidently closely mixed up with the occult, with the mystical, with matters outside the ordinary knowledge and perceptions of human beings, and she had deliberately brought herself into touch with a man upon whom there centred a mystery which left common practical faculties dazed and helpless. I was very loath to relinquish the thought that the two things might in some way bear upon each other, but I could perceive as yet no connecting link between them. Mrs. Stuart had used one word that Dr. Hegiras had used, the word “catalepsy.” It was not an ordinary word—not a word you would hear in a thousand ordinary conversations—and it did not define an ordinary condition. Yet there was

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nothing in her psychical theories that I found it possible to fit to the hypothesis which the alienist had advanced, nothing that could help it or simplify it. It seemed, indeed, a wretched business to be reduced to the supposition that a woman, exceptional both in appearance and in intellect, had made her way to my flat, and had carefully expounded to me the principles of a metaphysical system, merely as the result of accident. I felt that there *must* be a linking secret somewhere, if we could extract it.

However, she had not yet finished. I was leaning towards her, resting on the elbow of my chair. "And how," I asked her, "does all this help you to explain the disappearance of your husband?"

CHAPTER XIV

ACROSS THE ABYSS

FOR several seconds Mrs. Stuart sat playing with her reticule, looking into the fire.

"It is very difficult to explain in a few words," she said at last. "You will be able to understand that, like everything else, this power of throwing yourself across the abyss into another state of being becomes increasingly easy with training and practice. I have never personally succeeded in doing it at all, but I know that it *does* become easier. When a man has reached a certain stage of expertness he can get to the lower sub-planes of the astral without even putting himself into a trance. What he does is to throw the major portion of his consciousness across, while retaining just enough in his physical frame to enable it to walk about and carry on, for a time, the mechani-

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cal offices of life. You have a close analogy in everyday experience, in the case of an old lady knitting and reading, or knitting and talking. Most of her consciousness is with her book or with her conversation, but just enough of it is with the knitting to keep her fingers moving the needles in the right way. Ordinary absence of mind is another instance of the same kind. In both those conditions, consciousness is divided, and divided in unequal degrees, not of course between the astral and physical planes, but between two sub-planes of the physical. Have I made that plain to you?"

"Perfectly," I said.

"Probably you yourself have often smoked a pipe and written a letter at the same time?"

"Often."

"You say, no doubt, that you smoke automatically; but you don't. If some difficulty in the letter calls for a sudden extra draft of consciousness to the higher plane, you find afterwards, probably, that the pipe has gone out. You cannot keep a pipe alight, you cannot go on drawing at it, unless a fraction of consciousness is retained to the business of smoking. Well, now, I think that,

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when my husband came down on the morning mentioned in the newspaper paragraph, he must have divided his consciousness, in the way I have described, between the astral and the physical. There is evidence that his mind was not centered in his usual occupations, in the fact that he did not take his rod and tackle with him when he went out. The paragraph says, too, that his manner appeared to be distrait. That is just how such a condition as I have been telling you about would present itself to an ordinary observer. There is a common phrase which exactly expresses the fact: the man is "not all there." I have constantly dreaded that he might allow himself to do this at a time when I was not present to look after him. It is a fear that has weighed on me all my married life. You see the danger? A sudden extra draft of consciousness to the astral, such as I spoke of in regard to you and your pipe, would leave the physical body helpless. It might go on moving for a time, in the strict literal sense of the word, mechanically. But think of it! In a town he would have been run down by the traffic. On a lonely moor—" She stopped. She had been speaking with difficulty.

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"You fear," I began, "that——?"

"Yes, I fear," she broke out, "that he walked blindly, like a somnambulist, into some swamp, which engulfed him completely. And I had prayed him, besought him, almost on my knees, never to do it when I was not there. So often I had implored him—" Again she stopped, her voice breaking, tears starting in her eyes.

I got up and stoked the fire, choosing lumps of coal with rather more care and deliberation than was absolutely necessary.

"But I still don't understand," I said, when I had returned to my seat, "how you came to think that my partner, Brocklebank, might be in a position to help you.

"Because my husband told me so," said Mrs. Stuart.

"Before he went to Scotland?"

"No; on the day I wrote the letter to Mr. Brocklebank."

"Well, but how can that be?" I asked. "If you have heard from him, what becomes of your theory that he walked into a swamp?"

"It remains exactly where it was." My visitor smiled through tears that had barely dried.

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"You have still some more to learn, haven't you? I hope you are not very tired?"

She said this in such a charming way, that I think, even had I been tired of the subject, I should have contrived to deny it with every appearance of truth. But, in fact, I was far from being anything of the kind: on the contrary, I was waiting for her explanation with intense curiosity, even with excitement. I shook my head.

"If I have made myself at all clear," she proceeded, "you will be able to understand that, though it is quite impossible for physical beings to perceive objects composed of the finer astral matter, it is not impossible for astral beings to perceive objects formed of the denser physical matter. Far from that, they perceive the world as we know it with perfect facility. They do so, at least, on the lower sub-planes of the astral; on the higher sub-planes they are so far from the physical that they gradually lose all consciousness of it. But though they are aware of the physical world, it is exceedingly difficult for them to communicate with it, because of our heavy material encasement. Even our atmosphere is to them dense matter. An astral being might shout at you, beat you, and

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you would be quite insensible of it. It would be like attempting to attract the attention of someone in the central chamber of a pyramid by tapping on the exterior."

"Rather tantalizing!" I said.

"Intensely tantalizing," cried Mrs. Stuart, pouncing sharply on my lightly uttered word. "Probably those who are new to astral conditions have no greater trouble to contend with. If they have any special reason for wishing to communicate, it becomes veritably a nightmare, and their unavailing efforts hold them to the lower sub-planes far beyond a normal term. There would be no possibility of communication at all, if all physical beings were constructed as the majority are constructed. But, just as there are some people who possess capacities appropriate to physical conditions which others do not possess, so there are some—only a few, if you think of the teeming millions in the world, but not few in actual numbers—who have a limited power to use on this plane their astral faculties. Those who can use the astral sight are called clairvoyants, those who can use the astral hearing are called clairaudients. Many of them are employed as

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professional mediums between the physical and astral planes. I myself have a very slight power of clairvoyance, and rather more of clairaudience. Now," she suggested, looking at me with a smile, "you see what we are coming to?"

"You have had some communication in this way, from your husband?"

"On the morning that I wrote to your partner," she said, "just as I was waking, I become temporarily clairaudient. To be more precise, I retained in physical consciousness the remnant of a power which I had probably been exercising completely during sleep. I heard my husband's voice. One does not hear, as one hears in ordinary experience, with the ears, but with the whole of one's being. The effect is of a sound coming from within, not from without. He gave me Mr. Brocklebank's name and address. I repeated it aloud, again and again, to stamp it on my memory, and as soon as I could get paper and pencil, wrote it down."

"That would not necessarily mean," I put in, "if I have understood what you have been saying, that he was dead?"

"No, in his case, it wouldn't: it would mean only

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that he was on the astral when he spoke. He might have been alive then; he might be alive now. He has often spoken to me from the astral before, in order to test my powers and to give me opportunities to train them. But this message was not of that kind. He was speaking earnestly, urgently, and he was trying to say more—or rather, he was trying to make me hear more. But I couldn't. His voice became indistinct and intermittent and small—like a voice a long, long way off, or as if it were fathoms deep in the sea—it went farther and farther down, it wavered and struggled and died, and I remained conscious only of the physical sounds about me.”

Mrs. Stuart stopped speaking, and for two or three minutes the ensuing silence was unbroken. I was sitting with one knee drawn up between my hands, staring into the fire.

“All I retained,” my companion's voice resumed, “was a slip of paper bearing the words—WILLIAM BROCKLEBANK, 51, FRIAR'S COURT, MARK LANE, LONDON. Now, why did he give me that name?”

I still made no immediate reply. The circumstances surrounding Brocklebank were so

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peculiar, that I felt bound to pass them carefully, one by one, under review, to see if they could suggest an answer to Mrs. Stuart's question. He himself, I knew very well, would confidently put down all I had been hearing to fairy tales. He would be ready with an explanation, but it would be an explanation of a definitely rationalistic kind. He would, in fact—I felt very little doubt of it—impugn Mrs. Stuart's bona fides. Of course that was a possibility which had to be looked at, which one naturally and inevitably looked at. I discarded it utterly. In the first place, I could see no motive for the elaborate imposture that would have to be assumed. In particular, I could discern no means whereby it could lead to an extortion of money. But granting that the story I had listened to could be supposed to be in some way a prelude to a scheme for raising the wind, a credulous and superstitious person would surely have been chosen for the recipient of it; it would not have been launched (for, of course, this interview had been arranged for Brocklebank) upon one of the hardest materialists and skeptics in London. But, far more than by such arguments, I was convinced of Mrs. Stuart's good faith by the

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woman herself, by the charm and obvious sincerity of her personality. I felt indeed, with a slight, quick flush of heat, that it was an offense to her that such thoughts should be passing through my mind.

It was necessary, therefore, to accept her story as she related it, and to believe that she had obtained Brocklebank's name and address, either in a dream, or, as she supposed, through her possession of the unusual and questioned power called clairaudience. But why had she been directed to Brocklebank? What connection could he have with her husband?

Had the latter disappeared in Switzerland instead of in Scotland, I should have felt called upon to tell her of the recent circumstances in Brocklebank's history. For in that case one could not quite have excluded the possibility that, at a time when he was not normally responsible for his actions, the latter had found Mr. Stuart's body and had disposed of it, after taking possession of his clothes and valuables. I remembered Brocklebank's own statement that he would have no compunction in stealing anything he needed, if he could safely do so. It was certainly neces-

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sary to admit, in view of what had happened, that he might have returned to England by the date of Mr. Stuart's disappearance. But for what imaginable reason could he have set off immediately to the Highlands of Scotland? And how could one account for his taking such a journey without retaining the smallest recollection of it? There existed the possibility that the Theosophist had not gone for a walk on the moor, as supposed, but had taken train for London, and had there met Brocklebank, perhaps at the Great Northern Hotel, and given him some information. If that were the case, the latter would be able to carry it to Mrs. Stuart when he met her.

There remained one further possibility, which could not quite be left out of account. If Mr. Stuart was dead, as appeared probable, the two men had died about the same time. They might, therefore, presuming Mrs. Stuart's metaphysical theories to be sound, or to be reared on a basis of truth, have become associated in some extra-physical condition, such as she called the Astral Plane. But how would that help us? There had been nothing in my visitor's statement suggesting that her husband, for all the supernormal

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powers attributed to him and his investigations of the occult, could perform miracles, that he would be in a position to offer Brocklebank information enabling him to live again; and certainly there was nothing about Brocklebank himself and his recollections to tempt one to regard him as a messenger from the unseen.

I pushed such thoughts aside. From no point of view could I discern any reason for disclosing the unexplained and, except for Dr. Hegiras's suggestion, the apparently inexplicable mystery surrounding my partner. I was very reluctant to speak of it except under a clear imperative. Several recent experiences had shown me that it was necessarily received with incredulity, and that I was accused, in assorted shades of candor, of being either a liar or a madman. And I was growing more and more sensitive to, and more and more resentful of, that class of criticism.

"Frankly, I don't know," I replied at last to Mrs. Stuart's question. "I should regard William Brocklebank as just about the last man in the world to concern himself seriously with the phenomena which your husband has been investigating. He is a secularist and a materi-

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alist of the hardest and most uncompromising type."

"Perhaps that is the reason why his name was given to me," said Mrs. Stuart. "A Theosophist doesn't seek knowledge solely for its own sake, as a scientist does. He seeks it in order to be in a better position to help any of his fellow-men who may be in difficulties."

I could not keep back a smile. "Brocklebank doesn't regard himself as being in difficulties," I said. "We are the people, according to him, who are in difficulties."

Mrs. Stuart passed from this. "Why were you so long in answering my question?" she asked.

"Because I wanted to go through all I know about my partner," I answered, "to see if I could suggest an explanation."

"And none occurred to you?"

"I can think of only one possibility," I said, "and that a remote one. If your husband did not go on the moor when he left the hotel, but took a train to London, he might have come across Brocklebank. There is just that slender chance that my partner may be able to tell you something.

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I'm afraid I can think of nothing else. Anyhow, you would like to meet him, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes, please," she said. "Will he, or will you, ring me up when he is well enough to see me? I am staying at the Cecil."

"Yes, of course," I answered. "I'll ring you up to-morrow in any case. I wish I could do more to help you."

She rose. "It has been very good of you to listen so patiently," she said, giving me her hand. "I am afraid you must have found me and my woes very tiresome."

"On the contrary," I replied, "you have widened my horizon and given me lots to think about." I glanced towards a spirit-stand and glasses. "Can I offer you any bachelor fare?"

"Nothing, thank you," she said, shaking her head. "We are teetotallers and vegetarians and all the horrible things."

"Well, I admit," I said, as we walked out of the room, "that it does sometimes strike me as rather a barbarous business to kill and eat animals. But why not enjoy in moderation the fruits of the earth, in the shape of wine?"

I opened the door of the flat. She glanced at

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me with a humorous, deprecating smile. "Some day," she said, "I hope we shall talk of all these things."

"I hope so too," said I.

When I had closed the door behind her and turned back into the flat, I noticed on a table in the hall a letter which had arrived by the evening post. It bore a Swiss stamp and the Geneva postmark.

My thoughts were jerked back from Mrs. Stuart's affairs to the grim specter haunting my own hearth. I saw shadows crossing the open mouth of a furnace and a white, still form lying in its glare; I saw the features of Brocklebank calm as marble. The picture swept away and another took its place: a coffin that stirred, a coffin that rocked irregularly, a coffin that heaved up its lid bit by bit, till knotted, lacerated hands got through and a terrible contorted face appeared at the cleft.

I went into my study, closed the door, and opened the letter. The following is a translation of what I read:

"DEAR SIR,

"In reply to your esteemed communication, we

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take the liberty to inform you that, on the date mentioned, the body of an adult male was brought here for cremation. According to the authorizing papers supplied, the name of the deceased was 'William Brocklebank.' The incineration was carefully carried out in the presence of one member of the bereaved family, the body being completely consumed in the space of an hour and a half. Subsequently the ashes were handed to the widow in a light metal casket specially made to her instructions.

"Begging you, Sir, to accept the assurance of our high consideration and esteem, we have the honor to be," etc.

I tossed the letter into the air. So my eyes had not deceived me. Not only was I sane now, but I had been steadily sane all through.

I went to the side table and mixed myself a glass of whisky and Schweppe.

CHAPTER XV

THE MEETING

THE next morning, to my surprise, Brocklebank arrived at the office at his customary hour. The oil of rosemary, it appeared, had worked wonders, and he was in high spirits. Nevertheless, my inexplicable feeling of aversion to the man, of repugnance to his society, had steadily grown during the last fortnight, and nothing he could say or do, no revelation of personal characteristics, however intrinsically admirable or delightful, could remove it. I got used to him as I talked to him, but always at first I had this feeling of repugnance. When I saw him standing in the doorway leading from his office to mine, evidently enjoying my surprise, I felt an inward shrinking from him and breathed an inward hope that at least he would not touch me.

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"Your friend is a magician," he said. "Has she any more specifics of the same kind? If so, I'm willing to go into partnership on liberal terms. I'll sink a little capital and we'll come out as 'Magical Cures Unlimited.' Not only should we make a fortune, but the undertaking would have the secondary advantage of benefiting the human race."

"You are better?" I asked.

"Absolutely well. Convey to the lady my grateful thanks."

"She still wants to see you," I said.

"A woman of her evident discernment naturally would."

"What night will suit you? Make it as soon as possible: she is in London on purpose."

"I'm overwhelmed. To-night," he said.

"Right. I'll ring her up."

"What was the explanation?" he asked.

"It's too long a story to begin now. Come early to-night, and I'll tell you before she arrives."

Throughout that day my thoughts reverted again and again to my visitor of the previous evening. I retained a vivid impression of her wonderful face, her calm introspective eyes, her

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obvious distress, the quiet flow of her voice as she had talked of things utterly outside the domain of ordinary experience with the simple certitude that might have accompanied a description of travels in India. The more I thought about her, the more convinced I became of her sincerity, the more strongly I felt that her account of the means whereby she had become possessed of Brocklebank's address—whatever might be the psychological explanation—must be accepted.

That my partner's own view would not coincide with this was immediately apparent when he came to my flat in the evening. He arrived half an hour before the time I had appointed with Mrs. Stuart and took the chair which she had occupied twenty-four hours earlier.

"What do you think of Theosophy?" I asked him. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Anything about it!" he exclaimed. "I used to know a man who talked of nothing else."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"Theosophists," he replied, "are people who believe everything. They believe in angels, devils, fairies, vampires, salamanders, werewolves—everything. Their credulity is without limit."

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"You must keep those views to yourself when our visitor comes," I said. "She is a Theosophist."

"Oh, I see." His face was screwed up in a way which indicated a satisfactory comprehension of human guile. "She has been talking to me on the astral plane. That explains the letter. Does she see elementals under the chairs?"

"She never mentioned the word."

"Oh, she doesn't play her part well. The correct form is to gaze for half a minute into vacancy with glassy eyes, then to point with the forefinger outstretched and say, 'There's a horrible elemental under your chair.' That makes you jump."

"What's an elemental?" I asked.

"A horrid beast, resembling your sins, gibbering at you. It's beneath the dignity of a Theosophist to say he believes in devils, so he calls them elementals. Did she tell you about the loathsome seventh sub-plane?"

"She said something about sub-planes."

"But the seventh," said Brocklebank, "is a very special dish. It is reserved for you and me, and others of the carnally minded. A Theoso-

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phist is too much of a philosopher to say he believes in hell, so he calls it the seventh sub-plane."

"According to Mrs. Stuart," I said, "so far as I followed her, there is nothing worse than this world. She calls this hell, in a relative sense."

"Yes, for spiritually minded Theosophists. But for you and me—for beer drinkers and those who attend to the lusts of the flesh—there's the dickens of a slimy patch, full of creeping things. Did she tell you about the walking corpses you are liable to meet?"

"Not a word."

"Oh, she skipped all the horrors."

"Well, she said that she thought the whole conception was choked with detail."

"I quite agree with her," said Brocklebank: "choked to death."

I told him Mrs. Stuart's story exactly as she had given it to me. He made no comment until I finished, merely nodding his head from time to time to indicate that he followed.

"Well," I asked, at the end, "what do you make of it?"

"Just what I made of it before," he replied.

"I've forgotten what that was."

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"My fatal beauty."

"Be serious for a few minutes."

"I *am* serious," he maintained. "For some reason or other, she wants to get to know me, and so she has concocted this story. Probably it's a device to obtain money."

This was precisely the attitude I had anticipated he would take; yet I felt indignant.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew her," I said.

"She evidently knew her man," he asserted. "Your simple faith is touching. Of course she is personally attractive and well dressed: they always are. Probably the police have a list of convictions."

"Then how do you get over the newspaper cutting?"

"That's genuine, very likely. It may have suggested the scheme, whatever it is. She could easily take a name to correspond. No doubt she is used to it."

"But she wrote from a good address, and she is staying at the Cecil."

"How do you know she is."

"She told me so."

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"My *dear* Reece! And even if she were, that wouldn't clear her."

"Oh, I dare say I am very gullible," I said. "But, anyhow, as it happens, I am not her man, whom you say she knew. *You* are her man. You are the person she expected to talk to. I only came into it accidentally."

"Yes, she made a mistake," he said. "She may have heard some of these stories that are floating round about me and have got a wrong impression."

"Then it comes to this: you don't accept a word of what she says?"

"A word here and there," he answered; "but you can't expect me to believe in astral bodies and mysterious voices."

"Why not?"

"Because I have a rough working basis of common-sense about me."

"You might very well have that," I said, "and yet be less obstinately imbedded in sheer materialism."

"Well, but look at the thing," he said. "Even you can't pretend to think that she has been having mysterious vocal communications from a man

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who is dead, or who, at any rate, has mislaid himself in Scotland."

"Yes, I do," I said flatly.

He laughed and took out his cigarette case. "Oh, you would believe anything."

"Do you believe," I asked him, "that two people separated by hundreds of miles, and not connected in any way, can speak to each other?"

"You are thinking of wireless telegraphy?"

"I am applying no name to it," I said, "that or any other. I merely make a statement and ask you if you believe it."

"Of course I believe it. It's a fact."

"Yet, a few years ago—twenty or thirty years ago—if I had said that I believed it, you would have told me that I would believe anything."

He laughed again. "Very probably."

"Do you believe," I asked further, "that your body is entirely composed of minute moving units of electricity—that it is, in fact, material only to our coarse senses?"

"Are you talking about the divisibility of atoms, the new electron theory?"

"Again," I said, "I am not applying any

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names to what I say: I'm simply making a statement and asking if you believe it."

"It seems as if we had to believe it. And why not?" he asked. "If a thing exists at all, it's neither more nor less incomprehensible as electricity than as matter."

"Common-sense doesn't get in the way," I said, "because Science has recently given it its blessing. Now I heard to-day—I've been talking about this subject—that Theosophists have been saying the same thing for years, but people like you, who have got a rough working basis of common-sense, treated their statements as the meanderings of harmless lunatics."

"If they really said that," Brocklebank declared, "they made a good shot. Even old Moore does that occasionally."

"That might be the explanation or it might not. I'm not prepared to dogmatize, as you are. I can't see that it is necessary to rule a thing out absolutely, unless it is a proven scientific fact. Science moves comparatively slowly; its methods necessitate that it should. Other less exact and minute ways of discovering truths go ahead of it, philosophy for instance. Philosophers have been

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telling us for ages that there is no such thing as objective reality, that only the ego exists. People called it metaphysical subtlety and took no notice. But Science has now cut down the whole objective universe to electricity, perhaps to ether, so we are getting on."

"I didn't say we weren't," said Brocklebank.

"Well, but this is my point," I went on: "You will naturally admit that there are still, probably, a good many things in the cosmos which Science hasn't found out?"

"Naturally."

"Then why say so positively that occultism, mysticism, psychical research, or whatever you like to call it, cannot have got into touch with any of those things?"

"Oh, the whole thing is tomfoolery."

"That's sheer dogmatism again. And a man who takes his stand by Science ought to be the last to dogmatize about what he doesn't know. For my part, I neither believe nor disbelieve; but it seems to me to be quite possible that these people, Theosophists, Spiritualists—I admit that many of them are cranks and humbugs and washy sentimentalists, but the genuine ones, the practical

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ones—may be doing things, using forces, without knowing the how and the why of them. Later on, Science will come along in its leisurely way, step by step, and tell us the how and the why.”

“Well, so long as it satisfies you,” said Brocklebank, throwing the end of his cigarette into the fire.

If he intended to say any more it was cut short, for at that moment the door opened and Mrs. Stuart was announced.

She came in, as she had done on the previous evening, a wonderfully striking, almost queenly figure; but now her face was lighted by a friendly smile of greeting as she gave me her hand. Even while I held it, even while she was speaking, I saw the smile vanish and a series of startling, kaleidoscopic changes of expression chase one another across her features—incredulity, sudden joy, mystification, and, slowly, something like fear. Brocklebank had risen behind me. It was at him she was looking.

“Mr. Brocklebank,” I said.

Mrs. Stuart withdrew her hand from mine. In a few moments, the blood which had left her

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cheeks flowed back and her face resumed its normal expression.

"Do forgive me," she said to Brocklebank, "I'm afraid I must have startled you. You are so like my husband that for a moment I thought you were he. At least," she said, examining him and hesitating, "when I first came into the room I thought you were like him, but, now that I really look at you, I don't know that you are."

Brocklebank's cheeks were widening, his eyes were twinkling. "It's just like my bad luck," he said, "that you discovered your mistake in time."

Mrs. Stuart laughed. "Oh, that *would* have been a catastrophe," she said.

"Far from that," said Brocklebank, "it might have saved one: I should have sent Reece straight home to tell the Chicken that someone appreciated me."

"And who is the Chicken?" asked Mrs. Stuart.

"The Chicken," said Brocklebank, "is my wife, who, I regret to say, has recently developed a serious blindness to her husband's merits."

Mrs. Stuart looked at him for a few seconds. "I'm so sorry," she said, sitting down.

It was a trite sentence, but it was not spoken

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in a trite way. She really felt it. Her quick sensibility had discovered, in a few minutes, what was hidden from most of his friends, what I myself only vaguely guessed, that he did feel, and feel keenly, the estrangement from his wife.

"You were rather out in your reckoning, Reece," said Brocklebank, dropping back into his chair. "It was lucky for you that you didn't take my bet."

"What was the bet about?" asked Mrs. Stuart.

"Oh, that's a dark mystery," he replied.

"Has Mr. Reece told you everything that I told him yesterday?"

"Very carefully," said Brocklebank.

"Can you explain it?"

"Not in the least," he answered; "but I'm very grateful to the astral voices."

"If you were truthful and impolite," she said, "you would say that you don't believe me."

"Then I won't be truthful and impolite. But what have I done to call down such an impeachment?"

"You don't look like a true believer."

"Reece has been telling tales," he asserted.

"A few; but I think I should have known."

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She looked at him with a sudden turn to seriousness, even with appeal. "Call it fancy, if you like, Mr. Brocklebank," she said, "but it is true that I learnt your name and address in the way I have explained. That must mean *something*. Will you, in spite of your skepticism, search your memory for a possible clue?"

"That is exactly what I have been doing," said Brocklebank; "and the result, I regret to report, is practically nil."

"You have not met my husband?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Or heard from him?"

He shook his head.

"Nobody has spoken to you about him?"

"I have no recollection of it."

"Then what did you mean when you said the result was *practically* nil?"

"I think I might have said totally nil," he answered; "but your name, in some way, is familiar."

Mrs. Stuart became alert. "My surname?" she asked.

"Yes; I don't remember your Christian name."

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She drew a deep sigh. "At last *something!*" she said.

"Oh no, no," said Brocklebank hastily, with his laugh; "you mustn't build on it. It's too vague. It's nothing."

"But you meant specially and recently familiar?" she asked. "Of course everybody has heard the name."

"Yes," he answered, "specially and recently, but very dim and evasive. It is mixed up with other dim and evasive things that have got into my orbit lately. I think I have seen it written."

"Just the surname."

"No," he answered, after a pause, "there was an initial."

"What initial?" Mrs. Stuart was watching him eagerly now, waiting, it was clear, with acute but repressed anxiety for every answer.

Brocklebank stuck his two hands together under his chin and stared straight in front of him—a way he had when he was thinking.

"It might be L," he said, at last, "or it might be V, or it might be F. I think it was one of the three."

Mrs. Stuart opened her chain-bag and took out

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a letter. She folded it, so as to leave only a part of the writing visible, and handed it to him. "Is that handwriting familiar?" she asked.

"The weather remains fairly good," he read aloud, "but the fish are shy." He shook his head and passed the letter back to her. "No," he said; "we draw that covert blank."

"If I wrote down the name with each of the initials, it might help you to remember where you saw it," said Mrs. Stuart. "Will you give me some paper, please, Mr. Reece?"

I got a sheet and handed it to her on a writing-pad. Brocklebank passed her a pencil from his pocket.

"I'm not sure about it being written," he said. "I rather think it was printed."

"Very well. I'll try to print it. What initials did you say? L? Yes. S—T—U—I'm afraid my printing is not very good—" Suddenly she stopped. She was looking at the pencil-case in her hand. Slowly she raised her head and looked at Brocklebank, the expression of her face completely changed. "Will you tell me where you got this pencil?" she asked.

"Certainly," said Brocklebank. "I awoke

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one morning and found that Father Christmas had left it."

She stared at him.

"Surely Father Christmas isn't beyond a Theosophist?" he suggested, smiling broadly. "You are not going to say you don't believe in him?"

She turned to me. "What does he mean?" she asked.

"He had an illness which left his memory impaired," I said. "When he recovered he found himself in possession of that pencil-case, among other things. No one can explain it."

"Lots of other things," said Brocklebank, cheerfully; "in fact, a full equipment."

"Can you show me some of the other things?"

He felt in his pockets and took out first a flexible nail-file and then a small leather sovereign purse, both of which he handed to her.

"There are some more, if you'll wait a minute," he said, still feeling in his pockets. "There was a bunch of keys, but they're no use and I don't carry them about."

Mrs. Stuart examined the articles, turned them over. Then she looked up.

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"These are my husband's things," she announced, quietly.

For some minutes, since the handing out of the articles began, I had been vaguely prepared for her to say this, but the definite statement was no less astonishing and bewildering.

Brocklebank, for his part, was in no way perturbed. He looked very solemn. "I must have met him on the astral," he said. "Here's another." He handed her a crocodile-leather cigarette case.

Mrs. Stuart looked at it. "This couldn't have belonged to my husband," she said. "He doesn't smoke."

"Evidently I met several benevolent friends," said Brocklebank.

Mrs. Stuart had opened the case. "There appears to be a piece of soft folded paper behind the cigarettes," she said.

Brocklebank looked. "Oh, I thought that was part of the wadding," he said.

Mrs. Stuart took out the paper and unfolded it. "It's the bill," she said. "You bought the case at an Edinburgh store."

"Never been in Scotland in my life," said Brocklebank.

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"Look at it." Mrs. Stuart showed him the bill. "'W. Brocklebank, Esq., one cigarette case, seven and six.' That's not the bill in ink which they send you by post: it's the soft duplicate form which they hand you across the counter and which you pay at the desk."

"What was it Horatio said?" asked Brocklebank.

"Exactly what I've been telling you, Brocklebank," I said. "But Horatio didn't say it."

"On the assumption that visions are about," he said to Mrs. Stuart, "how do you account for this?"

"We can account for it without visions," she answered: "you must have been in Scotland, you must have met my husband, and you must have bought a cigarette case."

"You said you remembered being in a shop," I reminded him.

Brocklebank, as usual, found a humorous aspect in the situation that was unfolding. His eyes were twinkling, laughter was bubbling up in him. "But why should I go to Scotland even in a dream?" he asked. "And how do I come to be in possession of jewelry and trinkets and articles

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of wearing apparel belonging to a man whose acquaintance I have yet to make?"

We made no reply and a short silence followed. The humor apparent to Brocklebank did not appeal to me and did not, evidently, appeal to Mrs. Stuart. It was present in both our minds, I think, that his sentence might have concluded: "belonging to a man who has disappeared, and whose body, probably, is lying at the bottom of a marsh in Scotland." I began to perceive, indeed, that, if Mr. Stuart's body should be found, there would be circumstantial evidence to support a charge of murder against Brocklebank. He could be proved to be in possession of articles of value belonging to the former, he could be proved, by the date on the bill for the cigarette case, to have been in Scotland on the day that he disappeared, and he could be proved to have arrived, late on that same evening, at a hotel adjoining the London terminus of the Great Northern Railway.

While these thoughts were passing through my mind, I noticed that Mrs. Stuart was looking at him intently. The expression of her face, which at first was speculative, changed slowly until it indicated, unmistakably, dread, even horror.

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"Will you let me look at your hand, the right one?" she asked suddenly. There was a queer husky, nervous stress in her voice.

Brocklebank readily stretched out his hand and laid it within hers. "Take as long as you like," he said; "there's no hurry."

Mrs. Stuart, however, took a very short time, and then, with evident difficulty, said, "Thank you."

Brocklebank affected to be intensely reproachful and indignant. "But you can't read a hand as quickly as that?" he said. "I've been told that I have a very interesting left hand. The love line is in the left hand."

My eyes were on Mrs. Stuart. She was gazing at him in a fascinated way, but recoiling from him, drawing into herself with a look on her face of unutterable repugnance and loathing. What she had seen on his hand I could not imagine, but it was something, clearly, which had shocked and revolted her through and through.

Fortunately Brocklebank himself did not notice the change that had come over her. He had launched upon a funny story about palmistry.

Before he was half through with it, Mrs. Stuart

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rose, with a hasty, half-uttered apology, and said she must go.

Brocklebank got up, expostulating. "It's against all social canons," he said. "Just as we were getting friendly!"

She made a movement of her head—it was barely a nod—in his direction, and fled, rather than walked, out of the room.

I followed, completely at sea. At the hall door she turned to me.

"I must speak to you," she said quickly, with strange agitation, "I must speak to you at once. Will you come to my hotel?"

"Yes," I answered. "Give me just one moment."

I returned to the study. Brocklebank was standing by the mantelpiece, lighting a cigarette.

"That was a cleverish trick to get my gold pencil-case," he said.

"I am going to take Mrs. Stuart home," I informed him.

He made a great parade of protest. "I refuse my consent. Mrs. Stuart is my find, not yours. You're trespassing."

"Help yourself to whisky," I said and closed the door upon him.

CHAPTER XVI

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I HAVE no recollection that a single word was spoken, either by Mrs. Stuart or by me, during the drive to the hotel. She was deeply engrossed in her own thoughts, and I did not break in upon them. I was conscious, I remember, as I looked out of the window of the taxi-cab at the traffic of Oxford Street, of a feeling of lightness, of exhilaration. That was due, I think, in part, to the pure spirit of adventure, and, in part, to the sense that my companion was an unusually capable woman, working in an unusual field of inquiry, and that she, if anyone, might be expected to be able to throw some light upon a mystery which had hung over me like a nightmare for more than a fortnight, and which became only more impenetrable and bewildering

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with every addition to my knowledge of the circumstances surrounding it. The revelations at my flat had shown me only that there was *some* connecting link between the affair of Brocklebank and the affair of Stuart.

When we reached the Hotel Cecil, Mrs. Stuart took me to a sitting-room on the second floor. She did not sit or ask me to sit, but, as soon as the door was closed, turned to me and asked:

"I want you to tell me if anything strange has happened to Mr. Brocklebank recently, within the last few weeks, anything for which you cannot account? You spoke of a loss of memory."

I had been expecting some such question as this, and had determined to answer it.

"Something so strange has happened to him," I said, "that I do not expect you to believe it when I tell it, something so strange that, though I was an eye-witness of all that occurred, I could not believe it myself, I doubted my sanity and have even consulted a specialist in disorders of the brain."

Mrs. Stuart merely nodded. Then I related to her all the material circumstances of Brocklebank's recent history, from the date of our journey

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to Chamonix to the moment when he reappeared in my office.

"Less than a month ago," I concluded, "I saw Brocklebank dead; I saw him cremated; and now he is alive."

Mrs. Stuart had listened without making any comment.

"You are incredulous?" I said.

"No."

"You *believe* it?" I asked in amazement.

"Yes."

"I not only believe it," she added, "but I should have found the greatest difficulty in believing anything materially different from what you have told me."

She walked across the room to a writing table and, for the first time since our entrance, sat down. A leather escritoire was standing on the table. She unlocked this and took out a sheet of paper.

"Since my husband's disappearance," she said, "I have written down everything that has come through from him. Except for the name and address that I got on the morning that I have told you about, when for a few minutes I was peculiarly receptive, there is very little, only four

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words: 'body,' 'dead,' 'trance,' and again 'body.'

"I thought," she went on, "that he was trying to tell me that he had died in a trance and where his body was to be found. It was partly on that account that I got the impression that he had walked into a swamp; and, my mind being pre-possessed with that idea, it would be more than ever difficult for him to bring his meaning to my intelligence. I know now that I was wrong; that he was not referring to his own death but to that of someone else. To-night I have discovered everything that he has been trying to tell me."

I was standing, watching her, my elbow resting on the mantelpiece.

"Sit down," she said. "We have a lot to talk about. Have you no impression of the truth?"

I was afraid that she was going to accuse Brocklebank of murder.

"I realize, of course," I answered, "as you told Brocklebank, that he has probably somehow met your husband."

"I was mistaken," she said. "They have never met."

I drew a breath of relief. "But in that case,"

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I said, "how did he come into possession of his things? Do you mean that he stole them?"

"More than that."

"Just tell me," she went on, "how did you recognize Mr. Brocklebank when he reappeared? You say he had changed."

"Very much," I answered.

"His hair had changed, his hands had changed, his features had become finer, his build lighter. What did you recognize?"

I reflected for a few moments. "It is really very difficult to say," I replied. "A man may change outwardly to a very large extent indeed, but you know it is he. You can't mistake him, unless a number of years have elapsed, when his very nature and character may have altered or developed."

"What you recognized, in fact," suggested Mrs. Stuart, "was the essential man?"

"Precisely."

"Then it ought not to be immensely difficult for you to understand what I am going to tell you." She looked straight into my eyes—I was sitting facing her across the table, my chin on my hands. "That man—your partner, the man who calls

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himself Brocklebank—is using my husband's body."

I stared at her for a while, scarcely grasping her meaning. To one whose whole training and habit of thought had been to regard a man and his body as an inseparable unit, the idea propounded was by no means so simple of apprehension as it had been to Mrs. Stuart, who divided the two as easily as she divided the clothes from the wearer.

"Did you hear me, Mr. Reece?" she asked, still looking at me, when perhaps a minute had passed in silence.

"Yes—I'm thinking," I answered.

Then suddenly I saw again, as in my flat, an expression of unutterable repulsion pass over her face. "But can't you see the horror of it?" she cried out. "Can't you understand what it is to me to see the face I have loved laughing in that alien way? To see the features I know so well, so intimately, put to strange coarse uses, utterly desecrated?"

The depth and reality of the sentiment pervading her drove into my understanding with far greater force than had her mere statement. She was speaking of what was to her a live and atrocious

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actuality. Moreover, I connected it with the inexplicable repugnance to Brocklebank that had been growing in my own soul, and with the horror he had inspired in the breast of his wife. "I don't only fear him," I remembered her saying, "I hate him."

As Mrs. Stuart's meaning took hold of me, as it fitted itself slowly to facts of my own experience and gathered conviction, I was not immediately impressed by its bearing upon ourselves and our personal problems. Those latter were, for a time, overwhelmed by a dazed and giddy sense of the immense, the immeasurable significance of such an occurrence—had it indeed occurred—to the whole body of humanity. Was the individual being, as a separable entity, surviving death, a proven fact? Was the question which, for time beyond reckoning, had divided thinkers and feelers, reason and instinct, here solved? Was it solved against himself through the agency of Brocklebank—Brocklebank the materialist?

Mrs. Stuart's voice recalled me from these speculations to their starting point. "Does it seem so inconceivable?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "I can't say that. It

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fits, curiously. But I can't go all the way, all at once."

"I haven't had time yet," she said quietly, "to think out the detail. I mean, I can't say positively, at this moment, how the change was effected. But I am as sure of the fact itself as I am sure that I am talking to you. I was misled at first because the man himself so obviously was not my husband. When it came out that he was in possession of the pencil-case and the other things, I looked at him more closely, I looked at his features, I mean, eliminating the personality behind. They were altered and altering, the man Brocklebank had already stamped much of his individuality upon them, but I could not mistake them. Then I asked to see his hand. He imagined I professed to be a palmist. So did you, I think?"

"Yes," I said.

"I thought so. People always appear to suppose that Theosophy is a kind of fortune-telling. They lump us with palmists and astrologers and cranks and swindlers generally. It is nothing of the kind. I make no more pretension than you do to be able to tell fortunes, and it wasn't to

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read his lines that I asked the man to let me look at his right hand. It was because I wanted to see if he had a long scar running right across his wrist, a scar very familiar to me. I found it. It was then that I came away. My last particle of doubt had gone, and I could not remain in the same room with him any longer."

"I have had a similar feeling," I admitted, "during the last fortnight—a queer, instinctive aversion—for which I could not account."

"Your senses were quicker than your mind; they were telling you what you could not interpret. That man has no right to be here," she cried out, with sudden vehemence. "One's whole soul revolts against him. He is dead. His presence is a horrible and offensive intrusion."

"But it is impossible for me to accept this," I said, "as simply as you are able to accept it. You are asking me to believe that something has happened which is outside all human knowledge and experience."

"Oh, no," she answered, "it has often happened before; but never, to my knowledge, in this way. It is the means and the object, not the fact, that are so revolting. There is a good deal that

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is esoteric in Theosophy—necessarily so. Phenomena are discovered and investigated, but are not yet understood, and, while that is the case, to publish the facts from the housetops would be not only useless, but harmful. If you are interested in the subject and will come to see me some day at Illingham, I can give you names and particulars in a number of cases: they are all in the Theosophical records. There is no question whatever that this transference of a physical body from one occupant to another has often been carried out. There are people living on this plane at this moment who have never been born in our sense, and there are people no longer living on this plane who have never died in our sense. But in all such cases the transference has been carried out with the consent and by the desire of the living person, of the person, that is, possessing a physical body. Now my husband has not willingly relinquished his body; of that I am sure. He had no desire to die yet; physical life maintained its hold on him and its interest for him. His body, beyond doubt, has been stolen, deliberately appropriated when it had been temporarily vacated. It is the most iniquitous and horrible

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form of larceny that anyone could commit or imagine."

It was not, for all that, I conjectured, one that would be ruled out by Brocklebank's code of ethics. To reproduce ourselves and to get the better of other people, I had heard him say, were the sole purposes of existence. Granting Mrs. Stuart's premises, I could conceive him finding a very humorous flavor in the trick he had played upon the unfortunate Theosophist.

"But will you tell me," I asked, "exactly what you suppose has happened?"

"I am not prepared yet," she replied, "as I warned you, to commit myself to every detail, but I can tell you generally what certainly has occurred. Your partner, Brocklebank, died about the beginning of the last week in August."

"On the 22d," I said.

"On the 22d; nearly a week before my husband's disappearance. That happened on the 28th. During the interval Brocklebank was dead: he had no place or part in physical life. He would remain generally conscious of it, but be unable to participate in it. A Theosophist says he was functioning in his astral body on the

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Astral Plane; but you need not, unless you like, accept that phraseology. Well, what would be the attitude of such a man in such circumstances? You tell me he is earth bound, enslaved to the material conditions which the physical senses cognize; without aspirations to any finer or fuller development; regarding this heavy, enervating existence as 'our one chance.' That is so?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, then, what would be his attitude when he found himself removed from a state that to him is everything?"

"I agree," I answered, "that he would probably want to get back to it."

"He would want to get back to it; he would look upon himself as having been deprived by death of something desirable that was legitimately his. And the only possible means whereby he could again enter the physical plane would be by occupying somebody else's body, by committing the awful larceny that I have spoken about. Do you deny him the will to do that, presuming he had the power?"

"He might not quite realize the effect," I said;

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"he would be obsessed by his desire; but no, I don't."

"I have told you that it can be done," Mrs. Stuart went on, "and he would find ready helpers, those who have acquired powers as yet imperfectly understood and are prepared to use them unscrupulously. Theosophists call them black magicians. They are like our anarchists—enigmatical, malignant—soured, perhaps, and spiteful—whose only object seems to be to upset normal processes and produce a condition of chaos. They would help him, they would be glad to find a man willing to undertake such a part. Sometime between the morning of the 28th of August, when my husband disappeared, and the morning of the 29th, when Brocklebank awoke to physical consciousness in the Great Northern Hotel, the change must have been effected."

"Do you mean," I asked, "that, at that particular time, your husband would inevitably be the victim, that there would be no one else possible?"

"Oh, dear, no! His field of choice would be quite wide, for besides all the students in occult schools who have acquired the power to leave their physical bodies almost at will—a very

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numerous class, particularly in the east—there are numbers of people who involuntarily and habitually do so during ordinary sleep, though they remain on this plane totally unconscious of their experiences. But he would naturally choose a man of his own race and of similar age, and one whose body possessed a general correspondence in build and cast of features to the one he had lost.”

“But in temperament and character,” I objected, “your husband was evidently entirely different.”

“That wouldn’t matter. He was not concerned with the man, but only with the material structure he inhabited. Having obtained possession of a body, he would force it to the uses he desired and quickly impress upon its features his own prevailing characteristics. I was horrified, as I have told you, to see to-night the extent to which he has already done that.”

“But there would be a limit,” I said, “to his power of forcing a body immediately to the uses he desired. For some purposes the muscles have to be trained to obey the will, and if they had had no previous training—” I stopped abruptly. A

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recollection had sprung into my mind. "Did your husband play golf?" I asked.

"No."

"Did he drive a motor car?"

"No," she replied again; "his only hobby was fishing."

"And I believe you said he was very abstemious?"

"He was a teetotaller."

I felt a rush of hot blood through my veins. The exactness, the completeness with which the objections I was preparing to advance had been met by my own experience carried a force of conviction to my mind far greater than anything that had gone before. The theory fitted, too, with the curious hesitation of many people to recognize him, with the mistrust even of his own dog. An amazed, an awed, and, strangely, an exhilarated sense that Mrs. Stuart was right took hold of me. At the lowest, there was a weight of evidence impossible to ignore supporting the supposition that this thing that she spoke of had actually taken place—this thing to me, at least—whatever it might be to her—unheard of in human experience. It was a weight of evidence unbroken,

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so far as I could see, except in one direction. That point I put to her.

"But if he spent all this time, these six or seven days, in some other state of conscious existence," I asked, "how can you account for the fact that he has no recollection of it, not the faintest? Such hazy remembrances as came to him are of trains and shops, peculiarly terrestrial things."

"I admit," Mrs. Stuart answered, "that at present I cannot explain those slight recollections. But I am sure they are explicable. You must come and see me again to-morrow. To-night I am tired and shocked and distressed beyond measure. I can only say that they are not connected with the Astral. Of all that happened there he can retain no sense whatever. It is exceedingly difficult even for a trained expert to carry impressions from one plane to another. For a neophyte it would be an impossibility. As regards that his mind must be a blank."

I made no comment. For several minutes we sat facing one another across the table. At last I broke the silence.

"Presuming," I said, slowly, "that you are right—and, impossible as it seems, I come to think

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more and more that you are right—you would be neither wife nor widow, Mrs. Brocklebank would be neither wife nor widow, relationships, monetary affairs, everything, on both sides, would be in inextricable chaos. The situation would be appalling.”

Mrs. Stuart rose from her seat and stood above me. A look in her face caught me and stopped me as I was rising too. Possessed by horror, as she clearly was, every revolted fiber of her being recoiling, quivering, her strange beauty was yet lifted and illuminated by a curious exaltation.

“Appalling!” she repeated. “To me he is some monstrous creature, some terrible, grotesque, unholy birth. His existence here in this guise is an injustice and an offense to his wife, to you, to me, and, most of all, to my husband. His presence is a continuing, unendurable outrage. Death is the only solution. Death is the only force that can drive him, and must drive him, from the body he has usurped.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE RECOLLECTIONS

I WENT to the office the next morning with feelings in violent conflict. On the one hand, I was reluctant to the last degree to enter a building where I should come in contact with such a man as Mrs. Stuart had visioned; on the other, I was spurred on by an intense curiosity to discover whether or not her amazing supposition was borne out by a close examination of my partner's features. I had in my pocket a photograph of him, taken in the previous year, which Mrs. Brocklebank had given me on the night of our return from France.

When I went into his office, I found him, fortunately, speaking at the telephone; so I was able, for two or three minutes, to look at him minutely. I stood in a position which gave me a

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three-quarter view of his face, and compared it, feature by feature, with the photograph.

He finished his conversation on the telephone and looked up at me expectantly. I had put back the photograph in my pocket.

"Here is a letter from Cuthbertsons," I said. "I think you had better answer it: you know more about the matter than I do."

He took the letter and I returned to my own room and sat down.

My last doubt had been removed. Mrs. Stuart's tales of black magicians did not much impress me; but that the man William Brocklebank, by some means, by some mysterious agency outside my comprehension, was now manifested in a body other than that in which he had been born, I was morally sure. In comparison with the photograph, his present features were revealed as roughly similar in cast, in general proportion and relation to each other, but in detail all different. The bridge of the nose was much finer, the slight retroussé tip was not there, the chin was more pointed, the eyebrows straighter, the eyes larger, the ears were shorter, smaller, closer to the head, the hair was thinner and smoother. These dif-

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ferences were clearly apparent, though, as Mrs. Stuart had said, he had already begun to impress the face with his own characteristics. There was the same fullness of lip, the same arched creases in the brow, the little lines radiating from the corner of his eyes and his mouth. In particular, a perpendicular furrow in each cheek, though not so deep as I remembered them, were definitely present.

Is a man poured into a prepared mould, or does he beat out his shape from within? The question struggled out of a chaos of giddy, inarticulate thoughts and incoherent emotion, as I sat at my desk, again looking at the photograph; and for a time I followed its train with a mind curiously cold and detached. Both processes, no doubt, take place; in the work of the former we see heredity, in the work of the latter we see individuality. Noting how Brocklebank had stamped himself upon his form in a fortnight, how he had hammered it with his character, one could not escape the inference that the latter process is by far the more important of the two. While looking at him as he talked at the telephone, I had been disposed to wonder that features, differing in so many

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respects from those I had known, should have misled me. But the moment he put back the receiver and looked up at me with his familiar expression, I knew that it was quite impossible that I could have failed to recognize him. I fully realized, indeed, perhaps for the first time in my life, the immense superiority, as an identifiable fact, of the individual over the form, of the man over his body. We don't identify a friend by his features; we know him instinctively. He may have disguised himself, but the moment he moves, the moment he speaks, the moment he looks at us, we know him; the man shows through the disguise as clearly as through a sheet of glass; absurdly altered, he is patently, transparently himself. It is only when a man is not familiar to us, when we know him but slightly, that our eye rests, for identification, upon his features. A few people who had not been intimate with Brocklebank had failed to recognize him, but his friends had known him at once, in spite of his changed appearance. Mrs. Stuart, on the other hand, had been slow to identify her husband's features, because she had been confused and blinded by the presence of another man behind them.

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I emerged from the little pocket of detached mentality as suddenly as I had entered it, and, for the rest of the morning, alternated between moods of numb helplessness before an unthinkable situation and fits of strangely inordinate emotion. As the full reality of what had happened pressed home upon my consciousness, I was gripped, not only by repugnance and horror, but, as Mrs. Stuart had been, by a burning sense of indignation. Brocklebank, in this guise, had no right to be here; he was an alien, an intruder, an exotic from another plane, a man who had had his life. To satisfy his own crass materialism, his obstinate belief in the exclusive value of the solid circumstances of physical existence, he had played a trick upon us, intolerable in its callous disregard of every natural feeling. I believed that Mrs. Stuart would murder him rather than permit such a situation to continue; and, at that moment at least, flushing with the sense of the terrible affront that had been put upon her, I felt that I should not blame her if she did.

When I went to see her in the afternoon, however, I found that her mood had changed. Her emotions were no longer in the ascendant. She

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was thinking, coldly and keenly, and quite calmly. She asked me, first, if Brocklebank appeared, and had appeared since his return, to be in a perfectly normal state of mental and physical health.

"Has he any unusual experiences," she asked particularly, "that are in any way unusual?"

"The only thing that I have heard him complain about," I answered, "is that he sleeps too heavily and yet does not feel rested."

"Yes," she said, slowly; "that is what I meant—something like that." She remained silent for several minutes, sitting with her elbows on the table before her and her chin on her hands, deep in thought. "I keep getting a glimmering," she said, at last, "but no more as yet."

"How does his wife accept him?" she asked next.

"She is frightened of him, and she has conceived a violent abhorrence of him. We had a terrible scene one night when he went home. That is why he is now staying at a hotel."

"And were they good friends before? Did they get on well?"

"Splendidly. She was devoted to him."

"Where does she live?" Mrs. Stuart asked, after a pause.

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"At Byfleet, on the South Western."

"It's not very far, is it?"

"Oh, no; under an hour."

"I think I should like to go and see her before I return to Illingham," she said, "if you can take me down. I think I ought to. She is as much concerned, poor thing, as I am. Can you arrange for that, and as soon as possible. I am very anxious to get back home. I feel I may learn more there, and I have done all I can here for the present."

"I can speak to her on the telephone to-day," I said, "and, if it suits her, we will go to-morrow—even to-night, if you would prefer it."

"Yes, I think so," said Mrs. Stuart; "then I can go home to-morrow. Will you see if you can get on now?"

There was a telephone in the room. I rang up the exchange, got the connection, and within ten minutes had settled the matter with Mrs. Brocklebank. We were to go down that evening, and she would send the car to the station to meet us.

"As a reward for that service," said Mrs. Stuart, with the first smile I had seen on her face since she discovered the truth, "I will tell you

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the meaning of those queer recollections of Mr. Brocklebank. They puzzled me last night because I was prepossessed with the idea that my husband had been beguiled to London in a state of semi-trance."

"I thought," I said, "that you supposed he had walked into a swamp."

"Oh, that was before I suspected the truth. His body," she added, with another smile, "couldn't very well be both at the bottom of a swamp and sitting in your flat."

I blushed at my own stupidity. "Please explain," I asked.

"Well, it is quite clear to my mind," she went on, "that, in addition to the necessary absolute failure to recall anything that happened during six days when he was not on this plane at all, Mr. Brocklebank retains no recollection, or only a faint, fitful recollection, of the events of a whole day after he had taken possession of my husband's body."

"Then you think that the change took place on the moor, during this condition of semi-trance?"

"No, it couldn't have taken place while he was in a state of semi-trance; the trance would need

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to be complete. I think it had happened before then. I think the man who walked out of the Craigiel Hotel on the Wednesday morning—the man described in the paper as being strange and distrait in his manner—was not my husband at all, but Brocklebank.”

“Then your husband must have put himself into a state of trance during the preceding night?”

“Yes, I am sorry to say he must.”

“And Brocklebank?”

“When he attained consciousness in those circumstances, he wouldn't have the faintest idea what he was doing in Scotland. He would make enquiries, which would account for his being considered distrait, and the answers would only bewilder him more. He did, in fact, make such enquiries, as I have heard from the proprietor; and it was that which made me assume that my husband must have been in that curious state that I have told you of, when only a fraction of physical consciousness is retained. I have often been with him at such a time, when he could walk perfectly well, avoid obstacles, cross the road at the right places, and reach his intended destination; but

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if I put a question to him, he would either not answer at all or his answer would be rubbish."

"But why should Brocklebank go on the moor?"

"I don't think he did. That was merely an assumption of the newspaper correspondent, who said he was '*apparently intending* to walk on the moor.' Much more probably, he went straight to the nearest station and took the first train for London. His first thought would inevitably be to get back home. He would reach King's Cross late at night, no doubt very tired, dazed and uncertain of himself, and probably also, if he had drunk any wine or spirits, slightly intoxicated, and would go to the nearest hotel, the Great Northern. It is easy to understand that it would not be until after he had had a full night's sleep, that he would wake to complete, enduring consciousness in the body he had appropriated."

"That would account for his recollection of a train," I said; "but what about the shop?"

"What *you* do," asked Mrs. Stuart, "if you found yourself on your way to London in a rough tweed suit and a fishing cap, with no luggage and without even a cigarette in your pocket?"

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"Yes," I said, "I see; I should go and buy some things at the first opportunity."

"The first opportunity, in his case, would probably be Edinburgh, where he would have to change trains. And since he would have articles of various descriptions to buy, he would save himself trouble and time by going to a large store."

"He remembered something—did I tell you?—about hearing someone say, 'It's only sixteen.'"

"Yes," said Mrs. Stuart; "I think I can even explain that. My husband took a sixteen collar. Perhaps Mr. Brocklebank took a larger?"

"I don't know," I answered, "but I think it's very likely."

"Presuming he did, he would naturally ask for the larger size. The shopman, looking at him, might think he had made a mistake, might ask to see the one he was wearing. Brocklebank would take it off; the shopman would say, 'It's only sixteen'; Brocklebank would be surprised."

The soundness of her reasoning in this latter respect received a striking confirmation that same afternoon, after I had returned to the office. Brocklebank suddenly pushed open the communi-

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cating door and bounced into my room, looking very pleased with himself.

"I've just remembered," he said. "It came to me all of a sudden."

"Remembered what?" I asked.

"About that name 'Stuart'— where I saw it."

"Oh!" I had to re-order my ideas. "Well, where?"

"It was marked on a collar—one of those I found in my room at the Great Northern."

"So I suppose your purloined it," I said, "together with the pencil-case and the sovereign purse and the other things."

"Looks like it," he said, chuckling frankly; "but nobody can prove it."

"Speaking of collars," I asked, suddenly, "what size do you take?"

"Seventeen," he answered, promptly.

"Is that the size you are wearing now?"

He looked at me, for a few seconds, with a very characteristic expression on his face—an expression due to a violent inward struggle to prevent himself laughing, so that the dryness or sarcasm of the remark he proposed to make might not be spoiled.

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"Oh, no," he said, gravely, when he had brought his voice under the requisite control, "I take seventeen, but I wear twelve and a half; I like the choked feeling it gives you."

"Just to satisfy my curiosity," I asked, "would you mind taking it off and looking?"

"My dear Reece," he said, in the same tone as before, "if the dignity of the partners in this firm has ceased to be of any consequence to you, there is all the more reason why I should keep scrupulous watch and guard upon it. I don't say it in any way of complaint, but I have noticed that, of late, you have become strangely frivolous and have ceased to pay that strict attention to business which has hitherto marked a long and honorable career. Where have you been this afternoon, for instance? I've answered three telephone calls for you and interviewed Barker."

It occurred to me that, whether he complained or not, he had some right of complaint; for since his reappearance my attention to business, far from being strict, had been very disjointed and perfunctory indeed.

I treated him honestly. "I've been to see Mrs. Stuart," I said.

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I got, of course, the answer I expected. He bellowed with laughter.

"I knew it was a love affair," he said, when he had recovered his breath. "I only wanted to make you admit it."

I allowed him to think so.

"Last night," he proceeded, "and the night before, and now again to-day, and always closeted alone with her! You are making the pace uncommonly stiff. Are you going to see her again to-night?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And she is supposed to be lamenting the dear recently departed! You don't waste time, either of you. Before you plight your troth," he went on, with the same grave air as before, "it is my duty to inform you that the law won't presume death until seven years have elapsed. Seven years! She is a good-looking woman now, but think of seven years!"

"Time passes," I suggested.

"Yes, and so does the bloom on the peach. Unless I'm in error, she'll be well on the wrong side of forty by that time. Without using derogatory or unseemly language, I should say that

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you are acting like a damned fool. A man in your position, comfortably off, no hereditary vices, not too old, and no uglier than most men—why, there are hundreds of them, thousands, ready to drop into your hands. You can take your choice among the fairest flowers that bloom. And you elect to wait seven years, and then marry an old woman. Seven years!" he cackled, as he opened the communicating door. "You won't be so young yourself by that time."

I called him back. "You haven't looked to see the size of your collar," I reminded him.

"My collar!" he repeated. "What on earth—? Look here, Reece, I know a man in love gets odd fancies. I can humor you once in a way. But you must learn to restrain yourself. I can't keep on doing things of this sort for seven years."

He took off his collar and looked at the marks inside it.

"This is a queer thing," he said, in a puzzled tone. "It's not seventeen: it's sixteen."

"It's only sixteen," I said; "and again you are surprised."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STRANDED WOMEN

AS my narrative draws to a close, I find myself, as at the beginning, very sensible that I must encounter the skepticism of men and women whose experience has been exclusively of the tangible and visible things of a tangible and visible world. That feeling is increased by the knowledge that, in this respect, the most exacting part of my task lies yet before me, that the most amazing circumstance in a record of events both inordinate and bizarre has still to be approached. I know, of course, that to many people, many thousands the world over, nothing that I have told or shall tell will present more difficulty, will appear less credible, than does the rising and setting of the sun to the ordinary mind. But those who have studied phenomena outside the

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physical sciences are in numbers negligible among the multitude who have not.

It may be said, too, that there are witnesses who can speak to my veracity, who can confirm every incident I have related. That is so. But a witness, whoever he may be, who testifies to the occurrence of something inexplicable by any of the laws or processes at present known to science, is always suspect. Life outside this life is manifested every day to the sight or hearing of hundreds of reputable men and women, but the world will not believe what they say. The great mass of humanity remains steadily, strangely, obstinately incredulous. A cloud of witness cannot convince people of the persistence of the individual after death.

I have no right of complaint; for I myself, until I became involved in these events, was among the number. I had a strong intuitive feeling that the ego is permanent, but I thought that no proof of its continuance beyond the span of a physical life had ever been obtained. I hoped, I desired, but I was not sure. A well-known scientist has admitted that "There is to me no thought so intolerable as the thought of my own annihilation. To

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be blotted out while life flows out into greater knowledge and towards grander power, that is almost insupportable." That probably expresses the feeling of every intellectual man and woman. He goes on to say that he can "see no proof" to the contrary; and there again, no doubt, he reflects the prevailing sentiment. It is a curious fact that, while people passionately desire proof on this subject, they decline to accept the evidence that is offered them, decline even to examine it, because it is mixed up, undoubtedly, with chicanery. They will not take the trouble to sift it, to wash it, to separate the gold from the dross.

These reflections pass through my mind as I approach the most remarkable part of my narrative, as I come to describe an occurrence illuminating to those who witnessed it in a degree impossible to exaggerate, but so removed from ordinary experience that it cannot be easily credible when presented, however carefully, through the medium of a reporter.

Following my conversation with Brocklebank, I returned to Mrs. Stuart's hotel. I found her waiting for me, and, after an early dinner, we went down to Byfleet. Mrs. Brocklebank, whose

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black dress still suggested, with pitiful, ironic persistence, a recent loss, received us with a wondering, slightly apprehensive expression in her pretty, appealing eyes. I had told her over the telephone the general purpose of our visit, and the information had evidently caused her some trepidation, as was inevitable when she was approached by any new development of the strange and terrifying tragedy that had broken so cruelly across her life.

Mrs. Stuart was instantly attracted to her. Indeed, her appearance—young, small, lonely, and unhappy—could not but have struck a sympathetic chord in the heart of so protective and kindly a woman. She sat down beside her and explained to her, quietly and fully, the abstruse cause of her present position and the relationship of that position to her own; beginning, as she had begun with me, by showing her the newspaper cutting, and keeping her mind carefully directed to the corresponding dates in the two series of events. Mrs. Brocklebank listened intently, looking up from time to time at the other woman, in a puzzled, mystified way, and occasionally glancing at me, as if to see if I endorsed the statements that were being made.

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This latter interrogative she put into words when Mrs. Stuart finished. "Do *you* believe it, Mr. Reece?" she asked. "Do you think that this can possibly have happened?"

"I'm sure of it," I answered. "I compared his face to-day, when he was speaking at the telephone, with the photograph you gave me, and not a single feature was quite the same: it was another face." I went on to point out the bearing of the golf and the motor car incidents, of the instinctive repugnance we had both felt, of the purchases in Scotland and the possession of Mr. Stuart's clothes. "I don't pretend," I concluded, "to be able to say anything on the point of whether Mrs. Stuart is right or wrong in her view of the conditions beyond the physical horizon, which led up to the change and made it possible. That is all obscure to me. But the fact itself is indubitable."

For awhile Mrs. Brocklebank remained pensive. A feathery brown curl—a familiar friend of mine—had separated from its fellows and strayed over her cheek. Then, quite suddenly, I saw her face light up. Her eyes shone, her whole aspect changed with the enchanting effect of the sun

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breaking from behind clouds. "I *knew* that it wasn't Billy," she cried out.

A little later, Mrs. Stuart, referring to Brocklebank, used the term "your husband." To my surprise, Mrs. Brocklebank instantly challenged it.

"He is not my husband," she said, almost sharply: "he is yours. He is the man mentioned in the newspaper paragraph, the man who left the hotel in Scotland that Wednesday morning. Billy died at Chamonix a week before."

This was a startling aspect of the position, which, I was astonished to think, had not, until that moment, presented itself to me. I was absolutely certain that the man was not Mrs. Stuart's husband: I knew him beyond question. But I saw that, if it could be shown, as undoubtedly it could, that his body was Stuart's body, if his movements could be traced, as probably they could, from Craighiel to the Great Northern Hotel, a jury would require no more subtle method of identification. They would listen to nothing else. They would say that he had usurped Brocklebank's name and position, and imposed upon his friends. They would find that he was the husband of Mrs.

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Stuart—of Mrs. Stuart who loathed him even more than Mrs. Brocklebank loathed him.

The latter's unexpected statement had fallen in the room like a bombshell. Mrs. Stuart made no immediate rejoinder. Probably her mind followed a train of thought similar to that which passed through mine.

At last she said firmly: "He is neither one nor the other: he is an offense, an outrage."

"Yes," said Mrs. Brocklebank, very decidedly.

"It must never be allowed," I said, "to become a matter for decision by a Court of Law. It is outside the compass of any tribunal likely to be constituted in our time."

Both women agreed with that.

Before we returned to London, Mrs. Stuart asked Mrs. Brocklebank to go with her, the next day, to her home in Hampshire. "We must protect each other," she said. "We are both lonely and both unhappy, and we are commonly involved in this appalling thing."

Mrs. Brocklebank was standing in the hall, a pathetic little figure, preparing to bid us good-bye and to face another solitary night. Her face brightened like a flower in sudden sunshine.

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The past fortnight, alone in her house, wracked by her thoughts, probably misunderstood by her friends, had evidently been torture to her. The prospect of change, and of the companionship of a woman who not only understood her trouble but shared it, contained an obvious and powerful appeal. After some small polite demur, she accepted the invitation; and the two women arranged to meet at Waterloo.

In the train, on the way back to London, Mrs. Stuart broke a long period of silence with an enigmatical request. My thoughts, I remember, were still traveling over the ground opened by the doubt of which woman was wife and which widow. "Can I rely upon your help," she asked, "if I need it?"

"In what way?" I asked.

"I don't know. I only think I may need it. The present position is intolerable for everybody. That poor little thing has been nearly driven out of her mind."

"To do him justice," I said, "I don't suppose he ever thought what the effect would be upon other people."

"He thought of nothing, probably." A flush

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of indignation, of anger rose suddenly to her cheeks. "He was swamped, like all materialists, by overconfidence in his own assertions. He has died and he lives; and he still says, with complacent dogmatism, that death is the end of the chapter."

"He hasn't a doubt about it," I said.

"Oh, it makes me angry," she cried. "They are so sure—so superior. Think of the world, think of the dull drag and squalor of much of it, most of it. That is a materialist's 'be all and end all.' That satisfies him as a reason for the existence of self-conscious beings. If this were all," she said solemnly, "to give life would be an infinitely greater crime than to take it.

"Can I rely upon your help, Mr. Reece?" she asked again.

"You said last night that the problem could only be solved in one way," I reminded her.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that. I wouldn't ask your help for that," she answered. "It is impossible to say in what way I may need it. My power to take messages seems pitifully feeble now that there is an imperative call upon it. It is as if a ship were sinking at sea and the wireless would work only weakly and intermit-

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tently. Yet I feel that something somehow may be done, and that at any moment I may get the clue to it."

"Yes, of course, you may count on me," I said.

Four or five days later I received a letter from her, calling upon me to carry out this promise.

"I want you," she wrote, "to come down here for a day or two and to bring Mr. Brocklebank with you. I could, of course, ask him direct, but I have so little excuse, I know him so slightly, that I fear he might, not unnaturally, decline. It is safer far, I am sure, to leave it to you to induce him in some way to come with you. It is very important that he should: I am sure of that, but of no more as yet. The messages are very feeble and broken. I know that my husband is struggling to tell me more, that he is meeting difficulty of some kind, that he needs help from me. What exactly he wishes me to do I cannot distinguish, except to get Mr. Brocklebank to come here to this house. I shall learn more, I *must* learn more. In the meantime, do, for all our sakes, arrange this."

The letter reached me by the evening post at my flat. The next morning, about ten o'clock,

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I went into Brocklebank's office. When I opened the door, I received a shock that sent the blood to my heart. He was hunched up in his chair, his arms spread on his desk, his head resting on them. I connected this with Mrs. Stuart's letter and with the forces that apparently were concentrating upon him. I thought that he had died as mysteriously as he had come to life.

I went up to him quietly and looked closely at his face, as it lay sideways. He was not dead; he was not even in a swoon; he was merely asleep. Such a circumstance, after my fear, was oddly ludicrous; but I felt no inclination to laugh. It was so completely at variance with all my experience of him, that, for a few moments, I could only stand and look at him in astonishment and perplexity. If I had needed further and absolutely unquestionable proof of the correctness of Mrs. Stuart's conclusion, that view of him asleep would have supplied it. There was no more than a slight resemblance to the man I had previously known: but for his clothes and for the fact that he was sitting in Brocklebank's chair in Brocklebank's room, I should not have recognized him.

It was surprisingly difficult to rouse him. I

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shouted his name without effect. Eventually I had to conquer my repugnance and to put a hand on his shoulder and shake him. At last he lifted his head and stared at me vaguely.

"You had something to say yesterday," I said, smiling, "about wasting the office time and about the dignity of the partners in this firm."

He quickly recovered himself. His sense of humor, as usual, was equal to the situation. "I'm no great believer in the strenuous life," he said.

"So it appears," said I.

"It makes you grow old before your time. If people would only take things restfully and easily, they would be young at seventy."

"If that is your idea," I suggested, "what about a week-end in the country—birds warbling, insects humming, a droning summer day?"

"Man alive, this is September."

"So it is," I admitted. "Well, there's a suggestion of peaceful repose about autumn tints."

"What has put the idea into your head?" he asked, looking up from some papers which he had drawn in front of him.

"Mrs. Stuart has asked me to stay a day or two

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at her house in Hampshire, and she wants me to persuade you to come too."

When he had relieved himself of some of the amusement which this information caused him, he said, still struggling with laughter: "I'm to be chaperon, I presume?"

"Oh, no; she is not alone."

"Then I am to entertain the companion and keep her out of the way?"

"Just as you like," I said: "it 's your wife."

"Rachel!" he exclaimed.

I nodded.

"What on earth is *she* doing there?"

"She went because she was asked, and because she likes Mrs. Stuart."

"But when did she meet her?"

"The other evening: we went down to see her."

"You and Mrs. Stuart?"

I nodded again.

He gasped. "Do you mean to say," he said, "that the affair has gone so far already, that you are dragging the family into it?"

"Whose family?"

"Yours—mine—the firm's."

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"Put it that way, if you like," I said. "What shall I say to her?"

"Oh, yes, I'll come and see the fun. But what about the Chicken?"

"Well, Mrs. Stuart knows there has been a difficulty and she still asks you."

"Blessed are the peacemakers," said Brocklebank.

"Don't count too much on that," I said. "You can't manage her these days. You are not the man you were."

He was silent for some seconds.

"To tell the truth, Reece," he said, in a rare burst of candor, "I don't very much care. I've lost grip in some curious way. Things don't interest me, there's no salt in them: I don't *want anything*. The last few days I've had the queerest feeling I've ever had in my life, as if I shouldn't mind if I was dead. It may be this drowsiness. It's beginning to worry me. I can't wake and I can't keep awake. It's just as if I had been drugged."

"Do you suspect that?" I asked, with sudden curiosity.

"I can't," he answered. "I mix my own liquor

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and take it when I like. I don't dine in the same restaurant two nights together. But that is what it feels like."

"A doctor would probably tell you to get out of London," I said. "It may be bracing at Illingham."

"Where's that?"

"Mrs. Stuart's house."

"All right," he said, returning to his papers. "Next Saturday. A change may do me good."

For many days that sentence was to ring in my ears: "A change may do me good."

CHAPTER XIX

THE LITTLE ROOM AT ILLINGHAM

THE afternoon that we went out to Illingham was, I remember, soft and warm and brilliantly fine, and our journey took us through some of the most beautiful parts of Surrey. The sun shone brightly on a green countryside, wooded slopes, and scattered houses, as the train drew out from the London suburbs and passed Woking and Guilford. Later, while it slowly climbed the long bank in the Haslemere district, the scene from the carriage window was quite enchanting. Ridge after ridge of pine and heather and bracken and birch rolled away and rose higher, till they were bounded in the far distance by a range of hills blue and mysterious; and every now and again one's eye was caught by a little sheet of water sparkling like a diamond. Fancy pictured, among

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all this, innumerable dells and hollows and green, solitary glades. Such a scene, viewed from a modern railway carriage, a moving prison, suggested inevitably the ecstasy that can be found in escaping from the world of men and plunging deep into the heart of nature in her happiest mood; it sent the sense of the joy of living coursing through one's veins.

Brocklebank, sitting opposite me, appeared to be little interested in it. Once or twice, at my invitation, he glanced perfunctorily out of the window. But, for the most part of the journey, he nodded and dozed in his corner.

At Petersfield we found a large car waiting for us, in charge of a chauffeur in a neat green livery. This aroused Brocklebank from his lethargy to make one of his characteristic remarks.

"If the income runs to other things on the same scale as this, Reece," he said, as he drew a fur rug about him, "you'll be able to retire from business in seven years."

The drive from the station was through pleasant pastoral country, peaceful and quiet in the autumn evening, but lacking the romantic beauty of that passed in the train. The car took us along quickly

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and silently. I enjoyed the luxurious motion in the soft air, in spite of a certain vague apprehension of the unknown; and so it was with some disappointment that I realized, after covering perhaps five or six miles, that the chauffeur was slowing down preparatory to making the turn through a pair of lodge gates ahead. We swept up a considerable length of drive and finally stopped before the portico of a long, low house of old plastered brick, with a double row of tall windows in front. It was closely surrounded with oaks and beeches, and appeared somewhat gloomy. The daylight was failing, and I noticed that a light already showed through one of the windows.

The chauffeur, carrying our bags, led us through the front door into a roomy, carpeted hall, surrounded with furniture of black oak bearing an abundance of blue china. As we entered, Mrs. Stuart and Mrs. Brocklebank, hand in hand, came out from one of the rooms opening upon it. They made a singular contrast: Mrs. Stuart tall and queenly, Mrs. Brocklebank small, pretty, and winsome; the strange, striking beauty of the former emphasized by and emphasizing Mrs. Brockle-

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bank's plaintive, almost childish, appeal and the haunting charm of her serious eyes.

Both women looked slightly pale. With an effort, very apparent to me, whether or not it was equally so to my companion, Mrs. Stuart gave Brocklebank her hand and spoke a few words of conventional welcome. Mrs. Brocklebank made an attempt to smile and said something about "all three of us meeting here." I knew very well that her hand was gripping Mrs. Stuart's.

"A man who notices these things," said Brocklebank, as we went upstairs to our rooms, "might say that our welcome was slightly on the frigid side. Rachel is an iceberg and the other woman is an arctic continent."

"They'll thaw," I said.

I had every reason for knowing, indeed, that they neither would nor could do anything of the sort, but it was evident that something in the nature of surface cordiality would have to be practised, if the constraint during this visit was not to become intolerable. The dressing gong had gone as we stood in the hall, we had been shown straight to our rooms, and I had not had a moment to speak to Mrs. Stuart alone. I remained, there-

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fore, for the present, in utter ignorance of her motive in bringing Brocklebank to her house. It occurred to me forcibly, as I got into my evening clothes, that only a vital and imperative one could have induced her to subject all four of us to an ordeal which she must have foreseen, from her own feelings, would be singularly trying.

On this score, I was exceedingly relieved, when I reached the drawing-room, to find that there was another visitor in the house—a tall, heavy man with a big, clean-shaven face and pendulous cheeks, who was introduced as Dr. Jefferson. His presence provided us with the fullest excuse for keeping the conversation away from personal matters, and dinner, in consequence, instead of being the frozen function I had anticipated in my dressing-room, was got through comparatively easily. I assumed at first that he was an old friend of Mrs. Stuart, and was somewhat surprised to find, from a reference later, that she had made his acquaintance only in the course of the previous few days. He proved to be one of those men who, quite honestly and without ostentation, discover a first-hand knowledge of almost any subject that may be opened. He did not give

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the impression of being peculiarly erudite, he had not pored over books; but he had traveled and kept his eyes open, and had never missed an opportunity to obtain a new experience. From Hindu magic or the water of Lourdes to the remains of palæolithic man, from an earthquake in China to the cooking of an omelet, he could speak from direct personal acquaintance with the subject. This, combining with a genial disposition, made him as happy an accession to the party as could have been found. One inevitably suspected, indeed, that Mrs. Stuart had invited him to the house for the purpose of relieving what must otherwise have been an intolerable tension.

During dessert the conversation drifted from crystal-gazing, through auto-suggestion and will force to hypnotism. I noticed that these various transitions were quietly brought about by Mrs. Stuart, whether solely in her capacity of hostess or with some additional motive I could not tell. Once again Dr. Jefferson disclosed a first-hand knowledge of the subject that had come under discussion.

“Probably far more people possess this power than ever suspect it,” he said. “It was more or

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less by accident, when I was in the States a few years ago, that I discovered I had it myself."

One had the sense, as he said this, of a quickening of attention on the part of everyone at the table.

"You can hypnotize?" I asked.

"Oh, yes—give me a reasonably good subject."

"How interesting!" Mrs. Stuart exclaimed. "Can you, will you, give us a demonstration to-night, after dinner?"

"That must depend," said Dr. Jefferson, looking from one to another of us with a smile on his face, "upon whether anyone is willing to play the part of demonstratee."

"Oh, surely," said Mrs. Stuart. "Let us make a compact," she suggested, "that anyone he names will submit."

I thought this proposal was rather unfair upon Mrs. Brocklebank, who, it appeared to me, would be inevitably chosen, for she struck one as almost an ideal subject. She accepted, however, quite readily, and Brocklebank and I did the same.

"With the stipulation," said the former, "that I am not to be asked to wash my face in a basin of flour."

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"So you have merely to look round, Dr. Jefferson," said Mrs. Stuart, "and choose your victim."

The doctor scanned our faces. To my surprise, his eye passed Mrs. Brocklebank after a slight scrutiny and continued its search round the table. He examined us all twice, and eventually stopped at the member of the party I should have expected to see chosen last—William Brocklebank.

"I think Mr. Brocklebank might possibly lend himself," he said, "to a satisfactory experiment."

"I!" exclaimed Brocklebank, obviously genuinely amazed. "I've got a will of iron."

"Oh, of course, if you exert it, I can do nothing," said the doctor. "But I think that was hardly in the compact," he added, smiling.

"Do as you like," said Brocklebank, with his undercurrent of laughter, dipping a nut in salt. "Whether it is the result of the excellent dinner we have had or comes from a general sense of a well spent life, I feel far too peaceful and sleepy to resist anything."

"Then don't be long coming," said Mrs. Stuart, rising. "We will give you quarter of an hour and no more."

The two women left the room, and, since the

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wine was of the kind which one expects to find in the houses of abstainers, we followed them without exceeding the allotted time. They were seated before a fire in the hall.

"I think," said Mrs. Stuart, "we will go to a small room which my husband used for most of his psychical experiments: its influence might help. I have seen ghosts in this room," she added, with a smile at us, as she led the way.

"Then Reece had better stay behind," said Brocklebank. "His nerves are not equal to ghosts."

She took us up the stairs to the first floor and down a long, wide corridor. At the end of this, she turned up a narrow, carpeted staircase. We ascended it behind her in single file, the doctor going second and then Brocklebank. I waited for Mrs. Brocklebank to follow, but she asked me to do so. This separated us by a few steps from the rest of the party.

"Do you know what is going to happen?" I asked her.

"I knew," she replied, "that he wouldn't choose us."

"No more?"

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She shook her head.

The staircase opened, at the top, into a small room, circular or octagonal, certainly not square. It was difficult to tell its shape, however, for it was almost surrounded with plain, dark screens, similar to those used by photographers for back-grounds. I noticed that there was, in fact, a camera in the room, pushed into an angle of one of the screens. Mrs. Brocklebank's eye caught this, and then she looked at me.

"Spirit photography," I said to her. I spoke in a low voice and was somewhat surprised to find that it was half caught in my breath.

In another corner there was a narrow cabinet, something like a small wardrobe in shape, with a curtained front. I learnt afterwards that this room was the only one on the second floor at that end of the house. It formed a low tower and had been used by a previous occupant for an observatory. It was lighted apparently by electricity, but no lamps were visible. It was merely suffused with a bright, somewhat reddish light. Besides the camera, the cabinet, and the screens, it contained several chairs and a sofa, a small round

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table, and a closed bureau. The floor covering was dark and plain.

"I don't see any ghosts," said Brocklebank. "I suppose the machinery is behind the screens."

Nobody made any reply. He appeared to be the only member of the party who was not conscious of a certain tension.

"What do we do?" he asked. "I am under the impression that I am the chosen lamb that is to be led to the slaughter."

"You are the chosen lamb," said the doctor.

"In those circumstances," said Brocklebank, "I shall take the most comfortable chair, because if you don't put me into a trance, I shall certainly go to sleep. No washing in a bowl of flour, remember, or anything else that will give Reece an excuse to make ribald observations later."

He sat down, choosing, as he had said, the most comfortable chair. The doctor drew up a second chair and sat close to him, opposite.

"Look steadily into my eyes," he said.

Brocklebank obeyed.

For fully a minute, amid silence made audible by the ticking of a small clock, the hypnotist

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stared at him intently. Then he raised his hands and made several passes in front of his eyes.

It appeared to me unlikely that such a man as Brocklebank could prove amenable to hypnotic influence. I was mistaken. Very quickly, surprisingly quickly, we saw undoubted signs that he was yielding. Certain little subconscious movements of his hands, resting on the arms of the chair, ceased; his eyes became fixed. The doctor continued to make passes in front of him, perhaps for another minute. Presently he raised Brocklebank's eyelids. The latter made no movement. Then the hypnotist rose from his seat.

"Will you help me to move him to the sofa?" he said to me.

I complied. That Brocklebank was in a trance, and not merely in a deep sleep, as I had found him at the office, was evident from the rigidity of his limbs.

"He won't wake till I release him," said the doctor to Mrs. Stuart, when we had completed our task. "If necessary, I can keep him under for days."

"Oh, I am sure it won't be," said Mrs. Stuart, with more excitement—suppressed but unmistak-

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able—in her tone than she had shown in my knowledge of her. “Thank you, Dr. Jefferson.”

“Do you wish me to make any suggestions to him?”

“No; let him remain as he is for the present. Again thank you.”

She sat down, and the rest of us followed her example. It was a strange, a bizarre situation: a small, remote room surrounded by dark screens, uncertainly lighted; a man in a trance lying on a sofa; four people seated about him in tense silence, watching. By this time it had become obvious that it was no ordinary hypnotic experiment that we were witnessing: developments of some unusual kind were expected.

In a few minutes I became sensible, in an odd, inexplicable way, quite indescribable, that something was happening. I was conscious that a struggle was taking place, a struggle close at hand. The feeling was entirely subjective; I could see nothing, hear nothing; there had been no outward change whatever in the circumstances of the room. Yet that this sense was not peculiar to me alone was indicated in the moment that I became aware of it, for I felt Mrs. Brocklebank,

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who was sitting next to me, clutch my hand. It became sharper and stronger as seconds passed. I was quite clearly aware that it was not a muscular struggle that was proceeding, that it was a contest, rather, of minds, of wills. I gradually realized, moreover, that Brocklebank was one of the combatants. I realized this while my eyes were resting on him, as he lay on the sofa, his face calm, his limbs motionless. It was, I think, the most extraordinary, the most uncanny feeling that I have ever experienced—that sense of a man engaged in a tense struggle, while all the time one saw him in an attitude, and with an expression, of absolute repose.

Presently I took my eyes from the form on the sofa and glanced at the hypnotist. His face bore a puzzled look, but nothing more. Plainly he was not exerting his will, he was concerned in no contest with his subject. His work was over: he was the gaoler with the key in his pocket.

Next I looked at Mrs. Stuart. Her appearance startled me. She was sitting forward in her chair, her lips slightly apart, her expression—alert, anxious, breathless, tense—such as one may sometimes see on the faces of spectators at a critical

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stage of a race or a field game. Beyond doubt, she was conscious of something of which the rest of us were not conscious, or only dimly conscious.

The light in the room, which had been bright when we entered, was growing dimmer; it was growing, slowly but persistently, very considerably dimmer. At no time did it become completely dark, but a point of obscurity was reached when the occupants of the room appeared merely as outlines and shadows. I have never been able to determine whether that darkening was actual or illusory, whether some of the unseen lamps were extinguished, or whether our faculties, intensely concentrated on the invisible, became temporarily less sensitive to the visible. Certainly Mrs. Stuart did not move; no one stirred. And again I was made aware that the sense was not peculiar to me. The slow darkening, real or illusory, was equally apparent to Mrs. Brocklebank. Her hand fluttered in mine.

"Are you afraid?" I whispered to her.

"No," she said, "not really, not if I can hold you."

"Whatever happens, shall you mind?"

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"No," she answered again: "but don't move, keep near me."

So completely were all my perceptive faculties deflected during this period, so utterly removed was I from the plane of calculating and recording man, that I cannot make even a rough estimate of the length of time that elapsed while the condition lasted—the condition of strange silence and strange darkness and strongly felt invisible things. It might have been five minutes, it might have been an hour. Ultimately the bright, reddish light regained its full power, slowly as it had lost it, and, as it did so, the sense of a struggle became less and less acute, till it died away completely. We had got back to the situation precisely as it had been when the hypnotist put Brocklebank into the trance: nothing had changed. It gave one a sense of futility. We had passed through an experience curiously and mysteriously exacting, to no purpose.

Mrs. Stuart got up: her face had recovered its calm.

"Will you bring him round, Dr. Jefferson?" she said.

The hypnotist approached the sofa and made

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a few reverse passes before the eyes of the recumbent man. The latter stirred, stretched himself, assumed a sitting posture, rose slowly to his feet.

Mrs. Brocklebank clutched my arm with both her hands. We were looking at a tall man with calm, steady eyes. The face we saw was not Brocklebank's face; it was not even particularly like his face; it was the face of a man self-dependent and self-absorbed to the point of isolation, of a man looking inward, the face of a seer.

I say nothing, I offer no speculation in regard to the detail of the mystical processes that had taken place: I make no attempt to see behind the veil. I merely record the facts that were manifest to the physical senses of four people. The man who sat down was William Brocklebank, the man who rose up was Francis Stuart.

Mrs. Stuart stood in front of her husband. "Well?" she asked.

All the circumstances had changed so strangely that it was difficult at first to realize the new position. The hypnotist, perhaps with a quicker apprehension, had disappeared. My companion and I were suddenly and unexpectedly the wit-

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nesses of a domestic scene. Mrs. Stuart's attitude was not immediately amicable: explanations were required, reproaches were imminent. So I took Rachel Brocklebank by the hand and led her away.

THE END







